

# THE RĀM LĪLĀ

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“RĀM LĪLĀ” means, literally, Rāma’s sport. The uninitiated English reader may think “sport” a trivial term to apply to dramas which rehearse the deeds of a deity as told in an epic regarded as sacred scripture. The word *līlā* must necessarily be translated thus, but the reader should understand that “sport” represents a technical term of Hindu theology which is full of special meaning. A major tradition of Hindu thought describes as “sports” the whole of the divine acts in space and time. Confronted with the problem of how the Supreme Being, while axiomatically perfect and self-sufficient, could yet have had reason to produce the cosmos, Hindu thinkers have long taught that the creation, preservation, and dissolution of worlds spring from no lack or need on the part of God, but are the manifestations of his spontaneous joyful disinterested creativity—are his “sports.”<sup>1</sup> Though the doctrine of *līlā* is not the whole of Vaiṣṇava thinking on this problem, it is an accepted Vaiṣṇava teaching. Not only Viṣṇu’s creation of the cosmos is viewed as *līlā*, but also his actions within the cosmos when he enters into his creation in the form of his various incarnations. Thus the myths of all of Viṣṇu’s *avatāras* relate his sports, and Tulsī Dās in the introduction to his *Rāmāyaṇa* can refer to the entire content of his *Rāmcaritmānas* as “Harilīlā,” sports of Hari (i.e., of Viṣṇu), in his Rāma-incarnation.<sup>2</sup> When dramas which systematically enact the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are called the Rām Līlā, they are being identified by reference to their subject matter.

Dramas called Rām Līlā are produced by several different kinds of troupes, but the performances which go by this name are always based upon the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Tulsī Dās. They cover the main incidents narrated in his *Rāmcaritmānas* in a series of performances lasting many days, and they employ an unusual stage technique which combines recitation of the sacred text with simultaneous acting and dialogue. Dramas which Hindī usage consents to call Rām Līlā are sometimes produced by travelling companies of professional actors. Two such professional Rām Līlā *maṇḍalīs* were at work in Vrindaban in August 1949, when the troupe of one Paṇḍit Dīp Cand held forth nightly on a platform erected in the fruit bazaar, while another party was enacting the same sort of plays in the nearby grain market. In November of 1949 and again in February of 1950 a group of Caube Brahman actors came from Mathura and put on a month-long series of *Rāmāyaṇa* dramas. The season of Rāma’s birthday in March (Caitra śukla 9th) is a time of year when troupes capable of performing on *Rāmāyaṇa* themes are likely to be active. These professional performances are called Rām Līlā, but they are not *the* Rām Līlā, and it is not these which come to mind when the words are used without qualification. The great Rām Līlā of North India is a distinct social institution, an annual feature of the *daśahrā* holidays which begin in the latter part of September. Unlike the other traditional forms of drama found in Mathura District, the *daśahrā* Rām Līlā is a strictly local production. It is organized, financed, and staged in each town under the supervision of a committee selected for

this duty in a roughly democratic manner by the local Hindu community. This is the Rām Līlā which touches the experience of the average person who grows up in North India. It is this autumnal series of *Rāmāyaṇa* dramas which this essay describes.

The account which follows is based largely on personal observation and enquiry in Mathura and Vrindaban. The writer attended ten Rām Līlā performances in those towns and nearby Hathras in the *daśahrā* season of 1949 and obtained the publicity materials of the actors of the town of Aligarh. Friends from more distant cities contributed personal descriptions of the observances of their respective localities,<sup>3</sup> and actors and members of managing committees in Mathura and Vrindaban obligingly answered questions and supplied financial reports and other printed literature of their societies. Finally, the author is indebted to half a dozen writers of various generations of the past who have left descriptions of worth.<sup>4</sup> To be mentioned especially is an account of the Rām Līlā in Ghazipur written by H. Niehus in 1905, and James Prinsep's description of the festival in Banaras in the year 1825. The oral and written sources of information on practices of communities outside Mathura District were of special value in distinguishing local peculiarities from practices which are general throughout North India.

Deferring the question of how communities organize to produce these plays, we shall deal first with the persons who act in them, and the unique stage methods which they employ. The actors are recruited from the community in which they perform. The minor parts in the plays are open to all boys and men who belong to one of the four castes and whose age is regarded as proper for the particular role. Opportunities to act in the Rām Līlā tend to be sought after particularly by certain families, who provide a disproportionate number of the community's performers. There are special eligibility requirements for the roles of Rāma, his wife, and his brothers. The actors who represent these divine persons must be of Brahman caste, because, when they appear in costume and crown as the very embodiments (*svarūps*) of the divinities, even Brahmans will bow down to them and worship them. A Brahman boy may begin acting at the age of about ten years, when he may take the role of one of King Daśaratha's children—Rāma, Bharata, Lakṣmaṇa or Śatrughna—in the childhood scenes of the early books of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. On attaining the age of eleven or twelve, such a boy may be selected for the role of Sītā. At thirteen or fourteen, if talented and fortunate, he may be entrusted with the part of the grown-up Rāma. He holds this position for three or four years at most. When hair appears on his upper lip, an inexorable law of the Vaiṣṇava stage demands that his career as a *svarūp* come to an end. A younger actor must be found to take his place.

Rām Līlā actors are essentially amateurs even though they receive small cash payments and other favors. Out of the considerable treasuries raised to support the plays, Rs. 555 was divided at the end of the season among the actors and workers in Mathura in a recent year, and Rs. 161 among those in Vrindaban. In view of the large number of persons included in the distributions and in view of their month-long labors, the small individual shares were tokens of appreciation rather than pay. Free meals are provided for actors who remain on duty over meal hours. On the occasion of the enactment of Rāma's marriage, benevolent spectators give wedding presents as in real life to the actor playing the part of Rāma, and he is allowed to keep them. On the night of the enactment of Rāma's coronation, special admirers of any actor may come forward and place personal gifts in his hands. But the actors' chief gains

are pleasure and prestige. Nothing of the ancient disrepute with which India has traditionally rewarded her actors attaches to the performers of the Rām Līlā. The boys who are selected for this work are highly respected and widely envied.

The *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsī Dās is the subject matter of the Rām Līlā. Its function is to mediate the words and meaning of this *Rāmāyaṇa* to the Hindu public through musical recitation of the text and through acting which makes the meaning of the recited text clear and vivid. In technique, the Rām Līlā harmonizes the requirements of cantillation with those of drama. *Rāmāyaṇa* recitation has the priority and determines the structure of the play. The central person in all the stage proceedings is the chanting *paṇḍit*. From a prominent vantage point on or near the stage, he sings out to audience and actors the lines of the sacred text. One who wishes to follow the progress of the drama can do no better than to take a seat beside the *paṇḍit* and follow his recitation down the pages of his large *Rāmāyaṇa* from marked verse to marked verse. Sometimes he sings all the verses without omission for several pages together; then he may skip over many pages, pick out a verse or two here and there to serve as a bridge for the narrative, and pass on to a distant episode that has been selected for intensive dramatization.

In some communities it is considered praiseworthy or even obligatory to read the entire *Rāmāyaṇa* on the stage during the days of the Rām Līlā celebration. Prinsep noted that in Banaras under the patronage of the maharaja of that place "... nearly the whole of the Ramayana is read through in the course of twenty or thirty days, and whatever incidents are capable of being acted, or displayed, are simultaneously exhibited."<sup>5</sup> But in Banaras nowadays, according to Alexandra David-Neel, the entire epic is covered only in certain extraordinary years.<sup>6</sup> In Satna twenty years ago the reading of every word of Tulsī Dās was considered a rigid duty. This sense of obligation involved the people of Satna in occasional trying situations. The *Rāmcaritmānas* contains numerous descriptive passages which cannot possibly be cast into lively stage action. The majority of the local people no longer understood the archaic language of Tulsī Dās well enough to enjoy it as mere literary recitation. Therefore ingenious devices were employed to lighten the burden of the audience, yet fulfill the letter of the law. The book was so divided for the stage that a night's performance ended just at the point in the book where such a wearisome passage began. The next day the *paṇḍits* would arrive early and dutifully sing the passage through to an almost empty house, finishing just as the crowds began to arrive. If an undramatic passage of some length fell unavoidably in the middle of an evening's program, the singers proceeded through it in subdued voice while the audience was kept pleasantly amused by a dance or farcial interlude.

The Rām Līlā players of the Mathura area feel free to make whatever selection from the *Rāmāyaṇa* they wish. Some incidents of the epic are omitted entirely; others are presented in abstract, so to speak; and others are produced in full with great pomp and emphasis. The selection of passages is made to be of such length that the aggregate can be acted out in the time allotted to the local dramatic festival. The chosen episodes are grouped into units of such size that each can be covered at one sitting. The resulting schedule of performances is organized into a calendar and is published before the start of the season in the form of a large handbill or poster (*līlāpatra*). A comparison of the handbills of a number of towns showed that each community's selection is uniquely its own. However, each town's way of editing the *Rāmāyaṇa* for the stage

tended to be traditional, the same selection of incidents being repeated year after year.

The statement that the *Rāmcaritmānas* is the substance of the Rām Līlā requires two qualifications. The first is that some use is made of a *Rāmāyaṇa* composed by a recent poet named Radhesyam. Its modern Hindī verse is much more easily intelligible to present-day audiences than the now difficult poetry of Tulsī. In keeping with the general Indian literary custom of resorting to poetic expression in emotional situations, the actors of Vrindaban in intense scenes often abandon their usual prose dialogue for the verses of Radhesyam. This *Rāmāyaṇa* has a limited use in Satna as well. In neither town does it replace the *Rāmcaritmānas* as the text of basic recitation.

