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What is This?
While debating between different titles for this paper, I found myself struggling to keep 'Ramlila' out of the name. For me my paper was about serious things: gender categories and their sustenance, political domination and resistance, negotiated constitutions of rationality and decency; not, as might seem from a title 'Ramlila', about a traditional performance in dusty spaces repeating a familiar, reactionary myth. The recognition of my dilemma was followed by the realisation that there was a polemic I wished to be engaged in, with which I shall begin.

As with most developments in scholarship, we show a rather explicit pattern of following the West in our new regard for culture in history writing. Thompson expressed envy some fifteen years ago regarding the fact that we Indians were liberally surrounded by people's oral traditions, genres, performances, creations, whereas a social historian of England would be overjoyed to discover in his career one song that had not been studied before. Given the continued productivity and richness of people's traditional (in the non-technical sense of from the past) culture all around us, the fact that we have such few historians of work, leisure, family, ritual, everyday life, popular literature and consciousness can only be attributed to the processes of academic reproduction in institutions self-willingly isolated from surrounding reality. Without a desire to suggest international competition or nationalist signatures to history writing, I would like to express my confidence that now that culture and everyday life is coming to be taken seriously by historians in the West, it will progressively come to be seen as important here.

My own work on popular culture was based on an (insufficiently

1 A landmark that comes to mind is the Seminar on New History, Delhi, 1988.
formulated) intuition of an existing—and exciting—gap in Indian History that I wished to fill—the situation of many Ph.D. candidates. As also with so many dissertations, I found, once in the field, that I had bitten off more than I could immediately chew\(^3\) and have not been able to close that chapter of my research yet even while I have taken up other topics subsequently, such as primary education and curricula.

I will first give some arguments in brief for taking culture seriously in history writing, and then overview my particular arguments in this paper regarding the Ramlila.

The central problem for most social sciences, at least the two that I am familiar with, History and Anthropology, remains the seeming duality of causation, in structure (social, economic, political) and in human agency. They exist either simultaneously or in closely woven strands of cause–effect relationships. One is produced by the other and in turn conditions the other in one continuous process. This problem is most central to the discipline of History precisely because historians are interested in process and change, although many get away by making a static analysis of some totality in the past.

The problem can also be put as how to come to know structure such as class relations or authority and domination in the process of their structuring, realising that these relationships are always transmitted through cultural meanings. The inability of much of cultural–symbolic anthropology to sufficiently ground ideologies, philosophies, worldviews and other constructions of social reality in structural constraints and their social genesis, makes historians often bend over backwards in paying attention to the social world. That this social world is uttered and constructed by people in ways that can only be called 'cultural' may not be debated in principle by most historians but is in practice seldom investigated. They may feel also—as I have found myself feeling in the past—that they are being renegades in looking beyond material structures for agency; and there is always the threat of a return to narrative history.

My simultaneous discovery of feminism as a theoretical perspective gave me important insights in this area. It has to ward off the constantly threatening danger of the categorisation ‘woman’, essentialist, determined, universalisable, recoverable, always the object of structures, of patriarchy, of domination, of repression.\(^4\) Agency is elusive, but the political insistence

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that it must indeed exist gets translated into scholarship (sometimes) that hones methodological tools to overcome invisibility—of documents, data, subjecthood, consciousness itself. This is comparable to the subalternist enterprise where similar methodological questions are being asked, and I think the advance of feminist scholarship in the field is actually due to the essentially political aspect of feminism. To be a feminist means to believe in agency; then to be a feminist scholar is to have to produce evidence for agency.

With which I come to my own analysis of the Ramlila. My discussion of it is partly based on earlier work from which I take most of the factual details. But my interpretation of it has been revised in the light of the awareness, among other things, of being marginalised. Like other historians who study popular culture, consciousness, and the practice of everyday life, and use anthropological perspectives in doing so, I find myself on a periphery, because these subjects do not fit into the centre, still understood as those phenomena that play significant roles in the 'great transformation'—modernisation, industrialisation, and the emergence of bureaucratic and national states. I do not challenge the importance of these phenomena, but my own interest lies in paying increasingly careful attention to otherness, difference, conflict, to the costs of change, the exclusions, resistances, and invisibility of historical losers.

So I find in concepts and practices like the lila and the Ramlila a way of re-creating the experiences of the excluded; in a perspective that does not underestimate ‘great’ transformations or reject material constraints, but which does see the notion of ‘totality’—of cultural unity and continuity, of a unilinear development of history—breakdown. I find that in this so-called overarching ‘lila’ concept of the Hindus, women are excluded both grossly and subtly, at the level of its application in everyday life and less explicitly at the level of performance. Similarly, by studying its history I find that the meanings of religious experience, service to the Lord, darshan, and all the associated meanings of the Ramlila are not separable from the history of the production and dissemination of these concepts. The Ramlila is not a residue of the past or a fundamental part of folk culture. It is a live genre that has been the field for control and domination, expressing social relations,

5 See Kumar, The Artisans, Chapter 7.
6 The case for, or rather against, such marginalisation is well made by Hans Medick. Missionaries in the Row Boat? Ethnological Ways of Knowing as a Challenge to Social History, in Comparative Studies in Society and History, 1987, pp. 76-98. For the dualism inherent in most perspectives, see also Pierre Bourdieu, Social Space and Symbolic Power, in Sociological Theory 7, No.1 (Spring 1989), pp. 14-17: but it is a problem that much Social Science writing takes up.
7 The term used by Tambiah, with whose understanding of history I cannot but disagree, in Stanley Tambiah, 'At the Confluence of Anthropology, History, and Indology,' in Contributions to Indian Sociology 21, 1 (1987), p. 190.
defining the self and others, decency and progress. It is not 'traditional',
but has been constructed to seem so. It is not 'folk', but is historically
becoming so. It is not even 'religious', having been equally a 'social' or
'political' event until recently. It raises the question, who has the power to
bestow meanings? Which other powers does it accompany?

