

RAMLILA TRADITION AND RAM IN EVERY HEART: A LIVING HERITAGE OF INDIAN CULTURE

Dr. Ravindra Mishra Katyayan

Associate Professor and HOD Hindi,

Maniben Nanavati Women's College, Mumbai-400056, India

Email: intcinecon@gmail.com & ravindra.katyayan@mnwc.edu.in

ABSTRACT

Ramlila, the theatrical enactment of the Ramayana, represents one of the most profound and dynamic expressions of India's cultural and spiritual legacy. As a community-centered performance tradition, it serves as both religious devotion and social pedagogy. This paper explores the origins, diverse forms, and evolving cultural role of Ramlila, focusing in particular on iconic performances such as those in Ramnagar (Kashi), Ayodhya, Bissau (Rajasthan), Aishbagh Lucknow, and Delhi. Drawing upon historical records, ethnographic insights, and UNESCO recognitions, the paper discusses Ramlila as an intangible cultural heritage that continues to shape identity, morality, and unity. Special attention is given to the character of Ram as Maryada Purushottam and his symbolic presence in the hearts of devotees, across India and Southeast Asia. By blending scholarly analysis with data from Hindi-language fieldwork and regional sources, this study reaffirms Ramlila's relevance in a rapidly globalizing world.

Keywords: Ramlila, Indian culture, Ramayana performance, Intangible heritage, Maryada Purushottam, Kashi Ramnagar, Ayodhya Ramleela, Cultural transmission, Traditional theatre, Indian knowledge systems

I. INTRODUCTION

The Ramlila tradition, a dramatized enactment of the epic Ramayana, holds an unparalleled place in the cultural, spiritual, and social life of India. More than mere theatre, it represents a living tradition where art, religion, and community unite to sustain collective memory and moral values.

Rooted in the ancient narratives of Lord Ram, Ramlila functions as a pedagogical tool and an emotional journey that reinforces cultural identity. It is through such traditional mediums that abstract concepts like dharma (righteousness), maryada (code of conduct), and karuna (compassion) are transmitted across generations. This research paper aims to explore the depth, diversity, and relevance of Ramlila through historical accounts, ethnographic study, and case analyses of regional variations.

II. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach that blends historical inquiry with cultural analysis and textual engagement. It draws on regional narratives, performance traditions, and community practices associated with Ramlila across diverse cultural geographies such as Ramnagar, Ayodhya, Bissau, Aishbagh, and Delhi. Insights are shaped by close attention to lived practices, performative variations, and embedded values within these traditions. The study also references scriptural texts like the *Ramcharitmanas* and engages with existing scholarly and archival materials, allowing for a layered understanding of Ramlila as both an artistic enactment and a civilizational expression. This integrative method enables a holistic exploration of Ramlila's enduring cultural resonance.

III. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a comprehensive exploration of the Ramlila tradition as a dynamic embodiment of India's civilizational memory and cultural continuity. Through historical tracing, regional mapping, and critical reflection, it examines how Ramlila has evolved from scriptural roots into a living, community-driven performance practice. The discussion unfolds across seven interconnected dimensions—beginning with its origins and typologies, followed by emblematic case studies, its socio-cultural and philosophical relevance, and culminating in a global perspective and contemporary challenges. Together, these sub-sections illuminate the layered significance of Ramlila as a performative, pedagogical, and devotional tradition that continues to thrive in India and beyond.

3.1 Historical and Scriptural Origins of Ramlila

The origins of Ramlila are traced back to ancient India's oral and literary traditions, particularly the Valmiki Ramayana. However, the most widespread and accessible form of Ramlila today owes much to Goswami Tulsidas and his 16th-century Awadhi rendition of the epic—Ramcharitmanas. His poetic composition transformed the Sanskrit narrative into a people's scripture and inspired community-level performances in cities like Ayodhya and Varanasi.

Several regional legends attribute the genesis of Ramlila to the people of Ayodhya themselves, who, grieving Ram's exile, began re-enacting his life episodes as acts of devotion. Others credit Megha Bhagat, a 15th-century saint from Kashi, for initiating Ramlila. Regardless of the founder, what is clear is that Ramlila evolved as both a spiritual act and a cultural ritual, steeped in devotional emotion and shared participation.

3.2. Types and Regional Variations

Ramlila manifests in a wide variety of forms depending on region, culture, and community aesthetics. These include:

3.2.1. Sachal Ramlila (Mobile Performances)

Sachal Ramlila, or mobile Ramlila, represents a dynamic and immersive style of dramatizing the Ramayana. Unlike traditional stage-bound performances, this format involves actors physically moving through various locations, tracing the actual geographical journey of Lord Rama. The enactment unfolds across multiple sites—forests, riversides, villages, and open grounds—symbolizing events such as the exile, the crossing of rivers, or the battles in Lanka. This movement brings the epic narrative into real-life spaces, allowing audiences to follow the story both spiritually and physically. The format encourages direct audience engagement, as viewers walk alongside the actors from one scene to the next.