Secondly, the bulky editions of the *Rāmcaritmānas* used by the *paṇḍits* contain a good deal of material which was not written by Tulsī Dās. Printed for pious rather than scholarly use, they include a number of interpolated stories (*kṣepak*) which one cannot find in critically edited editions. One such interpolation elaborates into an episode the incident of Śabarī, the jungle woman who offered Rāma her best hospitality though it was only an offering of wild fruits. Another is the story of the *sañi* of Sulocanā, the wife of Meghnād, and the extended episode of Ahirāvaṇa's carrying off of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa into Pātāla, and the beloved passages in which Hanumān proves by tearing open his chest that the name of Rāma is written on his heart. These interpolations provide several of the most popular episodes of the Rām Līlā performances.<sup>7</sup>

There is no need to retell here the familiar narratives which the Rām Līlā dramatizes. With a few exceptions of the kind just mentioned, they are the stories told by Tulsī Dās, and may be read in the pleasant translations of F. S. Growse or of W. Douglas P. Hill.<sup>8</sup> An impression of the scope and content of the whole of a city's observances may be gained from the translation of Mathura's day-by-day calendar contained in the appendix to this chapter. It will be noted there that the presentations do not consist of dramas only. On the opening day and on the final day important rituals are performed. On numerous occasions throughout the season pageants and processions—spectacles rather than dramas—are held in the streets and other public places. The gods, for instance, go in procession to plead with Brahmā for help against the evil power of Rāvaṇa. Rāma and the demoness Tārakā lead their respective adherents through the streets, meet, and lock forces in decisive combat. When Rāma is to be married to Sītā, he travels to her parental home in a colorful wedding procession like that of mortal bridegrooms.<sup>9</sup> Later, Rāma with Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa walks barefoot to the edge of the city on the sad road to exile, amidst the genuine tears of many who line the streets. The citizens pour forth in a body to visit them at Citrakūṭ, which is identified for the time being with a certain spot in the suburbs. And when all the trials of the heroic family are finished, the victorious Rāma returns to meet his brother Bharata, travelling in triumphal procession with his monkey friends and allies.<sup>10</sup> Last and greatest of these vast open-air spectacles is the *Rāvaṇavadh*, the great outdoor pageant of the slaying of Rāma's demon enemy. In the Mathura festivities this episode was to be given serious dramatic rendering on a stage during the hours of evening, but in the afternoon it was massively and crudely represented under the open sky before a crowd equal in number to the entire population of the city. The arena was a sunken field at the edge of town, surrounded by banks and hillocks from which a hundred thousand people looked on. At one end of the field, colossal paper effigies of Rāvaṇa and his brother Kumbhakaraṇa (Kumbhkarāṇ) manned the flimsy walls of a



paper “fortress” of Laṅkā. There was some semblance of mute drama as Rāma and his monkey cohorts swarmed on the scene and prepared to attack. Two carriages bearing impersonators of Rāma and Rāvaṇa circled round and round in lively imitation of the tactical gyrations of the chariots of the two champions in combat. A great shout went up as Rāvaṇa was struck down. The ebullient crowd swarmed through the lines of police, the walls of Laṅkā were torn to tatters, and the images of the demons went up in flames.

These commemorative spectacles involve no dialogue nor any but the most rudimentary of pantomime. Yet these are the conspicuous public events which have time and again caught the eye of the foreign visitor and have often been photographed and described as the Rām Līlā in occidental memoirs.<sup>11</sup> The majority of writers have persistently reported the Rām Līlā to be a dumb show, devoid of dialogue. H. H. Wilson in *Selected Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus* mentions it as “a mere spectacle,” and Sylvain Lévi says, “The dialogue is entirely omitted. . . . The action is cut up into a series of striking tableaux. . . .”<sup>12</sup> These statements can be dismissed because their only foundation is the account of Jacquemont, who himself saw nothing of the Rām Līlā save the *Rāvaṇavadh* pageant. But writers who knew their local Rām Līlās more intimately have also reported them to be pantomime. Niehus says of the dramas in Ghazipur: “The performance consists entirely of pantomimes, to which the text is read out from the Ramayana.” And Prinsep’s report from Ramnagar in Banaras says, “The whole of the acting is necessarily in dumb show, and the *dramatis personae* are so numerous, and in general so unskilled in their duty, that the leaders. . . have great difficulty in making the performance keep pace with the oral declamation of the choir, or band of priests, who chaunt the sacred legend.” In face of such testimony this writer must concede that in some places and at certain times the Rām Līlā has evidently been staged as a dumb show. But he must insist that in none of the contemporary observances that he has either seen or heard of, is this the case.

The Rām Līlā of today, at least, is full drama. Its dialogue is subordinated to textual recitation, it is true, but the subordination does not mean that dialogue is minor in quantity. Its dependence is functional, and lies in the fact that the recitation carries the thread of the story and regulates what the speech and action of the performers shall be. The *paṇḍit*, ever the key man in the proceedings, sings out the *dohās*, *caupāīs*, and *sorathās* of the printed page in the ever recurring tunes appropriate to their meters.<sup>13</sup> If the acting is being done on a proper stage, the *paṇḍit*’s lectern is usually seen at its right-hand border. Sometimes he and his accompanists sit on a small detached platform which projects into the audience slightly in advance of the main stage and to its right. He is often equipped with microphone and amplifier to enable him to make himself heard above the sometimes boisterous chatter of the crowd. In Vrindaban, where most of the acting is done in the out-of-doors, the *paṇḍit* seated himself on a table placed at the edge of the rectangle of dusty lawn which served as stage. In swift moving action scenes he sometimes descended to the sidelines and strode up and down with the tides of battle, holding his book before him and singing out the verses in a stentorian voice. As these *paṇḍits* begin their scriptural chant from one of these vantage points, the performers on the stage begin to display in bodily motions the action being narrated, and when the verses of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have reported the words of this or that personality, the *paṇḍit* pauses while, on the stage, the appropriate actor repeats the substance of the speech in modern Hindī prose. Sometimes the actor’s utterance

is a fairly literal translation and sometimes a paraphrase of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and sometimes it is a fanciful elaboration along lines which the text merely suggests or provides with a reasonable occasion.

How cantillation and dialogue are interwoven may be seen in the transcription below of a sound recording made at an actual performance. The recording was made on the Rām Līlā stage in Mathura. The occasion was the enactment of the *Rājagaddā* or coronation of Rāma. After fourteen years of exile, Rāma is seated at last upon his rightful throne, amidst the rejoicing people of Ayodhyā. The devout of Mathura, acting nominally in the role of Rāma's loyal Ayodhyan subjects, press upward to the stage to salute their king and present gifts. Brahmans chant the Vedas before their sovereign and depart with rich rewards. Brahmā and Śiva pay their respects and take their leave. Farewells are being exchanged, and Rāma is thanking his helpers and allies of the late war and dismissing them with gifts. Here our recording begins.<sup>14</sup>

*Chant 1*

Umā's Lord<sup>15</sup> praised Rām's virtues,  
and, happy, he went to Kailāś.  
Then the Lord arranged for the monkeys  
all sorts of easeful abodes.

That beauty, that pleasure in meeting  
speech cannot tell, Lord of Birds!<sup>16</sup>  
Śārādā, Śeṣ, Veda<sup>17</sup> describe it;  
such charm is known to Maheś.

Vibhīṣaṇ, contented, arose then—<sup>18</sup>  
took up in his hand a necklace of gems.

*Vibhīṣaṇ*

O see! When my brother Rāvaṇ conquered the Ocean, the Ocean gave my brother at that time this necklace of gems.

*Chant 2*

What the Treasury of Waters gave to Rāvaṇ  
Vibhīṣaṇ received in turn.  
That same pleasing necklace of gems  
he dropped upon Jānakī's neck.

*Vibhīṣaṇ*: Now I make a presentation of this necklace to the revered queen!

*Bystander*: Cry out, "Victory to King Rām!"

*Chant 3*

Its brilliance became so great  
the rulers could not gaze on it directly.  
It was more glorious there than the concourse of kings;  
the hearts of all were charmed to see it.  
At that moment Janak's daughter the queen  
looked at Rām and then smiled.  
The gracious Rām said, "Please listen, dear.  
Give whatsoever you wish to whomsoever you please."

*Rām*: O Darling, please give this necklace to whomsoever you wish.

*Chant 4*

Then the beloved daughter of Janak, hearing the speech,  
took the string of jewels from her neck.  
“To whom shall I give this?” she thought in her heart.  
She looked in the direction of the Son of the Wind.<sup>19</sup>

*Sītā*: To whom shall I give this necklace?

*Chant 5*

Noting her merciful glance, the Son of the Wind,  
pleased, made a prostration.  
That necklace of jewels the daughter of Janak  
dropped around his throat.<sup>20</sup>

*Bystander*: Cry out, “Victory to Queen Sītā!”

*Chant 6*

Mahāvīr reflected in his mind,  
“There is some great excellence in the necklace.”

*Hanumān*

In the necklace which the revered Mother has graciously given me there must surely be  
some special excellence. Only for this reason has my Mother shown me the favor.

*Chant 7*

Soaked in the syrup of love for the Supremely Blissful One,  
he began to look at all the gems.  
“Save light, there’s nothing else in it  
to appeal to the hearts of devotees!”

*Hanumān*

The revered Mother has doubtless given this out of kindness. But in it, apart from light,  
no other thing is visible to which the minds of devotees should be attracted.

*Chant 8*

“Within the gem there must be some kernel.”  
Then he broke one pearl.

*Hanumān*

But a thing given by Mother cannot be without importance. Therefore there surely  
must be some kernel inside these gems. I am going to break one bead first, and see. (The  
actor crushes one bead between his teeth. Since the “gems” are grapes, this is not difficult.)

*Chant 9*

He began to scrutinize the inside of it.  
Seeing this, people were soaked in astonishment.

*Hanumān*

Inside this, nothing is visible but lustre. Just as there is lustre outside, there is lustre  
inside too, but far more than that.

*Chant 10*

Then stout Hanumān broke another.  
 Seeing it to be without kernel, he discarded it.

*Hanumān*: There's nothing in this either!

*Chant 11*

In this way he breaks one pearl after another.  
 It gives great pain to the multitude of bystanders.

*Bystander*: O look! Why is Hanumān here breaking this necklace of gems in this way?

*Chant 12*

They began to say, each in his own mind,  
 "To one who has no fitness  
 Please do not give such a thing,  
 or see the same sad state of affairs!"  
 Then some king cried out,  
 "What are you doing, Hanumān?  
 Why are you breaking the necklace—  
 the beautiful jewels—O Wise One?"

*Bystander*

O Hanumān, why are you breaking up and throwing away a necklace of such beautiful and priceless jewels?

*Chant 13*

Hearing the speech, the Son of the Wind said,  
 "I am looking for the joy-giving name of Rām.  
 The Name is not to be seen in this;  
 that is why I am breaking it, O brother."

*Hanumān*

Brother, I am looking in it for the name of the joy-giving Rām. The name of my Lord is not visible in it, brother. That's why I'm breaking it.

