

From Natya to Lila: Rasa, Ritual and Royal Patronage in the Ramlila of Ramnagar, Varanasi

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Abstract

Each autumn, the town of Ramnagar, on the far bank of the Ganga from Varanasi, becomes the stage for a month-long performance of Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas. Sponsored by the Maharaja of Kashi, the Ramnagar Ramlila moves from site to site across the town, and its audience moves with it. This paper reads the performance in three ways. It is environmental theatre, since fixed places in Ramnagar are made to stand for Ayodhya, Janakpur, Chitrakut, Panchavati and Lanka. It is royal ritual, since the Kashi Naresh still frames and legitimises it long after princely rule ended. And it is living heritage, recognised by UNESCO in 2008 and now facing urban growth, mobile phones and the two-year break forced by COVID-19. The paper also reads the Ramlila against the rasa theory of Bharata's Natyashastra. It shows that Ramnagar keeps the classical machinery of vibhava, anubhava and sthayibhava, but turns the detached relish of the sahridaya into the devotional absorption of the bhakta, a shift that later theorists named bhakti-rasa. The study is a qualitative synthesis of ethnographic, theatrical and historical scholarship, chiefly the work of Richard Schechner, Linda Hess, Anuradha Kapur and Philip Lutgendorf, read alongside heritage records and recent press reports. I argue that the Ramlila has lasted because it draws together three kinds of authority that are usually found apart: the sacred authority of the text and the boy actors who embody the gods, the symbolic authority of the Maharaja, and the lived authority of devotees who walk the story night after night. If this is right, protecting the Ramlila means protecting the physical, acoustic and social setting in which these three meets, and not only its script and costumes.

Keywords: Ramlila; Ramnagar; Varanasi; Ramcharitmanas; Natyashastra; rasa; bhakti-rasa; environmental theatre; ritual performance; royal patronage; lila; intangible cultural heritage

1. Introduction

During the Dussehra season, towns and villages across the Hindi-speaking north stage their own Ramlilas. Most run for ten or twelve nights on a single stage and end with Ravana's effigy going up in flames. Ramnagar does things differently. Its Ramlila opens on Anant Chaturdashi and runs for about thirty-one evenings, moving through a chain of permanent and seasonal sites spread over several square kilometres of the town (UNESCO 2008; Schechner and Hess 1977). Nobody sits in front of a proscenium here. People walk, stand, wait and sometimes camp beside the action as Rama goes into exile and comes home again.

Scholars have long treated Ramnagar as the most elaborate and best attended Ramlila in India. Schechner and Hess (1977) put this down, first of all, to the patronage of the Maharaja of Benares, whose home in Ramnagar Fort anchors the event both on the map and in the minds

of spectators. When UNESCO inscribed “Ramlila, the traditional performance of the Ramayana” on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008, it named Ramnagar among the most representative Ramlilas and noted that, where most last ten to twelve days, Ramnagar’s may last a whole month (UNESCO 2008).

My central question is a plain one: what holds the Ramnagar Ramlila together as a single event, and why has it lasted? Four narrower questions follow from it.

1. How is the town’s space organised and ritually turned into the geography of the Ramcharitmanas?
2. How is authority shared among the royal patron, the hereditary ritual specialists and the child performers?
3. How far does the classical theory of rasa in the Natyashastra explain what the Ramlila does to its audience, and where does it fall short?
4. How has the Ramlila coped with the pressures of the last century, from the end of princely rule and UNESCO status to urban growth and the COVID-19 pandemic?

The answer I develop is that Ramnagar binds together three kinds of authority, which I call textual-sacred, royal-political and devotional-experiential, and that the Ramlila depends on all three being present at once. The title names the three strands through which I follow them. Rasa stands for the textual and devotional side, ritual for the town-wide staging and its processions, and royal patronage for the Maharaja’s role. Section 2 reviews the literature and Section 3 sets out the method. Sections 4 to 7 deal in turn with history, space, performers and audience. Section 8 reads the Ramlila against the rasa theory of the Natyashastra. Section 9 turns to continuity and change, and Section 10 draws out what the argument means for safeguarding.

