



PROJECT MUSE®

"Ramayan Gaan" or Singing the Ramayan in West Bengal, Assam,
and Bangladesh

Tutun Mukherjee, Saymon Zakaria

Asian Theatre Journal, Volume 37, Number 1, Spring 2020, pp. 89-106
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/atj.2020.0026>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/757878>

“Ramayan Gaan” or Singing the Ramayan in West Bengal, Assam, and Bangladesh

Tutun Mukherjee and Saymon Zakaria

The Indian epic, the Ramayan, has been kept alive in the popular imagination in India, through various textual, oral, visual, and performance forms. While Ramlila is the most popular live performance form to enact the Ramayan in the Hindi-speaking regions of North India, Ramayan Gaan is the form that prevails in the Bengali-speaking regions of West Bengal and Assam in India, and in Bangladesh where the event is also called “Kushan Gaan” or “Kush’s Song.” While Ramlila is based chiefly on Tulsidas’s Rāmcaritmānas, Ramayan Gaan is indebted to Krittibas Ojha’s slightly earlier Ramayan. This essay discusses salient features of Ramayan Gaan with occasional reference to Ramlila, illustrating some of their shared narrative and ideological elements as well as some of their critical disjunctures. It underscores the fact that in Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country, Ramayan Gaan is enthusiastically performed and appreciated by Hindus and Muslims alike. This essay also charts the transitional zone, ontologically and geographically, where Ramlila meets Durga Puja in the eastern regions. Significantly, in Ramayan Gaan, Ram invokes Mahashakti (Durga) before his battle with the ten-headed Ravan, and Sita, in the form of Bhadra Kali, defeats the thousand-headed Ravan. Together, these narrative elements help explain the conjunction of Ramayan Gaan and Durga Puja in the Bengali-speaking regions.

Tutun Mukherjee (1952–2020) was Professor of Comparative Literature, and Joint Professor at the Centre for Women’s Studies and the Department of Theatre Arts, at the University of Hyderabad, India. She specialized in literary criticism and theory, and her research interests include world literatures and comparative literary studies, women’s writing, translation, theatre, and film studies. Her publications include: Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation; Girish Karnad’s Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives; The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: An Anthology of Recent Criticism; “Women’s Theatre” in OUP Encyclopedia of Indian Theatres, and 89 research papers and book chapters. She also translated plays by Mridula Garg and Mahesh Dattani.

Saymon Zakaria is Assistant Director in the Folklore Department of the Bangla Academy in Dhaka, Bangladesh. A scholar of Bangladeshi folklore, he wrote a doctoral dissertation titled The Traditional Theater in Bangladesh: Content and Mode of Language. Besides writing plays, he has conducted ethnographic field surveys related to Intangible Cultural Heritage. He has also delivered academic lectures and conducted workshops at universities around the world. His books include Pronomohi Bongomata: Indigenous Cultural Forms of Bangladesh, and Prācīn Bāṅglār Buddho nātok; Bāṅglādeśer loknāṭok: bishoy o āṅgik-baicitrya. He has co-edited, with Keith Cantú, Carol Salomon's City of Mirrors: Songs of Lālan Sāi (Oxford University Press, 2017). In 2019, he was a recipient of Bangladesh's prestigious Bangla Academy Literary Award for his research contributions on Bangladeshi folklore.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* of Valmiki, considered *ādi-mahākāvya* or “the primary poem,” is one of the two major epics of India, the other being the *Mahābhārata*. Surveying India's long literary history, we can see many iterations of Ram's narrative, ones that appear in many Ramayans besides Valmiki's and in the Puranas (a classical genre that tells the stories of the gods), particularly the *Padma purāṇa* (circa tenth century). A condensed version of the Ramayan is even in Vyasa's *Mahābhārata*. Ever since Valmiki composed his *Rāmāyaṇa* over two millennia ago, the epic has been translated and adapted in many languages and forms; the story has been kept alive in the popular imagination through various textual, oral, visual, and performance forms.¹ These forms often overlap, aesthetically and narratively. They are fluid and ever evolving. Hence, the story has been able to retain its vitality and broad appeal even in contemporary India, where it is said that Ram's lore is created anew in each world cycle and enacted eternally. Valmiki's classical version in Sanskrit is comprised of seven books or sections (*kāṇḍas*) and 24,000 verses, and vernacular versions are also quite long. Given the Ramayan's massive size, what we often find in performance is episodic treatments of the story, ones that give highlights and open up space for commentary and reflection.

