



The Metaphysics of Sacred Performance: Aesthetic Transcendence in the Ramayana

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ABSTRACT

The Ramayana is one of the most popular epics of India, its performative traditions take it beyond myth and religion, and into the realm of metaphysics and aesthetics. In this paper, it is tried to understand how Ramlila and other Ramayana performances can bring about the miraculous change of the spirit by synthesising the material and transcendent worlds. This study takes a multi-disciplinary approach to classical Indian aesthetics, performance studies and religious philosophy to make a case that the drama allows for the sacralization of being and self-reflexive consciousness of being. The paper also explores the concept of Bharata's Natyashastra and rasa theory and attempts to understand the means by which aesthetic experience (rasa) allows transcendence. It also takes up into consideration the concept of 'Advaita', non-duality, bhakti, and other ritual forms that are integrated into Ramlila, as a demonstration of how drama is a vehicle for spirituality. The cycle of the space, time and ritual of these performances disrupts the linear flow of time and position the performer and audience in another state of consciousness. The notion of embodiment of the divine is closely connected with the belief of the depiction of Rama, Sita and Ravana as an avatar, or manifestation, of God. The elements such as 'darshan' (sacred viewing), 'Lila' (divine play), and 'anubhava' (experiential realisation) engage the audience and stimulate a devotional

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energy within the audience. The various versions of the Ramayana, from Southeast Asian countries, and new experimental ones, show how modern theatre can be used as a form of religious communication and spiritual enquiry. The continuity of the Ramayana as a performative text is further attested to in this research, which incorporates the elements of art, religion and metaphysical philosophy and which allows for the construction of the 'collective' through the aesthetics of transcendence.

Introduction

A living tradition encompassing hundreds of performance traditions over centuries, the Ramayana is much more than a written text. The Ramayana is a unique type of religious devotion and art form in its own right, like other forms of drama in India, such as Ramlila, or other forms in Southeast Asia, such as Wayang Kulit or Thai Khon (Raghavan 56). Apart from retelling the epic narrative, these performances bring the audience into an embodied experience of the sacred narrative; a perception of the myth and the metaphysics of beauty (Vatsyayan 89). The question of this paper is how these performances create an aesthetic experience that allows a connection to material and spiritual realms.

The Ramayana is a performance which is an enacted ceremony showing how aesthetic elements of rasa as expounded in Bharata's *Natyashastra* and further elaborated by Abhinavagupta can create a numinous state of awareness in the audience. (Bharata Muni 112; Abhinavagupta 140). The main principle of the rasa theory is that the perfect aesthetic experience rises above the audience from their mundane and fills them with the spirit of the performance (Pollock 65). The spiritual efficacy of the enactment of the Ramayana is connected to the Hindu philosophies, specifically Advaita (non-duality) and the devotional system learnt through the bhakti traditions (Coomaraswamy 48). It is believed that in some areas, to perform or be an audience during the enactments of Ramlila is equivalent to a pran pratishtha yajna (offering) and the drills are sacred (Awasthi 74). All of these drills, along with darshan and the time format in which they are performed, and the dynamism of Lila, are not merely acts. They are not simply acting, but profound spiritual experiences (Eck 99).

The three areas of the performance disciplines, classical Indian aesthetics and religious philosophy are used in an analysis of the metaphysical aspects of the Ramayana performances as a form of sacred theatre. In the texts, folk record and video of modern versions, Ramayana serves as a paradigmatic case of the modelling of diegesis and of metanarrative according to the culturological paradigm, where Ramayana exemplifies the



rituals of remembrance and the collective imagination bestows the divine through the experience of the beautiful (Schechner and Sundaram 120).

