

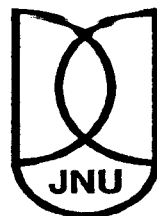
# **RAMMAN: AESTHETICS, TEXT, PERFORMANCE**

**(A STUDY OF A RITUAL PERFORMANCE TRADITION OF GARHWAL)**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the award of the degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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**2010**



## CERTIFICATE


*29 July 2010*

Certified that this dissertation entitled “Ramman: Aesthetics, Text, Performance (A study of a Ritual Performance Tradition of Garhwal)”, Submitted by Ms. Amita Rana, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work, and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any other University or Institution.




(Amita Rana)

This may be placed before the examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.



(Prof. H.S. Shiva Prakash)  
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(Prof. H.S. Shiva Prakash)  
Dean

Dedicated to

Vibhuti Raghubanshi

President Dramatics Society 2003-04

Lady Shri Ram College

And

My Grandmother Vidya Devi

(Their indomitable spirits will continue to inspire)

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## Desiderata

*Go placidly amid the noise and the haste,*

*And remember what peace there may be in silence.*

*As far as possible without surrender*

*Be on good terms with all persons*

*Speak your truth quietly and clearly*

*And listen to others, even to the dull and ignorant, they too have their story*

*Avoid loud and aggressive persons,*

*They are vexations to the spirit.*

*If you compare yourself to others,*

*You may become vain or bitter; for always*

*There will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.*

*Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.*

*Keep interested in your own career, however humble;*

*It is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.*

*Exercise caution in your business affairs, for the world is full of trickery*

*But let this not blind you to what virtue there is;*

*Many persons strive for high ideals, and everywhere life is full of heroism.*

*Be yourself. Especially do not feign affection.*

*Neither be cynical about love;*

*For in the face of all aridity and disenchantment,*

*It is as perennial as grass.*

*Take kindly to the counsel of years,  
Gracefully surrendering the things of youth.  
Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune.  
But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings.  
Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.  
Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.  
You are a child of the Universe, no less than the trees and the stars;  
You have a right to be here.  
And whether or not it is clear to you,  
No doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.  
Therefore be at peace with god,  
Whatever you conceive him to be,  
And whatever your labours and aspirations  
In the noisy confusion of life,  
Keep peace in your soul.  
With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams;  
It is still a beautiful world.*

*-Alan Watts*

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## Introduction

**“All the world’s a stage, and we mere players”<sup>1</sup>**

-William Shakespeare

Man created the stage to represent his encounters with life. For Aristotle, art is mimetic, and thrice removed from reality. It is representational. The above quoted line from Shakespeare is an apparent inversion of the Aristotelian idea, since the world, or reality, is taken as a stage. However, the world being a stage can be considered an extension of the same Aristotelian idea, with the world being a reflection of ‘the real’, and men being actors on this represented stage. It would imply that there’s a controller who controls the actions on the worldly stage, who writes the script. It is an intriguing idea – this interplay between the idea of life and theatre. This curious fluid connection between life and stage, the lived and the represented, the embodied and the staged has always been a fascinating subject for me. Is life drama, or is drama a reflection of life? Is the will free, or is freedom (or the lack of it) already willed? How is it that history writes the script for many future ages to come?

How is it that a simple story of a king and his victory continue to inspire awe, ideology, and politics in various heterogenous forms?

I am talking about the story of Ramayana. There’s a counterpoint to the above claim as well. My grandmother tells that her mother had no clue about who Rama was. Something that can qualify for ‘Believe it or not’

This was something that my generation would have been unable to believe, that grew up playing with the bows and arrows from the neighbourhood stalls that sold the weapons of Rama and Hanuman; a generation that grew up on an every-Sunday dose of prime time viewing of Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayana shown on National Television, in a time when there wasn’t much choice available in terms of surfing and skipping channels.

As I grew up, I got deeply interested in History which I studied for my undergraduate degree; and veered gradually towards the more cultural aspect of history, which drove me towards Performance Studies. One studied various performance theories, saw various plays and acted in

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<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, William. Act 2, Sc 7. Line 139. As You Like It.

theatre productions. Through all these wanderings, one autumn I was transported back to the old times, when I went to see different Ramlilas organized in Delhi. So, there were roadshows in Chandni Chowk at midnight when Rama, Sita and others drove in a chariot and people stood along the road with folded hands. Four or five different groups had their stages put up across old Delhi, and it was a massive affair with a sea of people coming to witness the grandest story of the victory of good over evil. There were giant wheels, sweets, 'gadas' of *Hanuman ji* on sale for children. The performances had a proscenium stage, and were laced with ribald humour. There still were groups that have an all-male cast. It is fascinating to study each group and its members, some of who have been in the business for decades. Some are not regular actors, they are a part of only the annual Ramlila, because they feel it's a kind of a divine call, and even an act of purification. I also witnessed the Ramlila staged at Sriram Bhartiya Kala Kendra where trained dancers, mostly from abroad put up a choreographed, spectacular, and a serious show where there were embedded debates as well – about the ambivalence of Ravana's position, for example.

With such varied juxtapositions, and my memory taking me back to the television serial of yore, I began wondering about the story of Rama all over again, and began wondering about my great grandmother. How could she not know the story that is told with such variegated colours? The hills of Himachal, cut off from the life in plains, a century back, was unaware of the biggest epic of this nation? Of course, one cannot make such a historical claim, but it is food for thought indeed.

I started reading up about the folk traditions in the hills associated with Rama, and stumbled upon the *Ramman* tradition of Garhwal. In it, curiously, Rama was not the biggest deity. There was Bhumiyaal Devta whose dance is trance inducing, in whose presence even Rama bends on his knees. The stories taken from the Ramayana are very selected episodes, and the entire tone and the content of this festival is different from the Ramlilas of the plains. A preliminary look suggests that there are several layers – that the story of Rama got merged with other local stories at some point and got manifested in a festival. It was a baffling and fascinating thought that the grand old mountains of Himalayas were for the longest time untouched or semi-touched by the grand old tradition of Ramlila and Ramkathas.

## The official Rama

Ramanand Sagar's Ramayana as already stated had acquired a cult status. Paula Richman says of this representation, "Observers estimate that over eighty million people watched the weekly broadcasts...It was not just that people watched the show: they became so involved in it that they were loathe to see it end. Despite the fact that Doordarshan, the government run network, had only contracted with the producer for a year's worth of episodes, the audience demanded more...Quite apart from such militant enthusiasm, the manner in which viewers watched the serial was also striking. Many people responded to the image of Rama on the television screen as if it were an icon in a temple. They bathed before watching, garlanded the set like a shrine, and considered the viewing of Rama to be a religious experience."<sup>2</sup>

Having read of this element of religious zeal, I once again went back to the Ramlila I had attended as a child in the neighbourhood, to which I was frequently accompanied by my grandmother. I remember how she, not unlike many others in the audience, sat with her hands folded in reverence and how at the end of each scene, with each curtain drop, there was low murmur, which in a collective, catapulted into a belligerent roar of 'Jai Siya/Shri Rama'. At that point, sitting happily in the lap of my grandmother, surrounded by people I knew from a neighbourhood I grew up in, I was unable to discern a 'militant enthusiasm' in it, as Richman would say. However, the successive events which mark the history of this nation, make one deeply aware of the collusion of the projection of the image of Rama and formulation of a reactionary sense of national identity

The mass circulation of Ramayana through the medium of television in 1987, according to Philip Lutgendorf, was a phenomenon. He says that "the Ramayana serial had become the most popular program ever shown on Indian television – and something more: an event of such proportions that intellectuals and policy makers struggled to come to terms with its significance and long range import."<sup>3</sup> The viewership of eighty million people in a land which was only beginning to open up to technology and was only gradually coming to afford amenities such as the television, did have a long range import. There are conjectures that this serial might have had a bearing on creating a religious frenzy that culminated in the demolition of the Babri

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<sup>2</sup> Richman, Paula. 1992. *Many Ramayanas: The diversity of a narrative tradition in South Asia*. New Delhi: OUP. pp 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Masjid. A 16<sup>th</sup> century mosque in the central Indian city of Ayodhya – Babri Masjid, was supposed to have been constructed on the orders of Babur, the first Mughal ruler in South Asia. However, it is believed in some circles that it had been built after bringing down a temple which marked the birth place of Rama. It was largely to avenge that demolition which had marred the pride of Hindus in the Mughal regime, that prompted the block by block demolition of the mosque four hundred years later. This is just a glimpse of the fiery Hindu revivalist ideology of the 90's.

### **Religion, history, politics**

However this was not the only time that 'sacred geography' became a feisty political issue. In 2007, three petitions were transferred from Madras High Court to the Apex Court challenging the Government's decision to construct the Sethusamudram Canal by dredging a portion of the Ram Setu, a 30- mile chain of limestone shoals called Adam's Bridge connecting India with Sri Lanka. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) filed an affidavit stating that there was no historical or scientific evidence to establish the existence of Lord Rama or the other characters of the Ramayana. Denying that the Ram Setu or Adam's Bridge is a man-made structure, it said Ramcharitmanas by Tulsidas cannot be taken as a historical record to "prove the existence of the characters or occurrence of events" depicted in it.<sup>4</sup> The ASI stand drew angry reactions from certain reactionary organisations and it was immediately labeled as an attempt to undermine the Hindu culture.

This sequence of events reminds one of the idea of Ideological State Apparatus that was floated by Louis Althusser. Althusser contends that states are not held by the sword primarily, but rather by interpellating the subjects into an ideology. The state operates through ideological apparatuses where the subjects are co-opted into an imagination of what a certain culture stands for. An example to demonstrate this would be the attempt at saffronisation of history text books in the first half of this decade. History text books for schools were being altered to downplay the Mughal part of history. In the changes proposed by the National Curriculum Framework during 2001, there was a revivalist zeal to celebrate a lot of ancient history when the Hindu

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hindustantimes.com/ramayana-no-basis-for-ram-setu-debate/article-1-247568.aspx> as viewed on March 10, 2010.

kingdoms were in power, and an aggressive attitude towards the idea of self-reflexive interrogation. The debate around the issue of Ram Setu became one of prime relevance, and it catapulted to being a debate both within the public sphere and the academic circles. The controversy reached such heights that NASA was obliged to declare that it had nothing to do with the use of its aerial photographs of the Adam's Bridge by some Hindu groups to imply that it was 1,750,000 years old and hence synchronous with 'ramrajya' – the golden period of Lord Rama's rule.<sup>5</sup> One witnessed the blurring of boundaries between myth and history. A myth is not just a myth; it contains history of a culture that has carried the mythology with it; it contains symbols that appear mythological but are historical in that a community has vested it with values. The values are not intrinsic; they rely for their existence, on an 'other', against which they define themselves.

According to Prof Richman, throughout Indian history many authors and performers have produced and many patrons have supported, diverse tellings of the Ramayana in numerous media. The televised Ramayana however did disturb some scholars like Romila Thapar, noted scholar of Indian history, who argues, that when the state acts as patron of the arts, it often favours social groups that yield great influence in that society. In Thapar's analysis, Doordarshan presented a Ramayana telling that reflected the concerns not of the vast majority of Indians, but of what she calls "the middle class and the other aspirants to the same status. For Thapar, the television Ramayana possessed a dangerous and unprecedented authority. In the past, many performances of the Ramayana have been sponsored by those in political power, but never before had a Ramayana performance been seen simultaneously by such a huge audience through a medium which so clearly presented itself as authoritative.<sup>6</sup> In addition, its broadcasters were self consciously presenting their version of the story as an expression of mainstream "national culture." In her critique of the television version, Thapar calls attention to the plurality of Ramayanas in Indian history: "the Ramayana does not belong to any one moment in history, for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places."<sup>7</sup>

That the television serial was followed by the demolition of the Babri Masjid in a few years

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/085999663025000> as viewed on July 5, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Romila Thapar, "The Ramayana Syndrome," Seminar, no 353 (January 1989) 72.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

may be a matter of coincidence, but one still conjectures that the creation of a religious ideology through mass media can lead to ossification of a certain sense of religious or national culture. Witnessing such events, one is piqued to engage with the idea of religion in the performative space of the public domain. Such politically charged events only further make one aware of a performance of religious ideology on the 'world's stage'. The images from the demolished Masjid which were carried and covered on live television was a performance of authority, of fear, of a symbol of an ideology that would come to dominate the political scene.

Recently, one witnessed a short sequence in the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, where a little boy, painted blue, holding a bow and arrow in his hand, embodying Rama, is shown, before violence in the name of religion and heritage is unleashed. All these images compelled one to look for, in Prof Richman's words - the other 'tellings' of Ramayana, which are hidden away from the mainstream view.

### **Quest for the hidden Ramas**

Along with Valmiki's Ramayana, there are hundreds of other tellings of the story of Rama in India, South-Asia and beyond. In confronting the diversity of the tradition, we are challenged to find ways of articulating relationships among these Ramayanas. Within these performative and textual traditions, there are so many stark ideological differences, that one realises that Ramayana itself has been a site for contestation of so many worldviews. Were the Doordarshan Ramayana and the broadly distributed videocassette tapes of it to achieve widespread acceptance as *the* version of the epic, Thapar warns of possible negative effects for Indian culture. The homogenization of any narrative tradition results in cultural loss; other tellings of the Ramayana story might be irretrievably submerged or marginalized.

It was perhaps this quest for retrieving a marginalized telling from the lap of the Himalayas before it gets subsumed by a dominant narrative that led me to *Ramman*, a folk theatre, ritual drama, village festivity or "ritual performance" as Prof William Sax would put it. *Ramman* is a ritual festival which manifests in the form of ritual theatre annually held in the twin villages of Saloor-Doongra, in the Paikhanda Valley of Chamoli district of Uttarakhand. It is performed as an annual offering to the village diety, Bhumiya devta, in the courtyard of the village temple.

*Ramman* is not performed at any other site in the Himalayas except for the region of Garhwal in Uttarakhand.

Having been so intrigued by various Ramas, and also having read about the famous Ramlila of Ramnagar, and wanting to work around the idea of 'efficacious'<sup>8</sup> performance within a community ritual, one started exploring if there was a rendition of Ramkatha in the mountainous belt of central Himalayas. There were two reasons why I wanted to look at this region. One emanated out of the intriguing knowledge about my great grandmother's lack of knowledge of Ramayana. The second reason was that these mountains have seen very little political upheavals for long periods of time, and have been able to preserve very old traditions, even the vestiges of which have disappeared in the plains. However, the Ramkatha and Ramayana renditions were not, and can never be bereft of political underpinnings. I discovered this in the case of *Ramman* as well. The fact that caste hierarchy is defined for the dramatis personae (for example, Rama is played by a Kshatriya only) , or the fact that Ravana is not demonised like in the plains, are telling signs of commissions and omissions.

### **Living theatre**

One of the hurdles one encounters as a student of Performance studies while studying such living traditions is the training one has received, of studying these through Western models. The idea of mimesis and representation has been central to the western idea of understanding performance and theatre. It is also a perception through which most western scholars tend to approach Indian performative and living traditions. William Sax however rejects the idea of studying the culture of others through the lens of one's own.

Performance, to be understood, in all its encompassing nature needs to be understood beyond the frames of the proscenium with which we have been overdosed. Performance needs to be seen beyond the paraphernalia of lights, costumes, perfect articulation, expert timing, chalking, blocking, scripting etc.

Performance, according to Richard Schechner, involves words like "script", "drama", "theatre"

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<sup>8</sup> 'Efficacious' an idea coined by Richard Schechner for performances which are not just entertaining, especially used in the case of Ramlila.

and “performance” which are all loaded and none has neutral synonyms. In a diagram, Schechner explains these as concentric, overlapping circles with the largest and the least strictly defined category being “performance” on the outside and drama as the tightest the most delineated thing is the smallest circle on the inside.

- Drama is the smallest and most intense circle. A drama is independent of the people who carry it, and it may be carried between places and times. Even if the people who perform the drama do not comprehend it, the drama remains preserved.
- Script is all that can be transmitted between places and times. The script is the code of events, and is transmitted between people. The transmitter must know the script and be able to teach it to others.
- Theatre is the event that is enacted by the performers. This is what the performers do during production. The theatre is concrete, present, and immediate. The theatre is meant to be the manifestation of the drama, but it is an articulation and concretization of it.
- Performance is the whole constellation of events that take place in and among the performers and the audience. This is all encompassing and inclusive, containing all of that which is not determined by the script or drama.

Schechner gives another brief summary of the terms: “To summarize thus far: the drama is what the writer writes; the script is the interior map of a particular production; the theatre is the specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance; the performance is the whole event, including audience and performers (technicians, too, anyone who is there).”<sup>9</sup>

Also reading up on other work and a lot of collaborative work done between anthropologists, linguists, ethnomusicologists, Indologists, folklorists and theatre scholars one realized how deeply connected the fields are, despite being so diverse and wide ranging. And as a discipline of Performance studies to fully achieve its scope, it must participate in inter disciplinary

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<sup>9</sup> Schechner, Richard. 2002. *Performance Theory – An introduction*. New York: Routledge. pp 87



communications.

In fact the question of inter disciplinary sharing has been at the heart of much of the collaborative work done by Schechner and Turner. In Schechner's opinion it would serve the academic pursuit of Performance studies better if we were to deepen our understanding and expand our horizon and vision in terms of understanding that Performance entails more than just the western tradition of dance and drama. It is to be viewed as a tool to understanding cultural processes.<sup>10</sup> One has to take into account that the discipline of performance has extensive potential to explore the living traditions and at the same time addressing links with disciplines such as folklore and anthropology. Especially in a country with as myriad traditions as ours, it is indeed a matter of joy that within the course structure one is allowed to explore the traditions of the community one relates to and in a way examine one's own roots and identity through the course of one's research. Together with the already stated reasons it was also a quest to work with a performance tradition within the Himalayas, a cartographic region one naturally tended to relate to. Thus I narrowed in on the central Himalayas and the region of Garhwal with the entrenched tradition of *Ramman*.

*Ramman* commences either on the 9<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> day after Baisakhi an agrarian festival in the month of April. Throughout this festival rituals are performed, the local version of the Ramkatha is sung and masked dances depicting various aspects of everyday life are enacted. The performances are conducted in honour of the village deity Bhumiyal devta, however the performance is not only restricted to local deities and goes onto include many Gods from the Hindu pantheon. Another important aspect of the performance is the singing of the Jagars, it is a form of folk music wherein legends are sung or invocations made to deities, the Garhwali version of the Ramkatha is also rendered by 'Jagaris' village singers adept at singing and having a knowledge of the legend or the narrative. A form of musical rendition of the local legends.

The performances are not only meant to propitiate the deities but the deities get embodied through the performers and appear as dramatis personae in the performances with specific roles. *Ramman* also bears a clear link with the historical memory of the community which is enacted in the performance known as Maal Nritya wherein a simulated war between the Garhwalis and Gurkhas is depicted which must have taken place in real historical time but now has become a

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<sup>10</sup> Schechner, Richard. Performance Studies: The broad spectrum approach. *The Drama Review*. Vol. 32-3. (Autumn 1988) pp 4-6.

part of a cultural memory of the people to which they keep going back. Historical accounts of the preëxisting tradition are available since 1911, but the tradition is said to have existed prior to this, however the documents available with the community attest to the enactment for over a hundred years. Every year on the Baisakhi day, the village priest announces the date for the festival and performance.

On the auspicious day of *Sankranti* in the Hindu month of Baisakh, Bhumiya devta comes out in a procession from his place of residence (which is a house in the village) to the central temple of the village, accompanied by the beating of drums and masked dances. At the end of the festival Bhumiya devta goes back to live into one of the residences for the entire year till the next annual celebration of *Ramman*.

The performance has various layers to it, for example on the second day of the festival, people offer *Hariyali* (newly sprouted barley plants), to the deity. The sequence of performances also takes into account Hindu deities such as Lord Ganesh, Lord Krishna and gradually the performance shifts towards the enactment of local Ramkatha, the core of the Rama story. This performance which appears as though forming the core of the entire event, in essence functions as a connecting link between the variegated narratives that intersperse *Ramman*. The local rendition of the Ramkatha is interspersed with performances taking into account the everyday living conditions of the people, the Mwar-Mwarin dance is one example of this, in which the representatives of the community depict the everyday hazardous life of the buffalo herding community and the travails they suffer while selling milk in the hills from the plains. Also there is the simulated enactment of the war that took place between the Gurkhas and the Garhwalis and it has become a part of the cultural memory of the people. The masked dances also make for interesting aesthetic aspect of the event.