Across western and northern India, in “the Hindi belt” where the lingua franca is Hindi, Ram-katha (*Rām-kathā*; Vaishnava storytelling about Ram) and Ramlila (*Rāmtilā*) performances are held during the monsoon and autumn months when agricultural work is minimal, although Ram-katha goes on all year round. Most of these performances are in Hindi and related dialects, and are based on Tulsidas's sixteenth-century version of the Ramayan, the *Rāmcaritmānas*. This text is not simply a translation of Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, but a completely new work that includes elements from many vernacular versions of the Ramayan and stories from the Puranas. It is written with the tenor of *bhakti ras* (the devotional sentiment), in a listener and reader friendly dialect of Avadhi, a literary precursor to modern Hindi.



FIGURE 1. A Ram-jatra performance in Barishal, Bangladesh, 2018. Ram (left) and Kali (third from left) appear in blue makeup. (Photo by Saymon Zakaria)

In the Bengali-speaking regions of India and Bangladesh, by contrast, other forms of Ramayan narration and enactment are popular, including most prevalently, Ramayan Gaan (*Rāmāyaṇ gān*), and related forms such as Ram-jatra, Ram-kirtan, and Ram-mangal (*Rām-jātra*, *Rām-kīrtan*, and *Rām-maṅgal*). (See Fig. 1 for a scene from Ram-jatra.) In fact, there are even more such forms, and many have multiple names. There is scarcely a folk performance in these regions, it seems, that does not somehow engage with the Ramayan. However, in this essay, we are chiefly concerned with Ramayan Gaan in the Bengali-speaking regions of India and Bangladesh, and its relationship to Ramlila in the Hindi-speaking regions of North India.

Both Ramayan Gaan and Ramlila are affiliated with and transpire during the autumnal festival of Navaratri (“Nine Nights”), which concludes on its tenth day, known as Dussehra or Vijayadashami (“Victory on the Tenth”), when a giant effigy of the demon-king Ravan is burnt, symbolizing Ram’s victory over evil.² The Navaratri festival begins with obeisance to the ancestors at the time of *mahālay pīṭṛpakṣh*, which falls on the first *amāvasyā* or new moon day, at the conjuncture of the months Ashwin and Kartik. While all of this is well known, what we want to draw out and underscore in this essay are two lesser known realities: first, the fact that Ramayan Gaan is widely performed and relished in Bangladesh, a country where Hindus make up only about

ten percent of the population, and Muslims, about ninety percent. Second, there are deep theological and epistemological connections between Ramlila and Ramayan Gaan on the one hand, and between Ramayan Gaan and Durga Puja on the other, connections that go far beyond their formal presentation in performance. It is in Ramayan Gaan performance that we can especially observe cultural synthesis of the stories of Ram and Durga, located as it is in Bengali-speaking regions where Devi (Goddess) worship is strong, although Durga Puja is celebrated in the Hindi-speaking regions as well.

Ramayan Gaan is also called “Kushan Gaan” (*Kuśān gān*), or “Kush’s Song,” particularly in Bangladesh, which references one of Ram’s twin sons, Kush. The name also reminds us how the twins sang Ram’s story at their father’s court, after having learned it from their preceptor, the poet-sage Valmiki. Hence, we have the consequential use of the term *kuśīlav*, which is used to refer to wandering bards.

The Story of Ramayan Gaan

The story told in Ramayan Gaan is the well-known one about the crown prince of Ayodhya, Shri Ramchandra, affectionately called “Lord Ram” by many devotees. It is so fundamental to the cultural consciousness of not only India, but of many South and Southeast Asian countries, that we will not recount it in detail here. Unlike Ramlila, Ramayan Gaan is primarily based on Krittibas Ojha’s *Śrīrām pañcāṭī* (fifteenth century), commonly known as the “Krittibasi Ramayan,” composed in medieval Bengali, in a style known as *pañcāṭī*. This ballad style is still popular among both Hindus and Muslims in the Bengali-speaking regions. Like the *Rāmcaritmānas*, this work also departs from Valmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* and is deeply infused with *bhakti* or religious devotion. It likely had great influence on Tulsidas and shaped how he wrote his own Ramayan.