2. Review of Literature

Writing on the Ramnagar Ramlila falls, broadly, into four groups.

Performance studies. The starting point in English is Schechner and Hess’s “The Ramlila of Ramnagar,” published in *The Drama Review* in 1977. They described the event as participatory environmental theatre and gave the first day-by-day account of its episodes, sites and crowds. They also made clear how much the subject touches: pilgrimage, bhakti, beliefs about rebirth, a culture that mixes oral and written forms, and the relations among the state, the Maharaja and ordinary people. Schechner returned to Ramnagar in “Striding Through the Cosmos” (1993), where he read the Ramlila as a map of the cosmos laid over a real town, and again in fieldnotes that set his 1978 and 2013 visits side by side (Schechner 2017). His Ramnagar writing became a reference point for performance studies in general, and it has since been examined in its own right as a case of intercultural encounter (Tuan 2018).

Theatre history and documentation. Anuradha Kapur’s *Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods: The Ramlila at Ramnagar* (1990) is still the fullest single study. Kapur describes the svarupas (the boys who embody the divine characters), the masks and effigies, the Ramayanis who chant the text and the Vyas who directs. Her key point, for this paper, is that performers and spectators take part in one continuous ceremony. They are not two separate parties.

Religious studies and the Ramcharitmanas. Linda Hess has written on what the audience experiences (1983) and on the social values the text and its staging pass on (1988), placing the Ramlila firmly within North Indian bhakti. Philip Lutgendorf's *The Life of a Text* (1991) sets the Ramlila beside recitation and exposition (katha) as ways in which Tulsidas's epic lives. He shows that the Manas is mostly heard and performed, not read in silence. For the wider idea of lila as divine play, Norvin Hein's *The Miracle Plays of Mathura* (1972) and William Sax's edited volume *The Gods at Play* (1995) offer useful comparisons.

Indian aesthetic theory. The theory of rasa set out in the sixth chapter of Bharata's *Natyashastra* (trans. Ghosh 1951) and developed by Abhinavagupta (see Masson and Patwardhan 1970) remains the foundation of Indian dramatic thought. Rupa Gosvamin's sixteenth-century *Bhaktirasamritasindhu* recast it as a theory of devotional rasa (trans. Haberman 2003), and Haberman (1988) showed how that theory became a practice of religious role-play. Schechner's "Rasaesthetics" (2001) brought rasa into performance studies, though it says little about Ramnagar itself. The two bodies of work, on the Ramlila and on rasa, have rarely been brought together in a sustained way.

Heritage records and recent reporting. UNESCO's 2008 inscription and the Sangeet Natak Akademi's documentation (Sangeet Natak Akademi n.d.) present Ramlila as intangible heritage that is partly under threat from mass media. Newspaper and magazine reports cover the cancellations of 2020 and 2021 and the more everyday pressures of traffic noise, electric light and phone cameras (Hindustan Times 2020; Zee News 2021; Outlook Traveller 2025).

What is missing. The core scholarship was written between the 1970s and the 1990s. Much less has been said about how the Ramlila's sources of authority have held up since 2000, a period that saw the death of Maharaja Vibhuti Narayan Singh, UNESCO recognition and the first break of more than a year that anyone involved can remember. This paper tries to link the classic accounts to those recent events, and to read the Ramlila through its own Indian theoretical tradition rather than through Western performance theory alone.

3. Methodology

The study is qualitative and interpretive. It rests on a desk-based review of three kinds of material:

1. **Scholarship:** journal articles, monographs and book chapters in theatre studies, anthropology and religious studies, found through library catalogues and by following citations outward from Schechner and Hess (1977) and Kapur (1990).
2. **Heritage records:** the UNESCO inscription file for Ramlila and the matching Sangeet Natak Akademi documentation.
3. **Recent reporting:** English-language news and feature articles from 2020 to 2025, used to track continuity and change.

