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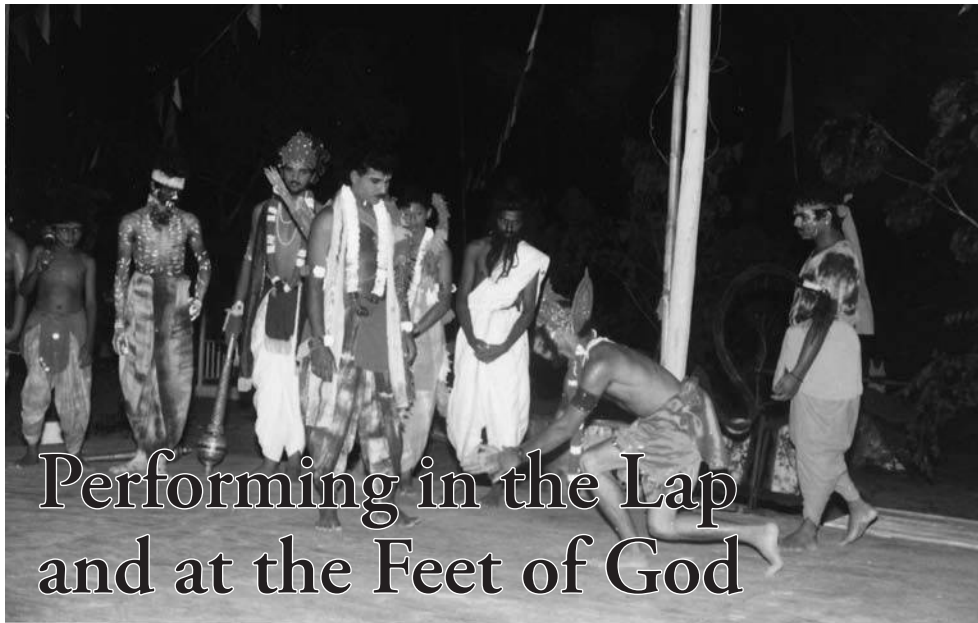
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## Performing in the Lap and at the Feet of God

### Ramleela in Trinidad, 2006–2008

*Milla Cozart Riggio*

*The performance was like a dialect, a branch of its original language, an abridgement of it, but not a distortion or even a reduction of its epic scale. Here in Trinidad I had discovered that one of the greatest epics of the world was seasonally performed, not with that desperate resignation of preserving a culture, but with an openness of belief that was as steady as the wind bending the cane lances of the Caroni plain.*

—Derek Walcott, Nobel Prize Lecture (1992)

As a child living in Wagoner, Oklahoma, I was enlisted by my Baptist evangelist father both to play the piano for his monthly hymn singing fests and to “teach” Wednesday night Bible classes. “What,” I asked my father, “shall I tell these people? I don’t know anything about the Bible.” “Oh,” he responded, “neither do they. Just make it up, but always assure them that—as our good hymn says—they are all ‘sitting in the lap of God.’ That’s what they want to know.” So week after week, while I unwittingly practiced for my future vocation, some dozen or so Baptist parishioners were asked by a nine-year-old girl to sit together “in the lap of God.” Having no idea what that meant, I conjured up an image of a gray-bearded, department store Santa/God with all of us piling at once into his opulent lap.

*Figure 1. “Bowling at the feet of God,” Sangre Grande Ramleela, 2003. (Courtesy of Premnath Gooptar)*

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Years later as a budding medieval scholar I encountered the Ebstorf *mappa mundi*, a 13th-century German universal T-O or *orbis terrarum* map that literally depicts the world as sitting in the lap of God, His head at the eastern topmost point, His hands and feet in the North (left), South (right), and West (bottom) (fig. 2). With God's throne securely in the East, the region of the rising sun at the top of the map, and the devil consigned to what the 14th-century English poet Geoffrey Chaucer called the frigid "fer [...] north countree" (1957:90), the world was mapped as a sacralized sphere with the Holy City of Jerusalem at its center, the four poles infused with a sense of divine privilege or demonic transgression.<sup>1</sup>

Played in spaces that, according to Martin Stevens, replicated the epic geography of such *mappa mundi* (as illustrated, for instance, in fig. 3), medieval Christian drama engaged its performers and viewers in a collective cosmic journey that was paradoxically both local and universal, historical and timeless. My own journey, which began so long ago in a small Oklahoma Baptist church, has taken me from staging, analyzing, and editing European medieval religious drama and Shakespearean plays, to literally dancing in the streets of Trinidad: first in 1991/92 "jumping flags" for the Shi'i Muharram funereal processions known in Trinidad as Hosay, which commemorate the assassination of Hussein and Hasan, the grandsons of the Prophet Mohammad on the plain of Kerbala; then for the last 13 years, "jumping up" for Carnival.<sup>2</sup>

When in 2006, I found my way into the cane fields of Caroni for performances of the Hindu epic drama known as Ramleela,<sup>3</sup> I had in one sense completed the circle in which I began. The images and metaphors were different. Instead of sitting in the lap of a fatherly god, I now found myself "bowing at the lotus feet of [...] Sri Hari [Lord Ram]" (Tulasidāsa [1988] 1990:3; see fig. 1). Different, too, was the worldview, the notion of the gods, their activity, the nature of their cosmic journey, and the human relationship to the Divine. I had entered a world where the deities themselves not only "play," but their play—or *lila*—creates Samsara, the cosmos, which it also preserves, transforms, dissolves, and re-creates in a continuous cycle. I was in the midst of a community for which the bowing and bending of the cane in these Caribbean fields echo and recall the mythical drama of their all-encompassing Brahman and his many avatars, played out not in the shadow of the Himalayas so far away in their northern Indian ancestral land but in the southernmost Caribbean island, just five miles off the coast of Venezuela.