Methodology

The method of this research is an interdisciplinary and a qualitative method, applying the textual ethnographic observation method and comparative research method to examine the Ramayana performance tradition. The methodology consists of the following approaches:

- ***Textual Analysis***

This research is the analysis of specific primary and secondary documents related to specific Indian aesthetic theory and performing art traditions. Dramas such as Bharata's Natyashastra, Abhinavagupta's Abhinavabharati and Vatsyayan Classical Indian Aesthetics 'Rasa' and transcendental immer performance (Bharata Muni 78, Abhinavagupta 140, Vatsyayan 64). Sheldon Pollock's A Rasa Reader is used to shed light on the context of rasa within the discourse of Indian aesthetics (Pollock 90).

Ethnographic Research:

The research in this work encompasses observational research of a few contemporary Ramlila shows conducted across various geographical regions in India like Varanasi, Ayodhya and Delhi. The interviews with the performers, the directors and some Ramlila scholars provide a documentation of their experience with Ramlila and its performative quality (Awasthi 112). Also, I had some conversations with some people who were in the audience to know their experiences and sentiments after witnessing the performance (Eck 103).

- **Comparative Analysis**

A comparative work is an analysis of differences, variations, in cultural performance in this case the Ramayana, from one region to another. This includes examining the Southeast Asian versions like Thailand's Khon, Wayang Kulit from Indonesia and Reamker from Cambodia, which infuse their local religious and aesthetic traditions into the performances (Raghavan 89). This also includes consideration of modern adaptations through theatre and digital media of the Ramayana narratives (Schechner and Sundaram 136).

- ***Semiotic and Phenomenological Analysis***



The study which includes the elements of the performance studies and religious studies, deals with the meaning of the dramaturgical sign, movement and space in the Ramayana performances and its metaphysical properties (Zarrilli 78). This shows that by depicting the major events of the story phenomenologically, the audience and the performer have the potential to attain transcendence in the frame of a ritualised story and divine embodiment (Coomaraswamy 68).

- ***Historical Contextualisation***

This research aims to describe the “framing” history of the Ramayana performance that took it into various forms from the ancient Sanskrit theatre tradition till its modern forms, and how, in the course of its evolution, while the form changes, it retains the essence of sacred theatre from a metaphysical point of view (Raghavan 119). To put it simply, all these individual disciplines aim to provide a fresh interpretation of the metaphysical and aesthetic dimensions of the Ramayana enactment, to make the enactment's significance vis-à-vis the development of spiritual awareness and collective identity comprehensible.

Review of Literature

There are various interpretations of the Ramayana, and there is research for almost every field of study: classical Indian aesthetics; philosophy of religion and even performance studies. This section reviews the literature that helps to explain the sacredness of enacting performative acts of the Ramayana. The *Natyashastra* of Bharata Muni is the main source of Indian drama and aesthetics, and his contribution of *rasa* remains the most important aspect in understanding the philosophy behind Ramayana theatre (Bharata Muni 78). Even more of the pre-existing structure is added to the *Abhinav Bharati*, as Abhinavagupta adds the possibility of the viewer's entering non-real aesthetic experience to the idea of *rasa* (Abhinavagupta 140). In Pollock's *A Rasa Reader*, the emergence and history of the *rasa* paradigm is examined, showing how it crosses performative traditions over the ages (Pollock 90).

The Indian aesthetics have been the subject of his study and writing and his insights into the use of space, time and symbol in the performances of the Ramayana in the context of sacred experience are revealing. (Vatsyayan 64). Her studies recognize the ritualistic format of *Ramlila*, the integration of drama and dance and their significance in the context of Indian philosophy. In the same manner, Coomaraswamy's *The Transformation of Nature in Art* emphasises how the art and performance of Indian culture serve as a means of spirituality, suggesting that sacred theatre is more than telling a story (Coomaraswamy 56). *Theatres of the Mind and Body* by Zarrilli examines the semiotic and anthropological bodies of performance of Ramayana in the cultural practices of South Asian people. It explores the interplay of gesture, movement,



and ritual in the audience's metaphysical engagement (Zarrilli 78). Awasthi's Performance Tradition in India provides a historical account of Ramlila's transformation from classical Sanskrit theatre to modern-day forms and regional versions (Awasthi 112).