In Ramayan Gaan performances, the story is told through both songs and dialogues. Songs are generally committed to memory. The main singer may write new songs or use former ones, but while singing them in performance, often interprets lines in new ways, as the episodes unfold. There is, therefore, a certain improvisational quality to the music that results from the close interactions between performers and the audience (see Fig. 2). Dialogues are a mix of prose and poetry, and there is both scripted dialogue and extemporaneous speech. Lines are delivered in a rhythmic style. Both the songs and dialogues are in simple, colloquial Bengali and related dialects, in order to facilitate understanding and enjoyment. The language is not highly Sanskritized or literary, and has a certain localized homogeneity. Scenes are interspersed with song and dance, and overall, played with a high



FIGURE 2. A Ramayan Gaan performance at the University of North Bengal, Siliguri, West Bengal, 2018. (Photo by Madanmohan Halder and Mohammad Intaj Ali)

degree of emotion and melodrama. As Albert B. Lord wrote of Ramayan Gaan six decades ago: “The singer of tales is at once the tradition and an individual creator. His manner of composition differs from that used by a writer in that the oral poet makes no conscious effort to break the traditional phrases and incidents; he is forced by the rapidity of composition in performance to use these traditional elements” (1960: 4). He adds that “singing, performing, composing are facets of the same act” (1960: 13).

One of the most remarkable innovations in the Krittibasi Ramayan is the way it blends the narrative of Ram with devotion to Devi. In the text, Ram himself is said to invoke and worship Mahashakti or the goddess Durga. This likely reflects the influence of the devotional work *Durgābhaktitarāṅgiṇī* (River of Devotion to Durga, fourteenth century) by the *bhakti* poet Vidyapati, and more generally, the prevalence of goddess worship in this region. During the war, Sage Narad advises Ram to seek Durga’s blessing so that he can defeat Ravan, a great worshipper of Lord Shiva, which he does. In fact, this narrative element is said to be the whole impetus for Durga Puja, a very important festival in the eastern regions. Further, Ram’s invocation of the goddess is considered so important, it has a name: *akāl-bodhon*, or the untimely awakening of the Devi, and there are many stories associated with it. Ram’s invocation

is considered “untimely” because the customary time to worship the goddess, in the form of Annapurna (“the Bountiful One”), is in the month of Chaitra which, according to the Bengali calendar, falls in the spring.

The close association between Durga and Ram is deliberate in Ramayan Gaan. By invoking Durga’s powerful *śakti* or feminine energy, Ram signals he is preparing for a decisive battle to vanquish evil. Depictions of Durga as a fierce warrior are attested in classical literature in Sanskrit even before the Bhakti Movement (twelfth to seventeenth centuries). For example, a line from the “Durgāsaptasatī” (Seven Hundred [Names] of Durga) or “Devīmāhātmya” (Glory of the Goddess), in the *Mārkaṇḍeya purāṇa* (circa third century), about the goddess’s battle with *asuṇī* (demonic) forces, describes her as follows: *Caṇḍikāśakti atyugraśivāsta ninādinī* (roughly: Chandika, the fiercely charging and roaring goddess). Later texts like Jimutvahana’s *Durgotsava nirṇaya* (Prescriptions on Durga Rituals, twelfth century), a treatise on *paddhatis* (rituals) to the Goddess, and the Bhattacharya’s *Purohit darpaṇ* (The Priest’s Mirror, 1924), an encyclopedic manual for priests, are also part of a long history of literature devoted to Durga.³

In the Bengali-speaking regions of West Bengal, Assam, and Bangladesh, the story of Ram and Sita recounted in Ramayan Gaan mixes freely with the poignant familial narrative remembered during Durga Puja: Uma (another name for Durga and Parvati) is said to be welcomed back into her mother’s home, on a brief sojourn from her husband Shiva’s mountainous abode of Kailash. During the festival, devotees sing special *āgamanī gān* (welcoming prayers) to receive her. In artwork associated with the festival, Durga is typically depicted in her martial form known as “Mahishasur Mardini” (Slayer of Mahishasur), sometimes accompanied by her children. Riding a rampaging lion, she is shown killing the evil shape-changing demon Mahishasur.

Roles of Characters, Costuming, Makeup, and Stage Settings

Ramayan Gaan troupes are somewhat smaller than many Ramlila groups. They often have around twenty members, and these include narrators, actors, singers, dancers, and musicians. They also generally have one principal singer (*gidāl*) who acts as Lav, and another, his singing partner (*dohār*), who acts as Kush. (Lav and Kush are the twin sons of Ram and Sita, but here assume the role of storytellers, as they do in the last book of the Ramayan.) The pair guides the audience through the performance, providing context and commentary as necessary. Ramlila, by contrast, only occasionally employs a narrator to

provide oral exposition; traditionally the only performer approaching a narrator in Ramlila is the *vyās*, who sings verses from Tulsidas’s Ramayan, typically without commenting on them as in Ram-katha. In Ramayan Gaan, the narrator might, for instance, explain difficult concepts such as the ritual known as *asvamedh yajña*:

Listen, my son, Assho means horse.
Assho is the word is from Shastro (classical text).
In Bangla people say ghora (horse).
Medh means blood.
Sri Rama Chandra held the fire of sacrificing the blood of horse.
The protagonist of today’s performance is that horse. (Zakaria 2017: 101–102)

The narrator also periodically steps in to explain the relationships between characters and give other important context. The rest of the actors in the troupe perform various roles as necessary. Many of the characters they play are stock ones, with conventional names. For example, the young comedians who act and dance between scenes are called “*chokrās*” (clowns), and are similar to the *vidūṣaka* character from Sanskrit theatre.

Ramayan Gaan troupes do not have any caste prescriptions. Both Hindus of various castes and Muslims perform in the medium. While in India performers tend to be Hindu, in Bangladesh, performers include both Hindus and Muslims. Some troupes have one or two female actors, but overall, most performers are men and boys, who may also play female roles. Although there is much variation in Ramlila groups, the most conservative groups tend to place brahmin or upper-caste men in the roles of divine characters. Women do perform in Ramlila too, but it is not the norm in many places.

Audiences for Ramayana Gaan tend to reflect the caste composition and social spectrum of their locality, just as Ramlila audiences do. It is not just people in the immediate locality who attend Ramayan Gaan performances. When it is performed in a village, people from neighboring villages also flock to performances which, like most folk performances in India, are free of charge. Troupes contract with patrons in advance and often charge several thousand rupees (about \$30–50) for a performance. They also charge for travel time, so this adds to the cost. For many individuals, the cost of hiring a Ramayan Gaan troupe is prohibitively high, so community groups and temple committees often step in to organize and raise funds for Ramayan Gaan performances, especially on festival days.

In Ramayan Gaan, there is minimal use of props and special costumes. Costuming, in fact, is mostly limited to Bengali-style clothing: *dhoti*, *kurtā*, *cādor*, and *sāṛī*, and simple ornaments. Makeup is also



FIGURE 3. Artiste Kripasindhu Roy performs as Lav, holding a *benā* in his left hand, at a performance in Kurigram, Bangladesh, 2018. (Photo by Saymon Zakaria)



FIGURE 4. A Ramayan Gaan performance in Kurigram, Bangladesh, 2018. Lav and Kush stand in the foreground. From left to right, a *khol*, *benā*, and harmonium are also visible. (Photo by Saymon Zakaria)

minimal. Actors and singers generally wear white makeup, although Ram is sometimes shown in blue or green makeup, given his association with Vishnu. Like his co-*avatār* (incarnation) Krishna, Ram is often shown with a blue or dark hue, and this is reflected in the popular *bhajan* (devotional song), “Raghupati Rāghav Rājā Rām” (Lord of the Raghav, King Ram), which relates that Ram’s body is dark like a storm cloud (“*sundar mūrti meghaśyām*”).

Live music is generally provided by a small orchestra. The main musical instrument in Ramayan Gaan is the bowed, one-stringed instrument known as “*benā*,” so Ramayan Gaan is also sometimes called “*benā kuśan*,” which implies that “Kush” will be singing and playing the *benā*. Some of the other instruments that are commonly used include the harmonium, *khol* (double-headed drum), *kartāl* (“clapping” cymbals), *dotārā* (a two-string instrument), Indian flute, and violin. The respective players are called by the names of the instruments they play. The principal singer and narrator (Lav/*gidāl*) carries the *benā* and a *cāmor* (yak-hair fan), and is responsible for orchestrating the entire performance, like the *sūtradhāra* (director) in Sanskrit theatre. (See Figs. 3 and 4.) Sometimes he takes up a particular role too, without changing his costume. In Ram-jatra and related forms, the troupe is often smaller, with one principal singer assisted by a small group of musicians. No special costuming is required for these performances as well.

The stage for Ramayan Gaan performances is often simply a temple yard, a village common, or the spacious courtyard of a private residence. A typical performance space is about twenty by twenty feet in diameter, demarcated by four bamboo poles, that are temporarily installed to hold a cover aloft over the stage, which is spread with bamboo mats. A smaller columned area is also positioned on the stage. Usually, the actors, narrators, and musicians all sit together in the middle of the stage and get up to perform when called upon, as scenes require. Throughout, the audience surrounds the stage, sitting or standing in close proximity, such that the composite audience also seems to be a participant in the drama. There are specially demarcated spaces for organizers, local VIPs, and women. The whole spacial configuration conforms to what Suresh Awasthi once said of the scenography of Terukkuttu (*terukkūttu*) street theatre in Tamil Nadu. Such performances, he wrote, have “nonrealistic and metaphysical treatment of time and place” (1974: 38).