Ramleela, the play that enacts episodes from the life of Lord Ram, Vishnu's seventh avatar, is based on Goswami Tulsidas's 16th-century *Ramcharitmanas* (or *Manas*),<sup>4</sup> written in Avadhi, a popular North Indian language. It is performed annually in more than 30 venues in this 2,000 square mile Caribbean island. In 2006, the first of the three years I attended, 23 communities claimed to offer 36 Ramleela venues, clustered largely "in the midst of the sugar cane fields—

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1. The author of the Ebstorf map was probably Gervase of Tilbury (1223–1234). Christian emphasis on the circularity of the Earth derives from 7th-century descriptions of Isidore of Seville (*Etymologiae*, Chapter 14). By the later Middle Ages, the *imago mundi* had become "a cultural inscription, a discursive plan of the universe as rendered by history, philosophy, scripture, folklore and travel accounts" (Stevens 1995:28).
  2. "Jumping the flag" means carrying or respectfully "dancing" the flags behind the commemorative tombs for both Hasan and Hussein during Hosay, Trinidad versions of the Indian Shi'i processions that take place during the first week of the Islamic month of Muharram each year. Trinidad has one of the largest Muharram celebrations in the world. "Jumping up," a synonym for "playing *mas*," means dancing in the street in a masquerade band during Trinidad Carnival, a massive series of celebrations that has provided the model for at least 50 West Indian style Carnivals throughout the world. For information on either Hosay or Carnival, see Riggio (1998, 2004, 2005, 2007, and 2008); for Hosay, see also Korom (2003).
  3. Ramleela is the phonetic spelling most commonly used in Trinidad, though the vernacular term Ramdilla is sometimes used. The term is almost never spelled Ramlila in Trinidad. Thus, because this essay focuses exclusively on Trinidad, I will consistently use the common Trinidadian spelling Ramleela.
  4. The generic term for the Ram Kathaa (story) is the Ramayana; *Ramcharitmanas* is the title of Tulsidas's work, which is often abbreviated as *Manas*.



Figure 2. *Ebstorf mappa mundi*. Note the head of God at the top, designated as East, with the feet and hands embracing the world at the other three poles. This map was destroyed by allied bombing in 1943 and is reproduced from facsimile copies. (from Gervase of Tilbury, ca. 1234)

describing the arc of Ram’s bow, all within a five mile radius of the Gulf of Paria” (Hindu Prachar Kendra 2007). Also in 2006, Carifesta, the pan-Caribbean presentation of festivals that takes place every few years, moving from one island to another, was held in Trinidad and Tobago. For the first time, Ramleela— identified as one of UNESCO’s “43 new [i.e., newly listed] masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritages”—was registered as a Carifesta activity, with nine of the venues agreeing to be listed as “official” Carifesta sites, and two groups presenting episodes from the longer play for Carifesta in Port of Spain (Hindu Prachar Kendra 2007).<sup>5</sup>

The Carifesta Ramleela flyer, designed by children as a project of the Baal Ramdilla vacation course at the Hindu Prachar Kendra in Enterprise, Trinidad, defined Ramleela thus:

Ramleela reenacts the epic Ramayana,<sup>6</sup> with a multilingual telling of the story of Lord Ram and life in his kingdom. It is the only annual reenactment of an epic in the Caribbean. The event is traditionally hosted in September or October during the Nav Raatam (Nine Holy Nights of the Divine Mothers) period. It concludes on the 10th day called Vijay Dashmi, celebrating the victory of Lord Ram over Ravan, the tyrant king.

Ramleela dramatizes episodes from the life of Sri Ram, the *deva* (deity) who came to earth to rule the northern Indian kingdom of Ayodhya.<sup>7</sup> Episodes commonly include his birth as well as that of his foe, the demon Ravan who controls the southern kingdom of Lanka; at least one venue portrays the birth of his wife Sita, and all focus on Ram’s education; his designation as heir apparent to the throne; the deception and betrayal that led to his father King Dasarath’s vow to exile him into the forest for 14 years so that his brother Bharat could rule, with Bharat’s refusal to take the throne; Ram, Lakshman, and Sita’s adventures in the forest; the kidnapping of Sita;

5. Baal Ramdilla performed one day at noon; another group the next night, both in the Jean Pierre complex in Port of Spain.
6. The Ramayana is the genre name for all the texts in the tradition, of which the Valmiki Sanskrit version, presumed to have been written by a Hindu sage known only as Valmiki, probably in the 4th century BCE, and the Tulsidas Avadhi adaptation of the Valmiki text are but two instances (see Lutgendorf 1991:3; see also Richman 1991 and 2001:2).
7. In Trinidad Ram is called both Ram and Rama; I have standardized throughout to Ram. Sri is an honorific prefix added to the name of devas, which I use occasionally in the essay. Ram and Sri Ram are interchangeable.

the role of Hanuman and his troop of monkeys in vanquishing Ravan; reclaiming Sita; building a bridge to Lanka after Ravan's destruction; establishing Ramraj, or just rule, in Lanka and elsewhere; and, finally, returning in a flying chariot, commonly called an "arial car," to establish Ramraj in Ayodhya itself. The *Manas* brings the epic story of the gods into the framework of Indian historical geography, playing out in part the conflict between northern India and points south, with overtones of the aryanization of northern India, where Ayodhya is a historical city, involved with that struggle.<sup>8</sup>

Though structured for a 10-day presentation, Trinidadian Ramleela performances last ordinarily from 3 to 10 days, with a couple of sites experimenting with single-day productions, and a few adding a final 11th day, all adjusting both the number and length of their episodes to fit their own presentational schedule. The last night's production usually ends with the burning of a massive effigy of the 10-headed Ravan followed by the return to Ayodhya, though in some venues the processional return of Ram and Sita with Ram's brother Lakshman, Hanuman, and others to Ayodhya takes place on the added 11th day.

In each venue, the production is organized and presented by a local Ramleela committee. Unlike Carnival, which is quintessentially urban,<sup>9</sup> at this point Ramleela belongs primarily to the villages, neighborhoods, *mandirs* (temples), and communities of the island. Its performers, which now (unlike earlier times) include women and many children as well as men, are mostly villagers or students, amateurs who enact the drama as an expression of their Trinidadian Hindu identities.