There are many elements that need to be looked into and taken into account from the perspective of Performance studies. As there has been a lot of work done on charting out the numerous works done around Ramayana it is imperative to consider the logic that informs *Ramman* and in Prof Richman's words present it as yet another 'telling' of the Ramayana tradition. One needs to delineate how the study will add to the already existing work on the Ramkatha tradition while at the same time exploring the many newer nuances of the tradition and studying particular theological, social, political, regional, performance, ecological, gender

and caste contexts that exist therein.

## Chapterisation

### Chapter 1

#### The Many Storied House: The issue of text

In this chapter the notion of text is raised and through the readings of various scholars the variegated text of *Ramman* is explored. The notion of Valmiki's text from which all Ramayanas descend has been abandoned for Ramayana as a text exists in many forms through many ages. While discussing the multifariousness of the Ramkatha tradition one discusses the meta tales and their significance in that they connect the present time with mythical one. One explores the idea how the story is always present amidst the participants and the performers. The audience and the characters are always participating in a social debate and the omissions and commissions that a community undertakes, takes the story out of the annals of the past from a mythical time to our 'here and now'. Through this chapter one is able to gather how various tellings of Ramayana incorporate not just cultural material and local flavor, but also archetypes that grapple with social stigmas, taboos and most rigid and dogmatic questions of ethics. The western notions of textuality and the idea of the text and its author as of paramount importance have been discussed in the Indian context wherein audience, performers and communities have forever replenished texts according to their own tastes and understandings. This chapter discusses *Ramman* as an amalgamation of myriad texts spread over time and in terms of values. How the text of *Ramman* is impromptu, innovated on the spot and extracted from the pool of cultural memory is extrapolated in this chapter. As Prof Richman states how selective tellings adopt a non-traditional perspective on otherwise familiar features of the tale and have therefore proved effective means for conveying political views,<sup>11</sup> by exploring similar strains in *Ramman* this chapter tries to investigate in what sense(s) if at all can the particular verbal formulations in question be regarded as texts and how they are related to local concepts and practice. What is the function of the text in relation to the actual performance and how stable is what is being presented as text? Is it fixed and final in local practice as it looks when it is recorded on page?

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<sup>11</sup> Richman, Paula. 1992. *Many Ramayanas: The diversity of a narrative tradition in South Asia*. New Delhi: OUP. pp 12.

## Chapter 2

### **The Masque of Rama: Aesthetics and Performance in Ramman**

In this chapter I largely take up the performative aspects of the text which make it fluid, accessible and adaptable and which account for its survival and transmission. Here one tends to take into account the public culture that testifies to the vitality and significance of the epic related performances. In this chapter, the aesthetics that frame the *Ramman* performance are brought to the fore. Aspects of performance such as physical setting for the performance, the marking out of a 'special, non ordinary space'<sup>12</sup> and vesting objects with value are discussed keeping *Ramman* in focus. This chapter largely takes into account the field survey conducted and explicitly describes the conditions found in the four villages of Saloor-doongra, Doongri, Selang and Badgaon. An interesting aspect dealt with in this chapter includes the aligning of *Ramman* to the grand tradition of Ramlila. This leads to interesting debates about folk and classical continuities in the context of India. This chapter deals with specificities of the performance, such as structure and organization of audiences, special markers such as music, costume or other visual display attributes and mode of behavior by various participants. Common components of visual and material attributes of the performance are described and further analysed. It has been observed that much of the study of oral traditions has been based on the collection and analyses, taking the notion of text as the point of departure. However since this approach has now been challenged within the social and anthropological studies, the chapter on aesthetics and performance aspects of *Ramman* focuses on features that are embedded within the performance.

## Chapter 3

### **Winds of Change**

This chapter takes into account the changes that the living tradition of *Ramman* is facing in the current scenario. The tradition since the 10<sup>th</sup> century has been inventing and re-inventing itself and thereby adding variegated layers. The transformations that *Ramman* undergoes in the post-

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<sup>12</sup> Schechner, Richard. 2002. *Performance theory – An introduction*. New York: Routledge. pp 8-10

Independence urban centric India has been studied by showing a gradual takeover of the living tradition by mass entertainment forms and large scale migration of performers and artists in search for livelihoods. Issues of economic sustainability and politics of sponsorship have been discussed with relation to state institutions and government agencies. The issue of Ramman being the sole representative from India to be enlisted on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage has also been brought to the fore by subtly raising the question of politics of cultural representation. Again aspects of omission and commission are discussed whereby certain features of the ritual are preferred to be shunned out of fear of interpretations that may emanate within audiences of different cultures. The vicissitudes that a living tradition has to go through are discussed at length. The dangers that living traditions face from intervention from outside agencies and institutions have also been highlighted. The chapter seeks to evoke a thought on the possibilities of engaging the cultural industry in providing the necessary capital support without uprooting the tradition from its context and the function that it plays within the structure of the community. The inevitable aspect of change cannot be discounted; however questions are raised as to what strategies would need to be evolved to help in securing the identity of the tradition. This chapter also takes into account the aspects of composition, transmission and circulation which form a central point of the study of performance traditions.

## **Methodology**

Area of research: Field work was conducted in Saloor-Doongra, Doongri, Selang and Badgaon villages of the Chamoli district in Uttarakhand between 20<sup>st</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> April 2010. The main town was Joshimath and district headquarters were in Gopeshwar. The population largely practiced agriculture and dominantly belonged to the Kshatriya caste.

Interaction with the community members in the socio-cultural context of the ritual was conducted. Interviews of the performers both prior to the ritual festival and during and after the event were conducted. Social science techniques most importantly – participant observation for the field work, from the discipline of field work anthropology was used for intensive data collection. Biographical sketches, performance histories and socio-economic profiles of the performers were observed. Nature, form, context and structure in terms of how the event has

been ordered and sequenced and in the larger framework, aesthetically conceived were analysed. Audio-visual documentation of the performance process was undertaken. Aspects of time, place and spacing was taken into account. Modes of framing and organising together with participants and their behaviours were observed. Interviews have also been conducted with informants and scholars working on the performative traditions of Garhwal.

# CHAPTER 1

## The Many Storied House: The issue of text

A.K. Ramanujan recounts a story with much candour which hints at the multiplicity of the Ramkatha narrative.<sup>13</sup> According to Prof Paula Richman, for knowing the diversity of the Ramayana tradition, we need to abandon the notion of Valmiki as the text from which all other Ramayanas descended. On the other hand, we need to instead consider the 'Many Ramayanas' of which Valmiki's telling is one.

According to the story that Ramanujan recounts, one day Rama was sitting on his throne, and his ring fell off. When it touched the earth, it made a hole in the ground and disappeared into it. He asked Hanuman to fetch it for him. Now, Hanuman can enter the smallest of the holes as he has the capacity to become the smallest of the small and the largest of the large. He went through the hole into the netherworld. Rama asked Lakshman to guard the door of the room where he was sitting and having a conversation with Brahma and Vasistha. If anyone tried to trespass, Lakshman was to cut his head off. At this point, sage Vishwamitra, known for his earth-shattering anger comes and demands an audience with Ram. Lakshman knew that he wouldn't be able to stand the wrath of the angry sage, and that he would burn the entire city. He decides to face his own destruction than that of the kingdom, and walks in to tell Rama that the sage had come.

In the meanwhile, Rama's conversation with Brahma and Vashistha is over and he doesn't mind the entry of Vishwamitra. Lakshman, however says, that his head should be cut off since he had violated the orders. Rama says that the conversation was over, but Lakshman insists that this would be a blotch on Rama's name if he let go of the offence just because he was his brother. Lakshman decides to end his earthly existence by drowning in the Saryu river since he is an avatar of Seshnag. Rama then summons his courtiers and arranges for the coronation of his twin sons Luv and Kush and then himself follows the example of his brother and ends his earthly existence in the same river.

All this while Hanuman has been in the netherworld looking for the ring. The king summons him and asks him his purpose. The King is amused on learning the object of Hanuman's visit

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<sup>13</sup> Ramanujan, A.K. 1992. "Three Hundred Ramayanas" in (ed) Richman, Paula. *Many Ramayanas*. Delhi: OUP. pp22-25.

and brings forth a platter before Hanuman on which there are thousands of rings. He then asks Hanuman to choose the ring that belongs to *his* Rama, for all those rings, says the king, belong to no one else but Rama. On seeing Hanuman baffled, the King says that Rama belongs to no one time. He says that there have been several Ramas and whenever one incarnation is about to be over, Rama's ring falls down.<sup>14</sup>

### **Rama within Rama**

The above stated story is a meta-Ramayana where there is an acknowledgement that Ramayana as a text exists in many forms through many ages. It also, of course, connotes the timelessness of the story whereby allegorically Rama is born in every age. Coming round in a circle again it is said in popular understanding that since Rama is born in every age, there is a Ramayana of every age as well.

There are many examples of meta-Ramayanas like the example stated above. In Adhyatma Ramayana (16<sup>th</sup> c.), when Rama is exiled, he refuses to take Sita with him. She argues on the usual lines that she's his wife; it's her duty, she has to share his highs and lows etc. Rama doesn't relent despite many such arguments. Sita gets furious and says, "Countless Ramayanas have been composed before this. Do you know of one where Sita doesn't go with Rama to the forest?" This is the clincher<sup>15</sup>. This motif is repeated in several Ramayanas.

Ramanujan tells another tale – that of the telling of Ramayana. A cultured woman marries an uncultured man in a village. A hermit, and a brilliant solo performer of Ramkatha comes to the village and the wife takes her husband along so that he gets initiated into things of higher taste. It is supposed to be an all-night performance. The husband dozes off; and in the morning when the party breaks, everyone is given sweets including him. The wife asks the husband about what he thought, and he said it was a very sweet experience. She thinks his mind is opening up to things of culture. On the second night, a little child sits on his shoulders, and he falls asleep again. In the morning, he has a backache as a result; and on being asked the same question again, he says, "It was very painful". The wife is delighted that the husband is responding so well. On the third night, he sleeps again, and a dog comes and pisses into his open mouth at

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<sup>14</sup> The above story is available in various languages; besides all mainstream Indian languages and several marginalized languages such as Tulu and tribal languages like Bhili and Santhali. It is also found in Balinese, Cambodian, Chinese, Javanese, Laotian, Malaysian and Thai.

<sup>15</sup> Richman, Paula. 1992. Many Ramayanas: The diversity of a narrative tradition in South Asia. New Delhi: OUP. pp-33.



dawn. To the same question the third time, he says, “It was very salty.” The wife realises that something is wrong and makes him sit with her in the first row and makes sure he is awake. Like the first ring episode mentioned in this chapter, it is again another ring episode where Hanuman is taking a signet ring as identification token from Rama for Sita and flying over seas. The ring falls off into the sea, and Hanuman is perplexed. At this moment, the husband from the audience yells to Hanuman that he will get the ring. He dives into the sea and gets the ring for Hanuman. Ever since then, the man has been respected as a wise elder. Ramanujan says that there are Telugu, Kannada and Tamil versions of this tale.<sup>16</sup>

All these meta-tales have a great significance, in that they always connect the present time with the mythical one. When Sita retorts and asks if there's any instance of her not going in exile with Rama, or when the uncultured man on listening to the woes of Hanuman plunges into the sea across time and space, or when Hanuman encounters a thousand rings to choose from – the metaphor is the same – that the story of Ramayana is not a story of the past, or from the annals of mythical time, but that the story is always present in our midst and that we are a part of it. The participant in the audience is also a performer, and so are the characters of Ramayana – they have a role to perform in sync with the endless continuum. The audience and the characters are all participants in a social debate. When Sita invokes all the Ramayanas vis-a-vis the exile question, she is not just urging Rama, she's urging the society to participate in the debate and answer in the affirmative.

The participant-performer intertwining is seen quite visibly in the tradition of *Ramman* as well. A dance may be happening in the centre of a circle, and someone from the audience may get up to teach a step or two to the performers. And this is not during the rehearsal, but during the final performance itself.

The above cited anecdotes also bring to light very interesting notions of time and timelessness that are embedded in our performance texts. All the three stories are codes – codes of time as well as values. The first ring story implies that there is a Rama in every age, as well as that there are a thousand co-existent Ramas; for the king asks Hanuman which one is his Rama's ring. The member in the audience jumping into the sea is perhaps a metaphor for a huge sea in which we

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<sup>16</sup> Richman, Paula. 1992. *Many Ramayanas: The diversity of a narrative tradition in South Asia*. New Delhi: OUP. Pp 46-48.

are all floating – which is beyond time. It is of course value laden – that whoever listens to the tale, gets a certain power. The stories are linear, and cyclical both. The sequence of the kernel structure is never broken but the stories are played again and again, and with multiple and fluid meanings.

In *Ramman*, the Ramkatha performances are minimalistic. So there could be a set of short dances accompanied by the singing of Jagar – which is Ramayana rendered in lyrical form in Garhwali dialect. The dance could be disconnected with the content of the accompanying lyrics. It is interesting to see how something similar is observed in the cafe culture of a globalised economy – where television plays in cafes without sound; and there's an accompanying and disconnected music playing. There could be a match or news playing on the television, with hip hop music in the background. Perhaps a little stretched but the analogy is not completely misplaced- a set of different codes of the same milieu wafts into the space. At the face of it, it appears like a contrived comparison, but a similar set of actions take place in the case of *Ramman* as well. There's a dance, and music – from the same milieu – a set of sounds operating at a different level, and set of visual performances at another level – both from the same story. The assumption is that the audience knows the story – it is a part of him – different senses can be appealed to simultaneously with different codes.

Dr D R Purohit who's spent a lot of time studying folk cultures of Garhwal contends that the performance texts of *Ramman* are highly codified.<sup>17</sup> He says that these stories must have been very long, and there must have been long scripts at a certain point of time, and that these have got shortened over time. So a short dance probably carries a dense weight behind it. The point is well taken, since in orally transmitted texts, codes are developed for the sake of building a pool of cultural memory.

However, the counterpoint is that texts are only secondary, and were used as an appendage to understand the story – that the performance text more significantly evolved through the performances themselves. I shall however return to this issue of oral texts later while discussing in detail the texts involved in *Ramman* performances.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Dr DR Purohit in person. April 27, 2010.

## The blind men's elephant

Thapar calls attention to the plurality of Ramayana in Indian history: “ the Ramayana does not belong to any one moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places.”<sup>18</sup> The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and intellectual concerns of each group were articulated. According to K. Satchidanandan, the versions of the Ramayana obtained in South Asia are so diverse that one has to specially look for the narratological resemblances that help us identify them as Ramayana.<sup>19</sup>

Just the list of languages in which the story of Rama exists is fascinatingly expansive: Annamese, Balinese, Bengali, Cambodian, Chinese, Gujarati, Javanese, Kannada, Kashmiri, Khotanese, Laotian, Malaysian, Marathi, Oriya, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Santali, Sinhalese, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tibetan. Sanskrit alone has twenty five or more renderings. Ramanujan tells that as long ago as the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Kumaravyasa, a Kannada poet, chose to write a *Mahabharata*, because he heard the cosmic serpent which upholds the earth groaning under the burden of Ramayana poets.<sup>20</sup>

Coming to the subtitle, 'the blind men's elephant' is an anomaly because the men involved in interpreting the elephant have done so with a long vision in mind. There are many tellings apart from the Sankritic and the north Indian renderings.

The Jaina tellings are the most revisionary in terms of recreating a vision. In them, Ravana is more like a Shakesperean hero with a tragic flaw. Rama is just an evolved human being close to *Kaivalya*. Since Rama has to attain that state, he cannot indulge in violence, and it is left to Lakshman to vanquish Ravana, a deed for which he goes to hell. The Jaina texts argue that the Brahminical prejudices have turned Ravana into a flesh eating, blood drinking demon. They try to reason through the Hindu texts and question as to how Kumbhakaran did not wake up despite

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<sup>18</sup> Romila Thapar, “The Ramayana Syndrome”, Seminar, no 353 (January 1989) 72.

<sup>19</sup> K. Satchidanand: Ezhuthaccan's Adhyatma Ramayana and the Ramayana Tradition. In (ed) Avadhesh Kumar Singh, *Ramayana through the ages*.

<sup>20</sup> Ramanujan, A.K. 1992 “Three Hundred Ramayanas” in ed Richman, Paula. *Many Ramayanas*. The diversity of a narrative tradition in South Asia .Delhi: OUP. pp 24.

boiling oil poured into his ears, or how the mighty Indra was captured by Ravana. The Jaina Ramayana of Vimalasuri, called Paumacariya, is well aware of the Valmiki text and very consciously corrects its errors.<sup>21</sup> Ravana is learned, able, and has earned weapons and fame through austerities. In one anecdote, a queen of a rival is in love with him – she sends him the map of the fort and Ravana is able to win the battle easily. Thereafter, he returns the kingdom to the defeated king, and advises the queen to return to her husband. He encounters a soothsayer who tells him that Sita would be his undoing. Very like a Shakespearian hero, he resists himself from falling in love, and falls, and falls ultimately on the battlefield.

In another Jaina telling, Sita is Ravana's daughter, and he is unaware of it. The classic Electra situation becomes his undoing. It is intriguing to see a Jungian archetype at play, and that in an inverted manner, for it is the father trying to marry a daughter, like Electra in Greek mythology rather than Oedipal situation where Oedipus marries his mother. In a Ramakatha of Kannada,<sup>22</sup> sung by traditional bards (*tamburi dasayyas*) who were untouchables at a certain point of time, the story begins with Ravana and Mandodri having difficulties in having a child. Ravana performs austerities and Shiva comes to him disguised as a mendicant and gives him a mango to cure the sterile curse. Ravana is to offer the flesh of the fruit to his wife, and eat lick the seed himself. When the time comes to consume the fruit, his hunger gets the better of him, and he eats the fruit and gives the seed instead to Mandodri. In a strange turn of events, Ravana gets pregnant himself, and gives birth to Sita through his nose on the ninth day. In Kannada 'Sita' means 'to sneeze'. The sages advise him to dress up the child and leave her in some place where someone may find her. And so she is discovered by Janaka, and the name is again justified, as 'Sita' means 'furrow' in Sanskrit. This intriguing prequel is a hint at the male envy of womb and childbirth.

It is fascinating to see how various tellings of Ramayana incorporate not just cultural material and local flavour, but also archetypes those grapple with social stigmas, taboos and the most rigid and dogmatic questions of ethics.

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<sup>21</sup> Richman, Paula. 1992. *Many Ramayanas: The diversity of narrative tradition in South Asia*, New Delhi: OUP. pp 34.

<sup>22</sup> Ramanujan, AK. 1992. "Three Hundred Ramayanas" in (ed) Richman, Paula *Many Ramayanas: The diversity of narrative tradition in South Asia*. Delhi: OUP. pp 36.

## Scribe and de-scribe

From the above discussion, one gathers that there are various scribes and they describe according to their cultural milieu and ideology, while retaining a basic kernel. I use the word 'scribe' rather than 'author'. One, because there's been a tradition of scribes writing religious texts, with a bigger authority over them, which gives it much more legitimacy. Two, because every small author on the way has shaped a local text according to his context, so that the authority in the end rests with communities than single writers.

Ramanujan contends that there is a common code and a common pool, and that this pool serves as the warehouse for contesting creativities and ideologies:

These various texts not only relate to prior texts directly, to borrow or refute, but they relate to each other through this common code or common pool. Every author, if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique crystallisation, a new text with a unique texture and fresh context. The great texts rework the small ones, for "lions are made of sheep" as Valery said. And sheep are made of lions, too: a folk legend says that Hanuman wrote the original Ramayana on a mountaintop, after the great war, and scattered the manuscript; it was many times larger than what we have now. Valmiki is said to have captured only a fragment of it. In this sense, no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling – and the story has no closure although it may be enclosed in a text. In India and in Southeast Asia, no one ever reads the Ramayana or the Mahabharata for the first time. The stories are there, "always already".<sup>23</sup>

So there are lions and there are sheep; some sheep are fragments of a lion; some lions have been made of many sheep. With centuries of bardic traditions, and contesting discourses, the history of Ramayana is nothing short of being 'Maya' itself. It is a very important point that Ramanujan makes, that no story is a mere retelling. The storytellers are aware of the pool, and they add their own fish to it according to their own aesthetic and political sensibility. The most important point in the above quote is about the stories being there "always already". The stories forge a complex connection with history and myths – a continuum of tradition, as also of debates around social values.