Individual Ramayan Gaan performances generally begin in the late evening and continue until dawn, so they tend to be longer than individual Ramlila performances, which nowadays often conclude by midnight. Some Ramayan Gaan events are held over several nights, but



FIGURE 5. A Ramayan Gaan performance at the University of North Bengal, Siliguri, West Bengal, 2018. (Photo by Madanmohan Halder and Mohammad Intaj Ali)

not over ten to fifteen days like many Ramlilas. While Ramlila performances typically begin with an *ārṭī* ritual, in which live actors are worshipped as deities (Ram, etc.) on stage, Ramayan Gaan performances generally begin with a prayer that is sung, followed by a song to Ram, inviting him to grace the audience with his presence. The performers then praise other deities and thank organizers. Next, someone in the troupe announces which episodes are to be enacted that evening.

Ramayan Gaan, in Thirteen Episodes

There are thirteen distinct episodes in Ramayan Gaan, which together mostly follow the same overarching narrative one finds in Ramlilas, with some notable exceptions. The thirteen episodes include the births of Ram and Sita, their marriage ceremony (including an interruption by Ravan who comes as a suitor), their forest exile along with Lakshman, Ravan's abduction of Sita, Jatayu's failed obstruction of Ravan, Ram's killing of Vali, Ram's army's building of the bridge to Lanka, Hanuman's killing of Mahiravan (often called Ahiravan in the Hindi-speaking regions), the death of Vibhishan's son Taranisen, Lakshman's incapacitation and revival, Ram's rescue of Sita and her test by fire, the slaying of Ravan, and finally, the ritual sacrifice of a horse

(*aśvamedh yajña*) (Zakaria 2008: 50–51). As mentioned, the thirteen episodes of Ramayan Gaan are taken from multiple texts, but principally from the Krittibasi Ramayan and the fifteenth-century *Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa* (Esoteric Ramayan). More episodes from Dasharathi Roy’s nineteenth-century Ramayan, such as the search for Sita, the death of Ravan, Ram’s return to Ayodhya and coronation, and Lav and Kush’s battle with Ram’s forces, are sometimes also added. This Ramayan, in *pāñcālī* form, was and still is very popular in rural gatherings.

There are a number of notable narrative departures between these episodes and what transpires in Ramlila. Some of the narrative trajectories specific to Ramayan Gaan have potent emotional content and are especially suited to dramatization. One key example is the episode of Sita’s birth. Unlike in the *Rāmcaritmānas* and in Ramlila, in the Krittibasi Ramayan and Ramayan Gaan, Sita is said to be the offspring of Ravan and his chief queen Mandodari.⁴ She is subsequently thrown into a river when it is prophesied that she will cause her father’s death, and is later adopted by King Janak. Another narrative departure involves Vibhishan’s adolescent son Taranisen. This young warrior engages in battle with Ram, ironically, with Ram’s name inscribed all over his body, so he is protected by the name of God. This creates a challenge for Ram, but Ram does ultimately slay him in battle. This episode is also not generally shown in Ramlila. The episode about Ravan’s brother Mahiravan/Ahiravan who resides in the netherworld of *pātāl-lok*, is often shown in Ramlila, however, with some differences in the plot. In Ramayan Gaan, Ravan’s mother Nikusha tells Ravan that he has another son named Mahiravan who rules the underworld. Ravan then summons Mahiravan and orders him to fight Ram.

Ramayan Gaan’s most notable point of narrative departure from Ramlila occurs at the end of the story. First, as mentioned, Ram invokes Durga and slays the ten-headed Ravan. Then Sita assumes the dreaded Bhadra Kali form (a fierce form of Durga) and dramatically slays another manifestation of evil, the thousand-headed (*sahastra*) Ravan. As the narrator (Lav/*gidāl*) says to Sita:

Ten-headed Ravan will be killed by Raghunath [Ram].
Thousand-headed Ravan will be killed by your hand. (Zakaria 2008: 63)

The thousand-headed Ravan familiar to the Krittibasi Ramayan, is found nowhere in the *Rāmcaritmānas* or Valmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, so of course it does not figure in Ramlila. In these two scenes in Ramayan Gaan—Ram’s invocation of Durga, and Sita’s dramatic transformation into Bhadra Kali—we can clearly see the deep intertwining of the story of Ram and the story of Durga in the Bengali-speaking regions. These

narrative elements also help explain the conjunction of Ramayan Gaan and Durga Puja there.