Indo-Trinidadians constitute 41 percent of the population of approximately a million and a third people; Hindus make up about 24 percent of that total population, far outnumbering other Indian groups, such as the Muslims (roughly 6 percent) and Christians (Presbyterians, Catholics, and, more recently, Christian evangelicals, about 3 percent; see Khan 2004:66).<sup>10</sup> Thus, their

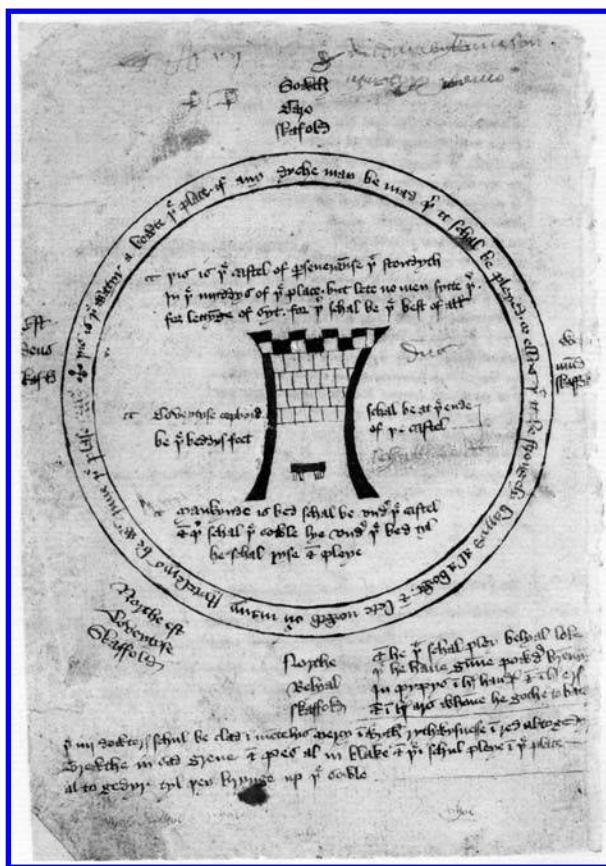


Figure 3. The stage plan of *The Castle of Perseverance*, *The Macro Manuscript*, Folger Library, MS V.a.354 c. 1425. (By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library)

8. "[A] complete picture of a major part of South-eastern Asia is presented by RamAyAna. The whole information looks like a travelers account covering various parts of India and neighbouring countries" (Saklani 2006:97; see also Krishnaswamy 2006:2; Guha 2005; and Gupta 1996).

9. Carnival is celebrated across the islands of both Trinidad and Tobago. However, the standard of celebration is set in Port of Spain (the "Mecca" of performance sites) or San Fernando.

10. Catholics constitute the largest religious group in Trinidad, with Hindus second. Many Indians became Presbyterian because of Canadian missionaries (see Samaroo 1982). And evangelical religions have been gaining in number recently. The Indo-Christians constitute perhaps 3 percent of the population. Many of them, particularly the Presbyterians, practice dual religious rituals, with Hinduism.



Figure 4. The Baal Ramdilla grong (playing ground). The Ayodhya loka (white) is in the North; Lanka (blue) in the South. Baal Ramdilla, Enterprise, Trinidad, October 2007. (Photo by Jeffrey Chock)

impact on the culture of the island is profound, though often contested, sometimes seemingly invisible, and partially isolated, as the Indian people—pejoratively called “coolies” throughout much of their history on the island—have often felt themselves to be since their first arrival as indentured laborers in 1845 (see Clarke 1993:121; Khan 2004:61–63). Widespread throughout the island and yet relatively unknown even to many Trinidadians, the annual reenactment of Ramleela encapsulates much Indo-Trinidadian history.

All this was new to me. Nevertheless, Ramleela struck familiar chords. I found myself again in the center of an outdoor theatrical arena that was at once a local playing space, in Trinidad called a *grong*, and a mythopoetic map of the universe (fig. 4).<sup>11</sup> Whether spherical or rectangular, the consecrated Trinidad Ramleela grongs, like medieval Christian playing spaces, reflect “a theological, mythical and historical reading of [a] world” zoned to differentiate good from evil (Stevens 1995:25), though for Hindus neither good nor evil is absolute. Whereas for the Christians, the North is the habitat of the Devil, in the Hindu world of Ramleela, the North (or Northeast) where Lord Ram rules in Ayodhya, offers the possibility of Ramraj, the rule of justice, goodness, and truth; the South, where for a time Ravan controls the kingdom of Lanka, is tainted by the devouring ego of the Demon, before he is at last through his death reconciled and reintegrated into the cosmic whole. The East—where the sun rises—is a place of special privilege for all, Christian and Hindu alike.<sup>12</sup>

Ramleela viewers (*darshakas*) have “*darsban*,” literally the opportunity to “see.” My darshan, what I saw in the Ramleela playing fields of Trinidad that was new and strange, and yet strangely familiar, was a historically enacted drama that is as much about the Hindu communities of

11. The term “mythopoetic map” (Schechner and Hess 1977:72), coined to describe the Ramlila of Ramnagar, India, has been adopted by the community worker Ravindra Nath Maharaj, known as “Raviji,” to describe the epic geography of the Trinidad Ramleela *grongs*, the dialectical variant of “grounds” (playing space). However, the orientation of the polar axis in Trinidad is between Ayodhya in the North and Lanka in the South, whereas in Ramnagar, it runs from northeast to southwest (see Kapur 1990: map on inside cover; Schechner and Hess 1977; and Schechner 1983 and 1993 for information on Ramlila in Ramnagar, which will not be discussed in this article).