The Ramlila has been studied by scholars of religion, civilisation, and cul-
ture. The 'lila' concept has been studied mainly by Indologists. In my paper, I
first suggest an alternative view of the lila. Then, in part I, I look at the
gendered nature of (a) the concept of lila, lila seen as Banarasi lifestyle,
and (b) the performance of lila. In part II, I look at its history to present
the class conflicts that have characterised it. In summing up, I throw up
some questions it raises about the nature of change, not all of which are
answered here.

The concept of lila is an extraordinary one. It presents some of the most
creative, subtle, original, insightful paired oppositions in Hindu thought,
putting the concept of dialectic itself to shame: the idea of abandon but
also control, playfulness but total application, freedom achieved through
discipline, amusement coexisting with purposefulness, superhuman bïïs
and joy within the earthly mundane, divine presence evoked by human
craft, ecstasy that breaks the bound of the self while celebrating the human
senses. It is the same concept as revealed in meditation and asceticism, in
Hindu cosmogony and bhakti, in the images and values drawn upon by
Hindus in both aesthetics and the sciences. Examples are limitless: the
ragas of classical music, the forms of Shiva, present day Hindu saints such
as Deoraha Baba and Anandmayi Ma, the image of the elephant drunk
with pleasure in the rains, and at my local level, the Banarasi immersed in
pan mastication and all night celebratory chaos as he participates in the
appearance of his gods on his homeground....

The pervasiveness of the lila concept in Hindu life is so marked that one
may well analyse it as being at least the one constant of Hindu life, since
like Ramanujan's notion of context–dependence it permits that very flux
and change, moving and varying with sociological complexities and historical
exigencies, that more rigid concepts cannot handle.

But what if lila is also a discourse, a set of rules with which statements
can be made both about what is True and what is False? What if, like other
discourses, it is also necessarily located in power, power that works not

8 I participated in 'The Concept of Lila in South Asia,' an international conference sponsored
by the Centre for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, April 1989, where I
heard a particularly rich collection of papers. I thank all the participants for their discussion
and comments, most of all the organiser, William Sax.

9 A.K. Ramanujan, 'Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?' in McKim Marriott, ed., India
Through Hindu Categories, Delhi, Sage Publications, 1990. Ramanujan, of course, calls it
'Indian' rather than 'Hindu', an unfortunate, if typical, oversight.
through the better recognised forms of repression or domination, but through
the sheer creation of knowledge, specially the knowledge of what is Right?
What if its rules, like those of any discourse, while producing what count as
Truthful and Meaningful statements, consistently marginalise and trivialise
others? And, most of all, in doing so, its statements still pose as Natural
and Essential, rather than being part of a necessary heterogeneity and
differentiation?

The best reason for considering it a discourse is that lila has in fact come
to be seen, by intellectuals both within and without the society, as a Thing
out there, to be comprehended, defined, discovered in texts and perform-
ances, taken in all seriousness as Philosophy. In doing this, scholars have
swallowed the whole discourse potla–potli (bag and baggage, that is) and
consider it Natural, without history, without subjects, without contestation
and without the play of power. The most marked characteristic of a discourse
is its naturalness. What sounds, in present scholarship, more natural in
Hinduism than the concept of lila? Who would construct it, who would
contest it, whence could there arise conflict within it? This proclivity of
scholars is part of the largely essentialist enterprise of academia in general
where so much respect is given to Authority and Authenticity in general
that the lived-in world, with its undersides of suppressed meanings and dis-
united fragments, and even rather powerful tensions, is ignored. That
there is continuous construction of everything in society, including all texts
and belief systems, is a lesson to which usually only lip service is paid. The
nature of academic specialisation is such, moreover, that a scholar of a
certain kind of texts—whether inscribed or oral—remains basically con-
fined to that and the methodological project of looking deliberately for
contradiction, heterogeneity, and alterity, whether within or outside the
texts becomes difficult.

This is of course not an original discovery of mine and the point has fre-
quently been made in recent years.11 There are projects that seek to apply
the post-modernist stance of searching for seams, openness, difference,
and contradiction, even if they do not always do so consciously.12 I have
arrived at my present approach from battling for many years with data
from Banaras on both lifestyle in general and its Ramlilas, especially one
episode called the Cutting off the Nose, in particular. Looking at both
these areas, I tend to see lila, in both concept and practice—and obviously

10 See Dominick LaCapra, History and Criticism, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985;
11 Flax, Thinking Fragments; Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, New
12 For a friendly review of some such projects, see Gayatri Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies:
Deconstructing Historiography,' in R. Guha, ed., Subaltern Studies IV, Delhi, Oxford University
not coincidentally both, since they are part of the same discursive formation—as highly contested ground, in which conflict and violence has been endemic, victories unstable and temporary, and discursive displacements notable. Two striking areas of conflict are in gender relations and class relations.

Beware of the Ladies’ Men

Banaras is called by male informants *purushon ka shahar* (a city of men). They speak boastfully of a past when no woman was ever seen on the streets, and stayed well within their bounds. Change has come, in popular view, from the immigration of ‘refugees’ like Punjabis, Sindhis, and heterogeneous elements, whose womenfolk cannot be kept in check. They dispense with head covering, even wear short hair, work outside, transact business on the streets, and are certainly visible. Their influence has spread like a cancer and the old purity of Banaras is no more. Whereas there is little to support this view of women’s invisibility in the past—it might rather reflect a male inability to see women when they are, publicly, producers, consumers, and distributors, as they have always been in Banaras, and to tend to see them as symbols instead—the image is a powerful one. It is one of the parts of a larger construction regarding balance, order, and virtue in society which are all variously summoned up to buttress more particular actions.