<sup>23</sup> Ramanujan, AK. 1992 "Three Hundred Ramayanas" in ed Richman, Paula. *Many Ramayanas. The diversity of narrative tradition in South Asia.* Delhi.: OUP. pp 46.



Because the stories are there “always already”, one sees in *Ramman*, an evolved code that tells the story just through a vocabulary of minimalist gestures. So Ravana comes and dances, Sita comes and dances, the former puts the latter on his shoulder – and this becomes the whole episode of the abduction of Sita. As we've already seen, the singing of Jagar may be disconnected with the current action of performance. This is because the story is there “always already”. And yet this telling is not a mere retelling. It has its own scheme of presences and absences which we shall discuss in a little while.

The above discussion brings us at variance with the western notion of textuality, wherein the existence of a written text and its author is of paramount importance. It is inappropriate to study non-western traditions through the western lens, for western model of critique lays importance on definite text, author and teleology etc. It is also very limiting to study non-western performative traditions through western frameworks, for instance in terms of the divergent notions of time, which is linear in the former unlike the notion of cyclical time which exists amongst several tribes and various philosophical schools of India. According to Prathama Banerjee, when the British were trying to colonise the eastern part of India they were easily able to get the Bengalis to adapt to their notion of time, However, the Santhal tribe proved to be a challenge to their colonization, for they could never be appropriated to the notion of linear time, because of which they had to be physically displaced for the process of colonization to be carried without hinderance.<sup>24</sup>

Roland Barthes talked of the death of the author<sup>25</sup>. According to him, once a text was written, it had a life of its own, to be interpreted as desired by the readers, in the context they chose to place it in and according to their respective understanding. In the west, the notion of the author being dead is a fairly recent phenomenon. However, as discussed in the previous paragraphs, if one was to start seeking examples in the Indian context it is perhaps a well accepted and known tradition. The audience, performers and communities have replenished texts according to their own tastes and understandings. It can be seen both ways – that in our performative traditions, author's always dead and always born.

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<sup>24</sup> Banerjee, Prathama. 2006. *Politics of Time: “Primitives” and history writing in a colonial society*. Delhi: OUP.

<sup>25</sup> Barthes, Roland. “Death of the Author”. *Aspen*, No 5,6. 1967, 1968.

One is often reminded of the difficulties encountered in coming to one comprehensive edition of the Mahabharata. Prof Molly Kaushal says that 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 a region. Linking the text with local geography and rituals; incorporating songs and narratives from the native repertoire; and by making the characters follow the moral and ethical codes of the community, the stories become locally and contextually bound, many a times making it an ancestral tale of the origins of a tribe.<sup>26</sup> In this way the text is constantly being recreated in the 'now and here'. It is simultaneously 'nowhere' in the schema of the western teleology, because of a certain timelessness built into the form of the performances and the multiplicity and fluidity of historical contexts within which the text is embedded.

### **Ramman and text**

Ascribing authorship is a complex issue. In *Ramman*, one can see the amalgamation of myriad texts spread over time and in terms of values. If one is to delineate even five texts incorporated into the overall framework of *Ramman*, one can talk of the inbuilt Ramkatha structure, the use of mask tradition, the local narratives of characters such as the baniya-banyain, mwar-mwarin, the historical figures from the battle between the Gurkhas and the Garhwalis, known as the maal nriya, the invocations to Ganesh, Kalinki, Surya devta and Bur devta and the deity of the local chieftains, the Kathyuri kings – Narsingh devta. It is amazing to see a tradition be an amalgamation of so many texts built into its structure. The Ramkatha element is pervasive; it appears as a 'sutradhar' element in the whole performance, as though it appears only to link the various motley elements that are part of the whole text. The Ramkatha element is rendered through the process of Jagar singing. Jagars are Garhwali lores and legends which are rendered in the form of folk songs and they are unique to different occasions. It is a prevalent bardic tradition in this part of the region. The masked performances also form an intrinsic part of the performance. They become objects of veneration, for some of the masks represent deities such as Narsingh, Ganesh, Surya etc. The local characters which intersperse the Ramkatha

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<sup>26</sup> Kaushal, Molly.2008. *Ankan, Manchan aur Vaachan*- Seminar proceedings. Delhi. IGNC.A.

performance of *Ramman* such as the baniya-baniyain, mwar-mwarin give a very native feel to the entire performance. These characters also bring in the humorous element into the performance for these are characters that the village folk relate to most often.

### **Bhumiyal devta**

In the *Ramman* performance one of the most awe-inspiring aspect is the dance of the Bhumiyal or Bhumichetrapal devta. Bhumiyal is represented by, or embodied through, yak hair that is perched on top of a pole. He is the God of the land and the field. Even though the people constantly align *Ramman* to the more pronounced tradition of Ramlila, and the notion of enacting the life of Lord Rama, it is Bhumiyal who is the deity of the people and to whom they address their grievances. On the first day of the *Ramman* festivity, the time when Bhumiyal is brought out for the first time from his place of residence. Haryali (new fresh barley shoots in a basket) is brought and offered to the deity who is also regarded as the protector of the fields and livestock. A Jhumela is then sung and danced by the village folk and is keenly participated in both by the men and the women. Jhumela is a folk song-and-dance form. People dance in a circular pattern – a very common form found in most of the mountainous regions. During the singing of Jhumela, the most important feature that takes place is when Bhumiyal takes audience with the village folk. Bhumiyal becomes the deity to whom the people sing the travails of their life to and to whom they literally ‘talk to’ about their everyday lives. During this time the village people come forth and sing and tell him of all that has happened during the year gone by, the number of births within the community, the number of ‘village daughters’<sup>27</sup> that have been married and thus moved virilocally to their husband’s village, the number of old men and women from the village who are no longer here in this year’s celebration. At times it appears as though Bhumiyal is a sort of local village headman and through these rituals he convenes a meeting with the populace in his domain. He hears of how the young and old are faring and also lends his ears to the hardships faced by the villagers and in this way makes an assessment for his intervention. In a very basic sense when this tradition is understood, it appears to have some semblance to the present day census process.

A parallel of this tradition is seen in the Gambhira tradition of Bengal – it exists both in West Bengal and Bangladesh. The tradition is named after one of the names of Shiva. In it, Shiva is

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<sup>27</sup> Sax, William. Village Daughter, Village Goddess: Residence, Gender and Politics in a Himalayan Pilgrimage. *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Aug 1990) pp 491-512



the chief character of a performance. He stands in the centre with supplicants in rags on the periphery who come with accounts of all that has happened during the year, as well as with their grievances. The devotees of Shiva sing their grievances, and the songs are a parody of popular film songs, and the content is bitingly satirical towards the establishment. In the colonial times, the songs poked fun at the zamindars, and they were determined to weed it out. However, it survived and has reinvented its idiom in every age to appeal to the masses.<sup>28</sup>

It is interesting to see these kinds of performance texts in these 'living traditions'. Parts of these texts are impromptu, parts of them innovated on the spot, and parts of them rehearsed beforehand. These texts revitalise the traditions, and keep them current as also “always already” present. As has been emphasised earlier, these folk traditions have a built-in-structure of time that makes them “now and here” and “nowhere” simultaneously. This kind of a 'durbar' also forges a direct connection between the deity and his subjects. This deity-subject performance builds a long tradition over time which imbues the structure with its aesthetics, while the text is left fluid, discursive and argumentative. This recording of annual events also reinforces the bonds within the community, and this mock-court of sorts insinuates that it might have been a serious business at some point of time.

Bhumiya is not connected with Ramkatha in any manner but is the most integral part of *Ramman*. The tradition's performance text is very interesting in that how Rama's story co-exists with many other stories, and all these texts are always performed together.

### **Cartographic text**

The text adapts to the geography and the customs, and it is this process which lends it a very native flavor. Or rather, the local cartography at some point of time was made to fit into Ramkatha, to make Rama their own, as well as make the already sacred land more sacred.

There is a point from which one can see a mountain (Giri Parvat) in Chamoli district, the top of which seems slashed off. It lacks a regular peak. According to the folklore, it was on this missing peak that the 'sanjeevani booti' used to grow, and thus Hanuman cut that part off the mountain and carried it to where Lakshman lay in need of the remedial herb. In this part of the

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<sup>28</sup> Extracted from dossier sent by Govt of West Bengal to Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts for nomination to be sent to UNESCO for its Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. 2009.

region, it is common for people to jest with the character of Hanuman, and they also do not consider him a deity or pray him. This is quite at variance with the situation in the plains just below in Uttar Pradesh, where one can find Hanuman temples and statues strewn. It is, as if, Hanuman had scattered as many statues of himself as the pages of Ramayana as discussed earlier in this chapter, where we saw a tale where Hanuman is the writer of Ramayana at a mountaintop and he scatters the pages from there. This variance in attitude towards Hanuman, with most Ramayana texts, despite the story that this is the place where the life-saving herb was found by Hanuman, is startling and sets one pondering. That the terrain has been made sacred by associating it with such an important part of Rama's story, and yet the protagonist associated with the event is not a revered deity implies that the story of Rama is late entry into this region, where the baggage of tradition either was not too strong, or that local interpretations and reworkings of the story were very deliberate and ideological in nature.

A little digression would perhaps be useful to explicate this issue of reworkings. In the Thai version *Ramkien*, the emphasis is on war, primarily because Thai history is full of wars, and the debates and discourses are around war and warfare. Family values and spirituality are not the prime concerns as is the case with most of the Indian Ramayanas. Hanuman is quite a ladies' man who "doesn't at all mind looking into the bedrooms of Lanka".<sup>29</sup>

In the *Ramman* performance, Hanuman is generally seen as a jester, a funny character, and evokes laughter the moment he enters the performing arena. Generally played by an ebullient teenage boy, he is a part of the crowd more than the arena, and goes around collecting offerings from devotees, for Bhumiya devta. He mostly goes to the ladies since they are the ones who are supposed to bring offerings. He amuses people with his awkward gestures and monkey-like antics. Since it's a young boy playing the role, he is generally afraid before his tail is lit up for the Lanka-burning sequence. His reluctance at that moment becomes a comic situation, whereupon he lights up a haystack as a symbol of burning Lanka. This is one of the few sequences where symbolism reaches some kind of visual representation. Generally coded dance performances are enough to depict episodes. It is for the spectacular and comic effect both that probably symbolism is extended here. Also being an agrarian land in the mountains, the burning

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<sup>29</sup> Ramanujan, AK. , 1992. "Three Hundred Ramayanas" in (ed) Richman, Paula. *Many Ramayanas :The diversity of a narrative tradition in South Asia*. Delhi: OUP. pp 39..

of dry hay also becomes a bonfire for the community.

This non-God-hood of Hanuman is something I gathered through personal interviews during my fieldwork. However, Shivanand Nautiyal talks about Jagars that are sung for Hanuman<sup>30</sup>. Hanuman possesses the body of 'Pasua'<sup>31</sup> who dances with a frenzy and uproots a big bush/tree to be put in fire for *Mandan*. However, it is left ambivalent if Hanuman shares a god-like status as Rama does.

Another example of cartographic appropriation is that there is a village by the name 'Banas'. According to the local folklore, Garhwal, was home to Lord Rama in the years of banishment. 'Banas' literally translates to banishment. Even in the Chamoli district and especially in the Saloor-Doongra village, during my field trip, the local people explained the masked characters that come between the Ramkatha sequences as people whom Rama, Lakshman and Sita met in their years in the forest.

The *mwar-mwarin* sequence where the local buffalo herding community is represented and their daily travails are depicted, are presumed to be people Rama met while spending his years in banishment. This particular sequence is rooted in the day-to-day problems with one instance where a tiger attacks a milk-seller, and other sequences depicting the long, arduous journey undertaken in the profession of a hill milk-seller who has to travel up and down all the time. Another similar dance of *baniya-baniyain*, depicting the travails of merchants, is also performed.

Even the characters from the recent and more historically placed battle between the Garhwalis and Gurkhas, reinforcing once again an intertwining of the historical and mythical time in *Ramman*. This is known as *Maal-Nritya* where two warriors come – one from the east, and the other from the west, and get involved in a pitched battle. The battle ends with the defeat of the Gurkha warrior, and ends with a comic effect, poking fun at the Gurkhas.

Thus, the *Ramman* performance text involves telling of historical tales with local prejudices,

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30 Kukreti Bhishma. "Religious dance, folk songs in Uttarakhand, Garhwal" at <http://www.apnauttarakhand.com/classification-of-folk-dance-songs-of-uttarakhand-garhwal-3/>. Last viewed on July 15, 2010.

31 Pasua is usually the oracle or whom the deity takes possession. It comes from the idea that gods usually ride their oracles, so pasua in translation means an animal.

telling of daily travails and social structures, revising current community situations through reviews heard by Bhumiya devta, and most of this is in some way considered connected with Rama's story.

### **Rama's story in Ramman**

In most versions of Ramayana, Dasaratha has three wives; Rama is banished to the forest for fourteen years at Kaikeyi's request to her husband to redeem her boon; Bharata rules the kingdom on Rama's behalf. In the forest, Surpanakha's nose is cut off by Lakshman in response to her endeavours to seduce him; Rama kills Bali, the monkey king; Ravana hears of Sita's beauty from his sister, abducts Sita from the forest with the help of the demon, Mareecha. A war ensues between Rama and Ravana on account of this abduction; Rama is helped by Sugreeva, Hanuman and Vibhishana – Ravana's own brother; Rama retrieves Sita; but despite the test of fire which proved her purity, he refuses to take her back as she has lived in another man's household; rumours force him to abandon Sita in the forest where under Sage Valmiki's care she gives birth to the twins – Luv and Kush. When she finally comes back, Rama again subjects her chastity to test at which Sita prays to her mother Earth to take her back into her bosom. Bereft of Sita, Rama too abandons the world.

While these tropes recur in most of the versions, they differ profoundly in the settings, portrayal of characters, in the narrative details in the presentations of episodes and the relative significance of people and events.<sup>32</sup>

In *Ramman* performance the most apparent variance is that in all of the villages where *Ramman* is performed, nowhere does it culminate with the war in which Rama kills Ravana and thus establishes the rule of good over evil. In Saloor-Doongra where the most massive scale *Ramman* is organized and is attended by huge masses, the Ramkatha sequence depicts the following:

### **Swayamvar of Rama and Sita**

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32 Satchidanandan. K. Ezhuthaccan's Adhyatma Ramayana. In *Ramayana through the ages* (ed) Awadesh Kumar Singh

This is a very short sequence where Sita stands with a *kalash* opposite Rama. They take a few rounds with the accompaniment of Jagar songs. The Jagars may even be missing, but the drums accompany the sequences for sure. There is a big *dhol* and a small percussion instrument *damaun*, to the beats of which the performers dance. The beats are very important; everything is in multiples of 18. The attachment with 'eighteen' comes from Mahabharata in which there are 18 parvas (episodes). Also, the great war was fought for 18 days. I shall discuss this further in the next chapter. However, since structures are an intrinsic part of the text, it is important to introduce these ideas here. The deviance from the text of the plains can be seen clearly here since *saat phere* or seven rounds would have been the normal scheme of marriage symbolism. The absence of the seven rounds, and the presence of 18-beat-based dance makes the text of this marriage stand out.

### **Sita getting enchanted by the golden Deer**

The Golden deer appears as a masked character who is strangely led by a man. Strange because Ravana's aide Mareecha in most texts transforms himself into a deer. Ram and Lakshman are shown going in a circle according to the text, in pursuit of the deer.

### **Abduction of Sita**

In the next sequence, Sita is carried by Ravana over his shoulder depicting her abduction. However unlike the images of Ravana one is familiar with, that depicting a large ten headed demon, the Ravana of *Ramman*, and more specifically of Saloor-Doongra, is just an ordinary looking man, with no embellishments to make him appear larger-than-life. He appears in a tattered gunnysack, looking like any other character who intersperse the dance sequences of Rama and Lakshman in *Ramman*.

## **Burning of Lanka**

The abduction sequence is followed by Hanuman dancing to the beats unaccompanied by Rama or Lakshman, after which he goes out of the dancing arena, into the audience and swiftly moves towards the stack of hay which has been piled towards a corner. He lights the stack of hay, symbolically representing the burning of Lanka and thus ending the Ramkatha narrative. This is one of the many instances where the audience space morphs into the performing arena.

In the village Doongri, the character of Ravana does not even appear. Sita just gets bewitched by the golden deer and goes following it. In the next scene, Rama and Lakshman take a round of the performing space, searching for her. After another round, they enter the temple which signifies the end of the Ramkatha narrative.

In Selang village, where *Ramman* is mostly a pantomime based production, Rama, Lakshman, Sita and Hanuman appear only intermittently and in the common parlance it is more of a 'Jhanki' production.

In Bargaon, the Ramkatha narrative comes to an end when Sita has been enchanted by golden deer, asks Rama and Lakshman to capture it for her. She, meanwhile, enters the temple, thereby symbolically representing her disappearance without even alluding to the character of Ravana. She appears again, wearing a mask, now having changed into a different character, and starts blessing the village folk by smearing red powder on their foreheads.<sup>33</sup> This text could be read as Sita having gone through all the travails, and tests by fire, has come out as a true 'Sati', a transformed person, more a goddess than a person. The smearing of the red powder of course has resonances with Holi, the festival of colours. The red colour symbolises fertility, and links Sita with the cult of fertility. According to most texts, she was found in a furrow and went back to the earth. Therefore, Sita has parallels with earths and is a metaphor for ideas such as burden-bearing, forgiving and yet being fecund.

## **The missing Ravana**

In all these representations and performances of *Ramman*, the most striking feature is that

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<sup>33</sup> This idea will be further discussed in the next chapter discussing aesthetic and performance aspects.

nowhere has the character of Ravana been portrayed on evil and demonic lines. In three representations, the character of Ravana was not even invoked during my field trip, and in the only representation where Ravana does physically abduct Sita by carrying her on his shoulder, he is rendered as a common village man, unlike the ten headed monster with enormous evil powers as he is portrayed in the classic texts and their tellings.

As already discussed, Jaina tellers of Ramkatha were well aware of the standard north Indian texts, reworked them, rationalised them, raised questions about many fantastic events. The most revisionary aspect of the Jaina tellings is recharacterizing Ravana who is shown as a noble, upright hero. Even in Kamban's Ramyana, Ravana is an erudite scholar, keen musician, and Vidya Vencatesan contends that he woos Sita with such style and finesse that Rama pales in comparison.<sup>34</sup> For Periyar, the political leader, Ravana was the ultimate hero. The only instance of a Ravana temple in North India is one at Kanpur<sup>35</sup>, which is located in the precincts of Kailash temple. The doors of the Ravana temple open only on the day of Dussehra.

The case of missing Ravana is curious and I couldn't find any convincing argument in the interviews I conducted during the field trip. One argument could be that it is a highly codified performance where only the essence of the story is retained. However, in the most compressed volume of work, Ravana needs to have a position since the story hinges on him.

So the second argument could be that probably it was decided that the performance would involve only figures that are venerable, so that it is an absolutely auspicious ritual. I conjecture this, also because there was a sacrificial cult in Badgaon, where a *sadhu* would be called upon to take on all evils haunting the village upon himself. He was considered a great man, and treated with great reverence. However, when he took the evils upon himself, he was taken to the edge of the gorge and sacrificed. This act of purification by the *sadhu*, and his sacrifice would cleanse the village of any dark shadows.<sup>36</sup> May be it was thought that evil is attracted by its performance, and only the sacrificial saint is capable of containing it. And thus, no performance

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<sup>34</sup> Vidya Vencatesan is a scholar who's worked extensively on Ramayana and compared Valmiki's Ramayana with French epic *Le Cycle de Guillaume*. This quote is from Kunal Purandare's article "Where Ravana is a hero, scholar, warrior, lover" DNA, 27 April, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> From the same article as above.

<sup>36</sup> This idea is explained in the next chapter while discussing the character of 'Hastola' an effigy of a buffalo like demon who appears in the *Ramman* sequence of Badgaon.

of evil would take place in a ritual performance.