*Chant 14*

Someone said, "One does not hear anywhere  
 that the name of Rām is in all things!"

*Bystander*

O Hanumān, the name of Rām is not inside everything; and we, with our ears, have never heard anything to that effect anywhere!

*Chant 15*

Said the Son of the Wind, "What hasn't the Name in it,  
 isn't of any use at all."

*Hanumān*

O brother, that thing is not of any use in which there is not the name of my Lord!

Chant 16

The same person said, "Listen, O Abode of Strength!  
does the name of Rām exist in your body?"

The Same Bystander

O Hanumān, you abode of strength, is the name of the Lord Rām written even in your heart?

Chant 17

Hearing the speech, the Son of the Wind said,  
"Certainly Hari's noble name is in my body!"

Hanumān: Yes, the name of the supremely noble Lord must surely be in my body!

Chant 18

Having spoken thus, the ape tore open his own heart.  
On every hair's breadth were the infinite names of the Lord.  
Seeing the name of Rām stamped everywhere,  
all became astonished at heart.  
There was a rain of flowers, shouts of "Victory!" in the sky.  
Rāghunāth<sup>21</sup> gazed with gracious glance.  
Hanumān's body became as hard as the thunderbolt<sup>22</sup> again.  
At once the Lord rose up;  
With his body a-tingle and tears in his eyes  
he took Hanumān to his heart.

In costuming, each North Indian community follows its own fancies, guided by only a few generally shared conceptions.<sup>23</sup> One such accepted notion is that murky colors are appropriate for demonic beings. Everywhere, Rāvaṇa and his henchmen are seen in blue or black clothing; the faces of the lesser demons are blackened with soot. Rāvaṇa's ten-headedness is always somehow represented, but in headgear of patterns differing greatly from community to community. The general intention in designing the dress of Rāma is that he should be made to look a king. But since the conceptions of royalty in the popular mind are vague, the results are various. In some towns Rāma wears a *cogā*. The costume worn in Mathura is a richly embroidered, red velvet coat reminiscent of an old style of western court dress. Sītā wears her distinctive coronet, called a *candrikā*, and a nose pendant of pearl (*bulāḥ*). The headdress of Rāma, here as everywhere, is a high cylindrical crown of a type peculiar to himself. A white feather (*turā*) is fixed at its forward peak, and at the very top there rises a spade shaped crest called *kirīṭ*. Major protrusions from the right and left sides of the headgear are said to represent earrings (*kuṇḍal*). A tassel of strung pearls (*jhūmkā*) dangles from each of these ear ornaments. A halo (*tej*) is attached to the rear of the crown. The lower border of the crown is fringed with a string of pearls (*baṇḍanī*). The dots and lines of sandalwood paste which often ornament the face of the actor are without special meaning. The *tilak* worn in the middle of the forehead by Mathura actors is of the pattern peculiar to members of the Śrīvaiṣṇava or Rāmānuja Saṃpradāya.

There is great local variation in stage design. No single structure or layout can be called the Rām Līlā stage. Since audiences sit upon mats on the ground, actors remain passably visible even when the stage is only a rectangle of earth under the open sky.

Therefore, communities can be found which do not trouble to put up any kind of erected stage. When elevated and covered platforms are built for the Rām Līlā, their function is not always to provide a central floor for the action. They may represent specific fortresses, palaces, or other buildings, serving only occasionally as the scene of some part of the panoramic action. It is a widely acknowledged principle of staging that, whenever a change of geographical setting occurs in the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the scene of acting must undergo a complete shift to indicate the change of place. A move is made at such times to a new arena, usually in another part of the town. The Mathura players perform during their season in six different localities within their city. The events set in Ayodhya and Janakpur are enacted on a stage erected in a large open air grain market in the heart of the Mathura business district. The heaven of Viṣṇu to which the gods go to plead for help against Rāvaṇa is set up in a nearby bazaar. Viśvāmitra's hermitage is identified with the grounds of a local temple. A landing place on the banks of the Jamna River becomes Prayag, where Rāma's famous dialogue with Kevaṭa the ferryman takes place. Citrakūṭ has yet another location, and the jungle scenes another. At most of these places a good deal of labor is expended in preparing special facilities for players and spectators. A group of young men who gained control of the Rām Līlā in Vrindaban some years ago were convinced that their audiences had no real need of such costly literal representation of the various localities of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Defying the convention of the shifting stage, they began a tradition of holding performances night after night in a single arena on the grounds of the Temple of Raṅgī. They give token recognition to the older principle, however, by enacting their various scenes now on one side, now on another, of the extensive strip of lawn that is their stage.

In building whole new theaters, so to speak, for each major change in scene, the Rām Līlā is lavish. But it is economical in use of scenery and stage properties. Save for a solitary throne in palace scenes, the stages are practically bare. Therefore they can be conceived as elastic, like the fields on which occidental pageants are enacted. If the plays are currently running in the spot designated as Ayodhya, the stage set up in that place can, with trifling shifts or none in stage equipment, represent any and every part of Ayodhyā. When later another stage is used for the jungle scenes, it serves as setting for every action said to have taken place in a thousand miles of jungle; one of its borders represents the site of Rāma's military headquarters on the Indian mainland, and the other side, twenty feet away, is Rāvaṇa's throne room in Ceylon.

This nonliteral way of conceiving and using the stage area manifested itself in facilities of quite different appearance in the three cities of the writer's experience.

In the town of Hathras a great pavilion had been erected, accommodating on its broad earthen floor not only the contending actors involved in the battle for Laṅkā, but most of the audience as well. A low platform under the center of this canopy served as the field headquarters of Rāma. A smaller platform in a distant corner represented the fortress of Laṅkā. Throughout the performance it was the place of Sītā's imprisonment and the roosting place of Rāvaṇa and his demon henchmen. A corridor between these two centers was kept clear of spectators, and up and down its length the war between the factions raged to and fro.

In Mathura the spectators sat upon mats under the open sky, but, for the protection of the actors, raised stages with roof and sidewalls of cloth were built on a framework of heavy bamboo poles. The floor-space was divided by partitions into three fairly

equal sections. At the rear was a large dressing room, sufficient to contain the great number of actors required by the dramas. The forestage was open, without curtains of any kind. The middle section was separated from the forestage by a filmy gauze curtain. When unlighted, its reaches were invisible to the audience, and were used as a waiting room by actors about to go on stage. But when illuminated, its interior was fully visible and served as a stage-within-a-stage for the representation of visions, dreams, or reveries. The forward section of the stage was the scene of the principal action of the plays. Though the space available for acting there was vast, it always shrank steadily during an evening's performance through the creeping encroachment upon it of children and the deferential seating of dignitaries along its borders. On this stage, too, particular sides or corners were made to represent particular *Rāmāyaṇa* localities. Rāvaṇa's stronghold was at center rear, and there he usually squatted with his sooty crew around him, even when not participating in the current action of the play. Rāma and his chiefs formed a continuing cluster likewise, just off the center of the forestage. Throughout the *Laṅkā* scenes the two parties confronted each other thus across a stage floor on which envoys went hither and thither, and across which the respective champions made their raids and fought their personal combats.

The staging arrangements in Vrindaban were analogous, but not at all similar superficially. The field of action was an avenue of beaten grass and earth some forty yards long and twenty broad. On one side of it sat and stood the adult male spectators; on the other the women and children. There was a roofed platform at the north end of this strip, but it did not serve the purposes of a true stage. The deities sat formally in its shelter to receive worship at the beginning and at the close of each evening's performance. During the conflicts of Rāma with Rāvaṇa it served as headquarters and rallying place for Rāma's forces. A low and roofless platform at the south end of the avenue was Rāvaṇa's citadel and the principal hangout of his demons. The action of the play moved up and down on the no man's land between. To present the story of an embassy or a foray, there was no need to replace painted jungle scenery with canvas battlements, for all localities involved in the epic narrative were continuously before the eyes of the spectators.

Let us describe how this outdoor stage was used on the evening of 11 October 1949. The portions of the *Rāmcaritmānas* which were to be enacted included the accounts of Rām's battle with Kumbhkarāṇ, and of Lakṣmaṇ's victory over Meghnād. These episodes were cast into tumultuous action. No recording machine could have caught all the dialogue, nor would the dialogue if recorded provide an adequate account of the happenings. Some scenes were made up of almost pure motion, few words being heard save the occasional narrative chant of the *paṇḍit*. But if a recording had been possible, it would usually show a mixture of recited verses and prose dialogue as in the text already presented.

The first stirrings of activity on this Rām Līlā stage begin at nine o'clock in the evening. Paṇḍit Kuṇḍanlāl arrives on the stroke of the hour, deposits his harmonium on the reader's table at the margin of the reserved area, and confers with the accompanists who are to handle the cymbals and drums. Rām and Lakṣmaṇ in full regalia now enter the stage at north and seat themselves with quiet dignity on a dais. An *āraṭī* tray with flaming wicks is brought and moved gently up and down in a circular pattern before them. A second attendant unwraps a large copy of the *Rāmcaritmānas* ceremoniously, rotates it over the flame of the lamp, and carries it to the *paṇḍit*'s

reading stand. Hanumān, who has been attending on the deities, now bounds down from the stage and leads the spectators in a shout of *Rāmcandra jī kī jay* 'Victory to Rāmcandra!' At 9:20 the *paṇḍit* raises his voice in chant, and with this act the drama proper begins.

The previous night's performance had ended with Lakṣmaṇ's recovery from a grievous wound inflicted by Meghnād's magic weapon, the *śakti*. Now Lakṣmaṇ's renewed fighting power again threatens the demons. Rāvaṇ, worried, is seen leaving his dark southern fortress to call to his aid his monstrous brother Kumbhkaṇ 'Pot-ears.' That massive demon has been sleeping—a shapeless heap—on a rope bed in the middle of the field. We can hear as well as see his slumbers. Kumbhkaṇ has eaten such a gluttonous meal six months past that for half a year he has been sunk in sleep. The counterpane pitches and quivers with each inhalation of his mountainous paunch. The blare of his hoarse snores reaches the farthest spectator.