12. Examined carefully, the Hindu orientation is not as different from the Christian as it initially seems. The sacred “eastern” orientation of the Christian map to some extent parallels the northern direction of Ramleela; it not only embraces Asia, but also includes the region of the Ganga, above which lies the Garden of Eden and the four rivers of Paradise (see Henry Davis Consulting n.d.). Moreover, within the sacred geography of the Ramleela grounds, the East also sustains a privileged position. (For an analysis that also links the Hindu Ramlila to medieval Christianity, see Schechner 1983.)

Trinidad as about the story of Sri Ram and his wife Sita. This is the narrative of a people who have found ways to establish their homes as sojourners, far away from the homeland commemorated and recalled by the drama they annually reenact, seen through the eyes of a more recent arrival. Darshan is always a personal way of seeing. My darshan is the story of Caribbean Tulsidas, as I experienced it over the course of three years.

## Bowing at the Feet of God

### *Ramleela in Trinidad*

*Go; Ah sending yuh on a mission  
to the Caribbean*

—Raviji (1995)

*Lila, then, is God's play.*

—William Sax (1995:3)

On Wednesday, 14 January 2009, an extraordinary Deeksha Sanskaar ordaining ceremony took place at the Hindu Prachar Kendra.<sup>13</sup> In addition to ordaining two women for the first time “in the Sanatanist/Orthodox Tradition, to offer religious services to Hindus” (Hindu Prachar Kendra 2009), the Deeksha Sanskaar also ritually passed the leadership of the Kendra itself from its founder, Raviji, the self-styled *sevak* (lit. “one who serves,” thus a community worker), to Sumarie Geeta Vahini, thus placing the organizational direction of a Trinidad Hindu community for the first time in the hands of a woman.<sup>14</sup> The ceremony was attended by several hundred Trinidadians who packed this mandir beyond its capacity—representatives of the First Nation peoples, African emancipation iconic figures, Roman Catholics, Hindu pundits,<sup>15</sup> professors, and celebrities, including the former First Lady of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, her Excellency Mrs. Hassanali. In the category of “was it worth crossing the ocean for,” which I often use to judge festive events in Trinidad, this richly moving ceremony ranked high.

Throughout the evening I was struck by the pervading presence of the Ramayana. Among her achievements, the new President of the Kendra, Geetaji Vahini, lists the distinction of having been in 1990 “the first woman to formally discourse on the Ramayan for seven nights Yagya<sup>16</sup> from the Singhaasan—seat of teaching” (Hindu Prachar Kendra 2009). For the past two years she has been in Ramayana studies at the Sankat Mochan Foundation in India, the waters of Ganga lapping literally at the feet of the building in which she studied, on the spot in which Tulsidas wrote the *Manas*. As the new leader of the Kendra, she was asked to establish Ramraj, or the rule of all that is “noble, right, and just,” in her community. In his ceremonial instructions, Raviji exhorted her to take the “manual of the *Manas*” as her guide.<sup>17</sup> The repeated

13. The Hindu Prachar Kendra is the name of a community organization established by Raviji (Ravindra Nath Maharaj); it is also the name of a mandir in the Raghunanan Village section of Enterprise, adjacent to the market borough of Chaguanas, where this community is centered. The Kendra (as it is popularly known) is both a center of worship and a locus for active community service. I am indebted to Raviji for interviews in 2007 and 2008, and for an extended tutorial in Trinidad Hinduism in 2008 and 2009. Raviji tutored me in the principles and practices of Hindu Trinidad that underlie my analysis. My research was also guided by the community of the Hindu Prachar Kendra.

14. This was the name conferred on Geeta Ramsingh during this ceremony. Raviji's relinquishing of his authority while still assisting in the transition was a rite of passage designed to insure continuity within the community. But it was not without controversy.

15. In Trinidad, a Hindu pandit is commonly called a “pundit.”

16. Yagya, or Yagna, are spiritual exercises or offerings for the glory of the Lord. The two terms are interchangeable.

17. In Sanskrit the term *manas* means “thought” and in Hindu philosophy designates “the human mind,” concepts that help to solidify the role of the *Manas* as a rational, moral manual (see Ahn 2009:28).

celebratory “victory” call and response cry was, typically, “Jai, Sri Ram.” We were told that Ramdilla, the local vernacular term for Ramleela, was a model for human behavior; that “God plays in a place where women are revered” and “elders are respected” (Vahini 2009a; see also Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha 1994:19).

Though the term “Ramdilla” is currently used almost exclusively by members of the Kendra, the influence of the Ramayana goes far beyond this one mandir. For many mandirs in Trinidad, the Ramayana has evolved into the central grounding narrative. Always a treasured story for the people, the *Manas* had replaced the Sanskrit *Bhagavata Purana* and *Bhagavad Gita* well before independence from the British in 1962, as the text used in the formal discourses of the Satsangh and Ramayana Yagnas (ceremonies with devotional reading, moral commentary, and chanting that stress the power of divine love or focus on the Ramayana) that link Hindus across the land (see, for example, Jha 1989:226). Hindu Trinidad is Ramayan country.

Why is this so? To begin with, the narrative of Sri Ram ties Trinidad Hindus to northern India, their ancestral homeland as well as the *loka* (sphere of existence or defined world) of Ram’s Kingdom of Ayodhya. Between 1845 and 1917, 145,000 Indians were shipped to Trinidad as indentured workers. Most came from Bihar or Uttar Pradesh, the latter the home state of Varanasi (Benares), where Tulsidas wrote the *Manas*, directly across the Ganga from Ramnagar where India’s largest Ramleela performance is annually enacted.<sup>18</sup>

These *Jabajees*—or brothers of the boat, as they came to be known<sup>19</sup>—shared three things: the journey together across the Kalapani, or (forbidden) dark waters; the boat (*jabaj*) from which the name of their brotherhood was derived; and the story of the Ramayana: “Being mostly from North India, Hindus here worship Ram and Sita, Shiva, Krishna, Hanuman, Lakshmi and Duruga [*sic*; Durga]. ‘Sita/Ram,’ not Namaste, is the most popular greeting” (Param 1994:n.p.).