Banaras residents sport what I have called elsewhere an ideology of leisure and recreation which fully exemplifies the male nature of the city. That is, the people of Banaras feel defined by their activities and lifestyle, and each of these is exclusively male or male-centred. Clearly articulated ideals are at work here: *mauj, masti, akharpan, phakkarpan*—carefreeness, abandon, eccentricity, joie de vivre—all of which are male. It is necessary to understand these in some depth, as well as the place of lila in them.

The Banaras resident (*Banarasi*, a term with cultural connotations of being true to the spirit of Banaras, a term that necessarily stands only for males) describes his pleasures as the following: working out in *akharas* (indigenous gymnasiums), going for outdoor trips outside the city for bathing and drugs, making and listening to music, celebrating festivals with public worship and processions, and simply wandering around the city. None of these activities include women: women do not visit *akharas*, they do not go on outdoor trips, they do not participate in weekly or fortnightly singing, they do not participate in processions or organise public pujas, and they certainly do not wander around, drinking tea on outdoor benches or eating by the wayside. This exclusion from the city’s prime fun activities is still a minor point, because of course women must have an alternate, rich and complex, world of activities of their own. But it has no name, no coherence.

13 Kumar, *The Artisans*.
no public articulation, no swagger (but of course a body language), and no sanction in Tradition. What is far more significant than women’s total exclusion from the ‘Banaras’ world of leisure and pleasure is their exclusion from the discourse of Banarasipan (Banaras-ness, what it means to be a Banarasi), a far-reaching discourse of power and control.

The notion of Banarasipan is similar to that of lila; in saying this I am but stirring the Banaras cultural pot with an analytical ladle to bring up some of the conceptual sediments sticking unobtrusively to the bottom. Here is the notion, the ideology or discourse of Banarasipan or lila: life is play, modelled on the example of the Lord, in this case Shiva, the patron deity of the city. Not only did Shiva found the city and locate it on his trident, thus becoming a Banarasi once and for all, his whole personality—supreme dancer, unpredictable eccentric, potent but controlled, terribly creative and horribly destructive, gentle to the point of bovinity and feminity, raw, uncouth, beastlike, beyond all mundane cares and trivial pursuits—is precisely what forms the self image of the Banarasi. The lila of the Lord is the definition of life for his devotee. The Banarasi, therefore, is always engaged in a kind of spinning of lila: a supreme craftsman, but jealous above all of his freedom, the freedom to abandon all work and simply wander, dream, sport in water, become intoxicated and perhaps destructive. Mud, garbage, refuse, shit, in proper beastly, jungle fashion, are objects regarded with bemused tolerance, indeed ritualisation and pleasure, as they are explicitly by some sanyasis (those at the last stage of asceticism). Defecation, as I have analysed at length elsewhere is particularly a multi-vocal ritual for the people of Banaras, and not a bodily function only, but aspect of the highest philosophy of life—one that sees, as it were, the divine among the dung—that can treat everyday cares with absolute indifference and engage in play instead, the goal being non-involvement.

Like all discourse, this lila discourse assumes its opposite, what is suppressed in order to give it the tight feeling of unity and consistency that it has. Behind the abandon and non-involvement in cares is the shadowy female figure squatting in the shades of house walls, blowing at embers to make the bread rise, worried for the time when the city trotter will return to eat and sleep. There is no trace of play, sport, freedom, or divinity—in short, of lila—in domesticity, and none of domesticity (witness Shiva’s example again) in the play and sport that comprises lila. The overall conceptual system, the discourse, of lila, is invoked by Banaras men to validate

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15 I am speaking here not of the domesticity analysed by Madan from primarily textual sources, where he opposes it to renunciation and equates it with the pleasures of the flesh. Since his analysis excludes women, as do the texts and informants he uses for data, his notions of domesticity do not correspond with mine, where I maintain that women are the ‘domesticated’,
a lifestyle through summoning up symbols, sub-concepts, Histories, and models, and confirm the discourse as totally natural and given, indeed as the only one possible. What is left out are the positions of others, and all the meanings and possibilities of meanings that are treated by the discourse as irrelevant, but are addressed regularly by others. Lila is a highly gendered discourse, and as such, 'a primary way of signifying relationships of power...a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated'.

It may be, that for all my (deliberately mild, controlled) stirring of concepts with my analytical ladle, the taste of the pudding is not quite right for my readers. Let me just reiterate how I line up my analytical categories to allow me to equate the concept of the lila with Banarasi men wandering around and chewing their mouths red with pan.

First, by listening to the representations themselves. The appearance, intersection, incarnation of the divine on this earth is translated by Banarasis as the ability to philosophise about and pull oneself free of, nagging everyday cares, including the fear of death. Moksha is a powerful metaphor in Banaras that refers not merely to release after death, but in everyday practice, under different names, to release from worry about purposes and achievements. As with the lord at his lila, this means intense involvement with chosen aspects of living, those that signal freedom, beauty, sensuality, and oneness with nature. So short of actually saying, 'Oh, the concept of lila: we actually apply it in our everyday lives. That's what we call Banarasipan,' male informants in Banaras would make all the representations necessary for us to draw the analogy. But if pressed, they would ponder the stench and filth surrounding them and pontificate, 'God is everywhere, in every stone and mudpile in the city, and continues to create (rachna) his lila. So must we be part of the garbage but above it.'