I read these sources against the three research questions and compared them where they disagree, as they do over when the Ramlila was founded (Section 4). For interpretation I draw on performance theory, especially Schechner's idea of environmental theatre and Victor Turner's (1974) work on ritual, liminality and communitas, and on the Indic idea of lila as developed by Hein (1972) and Sax (1995). For Section 8 I use the rasa chapters of the

Natyashastra in Ghosh's translation (1951), Abhinavagupta's commentary as presented by Masson and Patwardhan (1970), and Rupa Gosvamin's theory of bhakti-rasa (Haberman 2003). Limitations. The study uses published sources only and includes no fieldwork or interviews of its own. Performers and spectators are therefore heard only through earlier ethnographers and journalists.

4. Historical Origins and Royal Patronage

The history of the Ramnagar Ramlila cannot be separated from the Narayan dynasty of Benares. The family's seat, Ramnagar Fort, stands in sandstone on the east bank of the Ganga facing Tulsi Ghat. Maharaja Balwant Singh built it around 1750, but the Ramlila in its present form is credited to his successors.

When did it begin? The sources agree that the Ramlila took its current shape under Maharaja Udit Narayan Singh, who reigned from 1795 to 1835. They do not agree on the year. Newspapers and popular accounts give 1806 (Zenger News 2020), about 1830 (Hindu Blog 2009), or simply "the early 1800s" (Hindustan Times 2020). One local story says the king, annoyed that a nearby Ramlila had started without him, set up his own at Ramnagar (Zenger News 2020). Other accounts say he enlarged a modest performance that already existed, and some participants today speak of a tradition "at least 250 years" old (Madhok 2024). The safest reading is that royal patronage consolidated and enlarged the Ramlila in the first third of the nineteenth century, building on older local practice, and that later rulers elaborated it further. Patron, spectator and participant. The Maharaja's role goes well beyond paying for the performance. By custom, the evening's action does not start until he or his representative has arrived, often on an elephant or horse or in a carriage, and his coming and going frame each night. On Vijayadashami, the climax of the cycle, the royal procession to the Lanka ground has drawn crowds put at between 50,000 and 100,000 (Hess 2006, photograph caption). In Banaras the Kashi Naresh is revered as a religious figure as well as a civic one, and is popularly linked with Shiva. This gives him a double place in the Ramlila. He is the chief spectator of Rama's story, and he is also, for many in the crowd, a sacred presence himself.

After the princely state. Benares State joined the Indian Union in 1947, and royal titles lost their legal standing when privy purses were abolished in 1971. The Ramlila carried on regardless. Maharaja Vibhuti Narayan Singh sponsored it for more than fifty years after independence, and his son, Anant Narayan Singh, has overseen it since (Zee News 2021). Ramnagar is therefore a clear example of a ritual performance outliving the political order that created it. It may even help keep alive the standing of a royal house that no longer rules.

5. Environmental Staging: The Town as Theatre

What most sets the Ramnagar Ramlila apart is that the whole town serves as its stage. Scenery is not brought to a platform. Instead the audience is brought to a series of named places, each standing for a location in the epic: Ayodhya, Janakpur, Chitrakut, Panchavati, Ashok Vatika, Lanka and others. One organiser has put Janakpur about a kilometre from the Ayodhya site and Lanka about two kilometres away (Hindu Blog 2009). The long journeys of the epic are thus felt, in shortened form, in the legs of the spectators.

Schechner and Hess (1977) called this participatory environmental theatre. Schechner (1993) later pushed the idea further, arguing that for thirty-one days Ramnagar becomes a scale model of the sacred world of the Ramcharitmanas. Three things make the transformation work.