Sita/Ram is more than a greeting. It is a meditation on the coming into being of a community, dislocated and exiled to the Caribbean. When the period of indenture started, North India was already Ramayana territory. The languages the people spoke were sisters to Avadhi, the vernacular language in which the *Manas* was written. Moreover, it was in verse, and thus singable, easily chanted as part of evening prayers. When they came to the Caribbean, they brought not only the memory of the Ramayana but the continuity of language, music, rhythms, religion, and a strong oral tradition. In India, the *Manas* had taken the *bhakti* devotional tradition to the people.<sup>20</sup> In Trinidad, the story itself took on additional significance. Sri Ram’s *banvaas* (his exilic residence in the forest) affirmed the narrative of their own global wandering in the forests, plains, and swamps of this tropical island.

Though the Indians had come with the idea of returning home, it quickly became apparent that most of them would not do so. Forced to find a way to exist in this new place, under new circumstances, they were inspired by a story that was already imbedded in their consciousness and their ethos. Reenacting the Ramayana, thus, provided one means for coming to terms with their displacement. Their exile was echoed in the exile of Ram and Sita, expanded into another *loka*, beyond India; the return to Ayodhya mythically enacted the return to India that most of them would never make.

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18. Not all the indentured laborers were Hindus; some were Muslims, and some Hindus came from South India. But according to Bridget Brereton, 90 percent of the Hindus came from the Gangetic plains of northern India (2005:30).

19. Though “brotherhood” of the boat is the traditional term, more recently, to avoid gender implications, some have begun to refer to the “family” of the boat.

20. A *bhakti* tradition is one that defines the path to salvation through devotion to a particular deva.



Building bridges is a key element in the Ramayana story, particularly the bridge to Lanka, a loka that must be reclaimed both physically and spiritually.<sup>21</sup> Because of colonialism, the kingdom of the tyrant Ravan fit easily into the moral framework of the Jahajees in Trinidad. Two factors reinforced this connection: (1) The condition of “in-betweenity” itself.<sup>22</sup> Being in-between can provide the foundation for a bridge that connects two places. And so it was for the Indians in Trinidad. (2) The Hindu sense that the physical is always entwined with the metaphysical. The Ramayana narrative reflects this connection. The story of Ram’s manifestation, his descent to the earth, and his subsequent condition as one living between the mortal and the immortal not only belongs to the epic geography of India; it also parallels the state of the individual soul as perpetually in-between. The one *atman* (the soul) establishes the in-between, from one *jiva* (embodied soul) to the next. The process and the form of embodiment are individually differentiated, but there is just one soul, untouched and intact. So, too, the Jahajees found themselves living out Ram’s story, in a condition of in-betweenity that not only defined their position between India and Trinidad but also metaphysically affirmed the inner essence of the Hindu worldview, symbolized in the Ramleela drama. The central Ramayana story, all its different parts assembled into one whole, served to establish continuity in the midst of fragmentation, holding together the collective soul of a displaced people.

The notion of the *leela* itself is crucial. Not only the obvious concept of “leela” as the “play” of the devas through which the earth is created, but the fact that this play, which can only take place on earth, requires that Vishnu manifest himself in the earthly form of Ram. Thus, leela implies the condition of in-betweenity, the play that ties the lives of Trinidad Hindus not only to their homeland but more directly to the drama of the divine avatars (see Schechner 1993). God manifesting in human form is between *svarga* (heaven) and *bhoomi* (earth). Leela defines the action of God that bridges the gap between the divine and the human (see Whaling 1980:39): the reality, on the one hand, of an original state and the reality of a new state, synthesized into something beyond the form of the original and the new. Trinidadian Hindus experience in-betweenity, living as they do between their ancestral Asian homeland and their Caribbean home. Making their home, claiming a new space, finding a new language, they found their synthesis in the triumph of the vernacular and the transfer of the narrative.

#### *The Triumph of the Vernacular and the Transfer of the Narrative*

Unconsciously, driven by the story itself—beyond the plot, beyond the northern Indian significance of Ram—the Jahajees found in the Tulsidas *Manas* a multidimensional model for their own necessary reconciliation with Trinidad, a land they too had to claim spiritually as well as geographically. Just as Tulsidas transferred the essence of the Valmiki Sanskrit Ramayana into the vernacular of the people of India, transforming both the story and the characters through the language, so too the Ramanaya people of Trinidad in their own way have found a new vernacular, using the old material in the new space to create anew and reconcile the dilemma of their in-betweenity. As Raviji explains:

21. Several years ago, NASA scientists using aerial photography discovered the remnants of a human-made bridge between southern India and Sri Lanka, which now takes the shape of a reef but is thought by many to affirm the Ramayana narrative, though, as Paula Richman has pointed out, “scholars have not reached any consensus about exactly where Lanka was located, IF it was an actual historical place. Some claim it was in Orissa, some in present day Tamilnadu, and some in Sri Lanka. The name ‘Sri Lanka’ is quite modern and not necessarily the same as the Lanka in the text” (2009; for image, see Hare Krishna Community 2008).

22. The concept of “in-betweenity,” which is equivalent to Victor Turner and Arnold Van Gennep’s concept of liminality, is central to the work of Turner and Richard Schechner. This analysis parallels but is not directly indebted to their work, though without these three theorists, this kind of analysis would not exist. The concept of “in-betweenity” in the Trinidad Ramleela was suggested to me by Raviji (see Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969:94–95; Schechner 1993; and Raviji 2008b, 2009).