A second device is to look for what the representations exclude and suppress. The lila discourse directly and indirectly constructs male and female identity in Banaras by making naturalistic statements about the one and suppressing the other, while suggesting it continuously as the residual. Female saints (Anandmayi Ma, Betiji maharaj) and courtesans aside, this residual category is the opposite of the free, the acting agent with moods, personalities, preferences; the playful personage who chooses to recede or to get involved. Playfulness is not the prerogative of women, as is not lack of worry, carefreeness, abandon, and mouths dripping uncontrollably with

and Man the Householder as I find him in Banaras has forged an approach to incorporate both pleasure and non-involvement in it; T.N. Madan, *Non-Renunciation: Themes and Interpretations of Hindu Culture*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987.

pan. In what the discourse excludes as well as what it states, Banarasipan shows itself to be a subset of lila. For both, local power relations make possible these kinds of discourses, and these discourses, as Foucault puts it, are used to support power relations.¹⁷

So, in both its statements and their necessary exclusions, the discourse of lila/Banarasipan bases itself on the two rules: one, that a celebration of the pleasures of this world, with the recognition that everything is god, leads to a carefree, sportlike involvement with it which is a reflection of god's own sporting with and in his creation, ergo, an expression of the highest wisdom of life, lila itself. And, two, that women are not part of this vision of the good life as subject participants. They are simply not spoken of, excluded the most effectively by total silence, accompanied by the manipulation of symbols that are incontestably male.

The Ramlila is the staged theatre extending over many evenings based on the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas, familiar to everyone who knows North India. There are dozens of Ramlilas in Banaras, each to a ward, mohalla, or group of mohallas (ward and mohalla being administrative divisions, with eight wards in the city, and approximately 50–100 mohallas in each.) Each has an elected, mostly registered, body that collects funds, and appoints the amateurs and professionals who will stage the play. Almost all Ramlilas have histories—stories of beginnings and sometimes ends, and often revivals—that are written about or known publicly, and all are expected to have histories, i.e., to display the same dynamic quality that people experience in every other aspect of their lives. I chose to study the Ramlila of Chaitganj, a neighbourhood in Banaras, and one episode of that Ramlila called Nakkatayya, or cutting off the nose, for reasons that will become clear, but I fully believe that any of the other local neighbourhood Ramlilas of the city merits a similar analysis.

The plot of the evening consists of Ravana’s sister, Surpanakha, trying to tempt the two virtuous brothers, Rama, and then Lakshmana, to ‘wrong-doing’, whereupon an outraged Lakshmana slices off her nose to humiliate her for her conduct. The enraged demoness goes to her brothers to complain and they take out an army in procession. After hours of the procession winding its way through the lanes of Chaitganj, the rest of the evening’s theatre is enacted. Sita is taken in by Ravana disguised as a deer and foolishly begs her husband to trap the beautiful creature for her. Ravana then tricks her into thinking that Rama has gotten injured and is crying for help. The lady now forces her brother-in-law to follow Rama. Lakshmana is reluctant to leave her unprotected, but cannot disobey, so draws a Lakshmana rekha (line of Lakshmana) a protective line around her and their cottage that would spit fire on anyone who tried to cross it. Ravana arrives,

disguised as a mendicant. (The vainglorious, thoughtless) Sita steps out of the magic line to give him alms and is promptly abducted. Rama and Lakshmana then fight to rescue the lady, as her brothers have readied themselves for battle to avenge Surpanakha.

This rather bare plot, familiar from the Tulsidas Ramcharitmanas, consists of the story of two women who transgress the bounds set on them by men, rather explicitly as a line in Sita's case, implicitly as an expectation of moral conduct in Surpanakha's case, and how their trespassing leads them to fates worse than death, not to speak of overall warfare, wastage of resources, destruction of men, and a turning upside down of society.

A Society with Classes

So the Nakkatayya episode is permeated through and through with statements about asymmetrical gender relations. The plot of the vindictiveness of the ladies' relatives outlined above, however, is really the barest core of the Chaitganj Nakkatayya. The heart of the event lies in a julus, a procession, which finds its excuse, as it were, in the march of the demon army. When the Nakkatayya is spoken of, it is the procession that is referred to and merits a brief description.

Chaitganj, a market area (ganj) of some antiquity (founded by Chait Singh?) has a wide central avenue which is cleaned up and prepared elaborately for the evening by residents through public donations. Each shop is decorated, the street lined by stalls of eatables, toys, and crafts. Gates are put up by local merchants advertising their products, and the rows of lights and countless loudspeakers that characterise every Banaras public event are at their maximum. Policemen are posted every few yards; it is clear that this is no ordinary lila where pre-rehearsed sobriety prevails; it is an overwhelming, gigantic affair that is potentially combustible.