This type of Ramlila reflects a performative pilgrimage, turning the theatrical experience into a journey of devotion and communal participation. It is most commonly practiced in rural areas where the connection to land and mythology is deeply rooted. The spontaneity and spatial realism of Sachal Ramlila enhance its devotional appeal, blurring the boundaries between

spectators and performers. Though logistically demanding, this form sustains a strong traditional flavor and serves as a living expression of faith, memory, and regional identity.

3.2.2. Achal Ramlila (Stationary Performances)

Achal Ramlila, or stationary Ramlila, is characterized by performances held at a fixed location, often with elaborate, permanent or semi-permanent stage setups. Unlike the mobile format, this version relies on intricate scenic design to recreate important settings from the Ramayana, such as Ayodhya, Janakpur, Chitrakoot, and Lanka. The most renowned example of this format is the Ramnagar Ramlila, organized near Varanasi. This production spans several weeks and transforms the entire town into a sacred performance space, with different locales serving as thematic zones for various episodes. The physical immobility of the performer's contrasts with the narrative movement of the story, which is compensated by sequential scene changes and spatial transitions on the stage.

Achal Ramlila provides a more structured and logistically manageable format, allowing for detailed production value, larger audiences, and repeat performances at the same venue. The fixed location often becomes a pilgrimage site for devotees during the Ramlila season. This format emphasizes visual splendor, religious symbolism, and ceremonial processions, making it both a theatrical spectacle and a ritual event. It plays a critical role in preserving continuity, tradition, and communal identity in the performance of the Ramayana.

3.2.3. Stage Ramlila

Stage Ramlila adopts the aesthetics and techniques of modern proscenium theatre to present the epic of the Ramayana. Performed on constructed stages, often in auditoriums or open-air platforms, this version integrates theatrical devices such as lighting, sound effects, props, backdrops, and occasionally digital projection. Unlike traditional forms, stage Ramlila allows for flexible timing and scripting, often condensing the storyline into manageable durations for urban audiences. It also enables adaptation and innovation, incorporating contemporary issues or regional storytelling styles into the performance. Costumes and choreography in this format are more stylized, influenced by classical and folk theatre traditions. While it may lack the ritualistic depth of traditional Ramlilas, it compensates with artistic professionalism and technical polish.

Stage Ramlilas are particularly popular in cities and diaspora communities, where logistical constraints and urban settings make mobile or open-air performances impractical. They serve as a bridge between tradition and modernity, offering accessibility without sacrificing the essence of the epic. This format is also well-suited for educational institutions and cultural festivals, ensuring the continued relevance and visibility of the Ramayana in a rapidly evolving cultural landscape.

3.2.4. Silent Ramlila

Silent Ramlila is a unique performance tradition, most notably found in Bissau, Rajasthan, where the Ramayana is enacted entirely without spoken dialogues. This minimalist form of expression relies heavily on visual storytelling—through gestures, choreography, and facial expressions—complemented by traditional music and rhythmic cues. Performers often wear elaborate masks that represent various characters, using codified movements and symbolic postures to convey emotional depth and narrative progression. The absence of speech lends the performance a meditative and almost ritualistic quality, inviting the audience to engage more intuitively and spiritually with the story.

Silent Ramlila emphasizes the universality of the Ramayana's themes, transcending language barriers and focusing on visual and musical aesthetics. This form draws upon local folk traditions and involves community participation in costume design, music, and staging. Despite its simplicity, Silent Ramlila is a powerful medium of devotional expression, offering an alternative theatrical grammar rooted in Indian performative heritage. It stands as a testament to the adaptability of the Ramayana narrative across different artistic and cultural frameworks, while preserving the core essence of reverence and storytelling through non-verbal, yet evocative, means.

3.2.5. Shadow Ramlila

The *Shadow Ramlila*, a form of Ramlila performed through shadow puppetry, is even more fascinating than the traditional *Mask Ramlila* due to its unique diversity and characteristics. This theatrical style draws from Southeast Asian traditions such as *Wayang* in Java and Malaysia, and *Nang* in Thailand. The term *Wayang* literally means “shadow,” and thus the art is referred to as *Shadow Play* in English and *Chhaya Natak* in Hindi.