In moving, Ram claimed and was claimed by the land itself, not only Ayodhya but the forest in which he lived out his exile and Ravan's kingdom of Lanka where, by proxy, he established the first Ramraj through the rule of Bibheeshan. In Trinidad, instead of returning to India, we made a new vernacular Ayodhya, signified by the term "Ramdilla." In that context Ramdilla allowed for almost all the traditions to be practiced together: the singing tradition, the *kathaa* tradition [telling the story], the *paath* tradition [ritual recitation], the art of interpreting in several languages at the same time. Faced with having to claim space, speaking to the issues which our people faced under colonialism, and making an independent Trinidad and Tobago, we found our own David and Goliath in Ram and Ravan, in the people and the colonial power. The continual offering of citizenship in our own Ayodhya is the way we express our kind of patriotism, our love for our Nation, which we can only do in this way. The process of our being citizens here, as Ramayana people, had to come from the *Manas*. It reconciled being there, maintaining ties to India, and being here simultaneously. The Tulsidas *Manas*—itself written in the vernacular—already provided the model. Sublimating the pain, aware of our isolation, the cosmic journey also became our local story. This is the political dimension for us of the Ramayana. (2009)

The Ramayana narrative, which is simultaneously metaphysical, mythological, and historical, "always carries political messages, whether they are explicitly stated or not" (Richman 2001:5). Under colonialism, the political became explicit. The idea of going back home has always been a big thing for Indians in Trinidad, with somewhat ambiguous political fallout. When the People's National Movement (the Afro-Trinidadian-based PNM party) came to power at the time of Independence, one of the charges used against the "other" party was that the Indo-Trinidadian members of that party were not patriots, because it was often said, "They want to go back home."<sup>23</sup> But, in truth, this desire had become complicated. They came initially for five years.<sup>24</sup> For those who stayed, the notion of eventually going back was reinforced by the agreement that they would be permitted to go back, although they had traded the right to the return ticket for land on the island. This dilemma—of being here but looking there—had to find some resolution, and so they turned to the *Manas*.

The Ramayana ends with Ram and Sita returning to Ayodhya. It would seem that here the parallel with the Trinidad story ends for the Jahajees who remained, without returning. But in a more profound sense, the Jahajee Ramleela—and more broadly the Ramayana tradition in Trinidad—mythically completes the story by allowing Hindus to build Ayodhya in the new land, to which they ceremonially and mythically return each year. Ram's sojourn in Chitrakoot, the place in the forest where he refused the opportunity to return prematurely to Ayodhya, thus subordinating his own self-interest to fulfill his father's vow, won the hearts of the people of Ayodhya, paving the way for him later to establish Ramraj in his own kingdom. So too the sojourn in Trinidad of those who refused the return passage to India ultimately in order to build their Ayodhya in their new loka completed the Jahajee journey, merging the here of Trinidad with the there of India, the now of their lives with the then of the mythological narrative. According to Richard Schechner, all "being is playing" with multiple levels of reality superim-

23. The party situation in Trinidad has been somewhat fluid and complex, organized mainly along Afro- and Indo-ethnic lines. The Indo-oriented opposition party in 1961, when the PNM established the first national government, was the Democratic Labour Party. Under the leadership of Basdeo Panday, a cane field labor leader, the Indo-dominated parties evolved until in 1989 the United National Congress (or UNC) was formed. This is the only Indo-based party to have been elected into government, allowing for Panday to become Prime Minister from 1995–2000.

24. Though the period of indentureship itself was five years, after which the indentured servant was released from service, to obtain free passage back to India required another five years of residence (see Brereton 2005:33; Tikasingh 1982:12; Kale 1998). This gap contributed to the large percentage of those who stayed in the Caribbean.

posed one on the other throughout our daily lives (1993:28). Thus, the leela of Ram in Trinidad developed a dual dimension, the Ramayana reenacted, at times unconsciously, in the being/ playing of daily lives as well as seasonally in the Ramleela grongs, the one echoing, symbolizing, and finally merging with the other. The condensed multilayering of their experience provided the synthesis that resolved the dialectical condition of living in-between.

If Ram lived here, they had to create Ramraj here. There is authority in the *Manas* for this transference. According to Tulsidas: “Avadha tahán jahán/ Ram nivásu tahain divasu jahán bhánu prakásu” (Ayodhya is there where Ram resides; just like the day is where the sun is shining; Tulasīdāsa [1988] 1990:408).

Where Ram is, there is Ayodhya. In Trinidad, this insight is realized in several different ways: through the actualization of the Ramayana in daily lives (see, for instance, Dow Village Ramleela and Cultural Org., Inc. 1993:42); through the process of vernacularization; in the layout, preparation, and consecration of the Ramleela grongs; and in the recitation and interpretation of the Ramayana. In performative terms, one may look to Tulsidas for a conceptual framework in which to make sense of this process: “Desu kálu lakhi samau samájú, níti príti pálaka raghurájú” (The King of the Raghus [Ram], ever acting out of love and propriety, always considers space, time, circumstance, and community; Tulasīdāsa [1988] 1990:614).

How the dimensions of space (*desu*, or the Sanskrit term *desh*), time (*kálu*), condition (*samau*), and community (*samájú*) are configured, expanded, condensed, literalized, historicized, made mythic, and experienced locally: these are the heart of my Trinidad Ramleela story. Most complex and crucial are the issues involving *desh*, from which the others essentially flow.

*Desb: Entering Ramleela through Trinidad*

My experience was dramatized in October 2007 in Palmiste Park on the outskirts of the southern city of San Fernando, where a temporary temple painted in the colors of the Trinidad flag (red, white, and black) served as the gateway to the consecrated Ramleela grong and the loka for the *Manas*.<sup>25</sup> All performers entered the playing grounds through this Trinidad gate, bowing to “the book”—the *Manas*. As Pundit Vishnu explained, the rationale for the Trinidad portal lies in his pride in Trinidad’s distinctive role in preserving the Ramleela: “The Trinidad Ramleela survived when it died out in other places... It survived here, so this was a patriotic thing” (Dutt 2006).