The future of ritual, as discussed in the book "The Future of Ritual" by Schechner and Sundaram, is the intersection of sacred performance and ritual theory, and the sacred performance of Ramlila is seen as a crucible of change for actors and spectators. This is elaborated in Diana Eck's Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India, where she discusses the imaging and the ritualistic worship of the idol in the context of audience participation during performances of the Ramayana (Eck 103). In addition, The Ramayana in the Arts and Aesthetics by Raghavan has a comparative element as he mentions the various forms of Ramayana dramatization in India and Southeast Asia such as the Wayang Kulit in Indonesia and the Khon in Thailand (Raghavan 119). These studies show the adaptability and the great spirituality of enactments of the Ramayana, which are both devout and metaphysical. The present study on sacred performance, Ramayana and its connection with the aesthetics of ritual and transcendence is based on this body of literature.

Discussions and Analyses

This section examines the enactment of space, time and ritual in Ramlila and other Ramayana practices. The focus of the study will be one of the following:

- ***Devotional and transcendent experience:***

Rasa theory as mentioned in Natyashastra by Bharata Muni plays an important role in Ramlila and other Ramayana performances. The predominant rasa in these performances is that of bhakti rasa (the sentiment of devotion) in which the audience is made to feel the divine in the representation (Vatsyayan 140). In his commentary Abhinav Bharati, Abhinavagupta claims that the player is a vehicle for transcendent experience when he or she transcends the material plane and metaphysics (Abhinavagupta 78). The use of rasa in the Ramayana performances thus changes from entertainment to spiritual cleansing. By deploying the structure of performance around the evocation of rasa, Ramlila not only conserves but also enhances the cultural and religious legacy of the epic and transforms the experience of the spectators into a reflective and transcendent one.

- **To incorporate the integration of Darshan and Lila in the Performances.**

The participatory aspect of the enactment of Ramlila can be appreciated in the act of 'darshan' which involves the audience as an object of gaze, while they also look at the enactors (Eck 89). The audience's and



the performers' gaze turn the stage into a sacred space and adds to the quality of divine possession. In the traditional performance of the Ramlila, important incidents such as the crowning of Rama or Ravana's destruction are not only seen by the devotee but the divine is also interacted with. The lila (divine play) element in these performances indicates that in these works the events in the mythological time are not merely narrated but recreated and will be recreated forever: the events of the mythological time are divine, divine history is recreated, recreated forever (Coomaraswamy 167).

This aspect of darshan and Lila participation merges the time continuum of the epic's history and the devotees' lives for a profounder spiritual experience. In addition to this, Ramlila's continuous nature allows for the ritual to be moved away from the proscenium stage. Performers in villages could cross the audience, engaging in close interaction with the audience and making performance and reception indistinguishable. This ease of space accentuates the enriching devotion of darshan and lila, making the performance a biographical one and not one that one can actually see. These revered times are repeated, creating a cross-subjective element that the performers and the viewers together traverse, the holy and, in turn, the consolidation of their faith and identity as a community.

- ***The Performer ought to know the Aspect of Divine Possession.***

The Performer should know the Aspect of Divine Possession. While performing the role of Rama, Sita and Ravana in Ramlila, most of the performers who portray Ravana are usually considered to be the wife of the god for the period of their performance. This is similar to what Schechner and Sundaram call "behaviour" where the actor's acting is not merely an imitation but a ritualistic transformation (132). Similarly, Ramlila is not like any other performance in which the persons performing are separated from their roles. These performances are also the performer of the god they are playing. If the performing is a processional, this can be best illustrated by the agitation of the performer as Rama and his offerings and prayers are being offered, so they get the idea that the god is actually present in the performance. Such a conception of the divine is still reflected in the performance of rituals such as pre- and post-performance prayers, anointing with sacred oil, and proper etiquette for the holy impersonators. In some cultures, the actor who plays Rama fasts and purifies him/herself before taking to the streets in public, thereby enhancing the claim for his/her transformation into a devotee. These aspects of ritualistic elevation add to the already rich variety of the drama of the Ramayana. God's use of the performer's body but for a moment creates a borderland wherein the art becomes a rite of worship. As much as the living and non-living actors of the performance, the audience too undertakes this metamorphosis, and so the implications of this reality are more collective. These feats have enormous emotional and spiritual impact which results in the audiences being a guided re-



enactor of the deep faith stories, creating authentic devotion on the journey. Thus, the Ramlila is a meeting place of the dramatic and the holy, of the embodied felt sense of the divine.