In this form, leather puppets are animated in front of a white screen so that their shadows are cast onto it, creating a dramatic visual performance. Historically, this style of Ramlila was also staged in regions like Tibet and Mongolia. In Thailand, *Shadow Ramlila* is known as *Nang*, which has two main forms: *Nang Yai* and *Nang Talung*. *Nang* means leather, while *Yai* means big; therefore, *Nang Yai* refers to shadow plays using large puppets, often ranging from one to two meters in height. However, this style is now nearly extinct. *Nang Talung*, on the other hand, remains a popular entertainment form in southern Thailand. It uses smaller leather puppets and primarily performs stories from the Thai Ramayana, known as *Ramakien*. *Nang Talung* shows a strong resemblance to the Javanese-Malaysian *Wayang Kulit*, which is also known as *Wayang Purwa* or *Wayang Jawa*.

The lead performer in a *Wayang* show is called a *Dalang*, who is central to the performance. The *Dalang* manipulates the puppets to the rhythm of music, sings, and delivers dialogues. When dialogues are being spoken, the accompanying musical instruments are paused to maintain focus on the narrative. Typically, a *Wayang* performance includes around 148 puppets. Among them, the character *Semar* holds the highest spiritual significance. *Semar* is considered a divine symbol—his figure represents the idea of having neither beginning nor end. With a round shape, feminine chest, and masculine mustache, *Semar* embodies the concept of *Ardhanarishvara*, a deity that is half male and half female. In Javanese belief, *Semar* is considered the elder brother of Lord Shiva. Thus, *Wayang* is not just a medium of entertainment but also a path of spiritual expression.

In Bali, the *Ramayana* is performed through Kecak Dance Dramas, where large groups of male performers chant rhythmically while acting out key episodes like the abduction of Sita or the battle between Rama and Ravana. Unlike *Wayang Kulit*, Kecak involves live actors and open-air stages, often at temples or tourist venues. Indonesian adaptations of the *Ramayana* emphasize moral values, local mythologies, and spiritual symbolism. While the narrative structure remains largely faithful to the Indian epic, characters and interpretations often reflect local culture and religious syncretism. Thus, Ramlila in Indonesia is not merely a religious performance, but a living heritage that blends Hindu mythology with Javanese and Balinese aesthetics, philosophy, and community engagement.

3.2.6. Mask Ramlila

The *Mask Ramlila* is a distinctive theatrical tradition of performing the Ramayana using masks, combining dance, drama, and music. This form of Ramlila is practiced in various Southeast Asian countries, each with its own cultural nuances. In Cambodia (Kampuchea), the Ramayana is performed through a dramatic form called *Lakhon Khol*. The word *Lakhon* means drama, and *Khol* means monkey, hence it is often referred to as the "Drama of Monkeys." This dance-drama is performed in village settings, while more formal and elaborate episodes of the Ramayana were historically enacted in royal palaces.

In Thailand, the mask Ramlila tradition is known as *Khon*. It is a sophisticated art form where the performance includes dance, music, expressive gestures, and mime. The dance style is highly intricate and time-consuming to master. Dialogues in *Khon* are generally narrated from behind the stage, while the performers enact the story through movements. Only the clown character delivers his lines on stage. Masks are used exclusively for characters such as demons, monkeys, and bears, adding to the dramatic visual effect.

In Myanmar (Burma), a similar masked Ramlila tradition exists under the name *Yama Pywe*. Although originally influenced by the Thai *Khon* tradition, over time it has become an integral part of Burmese performance culture. Burmese audiences particularly enjoy humor, and thus the clown character plays a central role in *Yama Pywe*. Before the main Ramlila begins, there is usually a one to two-hour-long prelude consisting of comedic skits, dances, and songs to entertain the audience.

This form of Ramlila emphasizes not just the retelling of the epic, but also cultural elements such as humor, music, and elaborate choreography. While the narrative remains rooted in the Ramayana, its expression through mask, gesture, and regional performance styles highlights the deep integration of this tradition into local cultures across Southeast Asia.

3.3. Iconic Ramlilas of India: Case Studies

3.3.1. Ramnagar Ramlila: A Living Legacy of Devotion, Culture, and Community

Among India's many traditional expressions of devotion and storytelling, the Ramnagar Ramlila in Varanasi stands as a unique cultural and spiritual institution. Unlike regular theatrical performances, it is a sacred pilgrimage in dramatic form—a reenactment of Lord Ram's life, values, and ideal conduct. Renowned for its unmatched length, ritualistic depth, and immersive staging, this Ramlila continues to uphold centuries-old traditions.

The tradition of Ramnagar Ramlila dates back to the 18th century, initiated by Kashi Naresh Udit Narayan Singh. Inspired by Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas, this performance has continued without interruption for over 200 years. Set in the surroundings of Ramnagar Fort, this Ramlila has become one of India's most celebrated, sacred, and expansive performance traditions.

Running for 31 consecutive days, Ramnagar's Ramlila is the longest-running of its kind in India. It does not follow the typical stage format. Instead, the drama moves through different locations, transforming natural and historical settings into sacred sites such as Ayodhya, Janakpur, Panchvati, Lanka, and Chitrakoot. Each site mirrors key events from the Ramayana. Dialogues are spoken in Awadhi, and many spectators know the verses by heart. Actors are chosen in childhood and trained over years, not just in performance but in values and conduct, making their participation a form of spiritual practice (sadhana).