Places with a sacred memory. Many sites are permanent: buildings, gardens, tanks and open grounds that host the same episode year after year. This repetition makes them seasonal sacred places. For eleven months they are part of ordinary life. During the Lila month they carry the weight of the epic.

Procession as drama. The walk from one site to the next is itself part of the performance. The svarupas are carried or escorted, the Maharaja's party moves in state, and devotees follow. These processions act out the epic's own journeys of exile, pursuit, the march on Lanka and the return, and they make it hard to say where watching ends and taking part begins. On the night of Rama's wedding, the spectators simply become the wedding party.

Older sensory conditions. The Ramlila has traditionally used no electric light and no amplification. It relies on torches, petromax lanterns and the bare voices of actors and chanters. Silence is therefore part of the performance. When the Ramayanis chant, the crowd has to fall quiet to hear them. This discipline of listening shapes the devotional mood of the event, and, as Section 9 shows, it is now the feature most at risk.

The result is the kind of theatre Kapur (1990) describes, in which performers and spectators share one seamless ceremony. At Ramnagar the use of space is not decoration added to the story. It is how the story comes to be lived.

6. Performers, Text and Ritual Specialists

Authority inside the Ramlila is spread across several groups, each standing in a different relation to the sacred text (Table 1; compiled from Kapur 1990; Hindu Blog 2009; Zenger News 2020; Outlook Traveller 2025).

Table 1. Principal roles in the Ramnagar Ramlila

Role	Who performs it	Function in the performance
Svarupas (Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, Shatrughna, Sita)	Pre-adolescent boys, reportedly aged about 10–14, selected by audition in the presence of the Maharaja	Embody the divine characters; once crowned and costumed they are treated as living forms of the deities and receive worship
Vyas	Members of hereditary families of ritual specialists	Direct the performance, prompt dialogue from the text and supervise the training of the svarupas
Ramayanis	A group of chanters	Recite the Ramcharitmanas verse by verse; the dialogue and action unfold between their recitations
Adult character actors (Ravana, Hanuman,	Local men, some roles held within particular families across generations	Supply spectacle, conflict and masked characters

Role	Who performs it	Function in the performance
Parashurama, demons, monkey army)		
Craft and support workers	Local artisans and helpers	Make masks, effigies, costumes and properties

The text as a score. The Ramlila follows the Ramcharitmanas itself, not a separate play-script. The Ramayanis chant a passage, the actors speak dialogue (samvad) that expands on it, and the chanting picks up again. Lutgendorf (1991) shows that the Manas travels through North India mainly in this spoken and sung form. At Ramnagar the text works less like a script that actors interpret and more like a sacred score that has to be sounded.

Boys as gods. Boys are cast as the divine characters because their youth and ritual purity are thought to make them fit to hold the divine during the lila. The Ramnagar svarupas live under strict ritual rules for the season, and devotees come for their darshan. This sets Ramnagar apart from secular or commercial Ramlilas, where adult actors, sometimes film stars, play Rama.

Gender. Every role, Sita's included, is played by a male. Recent gender-focused work on Ramnagar has taken up this convention ("Staging Gender in Ramlila of Ramnagar" 2021), reading boy actors' performance of femininity as a point where religious, social and theatrical norms meet.

Heredity and continuity. Much of the Ramlila's stability comes from families. The Vyas and certain acting households pass down, from one generation to the next, what they know about staging, timing, costume and ritual. Very little of this is written down. The arrangement keeps the performance remarkably steady, but it also leaves it dependent on a small number of lineages.

7. Spectatorship, Pilgrimage and Devotion

The Ramnagar crowd is not one public but several. Ethnographers describe at least three overlapping groups. There are local residents, for whom the Lila is part of the rhythm of the year. There are devoted regulars, sadhus and householders from Varanasi and further afield, who attend every evening as a religious discipline. And there are occasional visitors, Indian and foreign, who come for high points such as the wedding, the killing of Ravana or the Bharat Milap. Daily attendance is estimated in the tens of thousands and climbs sharply on the main days (Hindu Blog 2009; Hess 2006).