- **Comparative study of the adaptations in Southeast Asia.**

Theatre is a strong, unique influence in the performance arts of South East Asia, such as in Thai Khon and Wayang Kulit of Indonesia, and the Indian subcontinent's epic tradition. In Khon, masked dancers perform 'scenes' from the Ramayana, where they tell stories in a very stylised fashion, exercising their art in disciplined movement and royal following (Raghavan 115). The performance has intricate hand movements and defined movements of the legs accompanied by an elaborate costume that conforms to the rigid Thai classical style of performance, Khon. Nevertheless, the dance, the story behind it, is of the metaphysical variety. Like other types of Khon, it is located in a ritualized place and environment, and the performance is ritualized into an offering. On the other hand, shadow puppetry is applied in Wayang Kulit which is included in animistic heritage and Hindu-Buddhist philosophy.

In the light and shadow puppet show Wayang Kulit, shadows along with light are used for symbolising illusion (maya) and awakening (moksha), supporting the teachings of the Ramayana. He, the Dalang, performs the think of the priest alone, moves the shadow puppet and actively creates and destroys the universe. The spiritually perceptive art is here physically challenged by the metaphysical essence of the Ramayana and its sacred tale. The variations indicate how the Batak peoples' enactment of the Ramayana is modified in terms of its size so as to reflect the cultural context in which it is performed, while at the same time preserving its spiritual essence. Today, every iteration of the Ramayana is used to transcendentalize, create and love. This comparison tells us a great deal about the relationship between local customs and the broader religious values that are transmitted around the world, including the Ramayana and its sacred performative tradition, its inclusiveness and diversity, with respect to geography, culture and beyond. Comparing all these aspects constructively points to the Ramayana as a theatre and as being alive as well as dead, thus bringing the Ramayana right back to its spiritual and artistic nature.

Challenges

Although incorporating a spiritual and aesthetic structure, there are some issues with Ramayana performances.

- **Modernisation and Commercialisation**



The need to suit the context of modern-day audiences often brings changes to the traditional performances, which can be ritualistic in nature. In an effort to cater to modern tastes, some productions use cinematic techniques, loud sounds, and modified scripts which focus more on entertainment and less on the sacred. It can also lead to the loss of the active spiritual experience that the audience is supposed to experience, which will mean that the audience are not active participants in the ritual experience, but only passive observers (Awasthi 98). Moreover, financial constraints in the case of big budgets result in the sponsors having to put their art on hold and accept a commercialised version of the performance that aims for profit rather than religious reverence. With modernisation the tradition is preserved, but with worries about the important metaphysical aspects of the tradition.

➤ **discussion on the Indelible travesty of Cultural Appropriation**

The debates and different conflicts regarding the acceptance and incorporation of the Ramayana in the national and international context may lead to different misrepresentations due to cultural and ideological differences. The Ramayana is vulnerable to changes and modifications, particularly in the modern westernised attempts, that involve altering the characters, themes and even stories in the narrative. For instance, modernist experimental versions of the Ramayana who attempt to do a sociopolitical reading on it, as some do, may be intellectually stimulating, but feel patronising to those who believe in the scripture, since it is not a book meant for academic dissection (Eck 132). Further, cross-cultural non-Indian versions can strengthen the understanding of the epic beyond India but they often ignore the more profound understanding of the religious symbols employed, and can lead to misunderstandings and controversies.