Ramnagar Ramlila transcends performance—it's a ritual, a festival, and a form of collective worship. For participants and audiences alike, it is an act of devotion. It serves as a powerful medium of cultural education, helping transmit ethical values and religious teachings across generations. As a result, it remains a pillar of Varanasi's cultural life. It runs for 31 days every year from 5PM to 9PM. But Bharat Milap Aarti is conducted at midnight, while Shri Ram Rajyabhishek is done at 6AM in the morning. This extended format offers a comprehensive, meditative engagement with every episode of the Ramayana. Performances take place across more than two dozen real locations, including Ayodhya (Ram's birth), Janakpur (Sita's Swayamvar), Panchvati, Lanka, Chitrakoot, Ashok Vatika, and more. This spatial storytelling allows viewers to experience the Ramayana as if reliving it. Ramnagar Ramlila has maintained its traditional look and feel till date. There is no use of modern technology, no microphones, LED lights, Speakers etc. The scenes are illuminated through torches and lanterns. Dialogues are delivered vocally by the trained actors. This gives a real feel of an authentic, spiritual atmosphere reminiscent of ancient times.

The costumes used are Traditional and prepared by the local artists. Handcrafted garments, jewelry, ornaments, and authentic designs enhance the historical and mythological feel of the entire Ramlila. The colors used are vibrant and lively, which give the audience a royal experience. The every day rituals like Vedic Rituals, Pujas, and Aartis are performed in the Ramlila by the artists. Audience also participate in them. Dialogues are mostly spoken in the form of verses from the Ramcharitmanas by Goswami Tulasidas. Most of the dialogues are known by the audience and repeated by them along with the actors, which creates a spiritual experience for both- the artists and the audience. Every year the Kashi Naresh (King of Kashi) starts the Ramlila and he remains present through the entire period. It is his patronage, which has sustained this Ramlila from more than 200 years in the rarest, purest, and unique form.

Even during the British colonial period, the Ramnagar Ramlila continued without censorship or compromise. It became a form of cultural resistance, reminding locals of their spiritual roots and civilizational pride. This unbroken tradition has helped protect India's indigenous art, language, and values.

The Ramnagar Ramlila plays a multifaceted role in society, like promoting unity, instilling values, economic upliftment of local artisans, vendors and increasing socio-cultural tourism. Besides it attracts the people from all class, caste, and religions. It is an open call to anyone who wants to explore the heritage, culture, mythology, religion of India. Ram's life is a role models for all, which teaches us discipline, justice, benevolence, sacrifice, love etc. It has kept its tradition from more than 200 years. The people from Hindu and Muslim religion work together for this Ramlila from generations and they are proud of it. Their active involvement has kept the spirit of this Ramlila very high in all times. It is an eco-friendly event, with no electricity, no technology, and no synthetic material ever used. The event offers an ecosystem where religion, culture, economy, and environment intersect.

In 2005, Ramnagar Ramlila was inscribed in the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, supported by the Government of India. The listing praised its:

- Oral tradition and communal learning
- Ritualistic depth and artistic merit

- Role in intergenerational transmission of heritage

This honor established Ramnagar Ramlila as a global symbol of cultural sustainability. The Ramnagar Ramlila is not merely a performance—it is a civilizational celebration. It bridges the sacred and the theatrical, the ancient and the living, the individual and the community. Its 31-day journey is one of devotion, discipline, and dharma, reenacted annually in the spiritual heart of India. In an era dominated by screens and spectacle, the Ramnagar Ramlila reminds us of the power of embodied tradition and participatory faith. It is a glowing testament to how art can uphold, inspire, and transmit values across centuries. Today, it continues to thrive—not as a relic of the past, but as a beacon of India's timeless soul.

3.3.2. Ayodhya's Ramlila: Legacy, Evolution, and the Struggle for Continuity

Ayodhya, the birthplace of Lord Ram and a spiritual epicenter of India, holds a revered place in the tradition of Ramlila performances. With a history spanning nearly three centuries, Ayodhya is considered the cradle of Ramlila. This tradition is spread across more than 70 countries, and known for grandeur and devotion.

The exact timeline of when Ramlila performances began in Ayodhya remains uncertain. However, tradition holds that Swami Manik Das laid the foundation nearly 300 years ago. Initially, these performances were not staged in the modern sense but were held in royal courts under the patronage of the local rulers. One of the most popular attractions was the enactment of Lanka Dahan and Lakshman Shakti, which drew massive crowds from nearby regions. In 1912, Maharaj Pratap Narayan Singh, the ruler of Ayodhya (also known as Daduwa Naresh), initiated large-scale Ramlila performances at Rajdwar, which gained popularity even surpassing that of Kashi's Ramlila for a time. These events attracted thousands of spectators annually. However, due to declining interest, these performances were discontinued in 1992.

