



Aesthetic Aspects of the Sacred Space in Ramlila Performance

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ABSTRACT

The ritual-performance tradition, Ramlila, which recounts incidents of the Ramayana, holds a unique place in the Indian performance culture as a merge of theatre, ritual, architecture, communal involvement and aestheticism. In this paper, the author discusses the aesthetic aspects of the sacred space in Ramlila performance by presenting an argument that space can be both a physical location, and as an active aesthetic and ritual actor. The study is based on the Indian theory of aesthetics, especially on rasa and bhava, the spatial theory and performance studies; it involves analysing the ways in which architecture, movement, sound, light, and the participation of the audience create the meaning of aesthetics. Using qualitative and theoretical approach, the paper will reveal that the aesthetic experience of Ramlila is the result of the ritual creation of space, the unity of the devotion, beauty, and performance. Placing Ramlila in the context of the larger discourse of non-Western performance aesthetics, the study offers a different model to the proscenium-based models of theatricality, where lived, communal, and sacred space rather than architectural elements are dominant.

Introduction

Ramlila is a performance tradition and most-ancient and culturally important performance tradition in India, which is performed during the festival of Dussehra every year in North India and various regional



variations throughout the subcontinent. With its origins in the Ramayana, Ramlila goes beyond the traditional scope of the theatre as it is played at once as a ritual performance, as a religious education, as a community festival, as an aesthetic performance. Contrary to the contemporary theatrical arts that use fixed architectural space, like the proscenium stage, Ramlila is performed in open, sacred, and socially shared spaces, such as the courtyards of temples, village maidans, streets, and the banks of rivers, as well as in a momentarily consecrated performance space (Schechner 71). Such performance spaces are not neutral spaces but ritualized and triggered by religious rites, symbolic markings and shared belief systems.

The fact that ordinary spaces are turned into a sacred performance arena enables Ramlila to blend with the everyday social reality without any clear delineation of the border between performance and life. Spatial openness of Ramlila facilitates unending communication of performers, viewers, ritual objects and divine presence and generates a communal aesthetic experience, which is deeply entrenched in devotional consciousness (Turner 94). According to performance theorists, theatrical meaning is created not alone by the use of scripted dialogue or acting strategies but by the dynamic action between body and space, sound, rhythm and audience response (Schechner 35). Sacred space in Ramlila mediates the communication between the performers, spectators and gods, creating the aesthetic experience through ad hoc involvement and common faith. In this paper, it is argued that Aesthetics of the Ramlila is essentially a spatial and a ritualistic activity and that sacred space is more of a central aesthetic agent than a passive space. Predicting the place of sacred space, the present work is a contribution to the further debates about the non-Western aesthetics of performance and criticizes Eurocentric theatrical paradigms that emphasize the fixity of the architecture, visuality, and authority of the text. Ramlila is rather a different paradigm based on ritual, communalism, and aesthetic energies of lived sacred space.

Literature Review

Historical and academic interest in Ramlila has focused on its religious context, storyline, and social place in the context of culture of North Indian society. In early ethnographic and historical research, Ramlila was treated as a kind of devotional theatre that is connected with the bhakti movement, its role as a moral teaching, religious education, and the social bond. These researches revealed the importance of Ramlila to transmit the ethical values and mythological narratives between generations.

According to performance studies, Richard Schechner recognizes Ramlila as a paradigmatic instance of environmental theatre with a non-proscenium spatial arrangement, the free movement of actors and viewers, and the combination of ritual and theatrical action (Schechner 89). Schechner claims that



Ramlila disintegrates the traditional distinction between stage and viewer and converts space into an all-encompassing participatory aesthetic experience. Ritual anthropological theories put forward by Victor Turner such as his liminality and *communitas* have been extensively used in Ramlila performances. According to Turner, ritual performances provide liminal space in which social hierarchies in everyday society are put on hold so that a ritual participant can feel collective identity, emotional attachment and spiritual renewal (Turner 128). Ramlila performances, when they are presented at particular ritual time, it could create liminal spaces where sacred space intersects with sacred time. Spatial theory gives a further level of analysis.

The idea of the production of space developed by Henri Lefebvre criticizes the idea that space is a neutral container and states the idea that space is socially constructed in the form of lived practices, symbolic representation and ideological systems (Lefebvre 33). In ritual practices like Ramlila, ritually consecrated space is created through repetition, enactment and through the collective memory which is highly similar to the concept of lived space as proposed by Lefebvre (Lefebvre 39).

Indian aesthetic theory creates an important tool of seeing the experience aspect of Ramlila. The concept of *rasa* by Bharata views *rasa* as the aesthetic feeling that the observer perceives due to the interaction of elements of performance and emotional states (*bhavas*) (Bharata 54). Abhinavagupta, through Abhinav Bharati also derives aesthetic experience as a transcendence process where the viewer transcends individual feeling to a universalized aesthetic awareness (Abhinavagupta 201). Although *rasa* theory has been widely applied to both the classical dance and drama, the spatial implications of *rasa* have hardly been explored in ritual theatre. This research paper fills this gap by pre-empting sacred space as one of the major contributors to aesthetic realization in Ramlila.