Watching as worship. For the devoted, the heart of the matter is darshan, seeing the deity and being seen in return, and here the deity is present in the svarupas. Hess (1983) stressed that what the Ramnagar audience does is not, mainly, judge the acting. It takes part in devotion by singing along, weeping, calling out praise and following the gods from site to site. The most treasured moments are often still ones, the jhanki, in which the action freezes into a tableau for contemplation.

A pilgrimage in miniature. Because the audience walks the epic's geography, the Lila month works as a local pilgrimage. Schechner and Hess (1977) made this link directly. Turner's (1974) ideas of liminality and communitas help explain the social effect: for a set period, differences of status loosen as people share the road, the dust and the long wait. The levelling

is real, but it has limits. The Maharaja's elephant, the reserved places for important guests and the uneven access to the svarupas all bring hierarchy back in.

Teaching values. Hess (1988) looked at how the Ramcharitmanas and its staging pass on social values about kingship, loyalty, gender and caste, and she warned that devotional power and social conservatism are bound up with each other. Any critical account of the Ramnagar Ramlila has to keep both in view: the intense shared experience it creates, and the ideals of order it helps reproduce.

8. From Natya to Lila: The Ramlila in the Light of Rasa Theory

The Ramnagar Ramlila is a religious event, but it is also theatre, and India has its own ancient theory of what theatre does to an audience. Bharata's Natyashastra sums that theory up in the rasa-sutra of its sixth chapter: vibhavanubhava-vyabhichari-samyogad rasa-nishpattih, "rasa arises from the combination of determinants, consequents and transitory states" (trans. Ghosh 1951). Reading the Ramlila through this sutra shows how much of the classical machinery survives at Ramnagar, and also how decisively its purpose has changed.

The classical machinery at work. Each part of the rasa-sutra has a clear counterpart at Ramnagar (Table 2).

Table 2. Rasa-sutra terms and their counterparts in the Ramnagar Ramlila

Term in the Natyashastra	Meaning	Counterpart in the Ramnagar Ramlila
Vibhava (determinants)	The characters and settings that give rise to emotion	The svarupas, the masked demons and monkeys, and the town sites that stand for Ayodhya, Panchavati or Lanka
Anubhava (consequents)	The outward signs of emotion shown by the actor	Gesture, costume and the formal speech of the samvad, prompted by the Vyas
Vyabhicharibhava (transitory states)	Passing feelings that feed the main emotion	Shifts of mood within an episode, carried mainly by the chant of the Ramayanis
Sthayibhava (dominant emotion)	The lasting emotion that ripens into rasa	Fixed and held in the jhanki, when the action freezes into a tableau
Rasa	The relished emotional essence	Experienced collectively by the crowd, most often as devotion

The month-long cycle also passes through most of Bharata's eight rasas. There is karuna (pathos) in Rama's departure for exile and Dasharatha's death, vira (heroism) in the battles of the Lanka episodes, raudra (fury) in Parashurama's anger at the breaking of Shiva's bow, bhayanaka (terror) in the demons, and a restrained shringara (love) in the garden meeting of Rama and Sita and in their wedding. The Ramlila is, in this sense, a full anthology of rasas spread across thirty-one nights.

From the stage to the town. The Natyashastra already knew a way of showing many places on one stage. Its convention of kakshya-vibhaga divides the stage into zones, so that an actor who crosses from one zone to another is understood to have travelled. Ramnagar can be read as this convention enlarged to the scale of a town. Here the zones are real places, and the actor's

symbolic journey becomes an actual walk shared by thousands. Similarly, the purvaranga, the preliminary rites that the Natyashastra prescribes before a play, finds an echo in the rituals that open each evening at Ramnagar and in the arti offered to the svarupas when each day's performance ends.