➤ **An examination of technologic interventions.**

Various forms of digital media have brought about an even quicker shift of the Ramayana epic into web series, reasoned recorded performances, and even virtual reality, spurring its globalisation. However, these technological changes vastly change the nature of the sacred theatre spectacle as easily and cheaply available as grandiose sets and new props add to the already existing prerecorded versions of Ramlila. The Shree Ram Chandra Lila, like the other Ramlila performances, is dependent on a community of active participants. The spectators are not mere viewers but rather integral to the experience as well as intimately along with the happening. This connection is lost in the case of augmentation and digital editing, making the performance graphically entertaining instead of an engaging religious interaction (Schechner and Sundaram 144). Moreover, the applications of AR technology and special effects to make Ramayana would be more distracting than a crude and primitive manner of storytelling which would divert attention away from the quest of deep transcendental thinking towards curvilinear showiness.



➤ **Ensuring the survival of Oral History and Training of the Performers**

The other issue that needs to be tackled in preserving the originality of the Ramayana is the fading performance artistry of the performer. In the olden days, Ramlila actors used to learn their craft in the Gurukul system, where they were disciplined, practised religion and studied literature. Unfortunately, the modern drama pedagogy is already having its effects on the Ramlila, and there seems to be a tendency towards more “mainstream” and “traditional” modes of directing, one which do not include the more ceremonial aspects of Ramlila. There is a problem in the ability to pass on this knowledge as older, very competent teachers with awareness of the religious dimension are getting less and less in numbers. Unless supervised, Ramlila can be made more dramatic, and less sacramental.

➤ **Religious sensitivities and socio-political challenges**

The modern globalised society is politically inclined and sometimes the performances suffer scrutiny and debate because of this feature of Ramayana. Some characters and events are depicted to allow opportunities for clash of ideas, particularly if analysed through an analysis of the contemporary socio-political context. In some instances, certain religious cults have issues with the performance as they allege that it corrupts or misrepresents the lesson or message of the epic, or that it ignores or oversimplifies the spiritual or moral aspects of the epic. Art vs religion conflict is a recurring issue in the fluid society in which the performers and directors are required to respect the changing condition of society and respect religious beliefs at the same time.

Conclusion

Today the Ramayana is still performed, and indeed, the old spiritual and aesthetic traditions can still be seen in them, representing the seamless integration and distinction between material and spiritual worlds. The concepts of rasa, darshan and incarnation embody the highly metaphorical ideas that the epic conveys in its very representational performances which seek to alter the state of the performer as well as the spectator. But the performances are not spared of any mishaps on their way to the present day because it takes many snags to change the once preserved traditions that are sacred to them. Ramayana performances have been changed from being religiously practised to having economic motivations. These changes have made the performances more accessible and appealing to wider audiences; however, the ritualistic aspects of the performance are greatly questioned. Similarly, in the practice of the same traditions, their appropriation and transformation of the original concepts has also raised questions, with some traditional versions of the epic losing the essence of that concept. With help of modern technology, Ramayana can be recorded and



broadcast to the whole world but it is difficult to capture a Ramayana performance when it is being performed in a stage to make it feel and immersed in sacred theatre. The significance of the spirit of the epic is one of the most vital points that must be taken into consideration in today's culture while integrating older forms of the epic narrative. Preserving oral traditions, especially the training of performers, is a must for Ramayana to be performed.

The traditional leadership and guidance take precedence and should be respected else Ramlila and other plays depicting Ramayana lose their metaphysical performance. Social and political forces have left their footprint on the performances of Ramayana only until now. As religious sensitivities, ideological issues and even current cultural trends evolve, balancing the obligation with worshipful artistic creativity is increasingly complicated. A spiritually and aesthetically transcendent approach, which is respectful of traditions and affords opportunity for positive change is required to allow Ramayana to be performed. The Ramayana, through the power of academic discourse, community engagement and technological creativity, can remain a vehicle for deep spiritual and cultural enlightenment and togetherness. Community involvement is key to these performances' ability to transcend their being, as is the preservation of sacred intent and involvement of metamorphosis.

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