The procession starts after midnight and is led by a hermaphrodite and a prostitute, suitably liminal and demonic, dancing and leering at the spectators. Then follow in quick succession bands of musicians, troupes of dancers, performers of traditional tricks of sword and pole wielding, magicians, fire breathers, animal trainers and their pets. The third and main part of the procession consists of some one hundred floats (lagas and vimanas) that depict four kinds of situations: (a) gods put together in combinations of elaborate balancing feats, such as Shiva holding up a globe merely with his trident, on which rotate other deities, or Hanuman with Rama, Laxmana, and Sita on each shoulder and tail, respectively; (b) A mime of a secular nature, such as in 1986 the assassination of Indira Gandhi; (c) Little children dressed up as royalty frozen into statues on intricate metal thrones; (d) Feats of mechanical motion (cycles, spheres, tubes, and girders), or electrical craft, powered by deafening electric generators.
The main street of Chaitganj is alive with activity well before the procession starts: lights, music, noise, shopping, wandering around. As the parade takes over the space, some few yards get cleared before it, and spectators line up on either side, and swamp back into the space as the parade passes on. There is a curious mixture of performance—hired and designed shows and art—and people's event, since there are no formal boundaries. How does all this constitute the lila? The Nakkatayya can best be understood as falling squarely within the repertoire of Banaras public events, displaying those qualities which make for appreciation in Banaras, which we must understand in order to see how it has been an object of contention. The power of the event lies clearly in the popular mind in the following features: (a) its size: attendance in it is reputed to be over 100,000, making it a lakh (lakh=100,000) mela, one of the three largest melas in the city. Size in everything, and for public events in calculation of the numbers attending, is a cultural preoccupation in Banaras, making it always more expensive and troublesome an occasion for the hosts or organisers, its rationality lying, in Bourdieu's term, in its display of symbolic capital,\(^{18}\) (b) It goes on all night, which is also indicative of bigness, all public events in Banaras striving to extend their hours through the night into the early hours, (c) The parade is a double winner, in itself as procession, and second, as display of craft and glitter. A procession is a highly charged political event, the clearest display of one's powers, leaders, and symbols, and indeed is used for agitations and political rallies the most frequently. Processions at festivals make the same statement about the solidarity and strength of the constituency of the particular god being displayed, they are also charged occasions where the boundaries between audience and performers, stage space and realspace, melt away. Moharram and Guru Nanak Jayanti, the immersion parades of Durga and Vishwakarma, are all political and symbolic statements, as well as occasions of community gatherings.\(^ {19}\) In 1911, for those who could not witness the Darbar in Delhi, parades were organised with officers taken out in state. In Banaras it was 'the procession of the Collector sahab':

Publicity posters and announcements had already been taken care of a day before, so there was a good crowd on the roads. The julus to accompany the carriage started getting ready on the campus of Queen's College in the afternoon itself. At the head was the Superintendent of Police, mounted, behind which were pole bearers, five cavalry, four cannons, and the band and platoon of Maharaja Banaras, then on a decorated

19 See, for example, the report 'The Procession of Sri Annapurnaji,' in *Bharat Jiwan*, 23 December 1912, p. 9.
elephant the pictures of Maharaj George V and Maharani Mary, behind
which was a police regiment, then the Collector sahab on a fancy elephant,
followed by the elephant of Maharaj Jangam, and about twenty elephants
of the rais (aristocracy). After that came the incomparable musicians of
Maharaj Bhinga, soldiers of Maharaj Banaras, lines of camels, the cavalry
of Maharaj Banaras and scores of phaeton carriages of the rais.20

The description continues with details of the route taken, the gates and
tents, the flower decorations at shops and homes on the wayside, and the
pleasure of the crowds. The obvious satisfaction in such reports and all oral
ones on the subject of processions in general, and of course the significations
created, make me evaluate the role of processions in Banaras public life
very highly. The Nakkatayya has the additional attraction of being a display
of craft and circus feats, which exerts a kind of magnetism, as with Moharram
taziyas and Durga images, making it imperative for people to attend, to
compare this year’s show with last year’s and this mohalla’s display with the
other’s.

(d) The Nakkatayya includes certain characteristics that people in Banaras
believe to be central to any popular activity, among which is supposed
sanction in tradition, and a deep moral structure in which good triumphs
over evil (picturesquely described as the akhiri nichor, the final wringing).
The Ramlila fulfils this condition in two ways, one through story telling as
in a mythological film, and the other through darshan, giving a chance to
view one’s favourite gods in highly amplified settings, as at the annual cele-
brations at temples and shrines.

(e) Compulsory to the popularity of public events in Banaras is also the
presence of, or a past or imagined existence of, bahri alang, the ‘outer
side’. This is open space, uncrowded, free, cool, receptive, one’s own.
Banaras residents behave like the citizens of a metropolis in seeking escape
to open spaces, but a look at the ward of Chaitganj makes this problematic.
Not only is it tightly packed and close to the centre, the fair itself attracts so
many thousands that it is one of the most bustling, overpacked events,
which needs constant police and volunteer supervision to prevent the
heightened feelings and sheer crowd mentality from erupting into anarchy.
Yet, when questioned why they like this Ramlila, people maintain that
they feel free and in the open, wandering here and there with friends, stop-
ping to taste this, enjoy that.... In my analysis, it is never people that crowd
people in popular thinking, but only buildings that do. If the space is an
open one, under the sky, regardless of the numbers in attendance, it is felt
to be open. Gigantic fairs and gatherings, such as the Kumbh Melas, with
millions attending, are not uncommon in India, but never spoken of criti-
cally or complainingly by their constituents.

20 Bharat Jiwan, 11 December 1911, p. 10.
f) Competitiveness is rife in Banaras cultural life and equally part of Ramlilas like the Nakkatayya. Floats and performers, animal trainers and fire swallowers are awarded prizes, shops fronts and decorated spaces compete to dazzle, and the most explicit competition is between the different akharas or clubs of sword and pole wielding. All the awards are broadcast in the printed Ramlila programme, in banners and signboards, and over loudspeakers. At the next level the whole affair is competing, although its primary position is long established, with all the Nakkatayyas of all the other neighbourhoods in Banaras, and some features such as metal thrones or artisans' stalls are regarded as better at the Kashipura (the metalworkers' locality) and Khojwa (the woodworkers' neighbourhood) Nakkatayyas, respectively. This brings us to the next feature, the commercial aspects of the fair, because prizes are voluntarily given, and their announcement provides an avenue for publicity for the person or business assuming the role of patron.