Where the classical model gives way. The differences matter more than the similarities.

1. The spectator. Bharata's ideal spectator, as Abhinavagupta later explained, is the sahridaya, a cultivated person who tastes rasa through sadharanikarana, the generalisation of emotion that lifts it above personal involvement (Masson and Patwardhan 1970). The Ramnagar devotee is not detached in this way. For them Rama is not a character being represented. He is present in the svarupa, and the proper response is not aesthetic relish but darshan and surrender.
2. The actor. The Natyashastra expects a trained actor to master four kinds of abhinaya: bodily (angika), verbal (vachika), costume and make-up (aharya) and the involuntary signs of inner feeling (sattvika). At Ramnagar the boy svarupas have little formal training. Aharya dominates, since the crown and make-up are what make the boy a god, and much of the vachika is carried by the Ramayanis and the prompting Vyas. The sattvika signs of tears, trembling and hair standing on end appear most strongly not in the actors but in the audience. In effect, the work of feeling has moved from the stage to the crowd.
3. The goal. For Bharata, drama is pleasure that also instructs. At Ramnagar the goal is religious merit and closeness to the divine. Watching is itself a form of worship.

Bhakti-rasa as the missing link. These shifts are exactly what later Vaishnava theory set out to describe. In the Bhaktirasamritasindhu, Rupa Gosvamin took over the classical apparatus of vibhava, anubhava and sthayibhava but made love for God (bhakti) the dominant emotion and the source of the highest rasa (Haberman 2003). Haberman (1988) showed how this theory turned devotional life into a kind of acting, in which the devotee takes on a role in the divine drama. Rupa Gosvamin wrote about Krishna devotion, not Rama devotion, and Tulsidas worked in a different tradition. The comparison therefore concerns a shared shift in Hindu aesthetics rather than direct influence. Still, it is the right frame for Ramnagar. The Ramlila keeps the grammar of the Natyashastra while changing its meaning: the sahridaya becomes the bhakta, representation becomes presence, and rasa becomes devotion.

Schechner (2001) proposed rasa as a model for an embodied, participatory theatre, but without testing it against Ramnagar. The analysis here suggests that Ramnagar is the clearest case of what he described, provided that we see its rasa as bhakti-rasa. This is also where the title's movement "from natya to lila" becomes concrete. Natya is the imitation of a world for connoisseurs to relish. Lila is the play of the god himself, in which the spectator is also a participant.

9. Continuity and Change: Modernity, Pandemic and Heritage

People often call the Ramnagar Ramlila a time capsule, but it has always lived in a changing world. Table 3 lists the milestones discussed in this paper.

Table 3. Selected milestones in the history of the Ramnagar Ramlila

Date	Event
c. 1750	Ramnagar Fort built by Maharaja Balwant Singh
1795– 1835	Reign of Maharaja Udit Narayan Singh; Ramlila consolidated in its present form (exact year disputed)
1947	Benares State accedes to the Indian Union
1971	Abolition of privy purses; royal titles lose legal recognition
1977	Schechner and Hess publish “The Ramlila of Ramnagar” in TDR
1990	Kapur publishes <i>Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods</i>
2000	Death of Maharaja Vibhuti Narayan Singh; patronage continues under Anant Narayan Singh
2005	Ramlila proclaimed a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity
2008	Ramlila inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List
2020– 2021	Ramnagar Ramlila not staged for two consecutive years owing to COVID-19

Heritage status. UNESCO’s inscription covers Ramlila as a North Indian tradition and names Ramnagar among its most representative forms. The nomination pointed to mass media, and television serials in particular, as drawing audiences away from live performance (UNESCO 2008). For Ramnagar, heritage status has brought wider fame and more tourists. It has not, however, taken control away from the royal family and the hereditary specialists. That keeps the ritual in local hands, though it also means the future of the Ramlila rests heavily on one household.