Rāvaṇ prods him. Rāvaṇ pleads his desperate need of help. Pot-ears hears nothing. The demon king calls from his capital a host of minor imps and orders them to wake his brother. The average age of these apprentice demons is perhaps nine or ten. Their whole equipment is a soot smeared face, a blue-black shirt well fouled with dust, and an exuberant willingness to attempt any mischievous assignment. The clowning spirit in which the demons carry out their diabolic responsibilities is striking. In this day and age the goblins of old are taken lightly and even take themselves lightly. The imps swarm upon Kumbhkaṇ—sit on his neck, clamber to the top of his abdominal hump, jump up and down on his paunch and shriek. Kumbhkaṇ belches, shrugs them off. They climb on again. His belches become awakening grunts. He sits up and roars. Rāvaṇ tries to explain to him the current peril to the demon cause. Kumbhkaṇ's mind is preoccupied with ordering breakfast: a herd of roasted buffalo, and a million bottles of wine. The imps lug in huge baskets of victuals. Like stokers, they throw food with shovels into the minister's greedy maw—all the while stuffing themselves as well. His mouth is too full to speak clearly, but Kumbhkaṇ keeps bellowing for more. In his greedy appetites and loud voice, Kumbhkaṇ incarnates the qualities which Hindu feeling looks upon as the nadir of breeding and virtue.

Finally, bloated with food and heated with wine, Kumbhkaṇ picks up his ungainly body and lurches off toward the wars. As demon general, he musters an untidy army from among the imps. He drills his disorderly squads by bawling in corrupt English, "*rāṭ, leyafṭ, rāṭ, leyafṭ . . . hāṭ!*" To salute, the demons assume a squatting posture and hold their noses. They prostrate themselves in the dust before their commander. Now the whole body rises and charges off in the direction of Rām's camp in a formation as military as the snake dance at a high school football rally.

In mid-field, Kumbhkaṇ meets his brother Vibhīṣaṇ, who has abandoned his evil kin to espouse the cause of Rām. The fate driven brothers pause to take final leave of each other. Vibhīṣaṇ then breaks away to warn Rām of Kumbhkaṇ's impending attack. Rām gives the alarm to a host of juveniles who have been swarming about him in the red jackets of his monkey allies. The signal stirs them up even beyond their usual agitation. They pour down upon the field. Ununiformed irregulars join in from nearby rows of young spectators. Rām's motley host rolls out, collides with the horde of Kumbhkaṇ, and both dissolve in dust: the rival groups of little boys catch hold of each other's shirttails and pull and push each other down into the dirt in the best of spirits. A group of agile "monkeys" begins to tease Kumbhkaṇ. He lunges vainly



at them again and again, with threatening roars. Finally he pulls up a “tree” (a branch planted upright in the ground for the purpose), and with menacing sweeps he drives the young apes back before him to their camp.

Twanging the string of his bow, Rām leaps down from the platform to succor his fleeing allies. The soldiers of the demon army see him and turn tail, leaving Kumbhkarāṇ to face Rām alone. A protracted duel begins between the two champions. To the measured rhythm of the *paṇḍit*’s continuous scriptural recitation, the combatants circle each other. The whirling steps and the stylized brandishing of weapons give the battle almost the appearance of a dance. Rām discharges light reed arrows which drop at his opponent’s feet or flutter in the air above. At last the two close in. Kumbhkarāṇ goes down heavily. Wails go up from the demon camp, and from the crowd a shout of “*Rāmcandra jī kī jay!*”

Meghnād, son of Rāvaṇ, rises from among the demon cluster now, a picture of vengeful wrath. Standing on the edge of the platform and waving a scimitar, he makes a vaunting speech in a *rākṣasa* tongue that sounds very much like Urdu. Then he rushes forth and falls upon the dark gowned actor who plays the role of Rām’s ally, the bear Jāmbavān. They grapple. The bear throws Meghnād down and pins him to the earth for a moment, but he breaks free and returns, shaken, to his base. Next Meghnād tries to gain supernatural power by performing a Vedic-type sacrifice. He and his urchins fix their black pennant in the ground, build a fire, and seat themselves around it. A ritual chant goes up from them in the cadence of Vedic recitation, but their language is a jabberwocky, a demon’s pseudo-Sanskrit which brings a roar of laughter from the audience. At the other end of the field Vibhīṣaṇ warns Rām that the sacrifice, if completed, will make Meghnād almost invincible. Rām sends forth his monkeys to interrupt the rite. The monkeys swirl around the group of sacrificers, at first keeping a respectful distance. The busy demons take no notice of them. The monkeys grow bold; they swarm in, kick the demons’ backs and pull their hair. They badger Meghnād to such a fury that he breaks away from the fire. Thereby his sacrifice is spoiled. Rām requests Lakṣmaṇ now to put an end to Meghnād altogether. As Meghnād is pursuing the monkeys up and down the field, Lakṣmaṇ stops him short. The two join in the dance-like combat, and Meghnād falls under Lakṣmaṇ’s arrows.

The last scene of the evening showed the *satī* of Meghnād’s faithful wife Sulocanā. The day’s events ended at midnight with the usual flame worship of the impersonated deities.

The Rām Līlā is produced under the supervision of a committee elected by an annual meeting of all the Rām Līlā enthusiasts of a locality. The committee raises and spends the budget, marshalls the public processions, and exercises a power of final decision in every matter connected with the observances. The supervisory bodies of all communities are much alike in structure and function, but they bear a variety of names. The promoting body in Satna was known by the English title, The Ram Lila Committee. The dramas in Hathras are publicized as the activities of the *Sārva-janik Dhārmik Sabhā*, The Public Religious Society, and in Vrindaban the publications of the association appear under the name of the *Śrī Pañcāyatī Rāmīlā Kameṭī*, the Public Rām Līlā Committee. The general public and even the officials of the organizations use these names casually, substituting equivalents freely in speech and in print.

The idea is an established one that a town ought to have one Rām Līlā celebration, conducted under the auspices of a group representing the united Hindu community.

Though this ideal is recognized, it is often honored in the breach. Banaras has long had at least three bands of performers at work during the *daśahrā* season. Any group of malcontents or enthusiasts are conceded a right to organize an independent performance in their own ward of a town and to compete for the preeminence. If they prove clever in assembling talent and funds they may eventually win the position of the recognized Rām Līlā of the place. The memory of the older residents of Vrindaban is long enough to record the decline of several Rām Līlā organizations and the rise of others to supremacy. Though a rivalry of this kind is found to be going on frequently enough, the normal situation in any town is that one group of players either has the field entirely to itself or surpasses all others so decisively that it is recognized without question as *the* Rām Līlā society of the city.

In Vrindaban at the present time such preeminence belongs to the performers who meet at the Temple of Raṅgī, the city's one large shrine dedicated to Rāma. The *Śrī Pañcāyatī Rāmlīlā Kameṭī* of Vrindaban was organized about forty years ago when the Temple of Raṅgī (Rāma), then still relatively new, first attracted to itself a group of Rām Līlā players. The temple authorities provide a room for the committee's meetings and for the storage of its equipment, but neither the priests nor the temple manager exert any special influence in the society's affairs. The managing committee has a membership of about twelve, half of whom are businessmen and the other half Brahmans engaged in professional religious duties of one kind or another. Several members have college degrees.

This committee, like others of its kind elsewhere, is responsible eventually to the subscribers who provide the funds. In August of each year, about thirty days before the performances are to begin, the committee of the previous season sends messengers through the city to announce by beat of drum the annual meeting of the full society. The voting membership at this gathering consists of those present who made contributions toward the expenses of the Rām Līlā of the year before. The informal proceedings are governed by no written constitution or rules of order. The agenda seldom includes decisions on the detailed manner of performing the dramas, because such matters are rather completely fixed by local custom. The most important work of the evening is the election of new members to fill vacancies in the managing committee, and the launching of the financial campaign. The old committee proposes for the meeting's approval a list of new co-workers. One consideration in the selection of new members is enthusiasm and capacity for organizational work. But a second qualification, at least as important, is ability to help in one way or another in raising funds, for the most essential function of the managing committee is to meet the expenses of producing the plays and spectacles. The meeting also draws up a list of authorized solicitors. The committee members themselves form the core of the money raising staff.

During the month's interval between this general meeting and the beginning of the performances, the committee's canvassers scour the city, receipt book in hand, asking contributions from the head of every family of any substance. The extent to which the Rām Līlā is a folk affair is indicated by the published financial reports of the committees of Vrindaban and Mathura.<sup>24</sup> The Vrindaban committee raised Rs. 891 in 1946. Rs. 727 of this came from 613 contributors, most of whom gave one rupee. The largest single sum was a grant of forty rupees from the municipal government. The names of 183 of the donors were plainly Brahman, 164 were recognizable

as those of persons of the merchant class, three were Muslim names. The remaining twenty percent of the budget was obtained from the public largely through offerings given on certain ritual occasions connected with the spectacles themselves. When the *Bharatmilāp* procession is making its leisurely passage through the city, shopkeepers along the way invite the impersonators of the deities into their shops and offer refreshments and small gifts of money. And when each night's drama comes to a close with the *ārati* worship of the enthroned deities, many devout onlookers press up to the stage, pass their fingers over the flame of the lamp, and drop a coin into the tray on which it rests. The final evening of the series, the night of the coronation of Rāma, is an occasion when it is the duty of all those who have attended throughout the season to come forward at the time of the *ārati* and present a special gift. This is an obligation recognized and felt by all. The finance drive is the opportunity for those affluent enough to give in rupees; the *āratis* are occasions for those who can give only in coppers.

The report of the Mathura committee for the same year was signed by twelve members, seven of whom were merchants, three *paṇḍits*, one a teacher, and one a doctor. The total budget of Rs. 4151 reflected Mathura's greater population and wealth, but the sources of income were much the same. A total of Rs. 3572 was contributed by 740 donors. More than a hundred subscribers gave ten rupees each or more, but once again the treasury was filled mainly through contributions of one or two rupees. The municipal government made no direct cash grant, but paid a bill for special street lighting amounting to ninety-four rupees. In addition, the public works department of the city made available the services of a gang of its laborers to move equipment about and keep the grounds clean. A corps of boy volunteers contributed personal service in maintaining order and directing the crowds at the performances. A club of *Rāmāyana* enthusiasts called the *Rāmāyāṇ Pracāriṇī Sabhā* usually assumes some special responsibility for the costumes of the actors. Generally speaking it is the middle classes of these cities which furnish most support to the Rām Līlā and fill the ranks of its managing committees. Nevertheless, our study shows that its financial burden is widely distributed among hundreds of people. No individual or clique is in a position to control it through financial patronage. So broad is the popular support of the Rām Līlā that it would be hard to find any activity which expresses more directly the ideals and tastes of the Hindu public of a North Indian town.