Trinidad is the gateway to Tulsidas, the way into the Ramleela, in this venue and across this country. The Palmiste Trinidad portal is, thus, an emblem of the multilayered process through which the *Manas* has been actualized in Trinidad. The grong itself encapsulates the epic geography of India, from Ayodhya in the North to Lanka in the South, performatively both expanding and condensing the space. The grong expands to embrace the history and mythos of Ram’s India, translocated to the local ground; at the same time, it condenses the geography so that both India and Trinidad coexist in the space. Indeed, though it is customary to talk about



Figure 5. The *Manas* established in the Baal Ramdilla venue, appropriately in the East. Enterprise, Trinidad, October 2007. (Photo by Jeffrey Chock)

25. See Richman (2010) in this issue for a more complete description of the Palmiste Ramleela venue.

India as the country of origin evoked in the epic geography of Ramleela, historically the country that the grong encapsulates is more accurately Bharat Varsha, or simply to local folk, Bharat—the now somewhat mythic country of their ancestral origins and of the narrative itself rather than modern India.

The Trinidad portal configures the access to epic India for the Jahajees through the Caribbean. The space is, thus, both literalized and historicized, made mythic and experienced locally, becoming something magically other: the Jahajee Ayodhya, the ritual return of a people who have made their homes here. Typically, Indo-Trinidadians feel that their Ramleela is now in some ways more authentic than that performed in India. They have not only retained this legacy; they have bettered the instructions.

This process parallels the passage of the text into the vernacular, first from Sanskrit to vernacular Avadhi, then to English translation and, finally, through performance, into Indo-Trinidadian English. The story, in the words of Pundit Vishnu, “comes out of the book” (Dutt 2006). But in Palmiste the book rests on a small stand inside the Trinidad portal. It is large, elegant, and trilingual: the invocation and special verses are in Sanskrit; the Tulsidas text is in Avadhi (both Sanskrit and Avadhi are transcribed in the Devanagiri script);<sup>26</sup> and within the book, the Tulsidas text is translated into British English. The last stage of this process, transferring the story into Indo-Trinidadian English, takes place during the performance.

Within the dramatization of the Ramleela story, the narrative is presumably being told by Lord Shiva to his consort Parvati. Though they usually have a station symbolizing Mount Kailash where they can sit, they customarily circumambulate the space, with Shiva presumably telling Parvati the story that is being performed. Thus the narrative has multiple real and dramatized origins. It derives from the book, the *Manas*, which ceremonially sits on a stand in the East; it is portrayed as emanating from Shiva’s instructional conversation with Parvati; but it is actually narrated by a *vyasa* (narrator), also in the East.

Establishing the book also establishes the *vyasa*, the one who reads and interprets the text and, in Trinidad, also directs the Ramleela performance. Located in the East, standing in the “command stand” (the place where the *vyasa* does the narration, also called a “reading shed”) or sitting in a *singhaasan* (metaphorically the Lion’s Seat, another name for the “command stand” where the *vyasa* sits), the Trinidad *vyasa* chants *chowpai*, *dobas*, *sorthas*, and *chandras* (various meters and types of verse taken from the *Ramcharitmanas*) in Avadhi, often accompanying himself on the harmonium. Then in a narration that is often extemporized, he (or occasionally she) draws moral lessons for the audience from the narrative of Sri Ram. Finally, the *vyasa* narrates the action that in Trinidad is customarily mimed by the actors, using the vernacular to establish rapport with the listening “devotees,” as for instance when the *vyasa* in Harlem Village, Caroni, in 2007 described Keikyei, the wife who insists that Ram’s father designate her son rather than Ram as his heir: “When a woman make up she mind, she make up she mind.” In Trinidad, the *vyasa*—the director, chanter, and preacher—is often the focal point of the entire production (see discussion of acting below).

Just as the local space has tied the Jahajees immediately to India, so too the language of the *vyasa*, local vernacular English, makes the older Indian vernacular tongue of the *Manas* intelligible to this English-speaking Jahajee community, while the Tulsidas text and the Avadhi chanting continually signify the Indian origins. Establishing the book and consecrating the playing space are central to the process of translocating Tulsidas to Trinidad.

### *The Epic Geography: Consecrating the Book and the Space*

The book is established (*sthaapana*) as the source of the drama and set in its consecrated place at the beginning of the first night’s production in a ceremony oriented to the East, where the *vyasa*

26. Since this particular edition has been translated into Hindi, from Avadhi, it is in a sense quadri-lingual: Sanskrit, Avadhi, Hindi, and British English.

sits or stands and the book remains (fig. 5). The ceremony ends with an *aarti* (song praising a deity), through which the epic geography of the grong itself is effectively sacralized. The ritual seals the ground and locates everything. The performance typically demands a large open-air enclosed space approximately 150' by 110'. The shape may be rectangular or spherical. When played in the round, the space is demarcated by a porous waist-high fence that is traditionally made of bamboo, though other materials are often now used. As in India, the consecrated area embraces multiple lokas (spheres of existence). Dominated by Ayodhya in the North and Lanka in the South, there is the loka of Earth with humans, flora, fauna, and material existence; there is also the Deva loka, with numerous deities. The vyasa-narrator, surrounded by a mandali of singers and musicians, translates and interprets the text, which is typically recited in Avadhi. The performers enact a parallel pantomime in the middle of the grong through action, dance, and gestures. Tassa drums provide percussive rhythms for the actors (fig. 6). Outside the central, sacralized arena are the larger grounds, where food is prepared by members of the community and sold in stalls, and where children play either in open grassy areas or on rides offered as part of the Ramleela attractions. The audience either stands or sits in this area, which differs from venue to venue.