(g) People spend at the Ramlila, on food, trinkets, local crafts, and childrens' attractions. This economic activity is what is basically meant by mela or fair, so that a righteous critic might claim that the mela is nowadays taking over from religion altogether. Chaitganj is an important business area, and its traders and shopkeepers donate heavily towards its Ramlila; its size and attractiveness and attendant reputation clearly constituting symbolic capital for them. Chaitganj is not famous for anything as much as for its Nakkatayya and it is the capitalists of the ward who have the most to spend and the most to gain from the popularity of the fair. An interesting fact is that the date for the Nakkatayya is fixed for Karva Chauth (Pitcher Fourth), an important woman's fast that every wife keeps for her husband. Why Karva Chauth? It is a date that no woman will forget, and by extension her whole family. Although the consumption is chiefly by males on food, and by families on children's overpriced balloons and tit-bits, women are supposedly the most religious section of the population and can be trusted not to forget significant dates. The bringing together of unconnected dates such as Karva Chauth and Nakkatayya is a kind of sleight of hand by which the significance of the fast is made to extend into the fair, making both publicity and persuasion for the public unnecessary.

(h) Finally, we come to the conflict and difference. In my analysis so far, the Nakkatayya exemplifies Banarasi popular culture to the full by standing for the pleasures of bigness, artistry, competition, mela, julus, darshan, and bahri alang. All agree to that, whether they participate in the event or not, as for example police officers when in a neutral mood, for whom the evening is otherwise an oversize law and order problem only. But for Nakkatayya goers these are all positive characteristics, whereas for critics they are all subsumed under the characterisation of the Nakkatayya as ashil, asabhya, uncivilised. The Nakkatayya highlights splits in Banaras
society that are evidenced by other popular activities as well, not quiet and unmarked divisions, but active tensions and conflicts that have worked themselves out variously over the nineteenth century. The history of popular entertainments in Banaras shows them to have been simultaneously accorded respect as dharmik, i.e., religious or righteous, sanctioned in tradition, and condemned as ashlil, i.e., crude or obscene. The most outstanding examples are the sringars or annual celebrations at temples where it was customary for courtesans to perform and for the audience to enjoy their virtuosity and lack of virtue to the full. The popular festival of Diwali, likewise, was berated for its gambling, and Holi because of its obscene processions, drinking and drugs, and most of all galis, structured and rehearsed obscenities directed at members of the public, often printed and illustrated.21

The Chaitganj Ramlila was started in 1888 in a similar way to most of the others in Banaras, through a coordination of efforts of a merchant devotee (Mohan Sahu, a tobacco merchant, in this case) and a popular sadhu (Baba Fateh Ram). The Nakkatayya as a specially significant episode of the Ramlila series is first mentioned in local newspapers as a procession of floats in 1905. In a few years, it is never simply mentioned, it is described annually in great detail, and takes on the nature of a problem.

The Nakkatayya was both more literal and metaphoric at that time. It took the business of being a demon army more literally in that the floats consisted of depictions of evil, of all that was considered worst among social practices: problems such as drunkenness, wife-beating, infidelity, bigamy, prostitution, and gambling—not in a spirit of preaching or direct criticism, but rather with that special fascination with horror which enables one to savour what is unsavoury and forbidden from touch as a rule, and made available on one special occasion. The Nakkatayya was akin to carnival and charivaris in that it reversed social structure for an evening, making available to the senses in artistic, rehearsed ways, what was condemnable and forbidden the rest of the year. It was never quite carnival in that there was no overall licence to overthrow structure; all the floats and mimes were planned and permitted, and the demon army was finally a group of performers, albeit close to spectators given the nature of public processions. An article called ‘Swang [mime] in the Ramlila’ in the Bharat Jiwan describes the event:

There used to be a rather good Ramlila in Kashi in many places, but now they are all gone...[mention of a few that are finished] The Kashiraj’s Lila in Ramnagar continues, of course, but it is not like it used to be; it gets completed somehow. In other places in Kashi, Ramlila is that only in name. The Nakkatayya is now a swang. The cutting of Surpanakha’s

21 For a larger discussion of this, see Kumar, The Artisans. Chapters 6 and 7.
nose, Khar-dushan’s collecting their army to attack Rama—these are unimportant; all that counts are the mimes. The whole form of the Lila is changed. Floats are decorated showing males and females of low castes at their work [examples of gardeners, traders, etc.], of a bride and groom at their wedding, and so on. It’s not enough that men and women are shown in intimacy, people dressed up as washermen and washerwomen and other low castes, create a real disturbance. Abusive actions and immoral behaviour is shown and vulgar words spoken. What is this trend of showing the faulty lila of the world behind the facade of God’s lila?22

There was a perceptible trend to criticism from the beginning, but we also know, through oral history and the local journalism of the period, that the patronage for the Nakkatayya in early twentieth century was not restricted to any particular class of people. Gender, yes; as a part of the Banarasi lifestyle, Nakkatayya was the domain of men in their love of freedom and sport, excellence in craft and performance, and akharpan (eccentricity) in general. But the wealthy and the educated, the thoughtful and the cultured (rais, budhijivi, chintashil, sabhya) all gave money towards, and often took out their own floats annually in the Nakkatayya. Such participation was part of the overall sharing between classes of notions of the good life, of mauj, masti, and shauk, the love of something for its own sake. Shauk is not a term usually used in a religious context, and refers to habits such as pan chewing, tea drinking, smoking, indulging in music and entertainments that verge on the unbridled. A lecherous old man, for example, may be described as shaukeen. In Banaras, given its lack of division between the sensuous and the righteous, so may a regular Ramlila goer be described, with a different set of accompanying gestures. Wealth and aristocracy in Banaras has been exemplified by shauk, the taste, means, and consequently preference for patronage of singers and dancers, good food and compatible company, boating on the river and racing on horse carriages. This is the Banarasipan shared at all levels by the men of Banaras, albeit with varying means, elaborated in the local press, in essays by the literati, as well as the reports of informants.23