The third argument, which is a counterpoint to the above, is that probably Ravana is not a demonic figure in the Garhwali imagination. The opposite is also not true. Probably, it is just indifference to that part of the narrative. Since the performances have evolved over centuries, and have got codified, it is difficult to know.

The fourth argument, which would run for the entire text of *Ramman*, is that the set of performances have evolved with the merger of a Great tradition and a Little tradition<sup>37</sup> – the former is the mainstream Ramayana traditions of the northern plains, and the latter is the worship of local deities through ritual performances in the central Himalayas. Ramayana is not intrinsically their story, it was imported from the plains, and the appropriation was done keeping in mind the aesthetic and historical traditions of the region.

It would be noteworthy to recount that the only fight sequence that is depicted is that of Garhwalis and Gurkhas, and this sequence is also depicted comically. Having lived in isolation and relative peace, war probably has never captured the imagination of the local folk in the way it does in other places. While discussing the role of Hanuman in *Ramman*, we have already seen the exact opposite of this – in Thailand where the story is woven around the war and is not bothered much about family values and morals.

### **The last dance**

The festival culminates with the dance of Bhumiyaal. A thick mane of yak hair perched on top of a pole, swaying wildly against the backdrop of icy mountains is an awe-inspiring event. Also at the culmination, there is a dance of Narsingh who is represented with a mask. While Bhumiyaal can dance several times through the performance, Narsingh dances only once; and the two gods never dance together or come face-to-face with each other. This again reinforces the idea of merger of various traditions, and in this case it was clearly decided that the prime deities of the

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<sup>37</sup> The idea of Great Tradition & Little Tradition categories were introduced by the sociologist Robert Redfield, to distinguish between the major, continuing components of a religious tradition and the appropriation of them at local or village level.



two traditions will have their positions intact in the pantheon.

### The layers

The dances are in circles; any audience member can become a part of the dance; Gods possess human bodies; a sage can swallow all the ills; warriors of historical age dance with Rama of the mythical age; Mahabharata tradition is invoked for beginning a Ramayana sequence; vicissitudes of merchants and milk sellers are also linked with Rama; Rama also bows down to Bhumiya. Time is not something that gets lost, but rather a floating ether in which past co-exists with the present. For western sensibility, this is probably a post modern narrative. This is why this chapter also refrains from charting out the narrative in a neat, teleological pointed sequence.

It would be useful, however, to understand why the narrative exists in the form it does. It would be important to look at the history of the region and the festival for this. In an interview during my field trip, Dr Purohit tried to explain the variegated blocks of the whole. I also spoke to several locals to understand their sense of history of the festival. Here's a kernel of what I gathered in terms of understanding the various layers of the performance<sup>38</sup>:

It seems to be a highly codified form of representation. What's now shown in a minute probably had a long script at some point of time. It's been shrinking, and has become a complex code now. For example, in the Sita Swayamvar sequence, Sita stands with a pot opposite Rama, and this symbolises that Rama has won her. When the demon comes disguised as a deer, he is led by a herder which is a deviance from the standard text. This shows that pastoral tradition and Ramkatha tradition coalesce in this. This idea has already been put forth cursorily, but since this is also a part of the history of the performance text, one deems it fit to include this idea here as an initiator.

The Kathyuri dynasty ruled the region from 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century roughly, and they re-located to Kathyurgarhi during this time as well. The last Kathyuri ruler of this region, Bhanu Pratap,

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<sup>38</sup> These views and facts are a summary of various discussions I had with Dr Purohit and various local people of Saloor-Doongra especially Devender Singh Rawat, Avatar Singh Bist and Kalam Singh Bhandari.

married his daughter to Kanak Pal of Kannauj. This is the time when Shankaracharya came to this region. Shankaracharya's *kul-devta* was Narsingh while the *kul-devi* of the Kathyuris was Nanda. Hence came about a confluence of two traditions. The next period is the establishment of Badrinath around the 10<sup>th</sup> century, which was also due to the efforts of Shankaracharya. With Badrinath, started the Vaishnav cult, in which chanting is an important idiom. Narsingh and the Vaishnav cult are not at odds, since Narsingh is considered the fourth avatar of Vishnu. The Vaishnav cult had a huge impact on the local understanding of religion, since there's a lot of representation of Gods and their *lilas*. We will come back to the idea of *lilas* while discussing performative aspects, but roughly *lila* is not just the acts of Gods in their human form, but also has the connotations of deceit, play, illusion. So the folk dances merged with the more narrative *lilas*.

Badrinath was a pilgrimage place for *sanyasis* primarily, as well as in a smaller measure for the local populace because of the proximity of the *dham* to Garhwal. On their way back, many people did not return to where they came from. They got tired, and settled down in the mountains of Garhwal, and they came to be known as *Thakedus* (from v. 'thakna' in Hindi for tiredness). These people changed the religious mapping of the region with their insertions of the Rama narratives. This time is six centuries before Tulsidas, and the Ramayana in vogue with the *sanyasis* was the Valmiki text. They started singing the texts available at that time, in the region around Joshimath, and they started singing it in 'Chaturmas' (*sawan* and *bhado* – the rainy season, roughly August and September) since no travelling could be done in these months.

There already was a mask tradition that existed in the area. The king got impressed with what the *sanyasis* were doing, and urged them to take their tales to every corner of Garhwal. The mask traditions would thus get bonded with the singing of Ramkatha. The local population would then, with king's patronage, start singing Rama's stories with their own idioms and understandings.

At this point, there were existing Ramlila traditions in the plains, for example in Mathura. In the Garhwal mountains, *dhol* players were specialised artistes and commanded respect and wealth in the society. Dr Purohit says that their social capital was immense, as much as that of a

Brahmin.<sup>39</sup> They did not have pressures of survival, and used to come up with very fine creations. They created the beats to which the characters of Ramayana would dance. These players known as *aujis* have been performing for generations, and the structure that they devised has more or less remained intact. This could be called the fixed part of the text.

Saloor Doongra was an important village around this time of 10<sup>th</sup> century, and it was a seat of minor chieftains. They had the cult of Bhumiya devta, and to this, on the royal orders; they added the Ramkatha tradition which had come from the Vaishnavites. Later additions were the dance of *mwar-mwarin*. When traders came in, the story of *Baniya-baniyain* also got included. Already pre-existing were cults of Bur deva and of Surya devta.

So this became a collage (and not a melting pot) where colours from different ages and travellers kept getting painted on the wall. The oldest cults are the masked traditions dating to a little before Christ, and the cult of Bhumiya devta. Due to the influence of Vaishnavas, the cult of Narsingh is also a major one.

### **In-flux**

As we've just seen, the influx of various influences has always kept the *Ramman* tradition in flux. It is an assimilating culture where new influences are assimilated and merged within the existing tradition. There rarely seems to have been a point of conflict of cultures except the Gurkha invasion already mentioned. So antagonism is not a part of the cultural memory largely, and which is why they also do not like depicting wars. Even the cults, all of which were major – those of Bhumiya, Rama, and Narsingh never created factions. Instead the pantheon kept on increasing.

The texts have always been fluid. The late pressures of modern living have however, shrunken the festival to two days. Even a few years earlier, it used to be around a week-long performance. Accordingly, the texts have become more codified, assuming that all the stories are known. It was an internal affair till a couple of years back, but the festival has got enlisted on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Given that it was internal, the codes worked. However now, when the festival will be taken

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Dr DR Purohit, in person. April 28, 2010.

outside its context, new codes would have to emerge.

An interesting development took place this year. Although the Pandav lila<sup>40</sup> is a very important performance tradition of Garhwal, it is not a major tradition in the villages of Saloor-Doongra, Doongri, Selang where *Ramman* is a more common tradition. However, this time when I went for the field trip, a new aspect of invoking the Pandavas through the performing of a little sequence from the Pandav lila was witnessed on the night before the beginning of the final *Ramman* performance. This addition can be seen as another attempt at refurbishing and refashioning the text.

*Ramman* is hosted by the Rajput caste; they are the chief patrons and organizers of this performance. Pandav lila also is intimately associated with the Rajputs of Garhwal, who make up roughly 60 per cent of the local population, own roughly the same proportion of land, and are thus the locally dominant caste, to use M.N Srinivas's terms.<sup>41</sup> Garhwali Rajputs regard the Pandav lila as their special tradition. It is their most public and self conscious representation of their own identity. The Rajputs in Garhwal believe that they have descended from the Pandava brothers<sup>42</sup>, so that when they perform a Pandav lila, they are in effect worshipping their ancestors. This element of ancestor worship was perhaps at the back of the minds of the organizers of the Saloor-Doongra *Ramman*, while they invoked the Pandavas to bless them and their *Ramman* by performing a small sequence from the Pandav lila on the "soonratta" – the night before the final *Ramman* performance.

This addition to the text when it is going to be more widely disseminated is perhaps to highlight for the audience that this ritual performance is patronised by Garhwal Rajputs who are descendants of Pandavas. It is an exercise in identity politics, and creating an image for the "other", the unknown audience. This is a very good example of changing texts, the reason for which gets lost in time.

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<sup>40</sup> The Pandav Lila is a tradition of ritual dramatization and competitive bardic recitation of India's great epic, the Mahabharata, it is performed during the winter months in the villages of Garhwal, the former Hindu kingdom that is now part of the Indian state of Uttarakhand in the west central Himalayas.

<sup>41</sup> Sax, William. 2001. The Pandav Lila of Uttarakhand in (ed) Kaushal, Molly. *Chanted Narratives: The living Katha Vachana Tradition*. Delhi. IGNCA. pp 165-174.

<sup>42</sup> Chief protagonists of the Mahabharata

Tambiah argues that although it is evident that many rituals seek to convey cosmological information (by which he means not only religious cosmologies, but also legal codes, political conventions, social class relations etc.) it is also true that the performance of ritual is always linked to the status claim of the participants in other words, to relations of power and to the various contents- social, political, religious and so on of the performance. Through various performative media, such as dance, music and drama, a heightened experience is produced in ritual, thereby indexing and often altering social relations while simultaneously legitimating them via cosmological paradigms.<sup>43</sup>

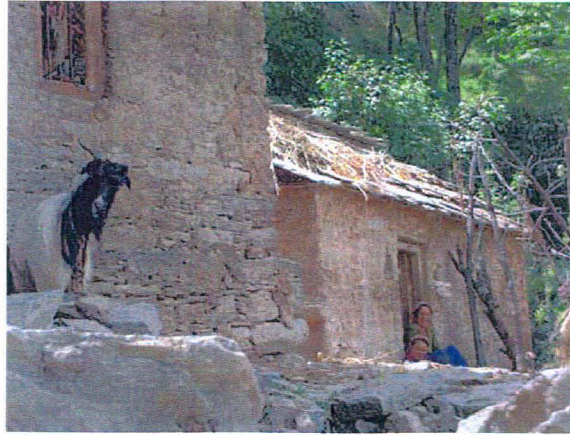
There is also a certain caste subtext that subtly functions within the performance context of *Ramman*. Upon asking Kalam Singh Bhandari, (an old Jagari, who also used to play the character of Rama) about who all were allowed to perform the characters of Rama, Lakshman and Sita, he promptly answered that it is mostly the 'high' caste people, especially the Rajputs who can play the characters. He then also stressed on the knowledge of martial values (which are most commonly invoked in the hill regions as it is dominantly populated by the Rajputs) which would naturally percolate in a person born into the caste. To depict King Rama it is important to belong to a caste which would have remnants of these kingly martial values, Rajputs. He himself belongs to Bhandari caste that is superior amongst the Rajputs in the region. The Rajput caste is also the 'yajman' ie the hosts of *Ramman*, so even though it is a community ritual and the entire village partakes in its duties, it is officially hosted by the Rajputs.<sup>44</sup>

It is interesting, and at the same time not paradoxical, to see caste structures also written in the text of the performances. The text has always been fluid, but two things have not changed about the performers – the nature of the drum beats, and the caste hierarchy which would decide the performers.

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<sup>43</sup> Sax, William. 2002. *Dancing the self: Personhood and performance in the Pandav lila of Garhwal*. New York. Oxford University Press. pp 4.

<sup>44</sup> William Sax while describing the Rajputs in his study on the Pandav lila recounts an anecdote related to him by his rapporteur Padam Singh, how Brahmins are stingy and so even if they do try and host a Pandav lila it would be a pandav lila with no sanctity for they would be too stingy to invite anyone and host them to partake of the benefices that accrue of these rituals. On the contrary Rajputs are the benevolent caste and they are king like in their attitude of generously giving and hosting. This stereotypical but nonetheless common understanding in the Garhwali villages might explain the reason behind most public rituals being hosted by the dominant Rajput caste.



*local house in Doongri*



*Mwar mask in Doongri*



*Bhumiyaal being danced, Doongri*



*Narsingh carrying Prahalad, Doongri*



*Dance of Bhumiyal, Doongri*



*Bhumiyal brought out for Jhumela*





*Bhumiyal offered Sada*



*Bhumiyal before being mounted on pole*



*Narsingh mask being carried*



*Shri Krishna in night performance*



*Bhankhor players*



*Ritual instruments used during possession.*

## CHAPTER 2

### The Masque of Rama: Aesthetics and Performance in Ramman

The pun is intended in the title (on masque/mask), for masque was a courtly entertainment of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, which involved various festivities like singing, dancing, acting with pastoral settings, mythological fable, and the dramatic elements of ethical debate. The allegories would be a metaphor for larger social issues. *Ramman*, of course, is not a courtly affair, but indeed it is, for it is the public court of Bhumiya devta who's been presiding over annual hearings for two millenia. Also, Rama doesn't wear a mask, but he's been bonded to the mask tradition of Garhwal mountains since the tenth century.

Many Ramayanas have been talked about in the previous chapter. To reiterate, Ramayana or the Ramkatha tradition is pervasive not only in India but throughout South East Asia as well. Stories revolving round Ram, Lakshman and Sita 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 flavor 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 space and time. The beauty of these epics is that they first appeared as oral traditions, and till date Ramkatha is pervasive in the oral tradition. It appears in multiplicity of forms and artistic expressions. It appears at various levels of ritual, festival, as ballad singing, drama, dance-drama, play, shadow puppets and also on the contemporary stage.<sup>45</sup>

The spatial and temporal canvas of Rama theme in art and literature is very vast, and so is the multiplicity of the art forms in which the theme is rendered. While retaining a basic thematic unity each version begins, develops and culminates in its own way. It is this idea of developing and culminating on its own which Prof Richman has started calling the many "tellings of Ramayana". She insists that like other authors, Valmiki is rooted in a particular social and

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<sup>45</sup> Kaushal, Molly. 2008. Ankan, Manchan aur Vaachan –Seminar Proceedings. Delhi. IGNC

ideological context. She says that Kampan's rendition should not be seen as a divergence from Valmiki, but the two need to be viewed as different tellings. Their differences intrigue us because they testify to the diversity of Indian culture, indicating that throughout history multiple voices are heard within the Ramayana tradition. The Valmiki and the Kampan versions are so different in terms of cultural idiom, metaphors and aesthetics that sometimes one wonders if they are not two different stories. Of course, Kampan kept the Valmiki story intact, but peppered it with ideology, personas, flora and fauna of his land in South India. This is why different tellings are a very rich repository of cultural and aesthetic information.

In addition to analyzing textual diversity, there has been a need to emphasize the diversity and significance of the renderings of the Ramayana in other genres. Recent scholarship of Indian Ramayana dramas and public culture testifies to vitality and significance of the epic related performances. Prof Richman, while stressing how these tellings possess their own logic, their own intended audience and their own richness also highlight that these tellings of Ramayana in India have included stories that are often conflicting with one another<sup>46</sup>. We have already seen the conflicting stories in the last chapter, specially the Jaina versions, that in full awareness of Valmiki, defy him and all his politics. Ramkathas as a pan-Indian, and beyond-Indian phenomenon became a matter of performing cultures. They became a ground for contestation of ideologies and cultures. It were as if Rama was the truth, and everybody performed him to show that their truth was *the* truth.

Prof Richman goes on to say that certain tellings have attained various degrees of dominance or popularity<sup>47</sup> (for example Valmiki's, Tulasi's, Doordarshan series). However, there always have been contesting voices, where Hindu Ramayanas have dominated. Where male dominance has been proscribed in the textual traditions, women's Ramayana songs have expressed alternative perspectives that are more in keeping with women's own concerns.

Particular incidents from the Ramayana are performed to express a community's view of reality. Such selective tellings, one which adopts a non-traditional perspective on otherwise familiar features of the tale have proved an effective means for conveying political views, and for

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<sup>46</sup> Richman, Paula. 1992. "The Diversity of Ramayana Tradition" in ed. Richman, Paula. *Many Ramayanas: The diversity of a narrative tradition in South Asia*. Delhi: OUP. pp3-22.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

inculcating religious teachings.<sup>48</sup> In *Ramman*, the omission of Ravana, or the inclusion of Narsingh and Bhumiya along with masks are statements of the community's identity. More than a statement, it is a way through which the community performs its cultural memory.

### **Musk and mask**

The deer of Ramayana is not a musk deer, but its effects in pulling the story towards a twist are like the pull of a musk deer. In *Ramman*, the deer's mask is not golden. However, intriguingly, the cult of *Ramman* which depicts very few episodes is fascinated with all things spectacular and 'golden'. The few episodes from the Ramayana which are visibly rendered look as they though they somehow appealed to the imagination of the people for their sheer spectacle value. So out of the innumerable episodes, they chose the 'golden' deer, and 'golden' Lanka among other few. It could also hint at the fascination of the local people with the glittering metal of gold, for it is not commonly found in the mountains and in the minds of the people it is associated with grandeur and splendor.

The masks play a very important role in the *Ramman* performances. When Dr Purohit first came across *Ramman*, he came across it while he was looking for the mask traditions in the region. So in essence *Ramman*, to the people, was better known as a mask tradition. The masks are invested with divine powers as they represent certain powerful deities, namely Narsingh devta, Ganesh, Kalinki and Surya devta. However, the characters of Rama, Lakshman, Sita and Hanuman wear no masks. This is probably because the mask traditions had been in existence for centuries prior to the introduction of the Ramkatha element, which came into being only towards the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The people of this region have kept various aspects of the tradition separate - like Narsingh, Bhumiya and Rama do not share the centrestage together but at different times. Rama still at times appears within the arena while Bhumiya devta takes the stage and is made to dance, but this never happens in the case of Narsingh devta and Bhumiya. As stated in the last chapter, the synthesis of the cult of Narsingh and Nanda devi led the Kathyuri kings to get their subjects to also establish the worship of Narsingh, and to incorporate him into their festivities and rituals. However, Bhumiya was already a well entrenched and

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<sup>48</sup> Richman, Paula. 1992. *Many Ramayanas: The diversity of a narrative tradition in South Asia*. Delhi: OUP. pp 12-13

established entity within the village cults. There may have been resistance to the new incorporations but there is no recorded history of it. However, getting another deity to usurp the power of Bhumiyaal could amount to irreversible loss of health and prosperity for the village at large following the wrath of the Bhumiyaal. The only way new introductions could be done was by the permission of the already established deity. His acquiescence was sought but a condition was imposed, that the Narsingh would never be allowed to dance in view of the Bhumiyaal, and that Bhumiyaal would still retain his overlordship. And thus the tradition continues wherein, while the Bhumiyaal dances in the arena, Narsingh mask is safely tucked away within the temple and when it is time for the Narsingh to come out and dance towards the culmination of *Ramman*, Bhumiyaal is 'disembodied' and kept inside the temple.

One of the things I found fascinating in the general 'embodiment' of the figures of gods in Garhwal was that either they are mounted on poles or 'dolis'. So mostly the representation of Bhumiyaal, is done through being mounted on a bamboo pole. The head of the pole or rather the head of Bhumiyaal is made up of hair taken from a yak's tail. In Garhwal, yak is colloquially known as - Chwaur Gai, and is usually found in the upper reaches of the Himalayas. It is also considered as an offering to Bhumiyaal to bring the hair from a yak's tail, as getting it is somewhat considered close to undertaking a pilgrimage. All the hair bound together are then covered with a silver *patra*. The silver embellishment is found in more well-to-do villages like Saloor Doongra but is missing in poorer villages that cannot afford it. Bright coloured satin cloth pieces called *sada*, are also offered to Bhumiyaal and these are tied to the bamboo pole to give form to a formless deity.