Following this dramatic scene, there is another major narrative development that is sometimes shown in Ramayan Gaan—Ram’s banishment of Sita to Sage Valmiki’s ashram in the forest, due to public censure. This aftermath to the story is virtually never shown in Ramlila. In fact, for many, it would be unthinkable to include this scene in Ramlila, which generally concludes with on a very happy and triumphant note. The story of Sita’s banishment is relayed in the seventh book of both Valmiki’s and Krittibas’s Ramayans, known as the “Uttar kāṇḍ” (The Final Book). Unlike Tulsidas, Krittibas chose to include this book in his rendering of the Ramayan so it is sometimes staged in Ramayan Gaan. In this scene in Ramayan Gaan, Sita is presented very sympathetically. This comes out when the narrator (Lav/*gidāl*) explains that,

Only the offspring of a *satī* [chaste and devoted woman] can tie this horse.
Offspring of a non-*satī* attempting to tie this horse will go to death’s realm. (Zakaria 2008: 63)

Lav and Kush, of course, later capture the sacrificial horse, thus proving Sita’s chastity and, we can presume, dispelling malicious gossip circulating about her in Ayodhya.

Some episodes of Ramayan Gaan are understandably more popular than others, and these are the ones most often selected for repeat performances. The involvement of audiences is crucial in this. With their innate cultural knowledge and enthusiastic participation, they help shape the content and style of Ramayan Gaan. Also, through their spontaneous show of appreciation for performances, audiences take part as performers and encourage performers to put on a good show. For their part, troupes are motivated to accommodate the wishes of the audience since performing is their livelihood. Although Ramayan Gaan performances presume a basic “stable text” (the Ramayan), they are always designed to fit into the regional repertoire, that is, whatever is popular in a given region. While there may be variations in presentation, it is a given that people believe that telling and listening to Ram’s story is a sacred act.

As the well-known saying goes, nobody hears the Ramayan for the first time.⁵ The episodes outlined above constitute the familiar repertoire of not only Ramayan Gaan, but also of other popular itinerant forms like Ram-jatra, Ram-kirtan, and Ram-mangal, which are performed during festivals and sponsored by local communities. These forms all have familiar plotlines, and audiences often remember the



FIGURE 6. A Ramayan Gaan performance in Kurigram, Bangladesh, 2018. Sage Vasishth (left) and Lav (right) are positioned behind stand mics. (Photo by Saymon Zakaria)

songs and dialogues of past performances—drawn as they are from the vast cultural memory of its audiences. Even so, performers still revise their performances from year to year, since they know that novelty is vital to the success of their performances.

The Moral Universe of Ramayan Gaan

The Ramayan is primarily a narrative about *dharma* (righteousness or religious duty), Ram being generally considered “*maryādā purushottam*” (the perfect man). Thus, Ramayan Gaan, like Ramlila, reinforces religious beliefs and delves into questions of social propriety and morality (Zakaria 2008: 30). In this regard, Ram’s inherent goodness is often contrasted with Ravan’s immorality. There are many lines that are meant to edify the audience and teach of Ram’s greatness, as when Sage Vasishth tells King Dashrath early in the story:

O foolish Son! Chanting Ram’s name once washes away
more sins than a man can commit in an entire lifetime! (Zakaria 2008:
51)

Later, at the conclusion of the war, when Ram and Sita are seated on the throne of Ayodhya, the narrator (Lav/*gidāl*) reminds the audience of

the divine vision of Siva and Parvati, in a manner that implies their equivalence with Ram and Sita:

Seated on Hara's left is Parvati, together the divine pair.
Look at them! Look at them, and fill your eyes! (Zakaria 2008: 60)

In moments such as these, Ramayan Gaan emphasizes the religious aspect of the performance. But Ramayan Gaan also shows the human side of Ram. There are a number of emotional scenes that show a more tender side of Ram than we often see in Ramlila. For instance, after Sita's post-war exile to the forest, one day Lakshman sees Ram crying and says,

Dada [elder Brother], I bow down to your feet.
You sit on the throne yet, overcome by sadness, you weep.
Do thoughts of Janaki [Sita] come to your mind? (Zakaria 2008: 195)

As in Ramlila, cherished social values are often communicated through such performances. Filial and fraternal duty and love are values that are especially extolled in Ramayan Gaan. Sometimes these values are even expressed by demonic characters. When Mahiravan objects to Ravan's plans on moral grounds since he has abducted another man's wife, Ravan tells him, "Father represents heaven and all duty. He is the aim of all penance. If he is happy, all deities are pleased" (Zakaria 2008: 59). As another example, after Ram's marriage to Sita is arranged, Ram awaits his father's command before going through with the wedding and insists that all four of his brothers' weddings be performed at the same time (Zakaria 2008: 53).