Methodology

This research paper is based on the qualitative and theoretical research approach that suits the performance studies, aesthetics and cultural analysis. The study relies on a close reading of texts and interpretive consideration of classical Indian aesthetical texts, spatial theory, and modern performance theory. Theoretical sources are primarily based on the *Natyashastra* and Abhinav Bharati whereas the theoretical frameworks take secondary sources in Lefebvre, Turner, and Schechner. The study does not use an empirical fieldwork, but conceptual synthesis and analytical interpretation of recorded Ramlila traditions in North India. This methodology is consistent with humanities-oriented research practices especially in research that deals with ideas of aesthetics, ritual, and space theory as the meaning is conveyed based on interpretive paradigms and not by quantitative metrics (Schechner 22).



- **Sacred Space Aesthetic Functions in Ramlila.**

Sacred Space Production like a Ritual. Ramlila does not have sacred space but is produced rationally by ceremonial practices like Bhumi puja, deity invocation, symbolic drawings and ritual offerings. With these practices, ordinary physical places are changed to the consecrated aesthetical spaces. Their recurrence every year strengthens the spatial memory and attachment and forms what Lefebvre refers to as socially produced space full of symbolism (Lefebvre 117). This rite of passage creates a sacred space under which aesthetic experience takes place. The viewer does not simply view performance but gets into a sacred space where piety and aesthetic experience cannot be separated.

- **Architecture is Aesthetic Sign System.**

The Ramlila architecture is an aesthetic sign system as opposed to a rigid theatrical structure. The visual control and cosmological symbolism of temple courtyards, sacred precincts give more credibility to the divine authority of the performance. There is the construction of temporary buildings in village maidans, arches, flags, painted screens and symbolic gateways which transform blank spaces to mythical landscapes of Ayodhya, Lanka, forests and battlefields. These marks of space lead the spectator in the emotional and imaginative involvement of the latter and allow rasa fulfilment to be met through visual symbolism but not through scenic design (Bharata 62). The fact that these structures are not permanent also helps to underline the ritual nature of the performance.

- **Mobility, Procession and Kinaesthetic Aesthetics.**

In Ramlila, movement and procession are core factors in the development of aesthetics of sacred space. The shows are usually presented in the form of journey-based staging, during which actors and audiences can move through sacred sites. Entry into the royal territory, exit into the woods, pilgrimage, and marching to the battle contribute to creating story and rhythmic lines of space, which strengthens the epic scale and continuity of the tale (Schechner 104). These physical processes make space relational to dynamic aesthetic field, in which the meaning is produced as a result of movement instead of a spectacle. Body becomes a central tool with the help of which sacred space is set in motion and experience of aestheticism is enhanced.

- **Sound, Light and Multisensory Aesthetics.**

Ramlila makes use of the rich multisensory aesthetic, which brings the sacred space to the fore. The singing of devotional songs, chants, percussion instruments, ritual calls and reciting words on verbal



form a complete acoustic atmosphere which surrounds the performers and the spectators. Sound acts as a spatial marker and makes the performance go beyond the visual boundaries. The use of oil lamps, torches and natural light in traditional lighting gradually reduces the stability of artificial lighting to create a wavering sacred light, which contribute to the atmosphere of ritual. This corresponds to sound and light interaction which enhances the emotional situations (bhavas) and the achievement of rasa, especially bhakti and karuna (Abhinavagupta 214).

- **Participation of the audience and Shared Aesthetic Experience.**

The fact that there are no strict spatial boundaries between the performers and spectators' makes spectatorship more of a participation. The listeners sing along, react emotionally and even pray and at times move physically with the performers. This participatory mode concurs with the idea proposed by Turner about *communitas* where people get the sense of group identity and emotional unity (Turner 132). Aesthetic experience is not isolated in Ramlila but a social experience, which helps to realize the communal aspect of the sacred space and shared worship.

Discussion

The discussion shows that sacred space in Ramlila can be viewed as an active aesthetic agent and not passive representation. Emotional perception and aesthetic response are regulated by architecture, movement, sound, light, and audience participation to the support of the claim of Lefebvre that space is produced through lived practice as opposed to a fixed design (Lefebvre 93). Using the Indian aesthetics theory, sacred space helps in achieving various rasas, and especially bhakti, Vira, and karuna. The sacred atmosphere helps spectators to overcome the subjective emotion and to experience collective aesthetic consciousness or aesthetic universality (Abhinavagupta 226). Ramlila shifts Eurocentric theatrical paradigm that give priority to fixed stages, architectural permanence, and textual dominance by pre-signalling spatial aesthetics. Rather, it suggests an alternate model of performance based on ritual time, collective action and lived sacred space (Schechner 118).

Conclusion

This paper has also discussed the aesthetic aspects of sacred space in Ramlila performance focusing on space as one of the key elements of the ritual and aesthetic experience. The study shows that Ramlila aesthetics are the result of the ritual creation of space through an interdisciplinary approach that involves the combination of Indian aesthetic philosophy, mobility theory, and studies of performance. The spatial-aesthetic approach to Ramlila is an addition to the general discourse on ritual theatre, performance



aesthetics in non-Western cultures and other spatial models of theatre. Future studies can be made on local differences, urbanities, digital restructuring and modern renegotiations of sacred spatial aesthetics of Ramlila performance.

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