The significance of the bamboo pole and the idea of giving form to the deity through embodying it on a pole is a curious thing. However, poles have been associated with deities in ancient traditions. The ancient Canaanites worshipped their deity, *Asherah*<sup>49</sup> in the form of a pole. Sacred trees and poles have been thought of as axels about which the universe revolves. Another example which focuses on the vestiges of this belief is the beribboned, Maypole<sup>50</sup> of

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<sup>49</sup> Ashera was the ancient goddess symbolizing fertility and was wedded to the paternal figure of El, the father of all Gods and kings in the Canaanite myth.

<sup>50</sup> A Maypole is a tall wooden pole erected as a part of various European folk festivals, particularly on May Day, although in some countries it is instead erected at Midsummer. In some cases the Maypole is a permanent feature that is only utilised during the festival, although in other cases it is erected specifically for the purpose before being taken down again. The anthropologist Mircea Eliade, in a theory supported by Ronald Hutton, theorizes that the maypoles were simply a part of the general rejoicing at the return of summer, and the growth of new vegetation. Source:

Britain.<sup>51</sup>

The other local deities (of which ancestors form a major chunk) are also given form on long bamboo poles, with mostly masks being used for the head of the deity. In the case of devis - female goddesses, they are usually depicted being mounted on their wedding palanquins, *doli*, as in the case of Nanda devi.

The masks of *Ramman* are also very important, in terms of understanding the antiquity of the tradition. Schechner says, “the phenomena called either/all 'drama', 'theatre', 'performance' occur among all the world's peoples and date back as far as historians, archaeologists and anthropologists can go. Evidence indicates that dancing, singing, wearing masks and costumes, impersonating other humans, animals, or supernaturals, acting out stories, presenting time, isolating or preparing special places or times for these presentations and individual or group preparations are coexistent with the human condition”.<sup>52</sup>

The making of masks is supposed to involve a very high degree of precision and in fact the entire process adds to its divinity. The bark of a birch tree is used to make the masks. It is treated with cow urine as it is supposed to have anti-bacterial properties and also because it is considered holy amongst the Hindus. The treated bark is then buried under the earth and taken out after a few days. The bark which has shrunk and acquired a curve while lying buried, is seen as being vested with the divine energy which would render it suitable for being carved into a mask.

Schechner, while describing the basic qualities shared by activities such as play, games, sports, theatre and ritual says that whenever any of these performative exercises are undertaken, inadvertently there is a special ordering of time, a special value is attached to objects, there is a non-productivity of goods, and often special, non-ordinary places are set aside or constructed to perform these activities in.<sup>53</sup> In everyday life, objects are given value according to their practical everyday use, scarcity or beauty. But in performance activities all the objects- except

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<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maypole>

<sup>51</sup> [http://www.khandro.net/nature\\_trees.htm](http://www.khandro.net/nature_trees.htm)

<sup>52</sup> Schechner, Richard. 2002. *Performance Theory- An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, pp 66.

<sup>53</sup> Schechner, Richard. 2002. *Performance Theory- An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, pp 8.



for certain ritual implements and relics, have a market value much less than the value assigned to the objects in the context of the ritual or activity. This could be said of in the case of the masks used in *Ramman*. To an outsider they are just about any other wooden masks and mostly also of crude make, but the value that the community invests in them makes these objects appear to have a life of their own.

This reminds one of Roger Fry's posthumously published *Last Lectures* where he spoke of the 'quality of vitality' which some artistic images possess. Fry contends that, 'some images give us a strong illusion that they possess a life of their own, others may appear to us exact likenesses of living things, and are yet themselves devoid of life'.<sup>54</sup> Robert Plant Armstrong made this argument central to his understanding and further called it 'affecting presence'. One can't miss the 'affecting presence' possessed by the masks of *Ramman*. The characteristics constituting this quality are such that they cause the objects which possess it 'to be treated more like persons than like things.' This could be seen in the way the mask of Narsingh devta especially is accorded the highest deference. The 'power' that is associated with these masks is not an inappropriate way to describe 'those distinctive though elusive properties'.<sup>55</sup> The 'quality of vitality' that Fry spoke of, is reflected in the masks of *Ramman* and especially the mask of Narsingh devta.

The 'affecting presence' that Armstrong speaks of, was apparent during my field trip when the entire community sat awestruck the moment mask of Narsingh was revealed for the first time during the performance. It is usually towards the end of *Ramman* that Narsingh devta mask, while being carried on the head of a Bhandari caste man, is revealed and thus made to dance. As already mentioned it would not be entirely inappropriate to use the word 'power' to describe those 'distinctive though elusive properties'. For whenever the Narsingh Devta mask is brought out to be danced, people inadvertently fold their hands in reverence and prayer.

However, this power and divinity that the community vested in these apparently otherwise simple masks, led to their being 'stolen' around 2004. The entire region lost many of these

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<sup>54</sup> Fry, Roger. 1939. *Last lectures*. New York: Cambridge University Press. pp 40

<sup>55</sup> Reviewed works : The Powers of Presence: Consciousness, Myth and Affecting Presence By Robert Plant Armstrong, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 16, No.3 (Autumn,1982), pp. 122-124.

ancient masks around the same time. Most of the original ancient masks were stolen. This made the community very suspicious of outsiders and their keenness to know about their ancient traditions, despite Garhwalis being a very hospitable and welcoming people. The masks (some of them) were made once again, but according to general perception they don't seem to have that same "affecting presence" and mysterious power that was reflected in the original masks. According to Dr Purohit, this incidence of masks being lost in an entire region, disturbed the atmosphere of the village remarkably, wherein they started being suspicious of one another. One of the characteristic features of the masks used in *Ramman* is that unlike masks in other commonly known traditions they are not worn over the face, but rather carried on top of the head. This could probably be because of the weight of the masks. The mask of Narsingh devta , weighing approximately around 20-25 kg. The mask of Narsingh devta comes out towards the end of the *Ramman* performance, at a time when it is twilight. It is the time when it is neither day nor night and the sun is gradually setting down. This time, according to popular lore, is when the Gods and demons are at their naughtiest best, and so they usually possess their 'pasua'<sup>56</sup> and dance with tremendous frenzy. Inadvertently it is a time when possession, as it is known in the western sense, takes place and the whole atmosphere is charged with the frenzied beating of the drums.

Usually the mask of Narsingh is so heavy that the man wearing it has to balance it with his hand constantly keeping it in place, while at the same time also being accompanied by another person just to help him bear the weight and move in the arena to perform his dance. At the end of the dance, he carries a pole with the mask representing the figure of Prahlad on his shoulder, and thus bringing the sequence to its end.

It is interesting to note that the word 'person' derives itself from the Latin word "persona" (which now connotes personality) but which earlier meant 'character in drama, mask'<sup>57</sup>, which was possibly borrowed from Etruscan 'phresu' which meant 'mask'. The word 'person' starts getting used in English as late as 13<sup>th</sup> century at which time mask traditions were popular in Europe as well. That man has used the term for mask to describe himself is a telling metaphor

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<sup>56</sup> Hindi pasva, "animal", Garhwali dungadi, "little horsie" reflecting the popular North Indian belief that gods 'mount' their oracles like horsemen..

<sup>57</sup> Online dictionary of etymology – [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com).

of how the idea of the world as stage has always haunted human imagination.

### **Dramatis personae**

Although the ritual performance involves the participation of the entire community, still one can easily witness the layered and subtle workings of caste always in action. One is reminded of the Durkheimian notion of collective rituals serving to create and foster solidarity among groups of varied kinds. Durkheim contends that rituals unite a community and that its performance is primarily inward, directed towards community members<sup>58</sup>. However, Richard Bauman counters this idea saying that ritual in plural societies is far removed from the notion of creating and fostering solidarity; on the contrary it may express conflict and desire for cultural change rather than any celebration of the community as imagined. According to Kertzer, the solidarity engendered by public ritual that Durkheim talks of, is not necessarily dependent on specific ideological content (which may be understood differently by different participants) but on the sheer fact of physical participation in collective ritual activity.<sup>59</sup>

In *Ramman*, one can clearly see the playing of the various castes and their interconnectedness. *Ramman* is hosted by the dominant Rajput community of the village but it is never openly stated and mostly it is an implied notion. The village head, called 'Ganiya' who is usually elected by the community belongs to this dominant caste group. The other functionaries of the ritual are elected by the head, and without it being projected, it is agreed that he chooses people from within a certain caste structure. Bhandari is considered to be the affluent Rajput caste and although the idea of the Narsingh mask being worn only by a person of the Bhandari caste has come to be alluded to 'tradition' now, one can't help not notice the economic and social underpinnings to this tradition. According to Kalam Singh Bhandari who was also the informer for Dr Purohit, the characters of Rama, Lakshman, Sita and Hanuman are played by Rajput boys. However, not wanting to appear to stress too much on the caste factor he also said that the other requirement for playing these characters was a sense of rhythm and the ability to dance.

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<sup>58</sup> Durkheim, Emile. 1912. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

<sup>59</sup> Sax, William. 2002. *Dancing the Self: Personhood and performance in the Pandavtila of Garhwal*. New York: OUP. pp13.

Like many other public rituals in Garhwal, performances are sponsored and organized by the village community collectively, yet the subtle underpinnings of every task and the caste that performs that task is well specified. The preparation of the ritual community meal is carried out by Brahmins. In Garhwal, on all auspicious occasions such as a wedding etc. it is a Brahmin who is called upon to cook the meal of rice for the entire community, for it is considered auspicious to have rice cooked by someone of high caste. Even in *Ramman*, the community meal which takes place a day after the festivity comes to a close, is prepared by a Brahmin. Usually, he belongs to the village, and in my field survey I noticed that the village was dominantly populated by the Rajputs and the one or two Brahmin families that resided within the village usually undertook to prepare the community meal. This is also because the community meal which is cooked, is first offered to the deity, it is considered that only a meal cooked by a Brahmin is suitable to make as an offering. The goat which is sacrificed to the Bhumiya at the end of the ritual performance of *Ramman*, is divided so that each family in the village may get a part of it as it is considered 'prasad'.

The 'Das' community commonly known in Garhwal as 'auji' belong to a lower rung in the caste hierarchy. However, no ritual in Garhwal is considered complete without the presence of this community. They are traditionally the drum players and their esoteric knowledge of the drums renders every performance complete and auspicious.

As mentioned earlier, the requisites for being a *Ramman* performer - apart from belonging to a certain caste - are also a sense of rhythm, and the ability to dance. This is a queer requirement from the performers of a tradition that seeks allegiance with the better known Ramlila tradition of the plains. The Ramlila tradition makes elaborate use of the script which is largely based and derived from the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas. In fact both historically and performatively, Tulsi's text lies at the heart of the Ramlila tradition. So if *Ramman*, as according to the prevalent belief, is a form similar to the Ramlila of the plains it would have concentrated more on the script and the rendering of that script through dialogues in a proscenium kind of a space, reminiscent of the Parsi Theatre era. However, what one gathered in terms of the aesthetics of production of *Ramman* (on the field study) was quite the contrary. Devender Singh Rawat, who was helping me out in village Doongri, while talking of *Ramman* and its performance aesthetics, kept talking of Ramlila and forging a sort of comparison between the two. While

describing *Ramman* rituals, he kept drawing parallels with Ramlila. He also said that whereas in Ramlila, the life of Lord Rama is enacted through the form of a narrative, emphasis lying on the story, following of an established oeuvre of a text, in *Ramman* the story of Lord Rama is largely conveyed through rhythm and dance. In his aspiration to link *Ramman* to Ramlila, he went on to say that all the elements of the Ramlila are present within *Ramman*. All the episodes of the Ramayana that are carried out through the medium of dialogues in Ramlila are instead rendered in the medium of dance, that perhaps being the only difference.<sup>60</sup>

The keenness of these people to align with the grand tradition of the Ramlila, is quite apparent. Also the 'only' difference that is conveyed is in the fact that whereas the Ramlila lays emphasis on the word and thus in that sense on the text, in *Ramman* it is dance and thus in that sense embodiment and movement.

While discussing the popular form of Ramlila and discussing its antiquity, Suresh Awasthi says although there is no conclusive proof of the antiquity of a given lila (many in number in various cities when talking of the Hindi speaking belt and especially Uttar Pradesh) there are several reasons to assume that the Chitrakoot production is indeed of greater age than the others in the city. In Awasthi's words it is pantomime based and lacks the dialogues which are standard in most other productions, which appear to represent a 19<sup>th</sup> century innovation. The Chitrakoot version's failure to incorporate them may indicate that it follows an older tradition in which the actors did not speak or even, for the most part act, but simply made themselves available for 'Darsan' to assembled devotees who listened to the recitation of the Manas.<sup>61</sup> It is noteworthy that the titles of several episodes in this Production's printed schedule include the word 'jhanki'<sup>62</sup>. This could very well be used for arriving at the antiquity of *Ramman*, although it is a variegated tradition with many layers embedded in it. The fact that *Ramman* is rendered in terms of dance and not so much in dialogues- requiring a script, makes a hint at its antiquity, if one is to accept Awasthi's assertion. The idea of dancing is very important in Garhwal for it is believed that at the time of these collective rituals it is a time for the deities to also dance and enjoy themselves, this is usually accomplished by taking hold of human's body (pasua) in

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<sup>60</sup> Personal conversation with Mr Devender Singh Rawat from village Doongri, field interviews taken on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2010

<sup>61</sup> Lutgendórf, Philip. 1991. "Words made Flesh" in *The Life of a Text*. Berkley: University of California Press. pp 258

<sup>62</sup> "nandigam jhanki" (Day 9), "jhanki of Mount Subel" (Day 14).

western terms 'possession'. This is a major aspect of many folk cults in India.

The establishment of the shrine of Badrinath, near the Joshimath area in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, by Adi Shankaracharya turned the area into a major pilgrimage spot for the Vaishnav followers. As mentioned Narsingh devta, the fourth avatar of Lord Vishnu was the chief deity of Adi Shankaracharya. It was largely the influence of his visit to Garhwal that turned the Kathyuri dynasty kings to accept Narsingh as a deity and establish temples dedicated to him in the region. There was a synthesis of the cult of Narsingh devta and Nanda devi who was the chief deity of the Kathyuri. In the *Ramman* performance, there is varied importance given to these two deities considering the location of the village. For example, in Badgaon, the *Ramman* festivity does not culminate with the dance of Narsingh devta as in Saloor-Doongra and Dongri village; instead it has the traditional doli of Nanda devi. In Badgaon the mask of Narsingh devta is not brought out. On asking a few local people I got the impression that the masks to a large extent were stolen in this village too. However, I propose to think that Narsingh mask would not hold much relevance in this village closer home to the snow capped peaks, where Nanda devi brings the festivity to end.

Although the establishment of Badrinath led to the influx of many *sadhus* and *sanyasis* into the region, the impact of Vaishnava traditions are not very pronounced in the life of the surrounding villages. The influences, though, can be seen in the pervasive *lilas* in the region. Pandav lila is the most famous one.

The centrality of *lila* in Vaishnava theology has been noted by many scholars<sup>63</sup>. Lutgendorf says:

...according to popular formula he had heard more than once in katha performances, "the Lord has four fundamental aspects [*vigrah*]: name, form, acts and abode [nam, rup, lila and dham] catch hold of any of these and you'll be saved!" Each of the four elements in the formula to an aspect of the Vaishnava devotional practice: the repetition of the lord's name (jap); the ceremonial worship of his image (puja,seva) and pilgrimage (yatra) to the holy places associated with his earthly activities. But what does it mean to "catch hold of" his lila- his legendary adventures? One method is to hear them artfully recounted in recitation and katha programs. But another method, and the one especially suggested by the term lila, is to witness them through some form of dramatic

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<sup>63</sup> See Hein, *The miracle Plays of Mathura*, 70 and the references in note 1 on that page; see also Wulff, *Drama as a Mode of Religious Realisation*, esp.chapter 1;

“representation.” This understanding needs to be qualified because vaishnavas consider the Lord’s acts to partake of his inherent nature and hence to be boundless and eternal. They do not have to be re-presented because they always exist, and the devotional activities through which they can be glimpsed are themselves aspects of the lila in which devotees are privileged to share. In the broadest sense lilas may be a way of life for the worshippers of Ram and Krishna.

This idea must have been at the heart of the Vaishnava Ramkatha reciters who according to Dr D R Purohit came visiting Badrinath. During the months of *sawan* and *bhado* as most *sanyasis* all over India wouldn’t move but sit in the temple precincts and recite the epics, they too started reciting the known texts of Ramayana. As has already been pointed out in the previous chapter, royal patronage to this form of ‘telling’ of Ramayana led to a merger of the mask tradition and the Ramkatha tradition around the 10<sup>th</sup> century. While oral chanting of the epic was carried out, the actors perhaps performed an abbreviated and sporadic pantomime, acting out some scenes but omitting others. This also explains why it is not necessary for the Jagaris and the performers to act in consonance. The Jagari could be rendering the part where Lord Rama has been born into King Dasaratha’s household, while the performers could well be into the enactment of Sita’s svayamvar (betrothal) with Lord Rama. With the Jagari rendering tradition gradually dying, the performance of *Ramman* may for ever be bereft of a narrative. This would lead to a newer understanding of the tradition as well as loss of heritage.

The first time when one witnesses *Ramman*, it is difficult to see it as a solely Ramkatha tradition or even to see the links with Ramayana. Till the time Jagari renders the Garhwali version of the Ramkatha and the characters of Rama and Lakshman dressed as the popular conception formed by the television Ramayana and the Ramlila groups from the plains, appear on the marked out space in the temple precincts. It just goes to show how variegated and layered the tradition is and that it would be a folly to subordinate this folk culture to the established classical literature and religion. The ‘evolutionary premise’ wherein the folk culture is seen as a derivation from classical domain nor the ‘devolutionary premise’ that interprets

such similarities as deviations from classical models can hold true for *Ramman*.<sup>64</sup> There are always folk and classical continuities and we must see an exchange between them. Infact A. K. Coomaraswamy pointed out that folklore in India should not be contrasted with the classical traditions, as in Europe. He argued instead, that whereas in Europe folk and classical traditions are separate, in India they share a common base.<sup>65</sup> Much of the study of oral traditions, oral narrative and the verbal arts has thus been based on collections and analyses taking the notion of 'text' as the point of departure. But there is now no longer the same universal confidence that texts in this, or any, sense form the natural focus for research into oral arts and traditions, and earlier assumptions are challenged within current work within social, literary and anthropological studies.<sup>66</sup> This makes it imperative to study various other features embedded within a performance which earlier because of the focus primarily wrestling with textual analysis, was not looked into seriously.

The shift from a temple or a palace setting was consonant with the implicit philosophy of the bhakti movement, which sought to make religious teachings accessible to the masses; it also served the organizers political and social aims. This is reflected in the outdoor performance of *Ramman*. Although it is still performed within the temple courtyard, however the temple structure is not an awe inspiring structure as found in the architecture of temples across India. In most of the temples found in the villages, it is mostly a mud and slate structure, which could easily be mistaken for a village house. It has no elaborate embellishment or a novelty in structure to distinguish it from any other structure in the village. However, this may be taken true only for the villages visited during the field trip and largely which host the *Ramman* performance, for there are studies of elaborate temples found in Garhwal too. The temple most often doesn't house any idol of the gods of the Hindu pantheon. This may be attributed to the fact that the temple is dedicated to the Bhumiyal so it doesn't house any other idol or image of another deity. The temple has a small attic like structure, and also has a parapet on top of which mostly the 'Bhankor'<sup>67</sup> players are stationed during the *Ramman* performance. The performance usually takes place in the courtyard and the village community which forms the audience sits around the courtyard marking out a circular space inbetween, as the performance space.

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<sup>64</sup> The model of the 'evolutionary' and devolutionary premise' has been taken from *Another harmony: New essays on the folklore of India*. pp

<sup>65</sup> Blackburn, Stuart H. and A.K. Ramanujan. 1986. *Another harmony: New essays on the folklore of India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>66</sup> Finnegan, Ruth. 1992. *Oral tradition and the verbal arts*. New York: Routledge. pp 18.

<sup>67</sup> Bhankhor is a long brass wind instrument which is blown from one side.



However the “effective performance area” extends from the space of the temple precincts and courtyards, many times. Also when the performance gets into a frenzied mode as happened in Badgaon, where the ‘possessed’ priest led the demonic effigy ‘hastola’<sup>68</sup> off towards the fields near the gorge (a meter away) the performance space expands phenomenally.