One of the responsibilities of a Rām Līlā committee is to decide when the series of dramas shall begin, and for how many days it shall continue. To try to discern the principles by which the committees are guided is a puzzling study. It has been possible to collate information on the calendars of sixty-three communities: the four small cities of Braj mentioned before, and fifty-nine places whose usual calendar for the *daśahrā* season as listed in the *District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*<sup>25</sup> makes clear reference to the existence of a local Rām Līlā, and specifies the dates on which it customarily started and ended. The data of the gazetteers is fifty years old, but because it includes information on the observances of a great many small towns and villages it is probably still needed as a corrective for the impression made by the elaborate celebrations of the cities. The duration of the Rām Līlā in these sixty-three places ranges all the way from nine to twenty-six days. In our four cities of Braj, long runs of eighteen to twenty-six days prevailed, but the places large and small listed in the gazetteers showed an average run of only ten or eleven. Our conclusion is that a nine day series of dramas is evidently considered a minimum,

and that a Rām Līlā committee may lengthen the season beyond nine days according to its financial means, the talent and interest of the people of the community, and the established custom of the place.

After deciding how many nights the dramas shall continue, the Rām Līlā committee must set the dates on which they shall begin and end. In the sixty-three calendars studied, the one common factor was that all included the nine days leading up to and including the tenth day of the light fortnight of the month of Āśvin, the *vijayā daśamī* day or "Triumphant Tenth" on which Rāma is said to have slain Rāvaṇa and stormed his citadel. Furthermore, there seems to be an almost universal sense that the final defeat of Rāvaṇa should actually be staged on that day. Only the Vrindaban players—ever unconventional—disregarded this rule by enacting Rāvaṇa's defeat eleven days later. In places where only a short series of nine or ten nights' performances is being put on, the story of victorious Rāma's happy return and ascension of the throne is abbreviated and included in the performance on *vijayā daśamī*, and with that day the whole project terminates. Many towns which can afford to be more leisurely continue for two more days—not by shifting the *Rāvaṇavadh* from its customary date, but by devoting a separate evening to Rāma's reunion with his brother (the *Bharatmilāp*) and another to the coronation scenes. A few even add two further sessions, featuring first Rāma's farewell to the monkeys, and then a concluding benedictory ritual. The generalizations about the Rām Līlā calendar which will stand are as follows: the dramas are held on dates which are sure to include Āśvin śukla 2nd through 10th; the killing of Rāvaṇa is almost universally enacted on the 10th; and communities may, with perfect conventionality, add three or four days of drama after the 10th, and begin as many days before the 2nd as they like.

The managing committee does not usually take direct responsibility for rehearsals and stage management. They take an active part in recruiting actors, but find it wise to delegate their training and supervision to persons having special practical skill. These directors are usually men who, in their younger days, acted in the Rām Līlā themselves. In Vrindaban one *paṇḍit* Puruṣottam, the priest of a local temple, coaches the young actors in the dialogues which are traditional in that town. Allowing them some liberty in formulating their prose speeches, he drills them with strictness in the exact recitation of the occasional verse components of their parts. The teaching function is carried out in Mathura by a trio which includes a *sādhū* named Bhadra Babaji, a professional *paṇḍit* named Govindji Caube, and a jeweler named Girrajmal who knows the entire series of plays by heart and whose specialized task it is to sit beside the stage during rehearsals and call to account any actor who departs verbally from the dialogue sanctified by custom. The town of Satna followed the unusual practice of bringing in from Ayodhya for the season a professional director of the Rām Līlā.

Considering the immensity of the material of the plays, rehearsal is taken rather lightly. Vrindaban's director tutors his actors individually in their recitations, but holds hardly any group rehearsals at all. Consequently the finished pageantry shows an awkwardness arising from constant physical improvisation. Rehearsals begin in Mathura two or three weeks before the opening night. Every third year or so, when new actors must be trained for the major roles, practice begins a little earlier. There, training in bodily movement is not entirely neglected, but the generalization still holds that the Rām Līlā emphasizes facility of verbal expression and views stage deportment as a matter of minor importance.

To undertake an aesthetic evaluation of the *Rām Līlā* is to attempt to judge the standards and tastes of the North Indian masses. Not many of the performances are filled with such heroics and buffoonery as the farcical struggle with Pot-ears which we have just seen, nor is the intense emotional piety of our earlier recorded text to be taken as representing the single mood of the *Rām Līlā*. The mixture of piety and light heartedness, together, gives it its tone. It grips its audience of thousands because, the community as a whole being its producers and to some extent its playwrights, it is the mirror of traditional folk interests and ideals. Seasoning the episodes with humor and feeling, the actors go through the old stories playing upon one popular emotion after another; the delight in children, the love of weddings, the sympathy for separated lovers; admiration for the obedient son and loyal wife, delight in the grotesque, feeling for animals, adoration of the fearless hero. The affectionate piety of Tulsī Dās suffuses play and audience; one sees it in the raptness of many an eye in the audience which seems to expect at any moment an actual appearance of its god. Through Tulsī's influence also, vulgarity is not among the *Rām Līlā*'s concessions to the popular mind. Nothing indecent is so much as hinted at. It is as true of the dramas as of the scripture on which they are based, ". . . here are no prurient and seductive stories like snails, frogs and scum on the water, and therefore the lustful crow and greedy crane, if they do come, are disappointed."<sup>26</sup> From Tulsī, too, comes the ethereal but earnest moral idealism of the *Rām Līlā*'s ingenuous tale of a clear-cut struggle between good and evil.

Regarding the *Rām Līlā*'s technical sophistication, Niehus calls it "the theatre in its baby-shoes"—and with some cause. It moves on amidst a degree of confusion which many outsiders would regard as intolerable. Spectators are allowed to invade the dressing room and even the stage. Onlookers when momentarily tired of the play chatter among themselves without inhibition. The paintings daubed on the cloth partitions of the stages are far less effective than pictures of the pure imagination. By foreign standards, the emotion of pathos is often indulged excessively. Since the project is too massive to be brought to perfection in the time allowed for rehearsal, the stage action lumbers on jerkily. The physical movements of the actors are usually somewhat stiff and under-expressed, showing little of the Indian dancer's facility in translating meaning into felicitous motion. The performers themselves measure their accomplishment in terms of quality of declamation, and this, as the writer has heard it, has been very well done indeed. With only the slightest trace of a sing-song, the actors spoke with a clarity, volume, poise and feeling that would be highly creditable anywhere, especially in teenage actors. The artistic level of the *Rām Līlā* as a whole reflects the fact that it is an amateur and popular institution, but sometimes at least it rises to excellence. Visitors who have pronounced it a primitive exhibition have done so on the basis of too slight acquaintance, usually limited to attendance at one of the crude outdoor pageants.

We turn now from aesthetic to social appraisal. How important is the *Rām Līlā* as an instrument of Hindu cultural education? A mere summary opinion on so general a question would not be instructive nor convincing. Let us break the inquiry down, therefore, into specific questions which can be answered more or less objectively. How deep an impression do the dramas make upon those who attend them? How large a part of the population of a given community do they reach? How thickly distributed are the centers in which the *Rām Līlā* is performed? How wide is the geographical area in which the *Rām Līlā* prevails? How long has this dramatic tradition been going on?

Of all these matters only the question of the power of the Rām Līlā to hold and impress its audience will have to be dealt with on the basis of personal impression. The performances observed by this writer were obviously highly successful in communicating the mythology and moral teachings of Hinduism. Their effectiveness could be perceived directly, in the intent faces of row on row of wide-eyed children who nightly packed its theater. Night after night for several weeks boys and girls of every age absorbed through eye and ear at the Rām Līlā a précis of the *Rāmāyaṇa* with a most vivid and intelligible commentary. A considerable body of lore is necessarily fixed upon the memory of any Hindī knowing person who has sat through the Rām Līlā even two or three times during the course of his life. The high degree of familiarity with the mythology of the *Rāmāyaṇa* which one finds among the common people of North India is hard to explain without assuming the existence of an effective means of oral education. Reading alone cannot explain it, because the majority cannot read. The Rām Līlā, if proved to be widespread in North India, may be regarded as an important contributor to this result. To my own judgment that the Rām Līlā is a powerful influence I can only add the testimony of the beloved poet Hariścandra of Banaras, "the Father of Hindī Literature," who about eighty years ago composed the following tribute: "Hari's play is a giver of happiness in every way./It enters the heart through speaking, hearing, and seeing and increases devotion./Love grows, sin flees, love of virtue springs up in the heart./That is why Haricand daily listens and applauds the deeds of Hari."<sup>27</sup>

Pending demonstration that the Rām Līlā is an institution of some age, we may credit it with having helped to preserve the continuity of Hindu political aspiration also. In the region where the Rām Līlā goes on, it is the most universally accepted and the most widely attended of Hindu festivals, having an appeal as nonsectarian as that of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. While all eyes focus upon the great culminating spectacles of the Rām Līlā—the return of victorious Rāma to his kingdom, his ascension of the throne, his acceptance of the fealty of his rejoicing subjects, and his making of arrangements for a utopian reign—the attention of the Hindu community is united as at no other time. Though the participants have not generally felt any conflict between their devotion to King Rāma and their allegiance to Mogul or British monarch, there was political significance, nevertheless, in the rare unity shown on these occasions, and in the specific content of certain of the pageants, and in the intense self-identification of the Hindu onlooker with them. When the Hindu citizens of a town at the time of the *Bharatmilāp* flocked in thousands to the edge of their city to join with Bharata in welcoming the returning Rāma, they were not turning out as mere spectators to see actors perform in a play. According to a prime doctrinal assumption of the Vaiṣṇava stage, they were thronging to welcome the god-king himself, incarnated temporarily in the body of an actor. And they themselves who hailed him as he passed in procession had a role to play: for the moment they were part of no Muslim nor Britannic empire, but subjects of King Rāma and citizens of his capital, Ayodhyā the Unassailable. Robert Needham Cust perceived the subtle relation between Rām Līlā and national feeling in a striking comment on the excitements of the pageantry in Banaras more than a century ago: "More wondrous is it, when we consider, that it is a people, who have naught of real nationality, who know not even the name of patriotism, who have bowed for centuries abjectly to any conqueror whom chance might place over them; who are incapable of unity for their own advantage; yet on this one occasion they raise

the cry of victory, though defeated; display unity of action, though hopelessly dis-severed; and might pass for patriots, did we not know they were not so.”<sup>28</sup> From the vantage ground of today we may add that the appearance of patriotism was not entirely an illusion. A seed of patriotic feeling was being guarded in this institution like a spark in ashes. As a mere spark it had no political force, but it was a spark which Mahatma Gandhi would blow into open flame one day by speaking to the simple folk of restoring *Rāmrāj*, the happy rule of Rāma. They could respond to this ideal because they had long responded to it. It was one of the few vital indigenous political ideas remaining in the vastly unpolitical mind of the oldtime Indian peasant. Through centuries of foreign rule the Rām Līlā helped preserve a basis for civic resurrection. It is a thing to be considered in the history of Indian nationalism.