The revival of the tradition began modestly in 1963 when a group of saints organized Ramlila at Rajendra Nivas Chauraha, which continued until 1994. In 2008, after a 14-year hiatus, the tradition was revitalized under the leadership of Mahant Vaidehi Vallabh Sharan, and today the Ramlila Mahotsav Committee continues to stage the event annually with renewed enthusiasm.

The modern format of Ramlila performance owes its structure to Goswami Tulsidas, whose epic poem *Ramcharitmanas* became the scriptural base for most Ramlilas in North India. According to Dr. Ramanand Shukla, author of *Ayodhya ki Ramlila*, Tulsidas reconnected the story of Ram with the masses, transforming it from a sacred text into a community event. Swami Manik Das, credited with the first invocation in Ramlila performances, was succeeded by a lineage of devotees like Bhagwan Das, Hanuman Das, Rampriya Das, and Premdas, all of whom nurtured the tradition. In Mathura, poet Vindu Ji Maharaj also contributed significantly to Ramlila's recognition.

A pivotal figure in Ayodhya's Ramlila history is Mahant Jayaramdas Vyas, who in the 1970s founded the Awadh Adarsh Ramlila Mandal. Under his visionary leadership, the group gained national and international recognition. His disciple, Mahant Manish Das, notes that the troupe has performed in Mauritius, Nairobi, Trinidad, Bangkok, and across nearly all Indian states. Their efforts turned Ramlila from a local event into a global ambassador of Indian culture, strengthening spiritual bonds within the Indian diaspora and promoting the teachings of Ram abroad.

According to Dhanushdhari Shukla, coordinator of the Central Durga Puja Ramlila Samiti, Ayodhya's Ramlila is now largely restricted to stage-based presentations, losing the open, immersive style it once had. Financial difficulties, lack of institutional support, and inadequate training facilities have contributed to a decline in artistic quality and public interest. Where once thousands gathered to watch the performances, today's Ramlilas struggle to attract large crowds. The loss of grandeur and cultural integration has made revival efforts more difficult, especially among younger audiences accustomed to digital media.

The Ramlila is far more than a theatrical show—it is a spiritual ceremony, a mode of moral instruction, and a repository of Indian values. Its purpose has always been to make the character of Lord Ram accessible and relatable, teaching values such as truth, sacrifice, devotion, and duty. Ayodhya's Ramlila has traditionally been a unifying force—a celebration where people from all backgrounds come together. It also contributes to the local economy, with artisans, costume designers, musicians, and food vendors benefitting from the annual festival.

Another dimension of Ramlila's legacy in Ayodhya lies in Tulsi Chaura, located in the Raiganj locality, believed to be the site of the first Ramlila performance led by Megha Bhagat, a disciple of Goswami Tulsidas. This sacred site is now visited by devotees and Ramlila enthusiasts as a historical and spiritual landmark.

In recent years, Ayodhya's Ramlila has gained renewed attention through performances by Bollywood actors, which are broadcast across various media platforms. These celebrity-driven renditions have helped draw new audiences, especially among younger generations and the diaspora. However, traditionalists argue that such glamorization often lacks spiritual depth and may overshadow the original purpose of Ramlila as a tool of moral education and cultural continuity.

Ayodhya's Ramlila, once known for its magnificence and authenticity, is now at a crossroads. It faces a paradox: while Ramlila is gaining popularity worldwide, its cradle in Ayodhya is struggling to sustain the tradition. Nevertheless, organizations like the Ramlila Mahotsav Committee and dedicated figures like Mahant Jayaramdas and his disciples continue to fight for its preservation. Their work shows that with renewed community support, funding, and training, the tradition can be revived to its former glory. Ramlila is not just an art form—it is an embodiment of Indian spiritual heritage, a living link to the Ramayana, and a reflection of the collective cultural memory of India. To preserve it is to preserve India's soul itself.

3.3.3. Aishbagh Ramlila: A Historic Tradition Evolving with Time

Aishbagh Ramlila, held in Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh), is one of the most renowned and enduring Ramlila performances in India. Believed to have been initiated by Goswami Tulsidas, this historic cultural event has attracted audiences for generations. While Ramlila popularity has declined in many places, Aishbagh continues to draw thousands of viewers annually, thanks to its evolving presentation and committed organizers.