The importance of penance and sacrifice are also highlighted as, for example, during the war when Ram explains to Lakshman why killing Meghnad will not be an easy task. Ram tells him that only a warrior who has "observed an ascetic life and fasted for fourteen years, and hasn't looked at a woman's face for fourteen years" is capable of defeating Meghnad (Zakaria 2008: 57). Ram's implication is that Lakshman is the only one capable of killing Meghnad for he has fulfilled these conditions. Even those in Ravan's clan are lauded when they act virtuously, and Vibhishan, Ravan's brother who supports Ram, is especially singled out in this regard.

Other scenes illustrate moral conundrums, as when Tara berates Ram after he has shot and killed her husband Vali, in accordance with his promise to Sugriv:

Ram, you are a coward! You shouldn't have killed my husband thus.
I curse you! Listen, I am a *sati*, a devoted wife, so my curse will come true.
You will rescue Sita, return home, and become king.

But you will be hurt because of Sita.
For Sita, you will commit suicide by drowning in the Sarayu River!
(Zakaria 2008: 55)

Ram then provides a rousing defense of his actions, citing his adherence to *dharma*.

Through these examples, we can see that Ramayan Gaan operates in a moral universe very similar to that of Ramlila. This is a moral universe where strict hierarchies obtain in both the family and in society. Rules must be followed, and respect and honor given where they are due as, for example between king and subject and between guru and student. In these ways, both styles of theatre pass along important social and religious values to audiences.

Concluding Thoughts

In this essay, we have elaborated some of the distinctive features of Ramayan Gaan and its relationship to Ramlila. Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of Ramayan Gaan performances is that they are very popular in Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country. In fact, they are enthusiastically performed and appreciated there by Hindus and Muslims alike. A significant reason for this may be the pervasive orality of the medium itself and the welcoming cultural ethos of its songs, many inspired by Baul fakirs (wandering mystics and bards), whose style of singing is known as *kabigān* or *bicārgān* (traditional musical performing arts of Bangladesh and West Bengal). Regardless of their religion, caste, or class, audience members can enjoy these songs, which are permeated with *bhakti*, love, and moral teachings. The unforgettable songs of Fakir Lalon Sai, who lived in the nineteenth century, are still beloved to this day. Venerated as a saint and considered “The King of Bauls,” he inspired countless poets including literary giants Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazirul Islam. Although Fakir Lalon Sai had no formal religious affiliation, his songs make frequent reference to the Ramayan. This same inclusive spirit pervades Ramayan Gaan.

In the Hindi-speaking regions, Navaratri is closely associated with Ramlila, but as one moves further east, where Hindi segues to Bhojpuri and other Bihari dialects, there is more and more association of Navaratri with Durga Puja. Once one crosses into the Bengali-speaking regions, Durga Puja is predominant, and the familiar style of Ramlila on the plains gives way to and mingles with other forms, such as Ramayan Gaan. At this transitional zone of religious practice, we can see how Ramlila and Durga Puja are seamlessly interwoven into the fall festival cycle. Even in Varanasi, which lays claim to some of the oldest and most celebrated Ramlilas in existence, including the celebrated

one in Ramnagar, we can see the overlapping worlds of these festivals.⁶ In Durga Puja, the elaborate rituals dedicated to Durga are invariably accompanied by *pāṭh* or the recitation of sacred texts like the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the Ramayan, reinforcing people's faith in the potency of the Word. This ritual context also helps to explain how both traditions, Durga Puja and Ramlila, can exist side-by-side so harmoniously.

To explain the immense draw of Ramlila performances, Philip Lutgendorf once cited a formula commonly applied to Ram-katha performances: "the Lord has four fundamental aspects [*vigraha*]: name, form, acts, and abode [*nām, rūp, līlā, dhām*]*—*catch hold of any one of these and you will be saved!" (1991: 250). This formula, he suggests, also has relevance to Ramlila, in the sense that it gives the audience direct access to the Lord's *rūp* (form). As in Ramlila, so too in Ramayan Gaan—once performers don the costume and enact "sacred roles," they are deemed to be personifying, or taking on the *rūp* of the deities themselves. Lutgendorf and other scholars of the Ramlilas in Ramnagar and Varanasi, including Richard Schechner, Linda Hess, and Anuradha Kapur, have all underlined the transformative effect of Ramlila performances on audience members who, as *darśanābhilāshīs* (those desirous of a vision), eagerly wait for a glimpse of the sacred personae (*svarūps*) (Schechner and Hess 1977; Kapur 1990; Hess 2006). The same pull, the same attraction to the *rūp*, is also felt by audience members at Ramayan Gaan performances.