The forms of religious expressions characteristics of bhakti-kirtan, bhajan, katha and lila – may reflect the Muslim potential presence and decline of large scale temple cults, but they also display positive strengths of their own. The Ramlila is outdoor and peripatetic not because later day patrons could not afford to construct theatres but because the pageant came to express notions of cosmography and pilgrimage that aim at reclaiming and transforming the mundane world.

## Music

The importance laid on dance can certainly not let music stay far behind. *Ramman* performance appears to rely more on the beats of the drums than the Jagar rendition. Infact in Doongri and Badgaon, *Ramman* was performed without being accompanied by Jagar singing. It could perhaps be an allusion to the fast disappearing tradition of Jagar singing. However it also makes one understand the relative importance of the drums in the rituals of Garhwal. According to Chandola, Garhwali folk drumming is a sophisticated art, and indispensable for virtually all public rituals.<sup>69</sup> The musicians’ esoteric knowledge, magically powerful utterances and especially their drumming are necessary not only to induce possession but also to provide the appropriate highly charged ambience of a performance. Although the ‘Das’ caste of musicians has a low rank, individual Das are highly respected for their learning and artistic skill. Drumming is the chief form of musical expression in Garhwali culture, occurring in solo improvisations and as accompaniment to many rituals. Drumming thus has auspicious, shamanistic and recreational roles. Like language drumming is not taught by rules but by example and impressionistic practice. What is impossible to miss is the relationship of the performance to the beats generated by the drums. Chandola claims that there are nine types of percussion instruments, some played in pairs or teams and each has a unique stroke pattern. The

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<sup>68</sup> Hastola is the effigy of a demon represented as a buffalo and it is sacrificed in the Badgaon Ramman performance.

<sup>69</sup> Chandola, Anoop. 1977. Folk drumming in the Himalayas: A linguistic approach to music. New York. AMS Press. pp 42-45.

most common of these nine percussion instruments are the Dhol (a large two headed drum played with a single stick) and a tympani like damaum, played with two sticks. Chandola claims rhythmic sequences of strokes produce rhythm or rhythmic cycles analogous to sentences in language. This was corroborated by the field interviews taken, wherein the local community claims that there once was an elaborate language of the drums and the 'auji' of one village communicated with that of another village for passing on messages. Rhythmic cycles constituted 'texts'. The performance of a text was distributed between a lead and subordinate drummer. Every performance is an improvisation in which the lead drummer provides the outline and structure. The subordinate drummer by following all or only some portions of the lead's text, provides the drone and gives the lead time to rest and to plan the next improvisation in the sequence.<sup>70</sup> Apart from the drums the only other instrument quite prominent in the performance was Bhankor, a seven foot long brass trumpet, which is a wind instrument and is blown from one side. It has a haunting sound and it is played intermittently in the performance and right at the beginning as a sort of inviting call to all the villagers. Its sound carries far and wide and has a peculiar tonal quality to it.

#### *Eighteen beats*

Having spoken at length of the importance of drums for the rituals of Garhwal and especially *Ramman*, one needs to highlight the 18 taals within which *Ramman* operates. I gathered from the people that one complete playing of a beat on the drums amounts to a 'chaunp' when a 'chaunp' is repeated five times it becomes a 'taal'. The idea of taal becomes very important in the case of *Ramman* because it is insisted that *Ramman* must be performed between 18 taals. So it is an elaborately planned and charted out set of permutations and combinations which are followed to complete these 18 taals and thus bring *Ramman* to its culmination. However it would be another inquiry when one probes into this insistence on only 18 taals. One finds the community at a loss for a conclusive answer. Why is there an insistence on completing only 18 taals not less nor more. One is piqued at the mystery generated by the number 18 and its significance within *Ramman*. I asked some of the people who were present for the *Ramman* festivity like my informant from Doongri village, Devender Rawat who was very involved in the preparations. He like many others was unable to give any definite answer but he called upon Avatar Singh Bist who is also the oracle 'Pasua' of Bhumiya devta in the village, to speak to me regarding the significance of the numerical 18. He gave a reason which really intrigued

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

me...according to him there were earlier 18 masks that used to 'be made to' dance during *Ramman* and all these 18 had to be brought out for *Ramman* to have successfully concluded. However as stated earlier during 2004 most of the masks were stolen from the villages which had a mask tradition, and Doongri being one amongst them also suffered the loss. Now that there are no longer these 18 masks which intersperse the *Ramman* performance. The remaining which could be restored and remade are only made to dance and hence the taals to which Rama and Lakshman are made to dance, have been arranged in a complex permutation and combination to make for all the entry and exit of all the masked and unmasked characters that intersperse the linear Ramayana story as narrated by the Jagars.

Being very intrigued by the number 18, I tried to probe further and also read on the available work on Garhwal of which William Sax's work is very relevant. As already mentioned, in the villages of Garhwal the idea of belonging to a particular caste was very relevant as a marker of identity. This is also a very Indian phenomena where one very major aspect of one's personality is his or her caste. However, In Garhwal the identity of a Rajput or the Kshatriya caste is very well pronounced and it comes from their belief of being the descendants of the Pandavas – the protagonists from the popular epic Mahabharata. Sax who claims Garhwal to be a region with very well entrenched Mahabharata performative tradition, in the villages of Saloor-Doongra, Doongri, Selang and Bargaon one did not come across a known tradition of performing the Pandav lila (the local enactment of Mahabharata). However due to its well entrenchment in the region of Garhwal, as also mentioned earlier, one witnessed a small invocation to the Pandavas - who in the region of Garhwal are looked upon as ancestors and so invocation also amounts to ancestor worship. I was seeing the proximity that the people in general felt towards the Mahabharata due to their myths of identity woven around these notions. On reading further on the Mahabharata one found that it was essentially the Mahabharata which has been divided into 18 *parvas*.<sup>71</sup> When one tried to understand the 18 taal insistence in this context, one was able to gather the idea of aligning to the larger tradition of Mahabharata, the proximity that the people felt with it, led to it being transposed into a tradition which is relatively being aligned to Ramayana and being seen as seeking inspiration from it.

Sax goes onto say "one particular striking example of the way in which Mahabharata stories are incorporated in local traditions is provided by the cult of the deity Jakh. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this village God's cult are his periodic ritual processions (*dyora*) which occur

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<sup>71</sup> Sax, William. 2002. *Dancing the Self: Personhood and performance in the Pandav lila of Garhwal*. New York: OUP. pp 46.

every few decades. Jakh is identified with Babarik, a character who is unknown in the Pune compiled version of the Mahabharata but well attested in folk traditions from Garhwal to Tamil Nadu, where he is known as Aravan (Hiltebeitel 1988, 1995b). When Jakh travels on his periodic ritual procession, he is accompanied by 18 masked dancers, including Karna, and Duryodhana. The idea of being accompanied by 18 masked characters must have been carried to the performance of *Ramman*, and in that sense this act also sought an allegiance of *Ramman* with the cult of Jakh which is again a very well entrenched tradition in the upper reaches of Garhwal. This helped put the jigsaw puzzle together and made one come to some sort of consensus on the issue of the 18 taals.

While the performance is on, a man is deployed purely for the purpose of keeping track of the taals, for it is through the taals that the entry and exit of various characters in the performance is decided. On the wooden panel at the head of the only door to the Bhumiya devta temple, marks are made with a piece of chalk to keep a track of the taals played. In a way, it is a job which requires a lot of agility and keen sense of music, for it is possible to get swayed by the commotion and the festive atmosphere.

The various characters that come to perform *Ramman* follow the code laid by the 18 taals which the main dholi plays out. To an untrained eye, this may appear as an amateur tradition with ill-rehearsed performers and unending, rambling and disconnected sequences. However, these are in essence, very systematically laid in a schema bearing aspects of high codification. It is not in an unplanned fit that these characters come out to perform their specific roles, but very like a professional theatrical production there is a stipulated cueing of entry and exit. All the masked characters come out once to dance their respective roles. Some of them have elaborate sequences of conversations with the *auji* who talks to them. This, however, happens in the night productions. On the final day of the *Ramman* performance, they have to very strictly adhere to the time frame to make sure that the entry of Narsingh is timed to fall around twilight.

Thinking of the issue of time, one is again reminded of Schechner's musings on the idea. Talking about the major varieties of performance time, Schechner mentions Event time, Set time and Symbolic time. Event time is when the activity has a set sequence, and all the steps of that sequence must be completed - no matter how long or short the elapsed clock time (it is mono directional, linear, yet cyclical in the sense that uniform measurements are adopted from day and night and seasonal rhythms). Set time is where an arbitrary time pattern is imposed on events- they begin and end at certain moments whether or not they have been completed.

Symbolic time is when the span of the activity represents another (longer or shorter) span of clock time. Or where time is considered differently, as in the Christian notion of “end of the time”, eg. theatre, rituals that re-actualise events or abolish time, make believe play and games.<sup>72</sup>

So *Ramman* in a sense is a mix between following the notions of Event and Set time. It has to make sure that the 18 taals are completed for *Ramman* to have come to its conclusion, but at the same time although the process looks oft repeated and winding, it has to wind to arrange for the entry of Narsingh devta around the time of twilight.

### **Performing the pantheon**

Apart from Narsingh devta, Bhumiya and the characters from Ramayana, there are several other deities from the Hindu pantheon and local beliefs that form an intrinsically important part of the *Ramman* performances. They display layers of history, of how the current nature of performances has evolved, and the links of these stories with ecology.

**Bur deva** – To the people of the village, **Bur deva** is the local version of Narad Muni from the Hindu pantheon. The name Bur deva comes from *Bhadh* or *Bhatt*. The Bhattas were Brahmins in the region of Garhwal; and the Dimri Bhattas who are the priests appointed to worship the sanctum sanctorum in the Badrinath temple, were called *Bhitla bhadhu*. So in essence Narad, who is a high Brahmin, is rendered colloquially as Bur deva, and he plays a greater role in the Jakh performance in the villages across the river Alaknanda but has been incorporated to play a little part in the *Ramman* performance of Saloor Doongra and Doongri village. He is represented by a man wearing a costume made of gunny bag and wearing a big wig over his head made of yak hair.

**Suraj Patr** or Surya Devta – Surya is the Sun god and was worshipped in cults prior to the establishing of the pantheon. He is also important because of Baisakhi, which in the Hindu calendar, stands for the start of the solar year. This is the time that the *Ramman* festival begins. He is represented by a mask worn over his head.

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<sup>72</sup> Schechner, Richard. 2002. *Performance Theory-An Introduction*. New York: Routledge. pp 9

**Ganesh** - He is invoked at the beginning of all auspicious occasions so that they may continue unhindered. He is also represented through a mask.

**Kalinka** - Another form of the fierce Goddess Kali or Durga often revered in the hills and in communities that offer sacrifices.

**Mwar-Mwarin** – Mwar Mwarin are the representations of the local buffalo herding community. Mwar first enters the arena with a mask, wearing a gunny bag costume. He performs some antics at the beginning and the village folk respond to it with peals of laughter. He is then attacked by a tiger (a man carrying the mask of a tiger). Mwar resists falling down but the tiger pounces on him again. This time Mwar falls to the ground and trembles uncontrollably. He then suddenly wakes up and winds into the centre shaking as though a force outside of him has taken control of his body, and is making it move uncontrollably. It appears as though he has been possessed.

During my field trip, when the Mwar was beginning the possession act, the villagers laughingly said he was only jesting, and spoofing the whole idea of possession. He started bringing a fistful of rice close to his mouth and started spitting a spell on it and throwing it on people, as is commonly seen of possessions in Garhwal. While the villagers were rollicking on these antics of the Mwar, his other half, the Mwarin came into the arena from the temple. It must be remarked at this point that all the characters in *Ramman*, whether male or female, are played by males. Mwarin enters, and is happy to find that Mwar has been saved from the attack of the tiger by the intervention of a deity taking possession of him. They hug and dance together with great bonhomie. This is a very humorous episode.

**Baniya Banyain** – These are also masked characters. According to Dr Purohit, traders from the region of Ramnagar started trading in the hills, and some also settled down there, gradually giving them a recognizable presence. There are stereotypes attached with the community, and in jest the villagers were heard saying that if the Baniya doesn't keep an eye on his wife, she might go with another man. This also shows a certain 'othering' of an immigrant community. It was a point of much jesting and the *auji* talks to the characters of Baniya- banyain at length on 'soonratta' – the practice performance that takes place on the night before the final performance.

However, on the final performance day, they appear and perform their dance and exit the arena.

**Shri Krishna and Rani Radhika** - Another of the masked characters, this particular pair was however absent in the performances in Doongri, Selang and Badgaon. The masks or costumes of the pair gives absolutely no idea of depicting Krishna and Radha. They are very different from mainstream representations, and this also shows how deeply entrenched iconography of the modern era, especially of Raja Ravi Varma, is in our psyches and cultural representations. They could be any characters but that they are given the names of representing Krishna & Radha. The influence of Vaishnavism is again apparent here, as Krishna lilas are very important in it.

**Khelwari** – This is a group of three to four characters who appear without masks, and a couple of them play women’s characters in a very lewd fashion, wearing revealing clothes. However, despite the fact that they don’t wear masks, their faces are wrapped with clothes with only two holes left for eyes. They evoke the loudest laughs from the audience. Usually these characters make use of exaggerated gestures to elicit such response. Also the influence of popular cinema is visible as they do the pelvic movements, but in a highly lewd and exaggerated manner. The village folk relate to their wild antics and jokes as they spoof situations within the village community.

The instance of secular elements like these Khelwaris, or Mwar Mwarin, or Baniya-Baniyain in an otherwise religious festival, is typical of community festivals like these. There is, like all performances, a need for comic relief which is provided by such elements. Also, this is carnivalesque in a way, since a very coded religious festival allows such ribald humour within its ambit. However, despite the fact that it looks carnivalesque, it is very different from Bakhtinian carnival where all sorts of inversions are allowed momentarily. Despite the fact that ‘erring’ women are the subject of these jokes, these roles are still played by men. Also, as we have already seen, the religious performances are all caste coded though everyone from the community is allowed to participate. The festival allows everyone to participate, but doesn’t allow ruptures in the status quo. This is one of the points where “mela” differs from carnival.

**Maal Nritya** - “Maal” in the local language means people of strength, like wrestlers or warriors. This idea must have led to the naming of the simulated war sequence between

Gurkhas and Garhwalis. This is part of the historical aspect of their identity. The villagers believe that the shield that the Garhwali *maal* wield is the shield which protected the honour of Garhwal when they were attacked by the Gurkhas. Both the Gurkhas and Garhwalis according to the nomenclature issued by the British, were martial races and formed part of their forces. Garhwalis were recognized for their sincere, loyal and hard working nature. However, although to most people in Garhwal and especially to the villagers in the villages enacting *Ramman*, the war between them and the Gurkhas is a part of their historical and cultural memory, yet one couldn't find a conclusive proof of this war having taken place. It could perhaps be attributed to the desire to rise in the eyes of the British and the tussle therein.

**Kur Jogi** – Kur jogi comes after the exit of *Maal* and from the serious simulated atmosphere of the battle, the audience are taken into the mood of a carnival. Kur jogi is a character dressed in a kind of weed which comes out of the fields. This weed has a tendency of sticking to clothes, so in effect it is thrown around like snow and the community indulgently takes part in this game. According to the locals this weed is considered as 'prasadi' during *Ramman* performance. At any other time if this weed is flung around as is done at the festivity, it would be taken offensively. According to an elderly man in Badgaon, Kur Jogi comes from Ganesh who was called Kuram. In time, the consonant 'em' got lost and the people started calling him 'Kuru'. This could also lead one to think of the Kaurvas from the Mahabharata, who according to Sax, are revered in parts of Garhwal especially Jaunsar. But this elderly man who was trying to explain the etymology, made no hint about this aspect. He recounted the popular myth of Shiva cutting off the head of Ganesh, and then promising to replace it with the head of any creature whose head was turned towards the east. And this is how the villagers make this particular myth also their own by appropriating it within their cartography. The elderly man said that when Shiva went looking for such a creature he found an elephant rolling in this very weed in Garhwal, and so he cut off its head and placed it on the torso of Ganesh. In this way the weed got connected with Ganesh and is considered a 'prasad'. But this also reminds one of the pastoral tradition that Dr Purohit talked of. At the start of the solar year, the weed is taken out and the agrarian links of the festivity get strengthened. However 'Kurma' is also the tortoise avatar of Lord Vishnu and this interpretation would veer towards the Vaishnav influence in the region.



**Hastola** – This character appears only in the performance in Badgaon as an effigy of a buffalo. This effigy has replaced the live sacrifice of an animal. Prior to the animal sacrifice a wandering sadhu used to be invited by the villagers to stay in the village for a few days. For the welcome and the hospitable treatment given to him the sadhu used to take upon himself the task of purging the village of all evil and disease. Towards the end of the Ramman performance this live human was offered as sacrifice in the gorge through which the river Alaknanda passes. However with the intervention of the British the practice of human sacrifice was abolished in time. The villagers believed that it was a demon like the narrative of Mahishasur which afflicted the village. However due to the lack of education pronouncing the name Mahishasur was a problem and the people usually ended up calling it Maheshasur. To avoid the inauspiciousness of calling Mahesh (another name of Shiva) as asur (demon) they started calling it ‘hasti’ also someone with a big persona. In time the name got morphed into being called ‘hastola’. It was only in Badgaon that *Ramman* performance brought out this character ‘hastola’ represented through an effigy of a buffalo which was sacrificed in the gorge to Nanda devi to purge the village of all evil and to restore health and prosperity.

**Purcheli** - This is the local blessing goddess, if one was to translate how the people respond to her appearance. During my field trip, this character appeared only in the *Ramman* performance in Badgaon. It may be recalled from the chapter 1 on ‘Text’ where one wondered about the non appearance of Ravana, and the disappearance of Sita into the temple, followed by her changed identity depicted through a mask worn over her head, followed by she blessing people by smearing red ‘sindoor’ on their foreheads. The masked character in Badgaon was called the Purcheli. In Saloor Doongra, however no masked character came to bless the people. However, a woman from amongst the crowd came forth and started trembling in wild, uncontrolled fits, and started smearing the red powder on people to bless them. Chanting, shaking, her language was incomprehensible.

### **Possession**

Though the language spoken by this woman who emerged out of the crowd was incomprehensible, her body language was something that one had got familiar with by this

time during the field trip. There had been a few instances of people getting possessed, including the buffalo herder being protected during a lion attack by getting possessed by a deity.

Possession is a common phenomena in various Indian religious rituals, healing practices, certain music performances. Of course, it's been a known phenomena across the globe. The more known reputation is notorious with 'witches' possessing the bodies, followed by a 'witch hunt'. In the case of *Ramman*, it is only deities that take possession of bodies. In the middle of the village during a packed performance, the effect of having become possessed is nothing short of being awe inspiring. All of the performance is ritual performance indeed, but it is most difficult to theorise the idea of 'possession' being acted out. This particular act is a metaphor for schism between the ephemeral and eternal, between the physical and the spiritual; it is also symbolic of what divinity can do when it intervenes with humanity.

Richard Schechner points out that not only the narratives but the bodily actions of drama reveal schism, crises and conflict. Eugenio Barba contends that performers specialize in putting themselves in disequilibrium, and then displaying how they regain balance, psychopathologically, narratively and socially- only to lose their balance, and regain it again and again. Theatrical techniques centre on these incomplete transformations. How people turn into other people, gods animals, demons, trees, being, whatever-either temporarily as in a play, or permanently as in some rituals, or how being of one order inhabit beings can be exorcised; or how the sick can be healed. All these systems of performative transformations also include incomplete, unbalanced transformations of time and space: doing a specific 'there and then' in this particular 'here and now' in such a way that all four dimensions are kept in play.