Beginning from the 1920s and gathering momentum in the 1930s, the critical assessment of the Nakkatayya took on severe and strident tones. The nationalist movement took on a hegemonic role, as it did almost

22 Bharat Jiwan, 23 October 1905.
23 There at least a dozen periodicals important for the 1880–1950 period, the most articulate and widest circulated being Aj and Bharat Jiwan; among many articles by local authors are Bharatendu Harishchandra’s, in Shivprasad Misra, ed., Bharatendu Granthavali, Vol. 1. Varanasi, Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1970; Mukundlal Sarraf’s collection in Gauravmayi Kashi, Varanasi, n.d.; and most of the articles in Dainik Jagaran Varanasi Praveshand, Varanasi, 1981.
everywhere in urban India, and a new discourse was constructed. This struggled chiefly with definitions of the self: how shall we be in private and what shall we display of ourselves in public? Sometimes the imagined comparison was with Christianity, and despair expressed at a situation where Hinduism was being displayed in the worst possible light to other faiths: 'Not to Muslims, because they actually are in this and co-operate to take it further. We particularly mean padres. Padres come from across the seven seas to bring light to Indians, and Indians who in actuality are the light givers, prove by such activities that they in fact live in pitch darkness'. But most often it was concern with creating a suitable national identity which could do justice to the authentic in Hinduism, in the history of the country, and the philosophy of the people. For that was necessary a purging, a reform, a casting out of vice, and a containment of proclivities that were labelled injurious. The descriptions of the terrible scenes witnessed at the Nakkatayya became more distanced:

Milksellers, flowersellers, trinket sellers...were these presented earlier at Nakkatayya as mimes? Is there any other Ramayana where we can see them? Then why do these swangs come out and why are they permitted? Or even if we allow them to be shown supposing there's no harm in that, what has to be questioned is their explicitly immoral behaviour, their extremely lurid talk, and their veritable shower of abuses. Even worse, when they reach a place with a big crowd of women, they say such crude, obscene things that it seems that shame has gone behind a parda, for neither the mimics nor the audience feels any shame.

The danger was voiced of the government taking steps to stop such a procession. With the growth of the nationalist movement came explicit suggestions for reform:

Such shameful scenes should be completely stopped. The organisers of the Ramlila can stop them in one day. If educated young men would make groups and plead with the makers of floats, these corrupt scenes could be done away with.... Scenes to arouse people should be shown on such occasions. Supposing you are oppressed by taxes and you want to arouse the public, you can make an image of a fat, prosperous man asking an emaciated one for tax, and alongside have three or four young boys walking and chorusing, 'Down with taxes!'.... Men, women, children, and the aged will understand the problem in one day. Or take out giant

24 Bharat Jiwan, 28 October 1907.
25 Ibid.
posters of the leaders of the nation, and recite their lives and characters in brief or distribute them as printed pamphlets....

What is significant is that in this passion for reform, critics, intellectuals, and nationalist leaders yet did not speak of a separation, of themselves as apart and aloof from society, and of the rest of the population as the object to be worked on. A consensus was always assumed, and practices in general had to be reformed. Certain practices had already been targeted by reform movements, and the locus of agitation was the caste or the sub-caste through caste meetings and associations: practices such as drinking, gambling, bigamy, and child marriage. The new development that may be marked in Banaras from the 1920s onwards (and surely in other places as well, if looked for) is reform at the popular cultural level, such as of the patronage of courtesans. After some years of this kind of struggle for reform arose a consciousness of separation: Banaras cultural life came to be divided into the crude and the reformed, gradually to coincide with the lower and the upper classes, the illiterate and the educated, the old fashioned and rural versus the modern and progressive. This was reflected in a linguistic separation of 'we' and 'they':

We want to assure the officers that Bhagwan Rama's lila has no relationship with this barbarism and vulgarity.... In our opinion it is time that the law took over and removed this abuse. If that is not done then those who do not wish to participate in such unseemly exhibition will be forced to do satyagraha.

The Nakkatayya went through three phases: first, as an ideological statement on Hindu society, that presented its values both directly (as the Ramlila story) and as reversal (the themes of the floats in the demon army). Together with depiction was a powerful element of activism at this stage: the Nakkatayya was actually performing a function, interfering in perceived problems in society to cure them through a certain kind of statement making. And this ideology, the activism, and the methods adopted to execute both were consensually held and valued by all classes of Banaras society.

In its second phase, a nationalist discourse spells out the nature of virtue, the self, and the community. The method—a festival procession—may still be retained (that itself is never criticised by our male subjects, only its

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26 Aj, 17 October 1920.
28 Aj, 10 October 1938.
content) and the reform is necessary for the whole of society, not merely some classes or castes, but the discourse is not amenable to debate. It assumes Rightness, Naturalness, and Representativeness, and has no spaces where those who believe in bigamy, for example, or the naturalness of drink and drugs, may make their statements. It is a hegemonic, controlling, unilaterally acting discourse, and to the extent that the nationalist movement was a middle class phenomena in general, it started off as a class-based discourse.