The pandemic break. The royal family called off the Ramlila in 2020 and again in 2021 because of COVID-19; in 2021 it informed the Varanasi police commissioner of the decision by letter. Participants said no one in their families could remember a two-year halt (Madhok 2024), and residents spoke sadly of the empty grounds (Zenger News 2020). What happened next is telling. Some Ramlila committees elsewhere in North India moved online in 2020 (Zenger News 2020; Hindustan Times 2020). Ramnagar did not (Hindustan Times 2020). This fits the argument of this paper. A performance whose meaning lies in being there, walking together and receiving darshan cannot simply be moved onto a screen.

A changing town. Recent reports describe pressures on the very conditions the Lila relies on. Members of the royal family have regretted the loss of trees and open ground around the sites, the spread of electric light where petromax lanterns once set the mood, and the traffic noise that drowns out dialogue in a performance that still refuses microphones. Photography, once tightly restricted, is now everywhere thanks to mobile phones (Outlook Traveller 2025). None of this touches the Ramlila’s content. What it wears away is the setting, the darkness, quiet and open ground, on which the staging depends.

Holding on by holding back. Seen in this light, Ramnagar’s refusal of loudspeakers, electric light and online broadcast is more than conservatism. It is a deliberate way of staying authentic. The Ramlila defines itself partly by what it will not take up.

10. Discussion and Conclusion

I set out to explain what holds the Ramnagar Ramlila together and why it has lasted. My answer is that it joins three kinds of authority which, in most Ramlilas, are weaker or kept apart.

1. Textual-sacred authority lies in the Ramcharitmanas, voiced by the Ramayanis and embodied by the boy svarupas, whose ritual status turns watching them into darshan. Section 8 showed that this authority works through the classical grammar of rasa, turned towards devotion.
2. Royal-political authority lies with the Maharaja, whose arrival opens each evening and whose family has kept the event going through the end of princely rule, the loss of privy purses and a change of generation.
3. Devotional-experiential authority lies with the spectators, above all the regulars, whose month of walking and waiting turns the town into sacred ground and confirms the performance as worship rather than entertainment.

What holds the three together is space. The town-wide staging described in Section 5 is where text, king and devotee meet. This explains why the most serious threats today are about space and the senses (noise, light, building and crowd control) and not about belief. It also explains why the Ramlila chose to pause during the pandemic rather than go online.

The comparison with the Natyashastra adds a further point. Ramnagar is not a folk departure from India's classical theatre. It carries that theatre's grammar of vibhava, anubhava and sthayibhava into a new setting, and changes its aim from aesthetic relish to devotion. Seen this way, the Ramlila of Ramnagar is a living bridge between Sanskrit dramaturgy and vernacular bhakti.

Implications for safeguarding. Three practical points follow for heritage bodies and the local administration.

- Protection should cover the conditions of performance as well as its content, for example through temporary traffic controls and limits on loudspeakers and bright lighting near active sites during the Lila month.
- The knowledge held by Vyas families and craft specialists could be recorded through oral-history projects carried out with the community's consent. This would lessen the dependence on a few lineages without taking away their authority.
- Tourism should be managed so that it supports devotional spectatorship and does not crowd it out, including simple guidance on photography that respects the devotional character of the event.

Further research. New fieldwork is needed on the Ramlila since the pandemic, on the lives of the svarupas and their families, on women's roles as spectators and supporters of an all-male performance, and on how the online spread of images is changing what darshan means. Sanskritists could also compare the Ramlila's episodes more closely with Sanskrit Rama dramas such as Bhavabhuti's Uttararamacharita and with the rasa theory of later commentators. In the end, the Ramnagar Ramlila survives not because it is frozen in time. It survives because each autumn it renews an alliance between a sacred text, a royal house and a devoted public.

To preserve it, we have to preserve the ground, literal and social, on which that alliance is acted out.

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