William Sax says that very often the performers are possessed by the characters they play. This kind of possession is popular in Hinduism, and especially in Garhwal; and according to Sax first time visitors from elsewhere are struck by the frequency of possession. Sax goes onto say that this has dramaturgical implications. Suresh Awasthi says that the most important feature in the theatre of roots, that is the contemporary Indian theatre, as it seeks to decolonize itself and reconnect with indigenious theatrical traditions, is its "rejection of the proscenium theatre" and its "use of a variety of spaces"<sup>73</sup>. The religious dimensions of indigenious Indian theatre can help us understand why this is so. In the *Ramman* performance, which occupies the major bulk of this research, one can never be sure where the stage ends and the audience begins, and this is

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<sup>73</sup> Awasthi, Suresh, 1989, 'Theatre of Roots: Encounter with Tradition' *The Drama Review*, 33: 48-69

true for a great deal of rural theatre of the type that William Sax calls 'ritual performance' and which have been at the heart of many of the musings of Schechner and Turner. Just as one can never be sure where the stage ends and where the audience begins. It is this fuzzy state of imperviousness which Turner calls the liminal, the betwixt, the in between. As A.K Ramanujan puts it, the notions of possession "are never far from the audience's mind ...bard and character, bard and audience, bard and actor, actor and character are merged at crucial moments and separated at ordinary times. One goes to the theatre/ritual to experience such mergers in different degrees"<sup>74</sup>. This permeability of the divine realm, according to Sax is quite characteristic of Hinduism. He believes that in the Western monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, there is an ontological gulf separating the divine and the human. However on the other hand in Hinduism, we find a profusion of deities: gods and goddesses of particular place, lineages, communities, groups and clans all ranged alongside the multitudinous deities of classical mythology. In mythology, Sax talks of demons becoming gods, and gods sometimes behaving like demons; in popular religion throughout India there have been people who have been regarded as gods and gods who descended on earth as people.<sup>75</sup> The aspect of possession, thus, according to Sax, reflects a wonderful idea of the immanence of the divine in the human, the proximity of the gods, the permeability of the divine and human realms. He also talks of people who would condemn possession as undignified and superstitious and banish the minor gods of the village and fields, and replace them with the great gods of the high tradition. This tension between polytheism and monotheism provides much of the creative energy of Hinduism.<sup>76</sup> Sax glorifies and talks romantically of the contrasts between monotheism and polytheism. He contends that *Pandava lila* and ritual performances like it remind us of the popular side of this dialectic, according to which the human and the divine are each present in the other.

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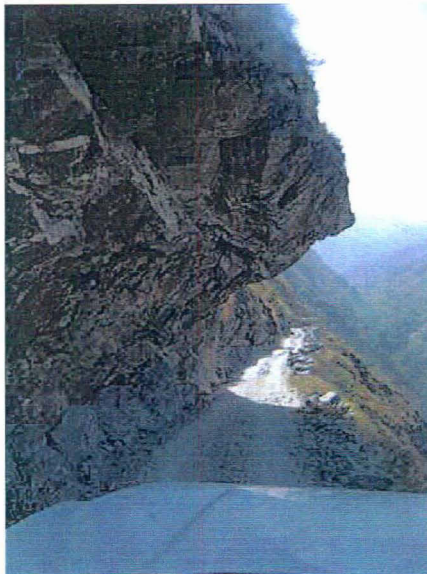
<sup>74</sup> Ramanujan, A.K., 1986, 'Two Realms of Kannada Folklore', in Blackburn, Stuart and Ramanujan, A.K. eds., *Another Harmony: New essays on folklore of India*. Berkeley: University of California , press.

<sup>75</sup> This idea is reflected largely in the Bhakti cult wherein ordinary people like Mira Bai, Namdev, Andal, Kabir attained the status of being or becoming God and in the popular epic Ramayana it was the protagonist Lord Rama who descended on earth as the mortal son of King Dasaratha, while he in reality was only a human incarnation of Lord Vishnu is Shri Krishna who too descended on earth as a normal human, and was the central character in the epic Mahabharata.

<sup>76</sup> Sax, William. 2001. Pandav Lila of Uttarakhand in (ed) Kaushal, Molly. *Chanted Narratives: The Living Katha Vachana tradition*. Delhi: IGNC. pp 165-174



*village Saloor-Doongra*



*Road to Saloor-Doongra*



*Bhumiyaal temple, Saloor-Doongra*



*Rani Radhika, Saloor-Doongra*



*Aujis having a break, Saloor-Doongra*



*Pandavas invoked, Saloor-Doongra*



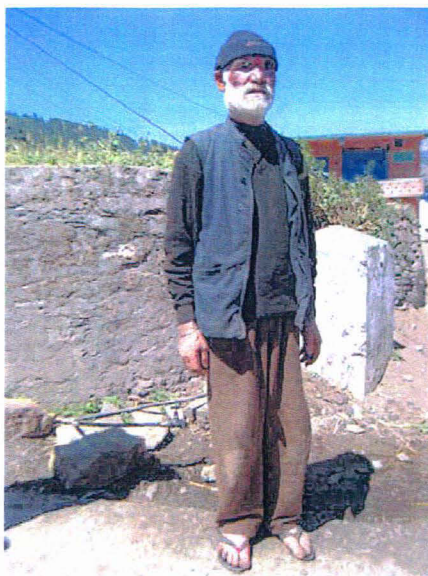
*small scene from Pandav lila*



*Pandavas on 'soonratta'*



*Masked characters dancing on 'soonratta'*



*auji for Saloor-Doongra Ramman*





*Rama and Lakshman doing a step*



*Hanuman collecting offerings*



*Haryali offered on first day*



*Bhumiya surrounded by haryali offerings*



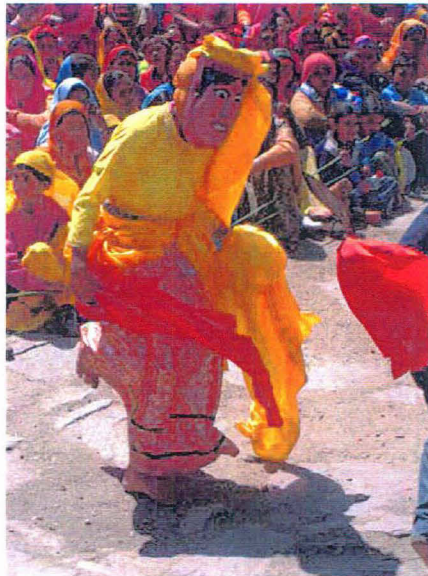
*Golden deer, Saloor-Doongra*



*The Pantheon, Saloor-Doongra*



*Maal, Saloor-Doongra*



*Banyain, Saloor-Doongra*



*Baniya, Saloor-Doongra*



*Rama and Lakshman, Saloor-Doongra*



*Masks, Saloor-Doongra*

## CHAPTER 3

### The Winds of Change

We sometimes say we need a change,  
As a change is good as a rest  
But often fail to ponder  
If change is for the best.

...And if we change too many things  
In way, or shape, or form  
Then constant need to change occurs  
And change becomes the norm.

And change becomes our mentor  
As change succeeds each change  
And every changeless constant  
That stays unchanged seems strange.

And so, if you're sore tempted  
To spawn unneeded change,  
Just change your mind and see that you  
Don't change it, for a change

-C. Richard Miles

The Garhwal mountains, owing to their impenetrability, remained unchanged for long periods of time vis-a-vis their customs and practices. They were not ravaged by wars or constant change of regimes or cultures. As a result, there are many customs that remain preserved in the area. Pandav lila is one of them, and this custom is not found anywhere else in India. In the chapter 1 about 'text', we saw how *Ramman* came into being around the 10<sup>th</sup> century, with the

establishment of Badrinath by Adi Shankaracharya, and the Vaishnav sages settling down in the mountains on their way back and singing songs of Rama. The older cults of Bhumiyaal and masked gods got merged with this new tradition, and a system of beats was evolved by the respected *aujis* or dhol players. The dances that are performed today strictly adhere to the beats composed some ten centuries back.

This story of the evolution of *Ramman*, tenth century on is also one of co-option, where a tradition from the plains got morphed with the more pagan cults. The tradition continues almost unchanged till the onslaught of British colonisation, when the sacrificial cults were done away with. As earlier mentioned, in its pre-British avatar a *sadhu* was sacrificed every year after he had taken all the evil upon himself to purge the village<sup>77</sup>. In the post-Independence urban centric India, riled by migration of performers and artists in search of livelihood, the *Ramman* performance undergoes another kind of transformation. The slow and gradual take-over of local traditions by mass-entertainment forms like cinema, radio and television has added to the constant mutations of *Ramman*.

*Ramman* got enlisted on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009, and thereafter it has started getting a lot of attention. Before going for my field trip, I went through the UNESCO document<sup>78</sup> that was prepared by Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA). In the document, the festival is described as an event of almost a week and a few more days. This was a very fascinating aspect for me, as it appears that any village associated with the festival, would drop their daily chores for a fortnight in the celebration of *Ramman*. Without sponsorship, this would require a humongous effort in terms of arranging finances for the festival, and sustaining the performers and the performances. The labourers would miss their daily wages. This would mean that the villagers have an enormous buffer of provisions created for this festival, and I had hoped to study how the internal economy works vis-a-vis the festival.

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<sup>77</sup> Chapter 1 *sadhu* purges the village also in Chapter 2 the entire description of 'hastola'

<sup>78</sup> A dossier prepared by IGNCA.



## Politics of cultural representation

However, when I went there, I discovered that the festival has now shrunk to two days in most villages, even to a single day in some places. The sequence of events starts with the village priest announcing the date on which Bhumiyaal would come out. This happens on the day of Baisakhi, 13<sup>th</sup> April<sup>79</sup> Bhumiyaal has been resting for a year in the home of a villager. Earlier, he used to rest in the temple, but masks were stolen in 2004 from the temple, and thereafter his abode was shifted to a safer place. On the day Bhumiyaal comes out, barley sprouts – *hariyali* – are offered to him and he hears the account of what all has happened over the past year, as already narrated. From this day, till the day of the final *Ramman* performances, masks are taken out every day, and sequences like mwar-mwarin, baniya-baniyain etc are played every night. These are, in a way, modes of transmission, whereby new performers learn from the seasoned ones. However, I discovered that these pre-final performances are very short now, almost bordering on non-existent, and barely anyone comes to witness them. Without any practice through the year, the performers almost perform straight on the day of *Ramman* now. The stories have shrunken, become codified as already discussed, but it seems that even these codes are getting codified, bordering on being lost.

The dossier prepared by IGNCA suggests otherwise, and this also says something about the politics of cultural representation. While it is being projected that the tradition remains intact, and that it needs funding for safeguarding; in reality the tradition has been in a state of a downward spiral and has not been able to sustain the onslaught of mass entertainment forms and lack of employment opportunities in the region. Also, this dossier does not mention the sacrifice of the goat and the element of possession that occurs as a part of the festivities, for the fear of interpretations that may emanate within audiences of different cultures.

This year, after the ritual form got enlisted by UNESCO, the Chief Minister of Uttarakhand came to witness *Ramman* on the final day. There were announcements from microphones alongwith a lot of humdrum as is common when a politician is visiting. The sequence of usual

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<sup>79</sup> The fixed date is probably as a result of colonial intervention, for Indian festivals generally operate on the lunar cycle, and hence the dates would change every year

events, and their decorum was thrown out of gear. Dr Purohit, who has been researching about the folk traditions of Garhwal for two decades was visibly upset, and contended that there should be “pin drop silence” when Rama is dancing.

This is just symptomatic of what might be coming. A living tradition has to go through its vicissitudes, especially when there is intervention from outside. An outside intervention is necessary given the state of many folk arts that are dying out. This intervention however has to be thought through in terms of dissemination of the art form, while keeping traditions that have lived for centuries intact. *Ramman* performers were called to perform at IGNCA in 2008, where the performance was packed into a couple of hours. It then, became a tailor-made performance with a ‘director’ installed to specially make the performance of this ritual palatable to Delhi taste. This is just the beginning. With recognition, there will be funding, and the performers would travel to various places to showcase their art. Dr Kushal Bhandari attested to the various problems faced when *Ramman* was to be showcased in IGNCA, Delhi. There were objections raised to taking the masks outside Garhwal and performing it out of context and season. Although he did manage to convince the Panchayat and the performance was held in Delhi, he realised the inevitability of depending on the villagers and their vicissitudes. This he considered would be a problem when *Ramman* would have to be frequently taken outside to perform. It wouldn’t be feasible to ask the Panchayat for the permission everytime. So he thought of it in terms of making it into a project wherein funds would be garnered and utilised for making the masks of the performance. However, this raises many issues. Would this kind of systematic ‘project’ be able to also infuse the masks with the vitality that the faith of an entire community vests in it? Would it not amount to just a replication with the loss of ‘sanctity’, that is so often invoked even by the initiators of the ‘projects’. The danger lies at the point where the performances will be altered to suit the taste of the audiences in various places. One says this at the risk of sounding conservative, but the point is conservation. A living tradition, like a living being, will adapt itself to the needs of time, and therefore change is inevitable. However, a strategy would need to be evolved that would help in securing the identity.

## Big and small fish

Let us take the case of the *qawwali* form. It was sung at *mazars* of saints, at small gatherings, had a minor presence in Bollywood films as well. Then came a revolution in the form of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, who fused the usual folk form with Hindustani classical music, and sang with such passion that the world woke up to take notice. Bollywood films started plagiarising his tunes, and converted the spiritual lyrics into bawdy ones – so *Dum Mast Qalandar* became *Tu cheez badi hai mast*. Khan, however, did not mind this, and said that this would lead the youth to find out where this music is coming from, and they would gradually get interested in the philosophy of Sufism. Khan proved himself right, there was a revival of *qawwali* music and despite its commercialisation, the art form itself received fillip.

The counterpoint is that along with a renewed interest, *qawwali* became a fashionable thing among art circles, besides becoming an 'item' formula in Bollywood. So it has been appropriated by both the mass and the class culture – where there is one *qawwali* in every other Hindi film production, and where there are ticketed events (with costly tickets) like *Jahan-e-Khusrau*<sup>80</sup> in the backdrop of old forts. This is not to say that such appropriation is detrimental for the art form – but this creates the phenomena of big fish and small fish. As in *qawwali* where popular and famous singers are called everywhere, while the unknown ones are reduced to singing in penury who would continue singing at *mazars* and *dargahs*. In time the small fish could die out, and the big fish could forget their old language.

Within the related artforms too, there would be a creation of big and small fish. For example, *Chaar Bayt* a tradition that flourished under the patronage of Afghan chieftains who came to India during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In principalities like Tonk, Rampur, Bhopal and Hyderabad, the tradition grew. The tradition of *Chaar Bayt* is a martial one, where the soldiers sang songs of enthusiasm, valour and nostalgia. They are high pitched songs meant to infuse a spirit of zeal. The four-liners are distinct in their form from *qawwalis* as just stated, and also in their philosophical underpinning, since *qawwali* is a Sufi tradition, while *Chaar Bayt* follows the Islamic norm of not using any instrument other than the *daf*. Now, *Chaar Bayt* is like a small

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<sup>80</sup> A sufi music festival held in Delhi organized by Indian Council for Cultural Relations.

fish, which to a lay ear will sound just like qawwali, and therefore would not be registered as a separate identity, and is obviously being gobbled up by the big fish. The Rampur version, for example, uses Hindi-film-type and qawwali-type lyrics now for popular appeal and despite immediate popularity, it has put itself at the peril of being consumed by a better known tradition.

The same danger lurks in the case of *Ramman*. If it starts taking elements from Ramlila for immediate appeal, it shall be reduced to being just another Ramlila over time. Also when the groups start performing outside, a couple of them will outsmart the others. They will raise themselves to become an international presence, perhaps, but in its location itself, small performers will remain back who would not get patronage to keep the tradition intact. Therefore, one has to tread with caution.

Over the last few decades, changes have been creeping as such in the tradition of *Ramman*. Earlier the performers used *pagdis*, which changed in the last decade to using *mukuts* or crown. There have been changes in the costumes too – they have become as lavish as would be for a stage performance. As one has earlier pointed out that masks are the prime adornments that are used, and at many times people from the audience dressed in plain shirts could join the performers in the dance, to participate, or even to teach. This change in adornments, Dr Purohit contends<sup>81</sup>, is novel and an ‘aesthetic’ addition to the tradition. However, these are Ramlila-type adornments that are making the tradition subservient to the better established and known form.

### **Many masks**

Earlier, it was considered inauspicious to take the masks out of the village. However, they were taken out in 2008 for the performance in IGNCA, after which when the masks were brought back to the village; they were ‘purified’ to restore back the sanctity vested into the masks. This was accompanied by goat sacrifice. This would be a boost for the tradition and would spread awareness –this shunning of dogma. The community now has got many masks made for performances outside.

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<sup>81</sup> Interview with Dr DR Purohit, in person. April 28, 2010.

However, the 'many masks' also means the 'many masks' that the performance will wear if a code is not made up, of how to take elements from other traditions, or how to respond to a diverse audience, of how not to be swept off.

Besides that, the more important question is about the value of these masks. They have the function of bringing the community together. On the day of the final performances, all relatives of all village dwellers are invited from nearby villages, and it is a huge congregation. It is the value invested in these non-living objects – the masks, the pole of Bhumiyaal etc - that bonds the community and gives them a sense of continued historical identity. The masks, in a way, carry the weight of the ancestors. Also they are catalysts that make men reach their deities through transformation through the masks. With mass production of masks, one can only conjecture about the ways in which the tradition will change. It is beneficial for the community to get an economic boost through their tradition, but at the same time, mass production would disinvest the masks of their powers, and also in time it would lead to some sort of cultural amnesia.

With a little exposure in the last decade, the community became vulnerable, and masks were stolen from various villages. Dr Bhandari, a local resident thinks that a big gang was involved in the thefts, but the police could not get to the bottom of it. However, this increased suspicion within the community, led the otherwise hospitable villagers to become wary of outsiders who come to study the tradition. Now, only one original mask survives – that of Prahlad. The rest had to be remade, and as just stated, a large number of them are planned to be made.

A couple of Garhwal University teachers, Ajeet Panwar and Sanjay Pandey, have received training in the singing of jagars and performed this year at the *Ramman* performance in Saloor-Doongra. They sang with the accompaniment of instruments like harmonium. It is an innovative addition, but then again, traditionalists like veteran Jagar singer Kalam Singh Bhandari think that their dialect is being diluted since these trainees do not know the local dialect well. Also the version they learnt has been taught by Thaan Singh from another region, so the dialect and sequences come in conflict. Besides, every village has variations in its own dialects. He also takes exception to the use of instruments since the only accompanying instrument traditionally used has been the dhol. It is a tough call to institutionally propagate the art form unless specialists are appointed for the purpose. Institutional support is good idea in terms of creating an infrastructure, of archiving, researching and training, but unless it is accompanied with *in-*

*situ* practice, it would be tough to perpetuate the context.

## Ritual and Theatre

Apart from this, the interest among creative artists and academicians has led to creative productions. Prof William Sax produced a play with Dr Purohit, titled *Nanda Devi Raj Jat* (2001) based on the legends of Nanda Devi. Purohit also extracted from the Pandav lila, the Chakravyuha sequence, which has a special flavour in this particular performance form – and created a theatre production out of it.

This is something on the lines of Victor Turner's idea of ethno-dramatics in his essay, “Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology”<sup>82</sup>. In this essay, Turner talks of his experience in Greenwich Village where he conducted a theatre workshop where he staged a production with a collaboration of theatre and anthropology students. He talks about the need for “ethno-dramaturgs” who would assist the director in understanding the context of alien lands and if s/he is going wrong. In this production, the students staged a play with African settings, and tried to incorporate their rituals into the performance. The point that Turner makes is that Western anthropology operates on Cartesian dualism by creating an “other”, and that theatre persons should evolve a more inclusive way of using the anthropologist’s data by living the cultures they are trying to represent. The actors imitate the rituals and feel it despite the fact that the rituals are “theatrical” for them. This propensity to live rituals of “alien” cultures and perform them on a home turf seems a repetition of representation exercises of various kinds in the 19th century.