Ramayan Gaan and related forms in the Bengali-speaking regions are beloved styles of folk art. They appeal because performers intimately understand and directly communicate with their audiences. As the dramatist-scholar Balwant Gargi aptly wrote, "Folk theater represents the people in their natural habitat, with all their contradictions and multifarious activities. It gives a glimpse of their style of speech, music, dance, dress, behavior, humor, proverbs, wit, and wisdom. It contains a rich store of mythological heroes, medieval romances, chivalric tales, social customs, beliefs, and legends" (1966: 5).

Today Ramayan Gaan continues to enthrall audiences. However, increasingly, it is facing stiff competition from cinema, television, video games, and the internet, and as such, has become what UNESCO calls imperiled cultural heritage. The relationships between patrons, performers, and audiences are changing. Those who endeavor to keep Ramayan Gaan performances going face various difficulties. For patrons, the cost of hiring a troupe is high and keeps rising, and for performers, the work is low-paying and precarious. Performers may sit idle for weeks or even months when demand for their art is low. Social changes have also affected the public's perception of Ramayan Gaan. Sadly, expanding literacy seems to have diminished people's interest in

the traditional arts, including the performing arts. The struggle to sustain forms such as Ramayan Gaan is becoming more acute day by day. It is the dedication of the performers themselves that keeps the forms alive today. Sponsorship and sustenance of the folk traditions are urgently needed at our present moment in time.

NOTES

1. For more on the plurality of Ramayan texts and performance traditions, see [Raghavan 2009](#) and [Richman 1991, 2000](#).
2. For more detailed studies of Ramayan Gaan, see [Zakaria 2008, 2017](#).
3. See [Sarkar 2017](#), on the development of the martial-cum-domestic Durga which is widely worshipped today.
4. Sita is also said to be the daughter of Ravan and Mandodari in Sanghadasa's Jain Ramayan.
5. See [Ramanujan 1991](#), on the diverse ways the Ramayan is learned and disseminated in India.
6. Hillary Peter Rodrigues has documented the performance of Durga Puja in his ethnographic study ([2003](#)). Summarizing the significance of the ritual, he writes, “Symbolic, verbal and gestural components from ancient rites were utilized, rearranged, supplemented with newer elements and syncretized into ritual mosaics that prove meaningful to worshippers today” ([2003: 1](#)).

REFERENCES

- Awasthi, Suresh. 1974.
 “The Scenography of the Traditional Theatre of India.” *TDR (The Drama Review)* 18, no. 4 (December): 36–46.
- Gargi, Balwant. [1966] 1991.
Folk Theater of India. Calcutta: Rupa & Co.
- Hess, Linda. 2006.
 “An Open-Air Ramayana.” In *The Life of Hinduism*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Vasudha Narayanan, 115–139. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kapur, Anuradha. 1990.
Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods: The Ramlila at Ramnagar. Kolkata: Seagull Books.
- Lord, Albert B. 1960.
The Singer of Tales. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lutgendorf. 1991.
The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Raghavan, V., ed. 2009.
The Ramayana Tradition in Asia. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.

- Ramanujan, A. K. 1991.
 “300 Ramayanas.” In *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman, 22–49. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Richman, Paula, ed. 1991.
Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2000.
Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rodrigues, Hillary Peter. 2003.
The Ritual Worship of the Great Goddess: The Liturgy of Durga Puja with Interpretations. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Sarkar, Bihani. 2017.
Heroic Shaktism: The Cult of Durga in Ancient Indian Kingship. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schechner, Richard, and Linda Hess. 1977.
 “The Ramlila of Ramnagar.” *TDR* 21, no. 3: 51–82.
- Zakaria, Saymon. 2008.
Bāṅglādeśer lokaṇāṭok: bishoy o āṅgik-baicitrya (Folk Theatre in Bangladesh: Variation of Content and Phenomenon). Dhaka: Bangla Academy.
- . 2017.
Pronomohi Bongomata: Indigenous Cultural Forms of Bangladesh, revised 3rd ed. Dhaka: Nympha Publication.