Each year, the Aishbagh Dussehra and Ramlila Committee ensures that the Ramlila experience remains dynamic and engaging. According to committee secretary Aditya Dwivedi, the focus is always on offering something new to maintain audience interest. The event features a cast of over 250 actors, with around 60 professional performers brought in from across India—

particularly from Kolkata, even during the concurrent Durga Puja celebrations. Kolkata artists also handle makeup and costumes, ensuring a high level of craftsmanship. Shankar Pal, who has played Ravana for 16 years, explains, “Preparing for Ravana’s role takes hours of makeup, but the audience’s response makes it worthwhile. We aim to improve and innovate every year.”

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, Aishbagh’s Ramlila was not halted. Instead, the committee organized the performance in a closed hall, after testing and quarantining all performers. The Ramlila was then broadcast live on Facebook and YouTube, ensuring that the tradition continued while observing public safety protocols.

A groundbreaking decision was made in the year 2022, to end the tradition of burning effigies of Kumbhkaran and Meghnad, which had been part of Aishbagh’s Dussehra celebration for over 300 years. Only Ravana’s effigy will now be burned. Aditya Dwivedi explains the rationale: “According to the Ramayana, Kumbhkaran and Meghnad advised Ravana not to go to war with Ram. They followed orders despite their disagreement. Burning their effigies misrepresents their roles. We want to restore the moral depth of the Ramayana.” This change was discussed for five years before being implemented, symbolizing a shift toward thoughtful reinterpretation of tradition in line with scriptural understanding.

The Ravana effigy is constructed annually by Raju Fakira and his team, who have been carrying on this tradition for generations. Raju notes the shift from using tree branches **to** bamboo frames and newspaper layers in modern construction. The effigy is assembled in parts and set up at the Dussehra ground for the finale. Aishbagh Ramlila is not just a religious event—it is a living symbol of India’s cultural heritage. With modern presentations, historic reforms, and youth involvement, it continues to thrive while honoring its 300-year-old legacy. The recent decision to rethink the portrayal of characters like Kumbhkaran and Meghnad marks a significant evolution in how audiences engage with the philosophical essence of the Ramayana, offering a more nuanced and respectful celebration of dharma.

3.3.4. Shri Sitaram Dharm Mandal Saraiharakhu: A Living Legacy of Ramleela Since 1932

In the heart of rural India, the village of Saraiharakhu in district Jaunpur (Uttar Pradesh), proudly hosts one of the region’s most cherished cultural events—the annual Ramleela organized

by Shri Sitaram Dharm Mandal. Since its inception in 1932, this Ramleela has evolved from a humble village play into a symbol of social unity, devotion, and cultural heritage, drawing participants from across the country, many of whom now serve in esteemed professional roles.

The Ramleela began as a playful initiative by three Kayastha brothers—Jayanti Prasad, Premnath, and Prakashnath—who crafted crowns, swords, and maces from paper and wood. What started informally has, over nine decades, matured into a respected and well-organized cultural institution. Despite recent interruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, the tradition remains strong.

One of the unique aspects of this Ramleela is that all performers belong to the Kayastha community, and many are highly accomplished professionals. These roles are portrayed with devotion and professionalism, turning the performance into an immersive religious and artistic experience.

The Ramleela transforms Saraiharakhu into a hub of festivity for the entire month leading up to Dussehra. Families return to the village, and relatives travel from metros like Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bengaluru, and Lucknow to participate. For the local community, the event is not just a performance but a social and spiritual reunion. It revitalizes bonds, fosters identity, and keeps ancestral traditions alive.

The event is organized under the leadership of Arun Kumar Srivastava, Kaushal Kumar Sinha, and Jitendra Srivastava. Interestingly, the organizing team includes doctors, engineers, and civil service officers, many of whom schedule annual leave to attend and contribute. Meetings for Ramleela planning are often held in the offices or homes of these professionals across the country, reflecting a deep personal commitment to the cause.

The permanent stage built by Shri Sitaram Dharm Mandal is not just a performance venue—it holds spiritual significance for locals. People offer prayers, vows (manoti), and even hold weddings at the site, treating it like a temple. The Ramleela of Saraiharakhu, organized by Shri Sitaram Dharm Mandal, is far more than a theatrical event. It is a celebration of faith, heritage, and community spirit that has stood resilient for over 90 years. With participation from across India, it showcases how tradition can thrive when rooted in devotion, inclusivity, and pride.

3.3.5. Bissau's Silent Ramlila: A Unique Cultural Heritage of India

In the heart of Rajasthan's Jhunjhunu district lies the small town of Bissau, home to one of the world's most unique theatrical traditions—the Silent Ramlila. Unlike conventional Ramlila performances that are rich in dialogues and narration, Bissau's version is entirely mute. Through expressive gestures, dramatic movements, and elaborate masks, performers bring the Ramayana to life without speaking a single word. This one-of-a-kind Ramlila is not just rare in India, but is believed to be the only one of its kind in the world, making it a treasured gem of India's intangible cultural heritage.