We have ventured to speak of a possible widespread effect of the Rām Līlā before ascertaining how wide its outreach really is. What fraction of a community’s population may be supposed to be touched by its Rām Līlā? Very high percentages could be given here if one wished to speak of the great crowds of twenty to a hundred thousand which in Mathura turned out to witness the processions and pageants. But the deep influence is that of the daily recitation-dramas, and we shall take account of the attendance at them only. By the rough estimate of this writer and others, the evening performances at Mathura drew crowds which averaged not less than 2500 people. About three percent of the population of Mathura and Vrindaban turned out nightly to see the plays at their respective centers. The provincial gazetteers include estimates of the Rām Līlā attendance of three hundred and eight towns, the average of which is 3525 persons. Since some of the attendance figures which are listed for certain towns run as high as 150,000 persons, it is clear that some local officials reported to the editor of the gazetteers the attendance at the great Rām Līlā pageants. The average of 3525 has been inflated considerably thereby, and we must discount the figure a great deal if we would get a true notion of the attendance at the plays. But if we suppose that the average crowd throughout the province actually numbered nearer one thousand than three, we are still reminded that we must not compare the audiences of the Rām Līlā with the relatively small groups of people attending western stage plays. The percentage of the population which turns out in Mathura and Vrindaban is probably not unrepresentative. Though these places are great centers of pilgrimage and might be supposed to have an exceptional number of residents interested in religious dramas, this fact is balanced by the smallness of the number of Rāma shrines and the high preference of the people of the area for the worship of Kṛṣṇa.

How intensively the Rām Līlā covers the Uttar Pradesh or United Provinces can be judged with some objectivity from the data on festivals given in the district gazetteers. Three hundred and twenty-one towns are named as celebrating the *daśahrā* holiday with a Rām Līlā. In addition, a vast number are said merely to celebrate “*daśahrā*,” with no indication of whether Rāma or Durgā is honored. Fifty years ago, many more than 321 towns staged some kind of Rām Līlā—how many more we cannot tell. We venture the opinion that there must be few villagers in the North Indian plains who are not within an evening’s walking distance of a Rām Līlā during the *daśahrā* season.

The boundaries of the territory in which the Rām Līlā prevails can be traced out roughly by examining a sea of literature on the holiday customs of many places.<sup>29</sup> As we have just mentioned, Uttar Pradesh (with the exception of the Himalayan dis-

tricts) is thoroughly devoted to the Rām Līlā. The Rām Līlā extends into Bihar and East Panjab, and deep into Madhya Pradesh. It has been reported as far south as Nagpur, but our material indicates that in Berar's Marathi speaking country, the enactment of Rāma's deeds takes place during ten days of April, uses a different technique, and no doubt has a different literary basis. Rām Līlā is not reported in descriptions of the *daśahrā* observances of Nepal, Bengal, Mysore, nor even Maharashtra and Rajputana; instead we read of Durgāpūjā, animal sacrifice, and worship of weapons. Performances have been noted in such distant places as Calcutta, Lahore, and Srinagar, but the plays there seem to be put on by groups of émigrés from North India. During September and October the Rām Līlā country is like a great central island in a sea of Devī worship. In general, its geographical home is that area in which Hindī is an everyday language and the *Rāmcaritmānas* can be made intelligible without great difficulty.

How old is the Rām Līlā tradition? The more remotely it can be traced, the more justice there is in attributing to it a significant role in the transmission of Hindu culture in North India. When Niehus asked how long it had gone on in Ghazipur, he was told only, "Since very ancient times," i.e., since time out of mind. Neither have the Rām Līlā societies of Mathura and Vrindaban any records or traditions about the beginnings of the Rām Līlā in those towns. Jacquemont, Prinsep, and Heber have left solid witness to the fact that the festival was a well-established institution in Barrackpore, Banaras and Allahabad in the 1820's.

A probe for evidence of the Rām Līlā in earlier times involves careful and critical examination of references to *Rāmāyaṇa* dramas in various Indian literatures. To introduce and examine the relevant texts is a complicated and space consuming project which would almost double the length of this article. Since the earlier history of the Rām Līlā will be dealt with thoroughly in a book soon to be published by the Oxford University Press, the matter can be handled in a summary fashion here.

North India has one well-established tradition, known in Banaras and Ayodhya, according to which a personal disciple of Tulsī Dās called Meghā Bhagat first staged the *Rāmcaritmānas* of his master at Nāṭī Imlī in Banaras about 1625 A.D.<sup>30</sup> Certain details in the printed version of this tale are definitely fabulous, but its basic assertion about the time and circumstances of the first dramatic use of Tulsī's *Rāmāyaṇa* is credible. It is especially plausible in view of independent evidence that serial *Rāmāyaṇa* dramas having characteristics of the Rām Līlā were already known in the sixteenth century, before the *Rāmcaritmānas* was written.

In the *Uttarakāṇḍ* of the *Rāmcaritmānas* itself, Kāka Bhuṣundi reminisces in these words on his childhood activities in a previous birth: "At last I obtained the body of a twice-born man (*dvij*)/which Veda and Purāna declare difficult to attain./Meeting and playing with the children then,/I used to perform all the *līlās* of the Hero of the Raghus."<sup>31</sup> The Hindī words translated "playing" and "perform" have the same ambiguity which troubles the interpretation of the English words. They do not, in themselves, prove that the playing of formal dramas is meant. But the reference in the last line to performing all the *līlās* of Rāma suggests a systematic and comprehensive "playing" which is hardly children's momentary imitative make-believe. Also, being born as a *dvij* (which in the *Rāmcaritmānas* means a Brahman) is regarded here as being in some special way a preparation for performing these *līlās*. Here we remember that in the Rām Līlā all impersonators of deities must be children who are



Brahman by caste. All in all, we believe this passage to show that Tulsī had known—probably in his own childhood—a dramatic tradition in which high-caste children enacted the *Rāmāyaṇa* in a manner akin to that of the present Rām Līlā.

Additional evidence to the same effect and coming from about the same time is found in the *madhyalīlā* of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's *Caitanyacaritāmṛta*, a life of the great Bengali religious leader Caitanya who died in 1533 A.D. Describing Caitanya's autumnal stay in Puri, this biography has the following to say of one of his pastimes: "On the 'Bijaya dasmi', the day of the storming of Lankā, the Master with His followers played the part of the monkey army (of Rama). Transported by the spirit of Hanumān, He seized a branch and broke it off as if it were the citadel of Lankā, shouting in a rage, 'Where art thou, Rāvana! Thou hast kidnapped the mother of the world, wretch! I shall destroy thee with thy kith and kin!' The people marvelled at His passion and exclaimed 'Glory! Glory!'"<sup>32</sup> We note that this drama at Puri was enacted by amateurs; that it dealt with a *Rāmāyaṇa* episode that is still enacted with great spirit, and that it presented the assault on Lankā on the very *viṣayā daśamī* day that is still considered the proper day for staging that event. Mention of the *viṣayā daśamī* as "the day of the storming of Lankā" implies that other episodes were acted on other days and hence that a series was being presented as in the Rām Līlā. Lastly, this was a popular festival drama rather than an aristocratic spectacle for a few: the audience was "the people." The description of these plays of Orissa was necessarily written before 1615 A.D., the latest possible date for the writing of the *Caitanyacaritāmṛta*.<sup>33</sup> But Kṛṣṇadāsa was referring to events in the life of Caitanya in the first decades of the sixteenth century. He could, of course, have connected these dramas wrongly with the time of Caitanya, but he could not well have deceived his readers about their existence in his own time, because religious persons of Bengal were accustomed in those days to go on pilgrimage to Puri in great numbers. This reference is taken as satisfactory proof that a *Rāmāyaṇa* festival drama quite similar to the Rām Līlā was in vogue in Puri before the time of Meghā Bhagat's activity (c. 1625) and probably before the writing of Tulsī's *Rāmāyaṇa* (c. 1575).

Taking this evidence together with Tulsī's reference to the plays of his childhood, we conclude that the work attributed to Meghā Bhagat was only a new application of a stage tradition existing in the sixteenth century. Sometime in the seventeenth century performers of this style of epic dramatization began to use the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Tulsī Dās as their text. The combination of the effective older dramatic technique with the forceful new literary creation gave the Rām Līlā power to become the universal North Indian festival which it is in the present day.

The search for traces of the Rām Līlā before the sixteenth century has not been fruitful. Neither the Sanskrit dramatists nor general classical literature has provided information on older *Rāmāyaṇa* dramas having its peculiar features. The literature of the learned is of course silent about a great many aspects of the life of the common people, and such a folk institution could have been current for generations without being mentioned in belles-lettres. But the cumulative silence of century upon century amounts eventually to a prohibition. The Rām Līlā could not have been ancient, and is not likely to have originated much before 1500 A.D.

Historical search beyond this point has been more profitable when seeking the predecessor from which the Rām Līlā developed. Ancient and medieval literatures do provide descriptions of a type of epic dance drama, quite different from the Rām Līlā

in external appearance, from which the present institution was probably derived. Though the tracing of the connection must await another occasion, it may be permissible to say here that the Rām Līlā represents one of the readjustments toward simpler art forms made necessary by the intrusion into Hindustan of a powerful Muslim culture. In modifying and revitalizing an older method of staging the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the creators of the Rām Līlā did much to preserve the influence of that epic in North Indian life.