The first stage may be called that of a naive (un-self-conscious) and unchallenged caste structure, and a Hinduism that is not imagined or supposed to be homogeneous and unified, with legitimacy accorded to local practices, and an active participation in the problems of everyday living assumed on the part of the people of a neighbourhood. The second stage contests the heterogeneity, the openness, and the dynamism, in culture, structure, and ideology. One definition of Hinduism is offered, based on a vision of progress, and no conflict in interpretation is accorded respect. One definition of the self is advanced, based on a vision of citizenship and nationhood, and no complexity is countenanced. To these extents, without explicating any difference, the nationalist discourse indulges in violence throughout, not 'us' against 'them', but an indifference and ignoring of who the 'them' might constitute.

At both stages the discursive formations are gendered ones. They are created by men, for men, and assume only men to be conscious agents. Women are acted upon, in the earlier discourse, as objects of malpractices: wife-beating, bigamy, and early marriage, and also the main sufferers from the practices of drunkenness and prostitution. In the latter discourse, they are the victims to be raised up, through the overall raising of society's morals, through education, promotion of nationalism, secularism, and a refined Hinduism.

The third stage followed after a brief and uneasy victory for the nationalist movement. The Nakkatayya was 'purified' of its obscenities, and simultaneously rid of its function of ritual reversal, of the ritual depiction of social features otherwise considered taboo. It did for many years actually include nationalist floats, but from the 1950s onwards there has been no urge towards that either. No social problems or concerns are visible in the procession today, as they were in either of the earlier phases. All social (and also economic, political, and all other) issues are today totally the domain of the government through its various agencies—the new multi-armed deity, one is tempted to say.

What is the function of the Ramlila then? It is firmly lodged in the repertoire of activities that constitute the world of Banaras popular culture: That it continues to be popular is a very significant comment on the resilience of popular cultural forms in the face of seemingly powerful competition from movies, Amitabh Bachchan, and orchestra music (as westernised music is
called in Banaras); not to mention the ever alert arms of the administration and the police nervous about disorder and particularly on religious celebrations. This is a matter that merits some thought, because the circus and iconic content of the Nakkatayya makes one realise that it does not successfully compete in any objective sense with either movies or the circus. At either, easily available in Banaras as in all towns, specially the former on video, one may either see far better performances of acrobatic feats, or displays of electronic wizardry, or representation of the gods. The much lamented demise of pre-capitalist culture when people made artefacts with their own hands, put on performances themselves, and audiences actually interacted with the stage, rather than the capitalist method of professional production of culture, thick-skinnedly marketed, and mindlessly consumed—this demise seems to be greatly exaggerated. Banaras is not a pre-industrial city. Yet its public events are all produced by people themselves and presented to live, interacting audiences.

But, respect this continuity as we may, we should labour to uncover those aspects in which the Ramlila is nothing like what it was, precisely because it is those that are opaque at first sight. The issue of dharma may be taken up first lest it be felt that the forest is being obstructed by the trees. To have the story continue as a plot is remarkable in that given the brunt of nationalist fervour, and Gandhi’s manipulation of symbols like Ram Rajya, there were ample opportunities for adjustment in and appropriation of the messages of the Rama story over the last 100 years, yet no adjustment or appropriation has taken place. This, I would argue, is because it is the charter for another discourse, that of gender, a totally silent, unaggressively presented, peacefully incorporated discourse. No men, ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’, have targeted the Rama story as an issue.

What of the religious content of the procession? If it was heterogeneous and open in the first phase, and rigid and centralised in the second (or sought to be), what kind of religiosity are we witnessing in the hundred odd floats of the Nakkatayya today? Just as temples and shrines proliferate, so do images and icons, but just as the former are no longer cultural centres, so are the gods not active agents with powers to interfere in social life. Those powers have been completely appropriated by administrative and police agencies, and there are at best, two rival loci of power, the government and the divine, with the former in the ascendant. This is not a trifling change, because in my analysis, the power of religion and of lila lay in that it was not a separate or constricted domain, but because it referred to lifestyle, social structure, and the whole business of life in general. Gods were not someone you worshipped at certain times, but another level of being in a continuous chain from yours whose model you followed, whose stories you alluded to, whose lila was an example for your own lila. This being all true for males and part of their discourse, belief system, culture, and ideology.
Presently, gods are perhaps boon granters, and their darshan is valued for wish fulfilment and as Tradition (*parampara*). That they can be seriously emulated in lifestyle or considered role models, or imagined to have any interaction with social life today is a matter of scepticism. This is obviously a much larger issue than I am capable of addressing here, and I would invite students of Hinduism and its cultural expressions to look for the evidences of function change in sign systems—discursive displacements, to use the apt phraseology of Spivak— to make for a better documented case one way or the other. To a large extent this is a class issue. Poor and illiterate people in their traditional occupations are still in a sense two phases ‘behind’, in the language of this analysis; those who consider themselves modern and are in different productive relations, assess reality differently.

So, the Ramlila continues, different in social structure—it is now the property of the lower classes; and in function—it does not enact ritual reversal, or indeed comment on social life directly at all, acceding leadership to the police and administration. The discourse that constitutes the lila was, and continues to be gendered. Our historical analysis, however does not allow us to leave it with an image of two homogeneous units, males and females. The particular statements the Ramlila made for men’s space, freedom, and selfhood have been greatly constricted over the last eighty odd years from challenges from other discourses, such as those directed at progress, control, the nation, and work ethic; so that now the lila, both as concept and performance, is male dominated but distinctly lower class. How the processes of differentiation and control worked themselves out within women’s spaces over this same period is yet to be understood.

29 Gayatri Spivak, *Subaltern Studies*. 