In Bissau, all major characters—Ram, Sita, Lakshman, Hanuman, Ravan, Meghnad, Kumbhkaran—convey their stories through facial expressions, body language, dance, and symbolic gestures, wearing colorful traditional masks. The Silent Ramlila spans 15 days, slightly longer than the usual 9-day Navratri-based format:

- First 7 days focus on the storytelling from the Ramayana.
- Day 7 features the Lanka Dahan episode.
- Subsequent days include Meghnad and Kumbhkaran's defeat.
- Ravan Dahan is not held on Dussehra but on Chaturdashi, breaking from convention.

Despite the absence of spoken dialogue, the vivid expression and choreography make the story easily comprehensible to audiences of all ages.

The tradition is believed to be 170–200 years old, with local legends attributing its origin to a spiritual woman, Sadhvi Jamna. According to historian Trilokchandra Sharma- Sadhvi Jamna lived near Ramana Johad in Bissau. She gathered village children and initiated the first performances using hand-made masks. Since the masks hindered speech, she proposed performing entirely through gesture, thus founding the tradition of Silent Ramlila. Her vision gave rise to a cultural legacy that continues today with community-wide participation and reverence.

Although silent in dialogue, music plays a crucial role. Traditional instruments like drums (dhols) and nagara provide rhythm and emotional resonance throughout the performance. Significantly, the music is performed by members of the Muslim Illahi community, turning this

Ramlila into a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity and communal harmony. This collaboration highlights how art transcends religious divides and fosters mutual respect.

Originally performed on the Gugoji Hill, the event later moved to Station Road, and since 1949, it has been staged in the main market area near the fort. The Ramlila features- Vibrant costumes and handmade masks, Traditional instruments, and Powerful non-verbal acting. Despite the absence of spoken words, the drama captures every nuance of the Ramayana and captivates its audiences—young and old alike. It offers not only entertainment but cultural education and introduces youth to traditional performance art in an innovative way.

Bissau's Silent Ramlila is a cultural marvel—an artistic expression of faith, tradition, and inclusivity. With its mute acting, ancestral masks, community spirit, and cross-cultural collaboration, it stands as a singular tradition in the global landscape of theatre and religious storytelling. Running strong for nearly two centuries, this Ramlila continues to inspire devotion, unity, and pride, proving that powerful stories can be told even in profound silence.

3.3.6. Ramlila in Delhi: A Journey Through History and Resilience

The tradition of Ramlila in Delhi is not only ancient but also deeply intertwined with India's cultural and political history. While Ramlila is celebrated across the country, Delhi's performances hold a unique significance, having withstood the test of time, religious suppression, colonial rule, and modern-day challenges. Today, Ramlila in Delhi is as much a symbol of cultural endurance as it is a spiritual celebration.

The staging of Ramlila in Delhi dates back centuries. However, it faced a severe setback during the reign of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, who banned Ramlila performances in an effort to suppress non-Islamic traditions. This ban brought the tradition to a halt, but not permanently. Devotees of Lord Ram remained steadfast in their faith and looked for opportunities to revive the practice.

A significant turning point came during the rule of Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah Rangila, Aurangzeb's successor. A devoted Hindu named Lala Sitaram played a pivotal role in reviving the tradition. Historical accounts suggest that the emperor asked Lala Sitaram for a loan

for the royal treasury. In exchange, Lala Sitaram proposed a condition—that he be allowed to organize Ramlila in his haveli. The emperor agreed, and Sitaram Bazaar in Old Delhi soon became a center for grand Ramlila performances, drawing large crowds and renewing the city's devotional spirit.

The last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, showed greater religious tolerance than many of his predecessors. He allowed and even encouraged the return of Ramlila, further reviving the tradition in the capital. Ramlila once again became a public spectacle and spiritual event, attracting people from various communities.

With the onset of British colonial rule, Ramlila faced new obstacles. The famous Ramlila ground in Delhi, once used for these cultural gatherings, was repurposed as a military encampment and horse stable. Public performances were either banned or discouraged, and traditional spaces were lost.

In 1911, visionary leader Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya intervened to revive Ramlila performances in Delhi. His efforts led to the reopening of venues and renewed public enthusiasm. Over the following decades, multiple organizations across Delhi began staging Ramlila, turning it into a widespread urban tradition.

Famous Ramlilas in Delhi: Today, Delhi is home to several well-known Ramlilas, including:

- Lavkush Ramlila
- Dilshad Garden Ramlila
- Ramlila Maidan Ramlila
- Mayur Vihar Ramlila
- Surajmal Vihar Ramlila

Each production brings its own style and audience, often blending tradition with modern theatrical elements. Ramlila in Delhi is more than just a performance—it's a narrative of perseverance. From Mughal bans to colonial restrictions and pandemics, this tradition has faced many trials but continues to thrive. It remains a vital part of Delhi's cultural identity, offering both spiritual reflection and artistic celebration year after year.