Enough has been said in the foregoing pages to indicate that the influence of the Rām Līlā in its modern form has been operative for at least three hundred years, and that for most or all of that time it has touched the lives of a significant proportion of the population of a large area. It has carried traditional Hindu ideals to the youngest and simplest of many generations and has helped preserve the continuity of Hindu culture in North India during periods of unusual stress and change.<sup>34</sup>

#### APPENDIX

##### A PARTIAL TRANSLATION OF MATHURA'S RĀM LĪLĀ CALENDAR FOR 1949

Reverence to Śrī Rāmcandra!  
 "Without association with the good  
 There's no telling of the story of Hari;  
 Without that, no flight of delusion,  
 And without delusion's departure,  
 No firm love of Rāma's feet."

Līlāpatra of the Mathura Rām Līlā for 1949 A.D., Śarhvat 2006

September 16: With the impersonators of Jānakī, Bharat, Lakṣmaṇ and Śatrughna present in full dress, the wrist-cords will be tied [solemnly binding all to fulfill their respective duties until the end of the season]. After this, all the actors go from the front of the mosque into Paṇḍit Kavalisingh's temple. They turn back and go into Durgacand Lane via the Central Bazaar. The drama of the wedding of Śiv with Pārvatī. The reducing of Kāmdev to ashes, etc.

September 17: The terrible austerities of Nārada. Sent by Indra, Kāmdev comes with Apsarases. Nārada goes to Śiv. Nārada's conceit and his going to the Lord Viṣṇu. The Lord's creation of an illusory city to rid Nārada of his conceit. Nārada's falling in love with Viśvamohanī and his going to the Lord and asking for a handsome appearance, and the Lord's giving him the shape of a monkey and destroying Nārada's pride. Nārada's cursing the Lord. Svāyambhuvamanu's going to do austerities; his vision of the Lord. The birth of Rāvaṇ and his doing of austerities; his asking a boon of Brahmā and achieving universal victory.

September 18: The procession moves from Ray Bahadur Paṇḍit Kavalisingh's temple and goes to the Asakunda Bazaar by way of Bharatpur Gate and Tilak Gate. The going of the gods to Brahmā. Then Brahmā and all the hosts of gods and the Earth in the form of a cow are fearful and recite the praises of Nārāyaṇ. The voice from the heavens. Thereafter the procession will pass the Svamighat Mosque and end at Ray Bahadur Paṇḍit Kavalisingh's temple.

September 19: The celebration of the birth of Rām and his brothers will be held. The christening, the childhood play, and Rām's exhibition of his vastness. King Janak's ploughing because of a famine, and Jānakī's appearing from the earth.

September 20: The sage Viśvāmitra asks Daśarath, the Lord of Avadh, for Raghunāth and Lakṣmaṇ to protect a sacrifice, takes them, goes onward, and rests on the way in the ancient ashram of the Ṛṣis. (This drama will take place in front of the Temple of Vaidya

ratna Paṇḍit Sohanlal Paṭhak.) The killing of Tārakā and the demons on the road. Viśvāmitra's performing the sacrifice, and the attack of the innumerable army of demons on the assembly of sages in order to interrupt the sacrifice. Raghunāth's killing of Mārīc, Tārakā, and Subāhu with a headless arrow. The destruction of all the demons by the arrows of Lakṣmaṇ. Rāmcandra's going to Janakpur with Lakṣmaṇ and Viśvāmitra. The deliverance on the way of Ahilyā by the dust of Rām's feet. The bathing and worshipping in the Ganges. Arrival at Janakpur. (This drama will be held at night at the Kaṭrā also.) Tārakā's procession will start from Ray Bahadur Paṇḍit Kavalisingh's temple, and that of Rāmcandra and Viśvāmitra will move from the Temple of Mahādev Mathurānāth at Dig Gate.

September 21: The arrival of Rāmcandra with Lakṣmaṇ to see the splendor of Janakpur, and the Janakpur ladies' talk among themselves. Janak's daughter goes with her companions to worship Pārvatī. At the sage Viśvāmitra's order Raghunāth with Lakṣmaṇ arrives in the flower garden. Rāmcandra and Jānakī's sight of each other, their falling in love, and exchanging of glances.

September 22: The presence of many kings at Sītā's *svayambar*, and Raghunāth's breaking the bow with his lotus hands. Paraśurām's sudden coming in great wrath into the hall of sacrifice. The dialogue between Paraśurām and Lakṣmaṇ. Paraśurām's going to the forest after testing and praising Rām. King Janak inquires of Viśvāmitra and sends a messenger to Ayodhyā. The messenger's arrival in Ayodhyā, the delivery of the letter, and the joy after it is read.

September 23: The wedding procession of King Daśarath from Ayodhyā to Janakpur (from Baṭivali Grove via the Central Bazaar, Kaserat Bazaar, Svamighat, Tilak Gate, Bharatpur Gate, and the front of the mosque, into the enclosed market). Enactment of the wedding of Rāmcandra.

September 24: King Daśarath's preparation to anoint Rāmcandra to the kingship. Mother Kaikeyī's going into the sulking chamber on the instigation of the slave woman Mantharā. The dialogue between King Daśarath and Kaikeyī. Rām is ordered to the forest.

September 25: Rām, Jānakī, and Lakṣmaṇ have hermit's clothing made and go in procession on foot from the enclosed market of Janakidas into the new Svamighat Bazaar in front of the shop of Lālā Lallomal. The interview with the king of the Niṣāds. The leave taking of Sumant. Their dialogue with Kevaṭ at Vishramghat, their sitting in the boat and disembarkation across the Ganges at Bengalighat. The farewell to Kevaṭ. The Lord's going to the ashram of the Rishi Bharadvāj (in the Jairamdas Temple in the Biharidas Compound). The carriage procession and the performance done by the inhabitants in Javaharganj. The arrival, via Bharatpur Gate, at Valmiki's ashram at the Ghee Market in Kishoriramanganj. The affectionate interview. The going from there to Citrakūṭ via the Shahganj Gate.

September 26: The procession of the host of Bhīls will begin from the temple of Ray Bahadur Paṇḍit Kavalisingh and will go to the Red Gate via Svamighat, Chatta Bazaar, Tilak Gate, the police station and the Central Bazaar. Bharat will start with the inhabitants of Avadh from Govindganj. Accompanied by the procession of Bhīls, Bharat will arrive at Citrakūṭ via Chatta Bazaar, Dori Bazaar, the central square and the Red Gate. The meeting and conversation between Rām and Bharat at Citrakūṭ.

September 27: Jayant goes in the form of a crow and pecks at the feet of Jānakī. Bhagavān pierces his eye. Bhagavān goes into the ashram of the Rīṣis and grants interview to all. His arrival at Pañcavaṭī. Sūrpnakhā's ribaldry with Rāmcandra. Lakṣmaṇ cuts off Sūrpnakhā's nose and ears. Khardūṣaṇ makes war on Rāmcandra and Rāmcandra and his army kill all three demons. Rāmcandra pursues Mārīc in the disguise of a golden deer; Rāvaṇ comes in the dress of a holy man, steals Sītā and takes her away. Rāvaṇ's fight with Jaṭāyu. Jaṭāyu is wounded by Rāvaṇ. Rām's wandering in search of Sītā. He meets Jaṭāyu and performs his cremation.

September 28: Rāmcandra goes to the hermitage of Śabari. Śabari's hospitality. Kabandh's

death at the hands of Bhagavān. Bhagavān meets Nārad, Hanumān, and Sugrīv and makes friends with them. The fight of Bālī with Sugrīv and the killing of Bālī. Tārā's mourning. The coronation of Sugrīv. Lakṣmaṇ goes in a rage to Kishkindhā. Sugrīv sends the monkeys. Hanumān goes to Laṅkā with a ring and tells Sītā of the welfare of Rāmcandra. His battle with the demons after the conversation, and his return with a bracelet.

September 29: Rāmcandra meets Vibhīṣaṇ and inquires about the secret. The placing of the image of Rāmeśvar on the seashore and the construction of the bridge. Aṅgad goes into the court of Rāvaṇ. The firm planting of his foot. The controversy. The attack on Laṅkā. Meghnād's terrible battle with Lakṣmaṇ. The *śakti* weapon strikes Lakṣmaṇ. Rāmcandra's lament. Hanumān brings the physician Suśeṇ and the medicine. Lakṣmaṇ wakes from unconsciousness. After a battle, Kumbhkaṇ is killed.

September 30: Lakṣmaṇ's terrible battle with Meghnād. Meghnād is killed. Sulocanā goes to Rāmcandra asking for Meghnād's head, and performs *satī*.

October 1: Ahirāvaṇ kidnaps Rāmcandra and takes him to Pātāl. Hanumān brings him back after killing that rascal. Rāvaṇ's grim fight with Rāmcandra. The killing of Rāvaṇ. Jānakī's meeting with the King. Vibhīṣaṇ's enthronement.

October 2: The procession of Rāmcandra will start from Citrakūṭ and will come to the Central Bazaar via Shahganj Gate and the Red Gate. The procession of Bharat will start from Govindganj and the meeting with Bharat will take place in the central square. They will then go to the compound of Lala Janakidas by way of Svamighaṭ, the Chatta Bazaar, Tilak Gate, and the Ghee Market.

October 3: The coronation of Rām. The reciting of praises by the (personified) Vedas. The farewell to Sugrīv and the other monkeys. Rām's sermon on the duty of a king to his subjects.

October 4: The Rām Līlā's benediction and oblation ceremonies, etc.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See *Vedāntasūtra* II.1.33 with Rāmānuja's commentary, tr. George Thibaut, *Sacred Books of the East*, XLVIII, Part III, p. 477; also Girindra Narayan Mallik, *The Philosophy of Vaiṣṇava Religion* (Lahore, 1927), I, 550-557; and Sushil Kumar De, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1942), pp. 260-262.

<sup>2</sup> Tulsīdās, *Śrīrāmcaritmānas* (Gorakhpur, *saṃvat* 2004), p. 34 *caupāi* 3.

<sup>3</sup> Particular thanks are due Radha Krishna Misra for data on the Rām Līlā in Aligarh, and to Kishori Mohan Nigam for a detailed account of the Rām Līlās of his childhood in Satna, U. P.