This is what Purohit and Sax are trying to do in a different way, and which is what may happen with stage performances of the *Ramman* as well. The anthropologists-cum-playwrights, in taking sequences out of Pandav Lila and similar traditions are trying to create a new cultural product for a different audience, and at the same time playing out rituals in the realm of 'theatre'. The other thing that I am talking about – the staged performances of rituals – will tend to veer more towards the stage and keep the rituals as exotic embellishments. Kalbeliya is a

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<sup>82</sup> Turner Victor. “Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology”. *Kenyon Review*. New Series, Vol 1. No. 3. (Summer 1979). pp 80-93

dance tradition of Rajasthan, of a snake charming community by the same name. With exposure, the tradition changed its form from a folk dance to a spectacle with black flowing robes and antics like picking up a ring on the floor with eye-lashes by bending backwards etc. Some artists revelled in it, while most others had to turn to daily wage earning in villages as the tradition has died out there but flourished on stages in bigger places.<sup>83</sup>

In the play *Nanda devi Raj Jat*, the play is performed in a proscenium setting and the term 'jat' denotes 'yatra' or travels of Nanda Devi. A *sutradhar* sits at a *chaupal* (village centre) on the stage, and urges people to listen to the tale of Nanda devi. Within his narration, players come on stage and enact episodes of the travel, after which they sing Jagars. The play has been staged mostly in Srinagar town of Chamoli district, and aims at spreading awareness about the Jagars and the cult of Nanda devi.

It is a fine effort but the debate of appropriation by cultural agencies and people remains alive. The anthropological and the folk material are rich, exotic and intriguing for an urban audience. It is a dialogue that is creating glocalisation, a synthesis of global and local, if one may use that term. However, it needs to be seen that the share-holding has parity, in the sense that if there is an awareness being created within an urban audience along with commercial use of cultural material also, there also needs to be an *in-situ* preservation and regeneration.

### **Preserving cohesion**

We have discussed the tradition of Gambhira in the chapter about 'text' as to how this art form from Bengal essentially is a form of protest, through performers in the dress of poor farmers supplicating to Shiva. This is akin to Bhumiya listening to the whole year's accounts. Gambhira was described by a British administrator-surveyor in 1918 as "an annual review of the acts of the year and penance for misdeeds"<sup>84</sup>. It is very interesting to note that after partition of India, it is the Muslims who kept the tradition alive in Bangladesh. The deity is the same – Shiva. This

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<sup>83</sup> Interview with Bhagwan Kachhawa, Program officer with West Zonal Cultural Centre. December 2009.

<sup>84</sup> From [http://www.indianetzone.com/29/gambhira\\_indian\\_folk\\_musical\\_theatre.htm](http://www.indianetzone.com/29/gambhira_indian_folk_musical_theatre.htm). (As viewed on 08.12.2009).

points out at how certain traditions outlive their religious boundaries and become the cultural ethos of a community. Intervention is important from the government side, but the need for an intrinsic revival has to be created within the community itself.

In the case of *Ramman*, with funds now coming, I discovered to my chagrin, during the field trip, that there is an atmosphere of suspicion among the neighbouring villages. In the nomination sent to UNESCO, the twin villages of Saloor-Doongra had been highlighted, and the other villages like Doongri, Badgaon, Selang had been left out. As a result, the left out villages feel that Saloor-Doongra was in the eyes of English-speaking scholars, and that is why they walked away with the help. There is bickering amongst the neighbours as a result. The first step in intervention, therefore, probably should be an assurance from the disseminating agencies that the funds are for resurrection of the tradition and not of a particular location or community.

Rituals, in a lay understanding, are performances performed within a context and have inherent faith and symbolic meaning embedded for a community which practices it. Most often it is performed as a “social drama” in Turner’s words<sup>85</sup>, and in that form it occurs on all levels of social organisation from state to family. A social drama is initiated when the peaceful tenor of regular, norm governed social life is interrupted by the breach of a rule controlling one of its salient relationships. This leads swiftly or slowly to a state of crisis, which if not soon sealed off may split the community into contending factions and coalitions. To prevent this, redressive measures are taken by those who are considered the most legitimate and authoritative representatives of the community. Redress usually involves ritualised action, whether legal, religious (involving faith in retributive action of powerful supernatural entities and usually involving a sacrifice) or military (engaging in head-hunting or organised warfare). According to Turner, social dramas (rituals) suspend the normal everyday role-playing; they interrupt the flow of social life and force a group to take cognizance of its own behaviour in relation to its values. If we follow this logic, then there's this aspect to take care of as well when trying to preserve an old folk tradition like *Ramman*. If its dissemination leads to a form where Bhumiya listening to the accounts of activities disappears, or the local tradition of all relatives gathering together gets diluted, it would mean transformations in an age-old system of cohesion of the

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<sup>85</sup> Turner Victor. “Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology”. *Kenyon Review*. New Series, Vol 1. No. 3. (Summer 1979). Pp 80-93.



community.

In understanding, anthropology Turner says that as a subject of study anthropology was modelled on the basis of science reports and thus entailed a lot of data collection and detailing.<sup>86</sup> It was a process of watching and under a microscope observing the 'other'. However this made it largely lacking in its human or social feel. In D.H Lawrence's words anthropology should be 'man-alive' and 'woman-alive'<sup>87</sup>. However, this living quality largely fails to emerge. It is largely to address these issues that the need for exploring interface between ritual and theatre, between social and aesthetic drama and between social sciences and performing arts emerged. Turner takes from Schechner and tries to explore the possibility of turning suitable ethnographic material into play-scripts. He works through the premise that "it is true we learn something about ourselves by taking on the role of others." Turner acknowledges that there are a lot of social scientists who frown upon the terms *performance* and *drama*. But essentially they are central to anthropology, since only by performing ethnography can one bring home the data. But this brings us to a series of questions as Rustom Bharucha also asks of Richard Schechner whether any ritual can be lifted from its original setting and performed as theatre. However Schechner responds that it is "just as an everyday event can be". This is possible because context, not fundamental structure, distinguishes ritual, entertainment and ordinary life from each other. Therefore, while disseminating, it is important to keep the context alive. This is where the role of researchers, folk-activists, and theatre people lies – to archive, understand the history, the current socio-political context linked with a cultural form, and build a preservation project accordingly.

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<sup>86</sup> Turner Victor. "Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology". *Kenyon Review*. New Series, Vol 1. No. 3. (Summer 1979). Pp 80-93.

<sup>87</sup> From 'Why the Novel Matters' in *D.H. Lawrence: Selected Criticism*, 1956

## Poesis and Mimesis

Turner admits that there are many “removes” in his situation of transposing a cultural idiom into a performance: “...for I was using Western substances to represent Ndembu objects which themselves had symbolic value in the ritual, making of them, as it were, situational indices of cultural symbols”<sup>88</sup>. He asks the reader if all this appears highly artificial, and answers himself that according to the students it was not.

The fact that students thought that it was not ‘highly artificial’ is probably because they were made to believe that the exercise was ‘highly artistic’. Turner has strong plans of using ‘alien’ idioms, and anthropological data to good use, in this essay.<sup>89</sup> In his methodology, he believes that the director should have less control, and that acting should not be based on verisimilitude. Poesis, he says, is more important than mimesis, but what this poesis is and how it will be achieved, is not touched upon by him. The other method he would want to adopt is that students read a certain text of an ‘alien’ culture, write a script according to what they perceive, enact it, and then go back to rewriting the script by rigorously studying the culture with the help of an ethno-dramaturg. The question is – Why is such an elaborate methodology being prepared for studying an ‘alien’ culture and enacting and re-enacting it out? Turner argues that it is living these cultures and rituals. However, the entire ritual culminating in a performance would barely be able to contextualise the ‘alien’ situation. One wonders if Turner’s attempts are a metaphor of neo-Enlightenment, of another cartographic exercise reinvented. The language itself of his essay is in the mode of ‘how to understand anthropological data’.

Turner offers a counterpoint to his own points at the end of the essay, almost as an afterthought, where he says that Cartesian dualism has made voyeurs of Western man, “exaggerating sight by macro- and micro-instrumentation, the better to learn the structures of the world with an ‘eye’ to its exploitation.”<sup>90</sup>

Turner admits that if ethnodramatics is to be taken seriously, it would have to become

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<sup>88</sup> Turner Victor. “Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology”. *Kenyon Review*. New Series, Vol 1. No. 3. (Summer 1979). Pp 80-93.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid

<sup>90</sup> Ibid

something more than a cognitive game “played in our heads”<sup>91</sup> and inscribed in “tedious journals”<sup>92</sup>. His admission, however, falls into the old binary trap with him paying tribute to “Eastern dragons who are lords of fructile chaos, whose wisdom makes cognitive knowledge, look somehow shrunken, shabby and inadequate...”<sup>93</sup>

However, the moot point is that of poesis and mimesis. Turner hasn't offered a model of poesis, but the idea perhaps is in the right direction. In the case of *Ramman*, if the people responsible for intervention and preservation thereof, have the idea of poesis in the right place, things should go in the right direction. If they can keep the context in mind, and the values attached with the tradition, and succeed in keeping them intact, it could serve as a model for many such *Rammans*.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid

<sup>92</sup> Ibid

<sup>93</sup> Ibid



*Bhumiyal with ancestor deity, Badgaon*



*Ganesh Mask, Badgaon*



*Preparing Nanda devi doli, Badgaon*



*Nanda devi doli being carried, Badgaon*



*Rama, Lakshman, Sita, Badgaon*



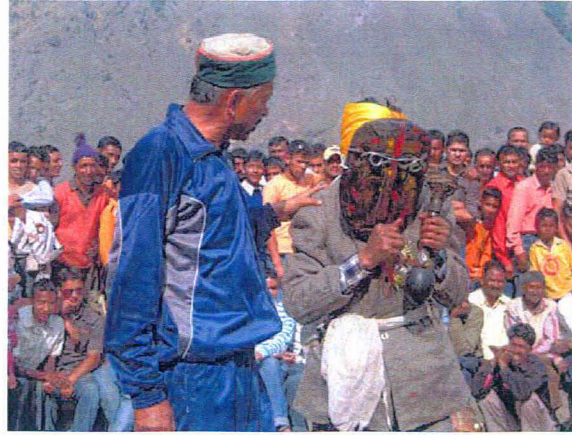
*temple entrance, Badgaon*



*Kur Jogi, Badgaon*



*Kur Jogi in his costume of weeds*



*Mwar performing antics, Badgaon*

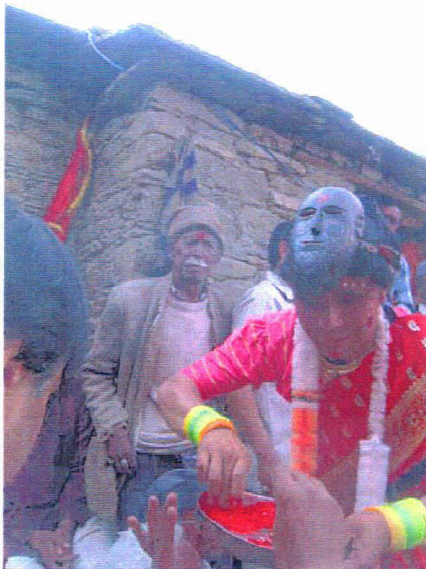


*Hastola, The demon effigy, Badgaon*





*Bhumiya dances, Selang*



*Purcheli, the blessing Goddess*



*Ravana carrying Sita*



*Symbolic Lanka burning*

## CONCLUSION

To come to a conclusion is always a difficult task, for it is difficult to reach definitive answers. Instead, often one sees more questions raised at the end of a quest, to be deliberated and pondered upon. This research has been a personal quest into a hitherto academically uncharted performance tradition. Many ideas and thoughts were grappled with on this personal journey, thereby making the process of research little more than an academic venture.

The fascination of venturing on the road less travelled has been at the heart of many of human endeavours. So what began as grappling with the image of Rama in tellings other than ones in popular circulation as the expression of mainstream “national culture”,<sup>94</sup> led to many understandings - some already in currency of folklore studies, anthropology and other disciplines.

My interest in studying *Ramman* was propelled by the desire of seeing a tradition which sought allegiance to the Grand Tradition of Ramayana, and yet had inherent possibilities of being seen totally as anachronistic to it. Initially the desire was to see the tradition in the light of how it deviated from the known versions – in other words, the Valmiki version. However, soon one realized that Valmiki’s telling, like many others, was contextually placed in its own scheme and time. While mapping the multifariousness of the Ramkatha tradition, one understood that *Ramman* - as Sax says of *Pandav lila* - is much less a text, a book but rather a tradition of performance, a local drama in which Ramayana is represented in recitation, dance and drama by amateur performers for an audience of fellow villagers and guests.<sup>95</sup> In the region of Garhwal, *Ramman* is viewed as a performance and is fundamentally oral and dramatic. Sax contends that this image of Ramayana or Mahabharata as an oral tradition of performance may be closer to its original form than the relatively recent bibliocentric images with which scholars are most comfortable.

This is where introduction of terms like ‘performance text’ is important. In oral traditions where performances are constantly innovated upon, each performance is a text in its own right. There are codes within performance of rituals which are not a part of any written text. There are codes of chaos as well – the acts of possession for example, in *Ramman*. The performer of the

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<sup>94</sup> The idea of national culture refers to the Ramanand Sagar’s version of Ramayana telecast on the National Television in 1987

<sup>95</sup> Sax, William. 1995 . ‘who’s who in Pandavilila?’ in (ed) Sax, William. *Gods at play*. pp 131-155

'possession' act would shake with frenzy, and perhaps believe too that he is possessed. This is where Western principles of rationalism come under the scanner, as to whether what is considered 'irrational' has been othered because of our limited understanding.

While analyzing various performance texts of the Ramkatha tradition, one realized that all texts belong to their own contexts. In Kampan's hand, the story acquires a flavour from South Indian lands; in Jaina scheme which was opposed to Brahminism, Ravana became a hero; other tellings are centred around women, and so on and so forth. Given that Ramkatha wielded universal appeal, it became a site for contestation of ideologies, many times consciously. Apart from being an ideological tool, it also became a vehicle for carrying cultural codes. In Ramman, it carries the weight and wisdom of ancestors, and a long history of changes. The layers were always added, and never annihilated. So what started as mask tradition and cult of Bhumiya, added Nanda Devi and Narsingh to itself, which was followed by Ramkatha, which was followed by a code of beats etc. It is interesting to see how performance codes like these help to preserve a tradition. The dances may keep adding up like later additions of *mwar-mwarin* and *baniya-baniyain*, but given that they have to be performed within the scheme of 18 beats, keeps the new contiguous with the old. An analogy to this may be found in Vedic chanting tradition, where diction and cadence is of much more importance than the meaning of the slokas.

Since one began grappling with *Ramman* as an oral tradition of performance, it was natural taking past precedence into account to base one's research on the collection and analysis taking the notion of text as the point of departure. However, finding this notion being challenged within social and anthropological studies, one gradually veered towards an observation of elements on field, focusing on features embedded within performance.

Schechner says that "academic inertia crushes thinking that goes beyond Western traditions of drama or dance, and beyond the idea of the performing arts as activities that take place on theatre stages". One of the fundamental and most enduring needs is to expand our horizons and not stifle Performance studies in the narrow garb of theatre or drama. As Schechner points out, methodologies need to become increasingly inter disciplinary and methodological tools need to be increasingly made available from performance theorists, social scientist and semioticians. Performative thinking must be seen as a means of cultural analysis.<sup>96</sup>

One of the major problems faced at the start of the research was a way of approaching the

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<sup>96</sup> Schechner, Richard. Performance Studies: The broad spectrum approach. *The Drama Review*. Vol 32-3. (Autumn 1988) pp 4-6

tradition and conducting the field survey. Through the course of the field work, one has tried to apply methodologies available within the discipline of social sciences such as participant observation, field interviews, together with audio-video documentation.

The research led to thinking about many aspects, especially since *Ramman* also got enlisted on UNESCO's Representative List of intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009. This led to exploring the various challenges that the 'living tradition' of *Ramman* was facing in the current scenario. Though skeptical of the changes taking place, one also realized through the course of the study that change is inevitable. Schechner says no culture is "pure" – that is, no culture is "itself". Overlays, borrowings and mutual influencing have always made every culture a conglomerate, a hybrid.<sup>97</sup> So although there are concerns that intervention into the tradition may bring forth several changes, one has to understand that living traditions are 'living' precisely because they have to go through vicissitudes of their life. The tradition of *Ramman*, in its current form, exists because there was a Vaishnavite intervention into an old mask tradition, in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The intervening agencies would need to tread with caution and ensure that the context and identity of the tradition is kept intact while introducing steps necessary to keep it afloat.

Schechner opines that attempting to fix cultures, or to stop them from changing would be like trying to annihilate history.<sup>98</sup> Although one does accept that it is not possible to ossify a living tradition which is bound to change, adapt and modify, however caution needs to be maintained for fear of little traditions being subsumed by the great ones in course of time. One has also tried to grapple with the idea of cultural representation. However most of the 'dossiers' prepared by cultural institutions and agencies treat the cultures and traditions as "natural species" threatened with extinction. Interventions based on "safeguarding" and "saving" although high-sounding, often are late twentieth century versions of the colonial patronizations.<sup>99</sup> Schechner also contends that allowing market forces or other kinds of social Darwinism to prevail is equally unsatisfactory. In a modern globalised world, it is wishful to think that the above mentioned two factors would leave any tradition untouched. The traditions in Garhwal hills had remained untouched for long periods of time because of their physical separation from the mainland because of the hills. Physical separation matters still, but change of worldviews through mass-media, and the pull of the plains for employment (since

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<sup>97</sup> Schechner, Richard. Intercultural Themes. *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol.11, No.3, The Interculturalism Issue (1989), pp 151-162.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid*

<sup>99</sup> *ibid*

globalization happens only in one direction) has considerably changed the scenario in terms of keeping a tradition going.

In the end it is only an attempt at concluding a debate on preservation policies for traditions which are living, breathing and which will adapt and add only more layers to their already variegated scheme. These communities of Garhwal, like many such communities on the globe, will continue to dance their selves, for it is an expression of their identity, their history. And history has lesser to do with the past than with what is yet to come.



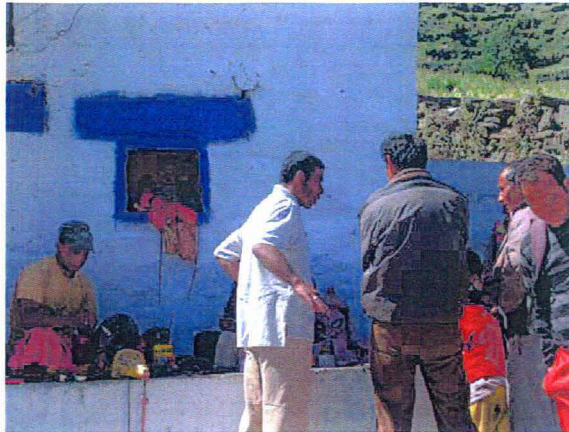
*Mask of Narsingh devta*



*Narsingh mask carried on head*



*Prahlad mask on pole*



*Painting the masks*





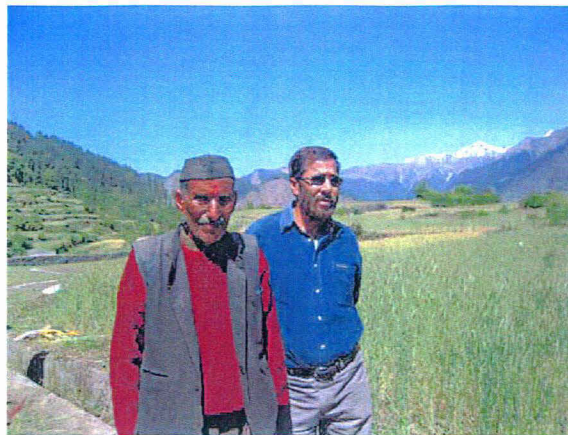
*Arena marked for performance*



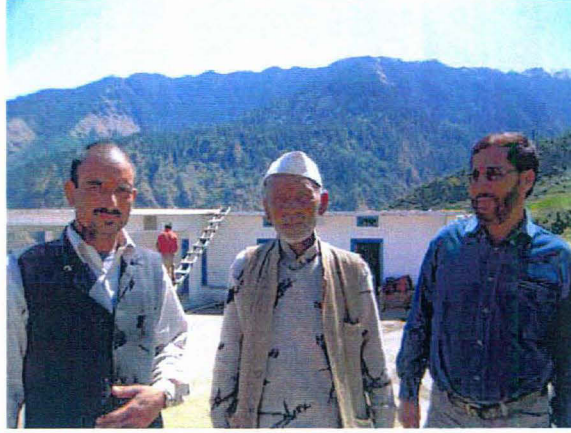
*Dhol, two sided drum and damaun*



*Ramlila influence in costume and weapons*



*Yelam Das and Dr Purohit*



*Ganiya, Oldest Das, Dr Purohit*

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