3.4. Cultural, Religious, and Social Significance

Ramlila is much more than a dramatic representation; it is a dynamic conduit for religious education, social unity, and cultural continuity. In every performance, core Indian values such as truth (satya), duty (dharma), devotion (bhakti), and non-violence (ahimsa) are communicated to audiences across age and class boundaries.

Ramlila events also foster community involvement, with local artisans, musicians, costume designers, and volunteers playing critical roles. The collective preparation and execution reinforce social cohesion, particularly in rural and small-town India. The tradition also accommodates gender inclusivity, with modern Ramleelas increasingly incorporating women performers and roles, challenging older patriarchal norms.

3.5. Ram in Every Heart: Philosophical Symbolism and Contemporary Relevance

Lord Ram as Maryada Purushottam embodies the highest standards of ethical behavior and duty. His unwavering commitment to dharma—whether as a son, husband, king, or warrior—serves as a moral blueprint for contemporary society. He is invoked as a symbol of justice, righteousness, and divine compassion. Quotes such as "*Ramadivat Vartavyam Na Ravanadivat*" (Be like Ram, not like Ravana) remain culturally embedded, guiding youth and adults alike in ethical choices. Ram's symbolic presence “in every heart” reflects an inner aspiration toward balance, humility, and resolve.

3.6. Southeast Asian Adaptations and UNESCO Recognition

The influence of the Ramayana and Ramlila is visible across Southeast Asia. Countries like Thailand (Khon), Cambodia (Lkhon Khol), Indonesia (Wayang Kulit), and Myanmar (Yama Zatdaw) have preserved and adapted Ram's story through dance, shadow play, and masked theatre. UNESCO declared Ramlila as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2005, recognizing its role in sustaining oral traditions, fostering intercultural dialogue, and enriching global heritage. This honor elevated Ramlila from a religious custom to a world cultural treasure.

3.7. Challenges and the Future of Ramlila

Despite its strengths, Ramlila faces several challenges:

- Urbanization and Media Influence: Modern audiences are drawn to cinema and digital entertainment, reducing live attendance.
- Lack of Funding: Many traditional Ramlila troupes struggle with financial support and infrastructure.
- Cultural Dilution: Commercialization risks reducing the philosophical depth of performances.

However, revivalist efforts, digital streaming, and integration with school and university curricula present promising paths. Cultural policy frameworks and international collaborations can further rejuvenate this tradition.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ramlila stands as a living embodiment of India's spiritual and cultural ethos. Through its rich diversity, regional forms, and deep symbolism, it continues to be a medium of ethical education, social unity, and devotional celebration. By representing the virtues of Lord Ram in dramatic form, Ramlila not only honors the past but also shapes the moral imagination of future generations. Whether performed in the lanes of Ayodhya or the royal halls of Thailand, Ramlila remains a universal expression of the quest for righteousness. Preserving and promoting this tradition is not just a cultural imperative but a civilizational responsibility.

REFERENCES

Bhattacharya, N. (2004). *Rama's Story in Performance: The Ramayana Tradition in South Asia*. Oxford University Press.

Doniger, W. (2009). *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Penguin Books.

Kapoor, S. (2002). *Encyclopaedia of Indian Heritage and Culture*. Cosmo Publications.

Lutgendorf, P. (1991). *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas*. University of California Press.

Narayan, R. K. (1972). *The Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic.* Penguin Books.

Richman, P. (Ed.). (1991). *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia.* University of California Press.

Schechner, R. (1985). *Between Theater and Anthropology.* University of Pennsylvania Press.

Sharma, A. (2011). *Classical Hindu Thought: An Introduction.* Oxford University Press.

Thapar, R. (2003). *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India.* Harvard University Press.

UNESCO. (2005). Ramlila – the traditional performance of the Ramayana. Retrieved from <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/ramlila-the-traditional-performance-of-the-ramayana-00108>

<https://www.aajtak.in/rajasthan/story/unique-silent-ramleela-of-jhunjhunu-177-year-old-tradition-lives-on-video-lcla-strc-2067265-2024-10-10>

<https://indianculture.gov.in/hi/unesco/intangible-cultural-heritage/raamalailaa-raamaayana-kaa-paaranparaika-paradarasana>

<https://www.himalini.com/169082/17/16/10/>

<https://panchjanya.com/2014/09/27/210356/archive/r99c663d8/>

https://upculture.up.nic.in/sites/default/files/documents/ayodhya_shodh_sansthan/Bhartiye%20Bhashao%20Mein%20Ramkatha%20-%20Sanskirt%20Bhasha%20%28Sakshi-25%29.pdf

<https://mediaindia.eu/culture/explore-different-faces-of-ramlila/>

<https://archive.org/details/dli.Ramlila?utm>