<sup>4</sup> H. Niehus, "Das Ram-festspiel Nordindiens," *Globus*, LXXXVII (1905), 58-61; James Prinsep, *Benares Illustrated in a Series of Drawings* (Calcutta, 1833; London, 1834), 4 unnumbered pages, il.; also in *Selections from the Asiatic Journal* (Madras, 1875); Reginald Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India from Calcutta to Bombay, 1824-25* (London, 1849), I, 190ff; Victor Jacquemont, *Voyage dans l'Inde* (Paris, 1841), I, 213-215; John Campbell Oman, *The Great Indian Epics* (London, 1912), pp. 75-86; Alexandra David-Neel, *L'Inde, Hier-Aujourd'hui-Demain* (Paris, 1951), pp. 67-73; Mischa Titiev, "A Dashehra Celebration in Delhi," *American Anthropologist* N. S. XLVIII (1946), 676-680; "Hindu Passion Play," *Life* (12 February 1951), pp. 90-97. The foregoing are partial and sometimes casual eyewitness accounts of the Rām Līlā. Documentary information of a different kind was obtained from the published annual reports of several Rām Līlā committees, including: Radhagovind Tentivāla, *pradhān-mantri*, *San 1946 ke āy vyāy kṛā vivaran, śrī pañcāyatī rām-līlā* (Vrindavan, n.d.); Keśavdev, secretary, *Hisāb śrī rām-līlā āy-vyāy sthān Mathurā san 1949 ī*. (Mathura, *saṃvat* 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Prinsep, 1833, first page.

<sup>6</sup> David-Neel, 1951, p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> The interpolations mentioned are included in Vidyāvāridhi Paṇḍit Jvalaprasad Mishra's edition of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, 20th edition (Bombay, *saṃvat* 1992).

<sup>8</sup> F. S. Growse, tr., *The Rāmāyaṇa of Tulsī Dās* 7th edition (Allahabad, 1937); W. Douglas

P. Hill, tr., *The Holy Lake of the Acts of Rāma* (Indian Branch, Oxford University Press, 1952).

<sup>9</sup> The wedding procession (*barāt*) took four hours to make its round of the city of Mathura. As in any wedding procession a corps of drummers (*tāṣāvāle*) headed the column. In this case they were bearded Muslims. The royal brothers and their relatives brought up the rear. In between rolled the floats and exhibits of every person, seemingly, who possessed any kind of animate or inanimate conveyance, and something which he wished to bring to the notice of the public. On one float the Rāmāyaṇ Pracāriṇī Sabhā, a religious organization, conducted a mobile *ḥathā* or public reading of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Merchants rolled by on carts piled with their choicest merchandise, exhibiting their wares and passing out advertisements to the massed bystanders. The slow procession brought the goddess Kālī into view, seated upon a moving throne. On the petition of a walking attendant, she leaped down to the street to manifest her destructive powers. In a ferocious charge down the pavement and back she swept the narrow street with terrifying circles of her flashing sword. The crowd scattered pell-mell. Śiva and Pārvatī, on tinselled jeep, came by in the role of special friends and clients of the Vaiṣṇava deities—the status usually granted them in this overwhelmingly Vaiṣṇava area. The seething crowd soon closed in tightly around all the floats save that of a snake charmer who, with insistent generosity, kept trying to bestow handfuls of serpents on all bystanders within his reach.

<sup>10</sup> The number and nature of the processions vary greatly from town to town according to local desires and the funds available for these costly affairs. In Aligarh, judging by the printed calendar of that place, some sort of procession is held every day. The Hathras program mentions five only; and in Vrindaban only the procession of Rāma's wedding and that of his final reunion with Bharata are held. In 1944 a group of young men gained control of the Vrindaban festival on a platform of eliminating the multiplicity of processions, holding that they conferred no aesthetic or educational benefit proportionate to their extraordinary expense. Even now almost half of the Vrindaban budget goes to the support of the two processions which are still maintained.

<sup>11</sup> The best descriptions of the *Rāvaṇvadh* pageantry are those by Titiev, Prinsep, and *Life* magazine, mentioned above. See also Fig. 39 in William Ridgeway, *Dramas and Dramatic Dances of Non-European Races* (Cambridge, Eng., 1915), p. 152.

<sup>12</sup> Horace Hyman Wilson, *Selected Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus* (London, 1871), I, xxix; Sylvain Lévi, *Le théâtre indien* (Paris, 1890), p. 317; likewise A. B. Keith, *The Sanskrit Drama* (Oxford, 1924), p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> Some of the melodies used currently in the Rām Līlā in Banaras are recorded in Ethnic Folkways Library P431, "Religious Music of India," Folkways Records and Service Corp., 117 W. 46th St., New York City. The chief musician is Paṇḍit Amarnāth Mīśra, *mahant* of the Sankat Mocan Temple, Banaras.

<sup>14</sup> Obtained by sound recording as far as chant 13 and transcribed by Govind Das Gupta, M.A. The remainder of the verses were taken from the stage copy of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the speeches were dictated by the actors privately.

<sup>15</sup> Epithet of Śiva, whose special abode is Mount Kailāsa.

<sup>16</sup> Garuda, to whom the story is being narrated.

<sup>17</sup> Great fluency of utterance is ascribed here to Sarasvatī, the goddess of speech, to Ādiśeṣha, the primeval serpent, and to the personified Vedas.

<sup>18</sup> This and all subsequent lines are an interpolation in Tulsī Das' text.

<sup>19</sup> Hanumān.

<sup>20</sup> The story to this point is found in Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, VI.128:78-83, ed., Kasinath Pandurang Parab (Bombay, 1902), p. 767, and the *Adhyātmārāmāyaṇa*, Lankākhaṇḍ 16:5-8, Calcutta Sanskrit Series No. XI (Calcutta, 1935), p. 895. The source of the episodes which follow is doubtful or unknown to this writer. Hanuman's cracking the jewels between his teeth may have been suggested by *Rāmcaritmānas* (See Note 2.), p. 831f, wherein Vibhīṣan at Rām's bidding showers raiment and jewels down upon the monkeys, who stuff the precious things into their mouths.

<sup>21</sup> Rāma.

<sup>22</sup> Hīndī simile regards the thunderbolt as the model of adamant hardness, rather than of speed and force.

<sup>23</sup> Pictures of actors in costume may be seen particularly in Ridgeway, 1915, pp. 135, 137, 193, 195f.

<sup>24</sup> Reports by Radhagovind Tentivala and Keśavdev, detailed in Note 4 above.

<sup>25</sup> D. L. Drake-Brockman, ed., *District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, vols. 1-2, 6-11, 14-36, 40, 42-44, 47-48 (Allahabad, 1904ff).

<sup>26</sup> Growse, 1937, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> Bharatendu Hariscandra, *Bharatendu granthāvalī*, ed., Brajratna Dās (Banaras, *saṃvat* 1991), No. 61. "śrī rām līlā," p. 770.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Needham Cust, *Pictures of Indian Life, Sketched with the Pen, from 1852 to 1881* (London, 1881), p. 36f.

<sup>29</sup> The geographical limits of the Rām Līlā have been defined mainly on the basis of information from the following literature. GENERAL: M. M. Underhill, *The Hindu Religious Year* (Calcutta, 1929), pp. 53-57; William C. Crooke, "The Dasahra: an Autumn Festival of the Hindus," *Folk-Lore*, XXVI (1915), 28-59; E. Denison Ross, *An Alphabetical List of the Feasts and Holidays of the Hindus and Muhammadans* (Calcutta, 1914), pp. 16, 66. NEPAL: Sylvain Lévi, *Le Népal* (Paris, 1905), II, 54ff.; Henry Ambrose Oldfield, *Sketches from Nipāl* (London, 1880), p. 342ff., "The Dassera." PANJAB: Oman, 1912; Richard Carnac Temple in *Indian Antiquary*, X (1881), 289f. The literary basis of Rām Līlā in the Panjab is not clear. KASHMIR: Florence H. Morden, "House-boat Days in the Vale of Kashmir," *National Geographic Magazine*, LVI (Oct. 1929), 451, il. RAJPUTANA: Louis Rousselet, *India and Its Native Princes* (London, 1882), pp. 268-271; B. A. Gupte, *Hindu Holidays and Ceremonials*, 2nd ed., Calcutta, 1919, pp. 185-188. GUJARAT: Rousselet, 1882, pp. 119-122; N. A. Thoothi, *The Vaishnavas of Gujarāt* (Calcutta, 1935), pp. 286-289—a superior sketch without clear place reference. BOMBAY: Lucia C. G. Grieve, "The Dasara Festival at Satara, India," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, XXX (1910), 72-76; Ridgeway, 1915, quoting D. R. Bhandarkar, p. 184, 190; Byramjee Jeejeebhoy, *The Bombay Calendar and General Directory for 1849* (Bombay, n.d.), p. 56f. MYSORE: L. N. Gubil, "The Dasara at Mysore," *Modern Review* (Oct. 1942), pp. 314-316. BERAR: *Panjab Notes and Queries*, III (1886), sec. 674; Śrī Purohit Swāmī, *An Indian Monk* (London, 1930), p. 17f. NAGPUR: Ridgeway, 1915, quoting Paṇḍit Hira Lal, p. 204. BENGAL: Oman, 1912, p. 85, "... the Bengalees do not perform the Ram Lila;" Jacquemont, 1841, I, 220, notes participants "... come almost all from the Upper Provinces . . .;" Padmina Sen Gupta, "Puja in the Bustees," *The Statesman*, Calcutta, Puja Supplement, Sept. 25, 1949, p. 2. FIJI: C. F. Andrews, "Indian Labour in Fiji," *Modern Review*, XXII (1918), p. 587. Ceylon has a *Rāmāyana* festival drama in Tamil which is similar to Rām Līlā in some ways: Hugh Neville, "The Ramayana as a Play," *The Taprobanian*, II (1887), 150-160, 170-172; Carl Hagemann, *Spiele der Voelker* (Berlin, 1919), pp. 50-57.

<sup>30</sup> Sarju Dasji Ayodhyani, *Rāmkrishṇalīlānukaraṇ Siddhānt* (Lucknow, *saṃvat* 1976). pp. 3-20.

<sup>31</sup> Tulsi Dās, *saṃvat* 2004, p. 944: "caram deh dviḥ kai main pāi, / sur durlabh purān śruti gāi. / khelaun tahūn bālkanh milā, / karaun sakal raghunāyaka līlā."

<sup>32</sup> J. N. Sarkar, tr., *Chaitanya's Pilgrimages and Teachings. From his contemporary biography, the Chaitanya-charitamrita: Madhyalīlā* (London, 1913), p. 169.

<sup>33</sup> Sushil Kumar De, "A Note on Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's Caitanya-Caritamṛta," *Journal of the United Provinces Historical Society*, IX (1925), p. 98ff.

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