The inner, enclosed space is traditionally consecrated ceremonially before the Ramleela begins with a *bhoomi pooja*, a worship ritual to the Earth, which establishes *kbalsas* (forms of purification) in the four different polar directions. Earthen jars are filled with things that represent the earth—water, flowers, unbroken rice grains—while the *deeya* (a small clay pot filled with oil and lighted) used for consecration represents both earth (the clay vessel) and fire (lighted on top). The jar represents space, while the ether is signified by blowing the conch shell (*shankh*) as part of the *pooja*. The jar and its contents are ceremonially placed as a symbol of the cosmos at different places in individual grongs, with the idea of encompassing or at least signifying the four poles of the circle: north, south, east, and west.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, a jar is usually established beside the *jharjbara* pole, which is at the center of the consecrated space and keeps out the evil influences from all directions. This ceremony with the establishment of the jars empowers the bamboo fence for protection. It keeps out unclean people, as only those who have honored the rituals of cleanliness, sexual abstinence, and abstinence from drinking alcohol and eating meat or salt are traditionally allowed without their



Figure 6. Tassa group at Sangre Grande. Vishal Giddharie on the *majeeras*, Vikash Giddharie, Narine Bajnath on the *cutter* (Leader), and Narendra Bajnath (Narine's son) on the big drum. October 2008. (Photo by Milla Cozart Riggio)

27. Though this is one tradition, there are other practices, as for instance, bursting coconuts rather than using jars, for the purpose of consecration. See the case study of Sangre Grande below; see the case study of Felicity for yet another practice.

shoes inside the consecrated space.<sup>28</sup> The top of the jharjhara pole marks the invisible upper fence of the consecrated grong. The buntings that fly from the top of the central pole and are tethered at the surrounding fence were originally the colors of the deities, but more recently tend to be any color of plastic that organizers can buy, with the understanding that they once served a ceremonial role now largely forgotten. This draping also serves to suggest the popularly used décor of *Mela* and *Mandap*—which together characterize an indoor space for community activity—while retaining the outdoor nature of the Ramleela performance.

Throughout the Ramleela enactment, this inner enclosed playing arena constitutes the consecrated ground of the leela itself. At the end of the Ramleela a *visarjan* (lit., dissolution) ceremony is performed, which concludes with the *shanti paath*, a mantra for peace, harmony, and happiness that in this case opens up the closed, consecrated space. In the visarjan ceremony, everything is dismantled and deconstructed through mantras, which invoke the blessing of peace for all the earth. The place then returns to its normal modern locale, even though physically the theatrical construction—the palaces in the North and South and any lokas within the consecrated space—may still be up. The mystical identity of the playing space in a sense trumps the physical nature of the construction. The grongs are not sacralized with restricted access until the initial ceremony of consecration takes place, and they may be opened once the shanti paath has been concluded. The construction of the Ramleela is, thus, physical, mythical, and ceremonial, even as it is also very directional, oriented especially to the North (Ayodhya) and the South (Lanka).

When establishing the Ramleela grongs in Trinidad, it is not always possible for practical reasons to orient them along the North/South axis. However, the mythos of the epic geography controls the sense of direction, so that wherever Ayodhya and Lanka are established mythically become north and south. People try to maintain the entrance gates through the East or North, though some venues, including the Palmiste Trinidad portal, have an entrance through the South. Limited by the physical location and the natural access, the logistics of the performance entrance and the natural entrance negotiate with each other, replicating the eternal within the limits of the local.

#### *Masking and “De-masking” in the Space*

The inner sanctorum (*jeela ksbetra*, or field of play) is sacralized, and its directional axis determines North, South, East, and West for the duration of the cycle. The action takes place inside this space; a porous bamboo (or substitute) fence divides the actors from the viewers outside the consecrated area. The actors include *paatras* (general actors) and *swaroopas* (those playing Ram, Sita, and Ram’s brothers, with the term in Trinidad sometimes extended to include any deity, such as Shiva and Parvati, Hanuman, Vishnu, or even Ravan). They wear color-coded costumes, signifying their roles as sages (gold with long beards), deities (various colors), their allegiance to Ayodhya (gold, red for Hanuman’s monkeys) or Lanka (black, dark blue, or sometimes green); as discussed above, in most, though not all, Trinidad venues, they mime the action narrated in English by the vyasa.

The concept of playing, or in Trinidad miming, the Ramleela is more than that of simply “personating” the figures of the narrative. In a manner very different from Western traditions, the actors assume the roles; by “playing” the devas, in one sense they become the devas; they are what they play. Since they maintain their own identities as Trinidadian villagers—children, boys, girls, men, women—this process enacts the simultaneity of realizing the *Manas* in daily life.<sup>29</sup> According to Satnarine Balkaransingh, an accomplished Indian Dance Master and PhD

28. This practice, honored at most of the Ramleela grongs I attended, is either relaxed or varied at a number of contemporary sites.

29. This process, which is of course complex, apparently echoes Indian practice, at least at Ramnagar (see Schechner 1983:265).

candidate who advises at one of the major Ramleela sites, the principle of playing in Ramleela is essentially “demasking the mask. The mask of everyday living is being de-masked.” Formerly, “all of Ravan’s team [of rakshasas or evil spirits] were masked. When they put on the mask, they were [...] no longer normal people. You don’t say, ‘I am in the Ramleela drama.’ You say, ‘I am playing Ramleela. I have re-masked.’” According to Balkaransingh:

One of the principal philosophies of Hinduism [Vedanta] [...] has “a aham brahman [...]” i.e. [loosely paraphrased], I am God. I come from God. I live in God. When I die, I return to God. I was not born in sin. I don’t live in sin and I don’t die in sin. For me, there is only knowledge—*vidya*—or lack of knowledge—*avidya* (ignorance). Therefore, when I play God, I am really identifying with that philosophy. I am God. (2007)

The polar opposition between *vidya* and *avidya*, or symbolically the movement from light/enlightenment to darkness and back again, is the primary directional emphasis of the Trinidadian performances. Because goodness and evil are relative, rather than absolute terms, even Ravan—himself initially a Brahman of great esteem—is not ultimately relegated to a position of absolute evil. Though killed and burned, he is finally reintegrated into the Hindu moral frame. The movement from light to dark, from knowledge to ignorance, is thus itself relative rather than absolute. Though each of Ram’s four journeys begins and ends in Ayodhya, the passage from north to south and back again is always through the forest, a loka associated with knowledge and enlightenment (Findly 2009; see also Findly 2000). Without the exile in nature, the *vidya* necessary for ruling Ayodhya would not be possible.

Though all swaroopas are accorded positions of dignity within the community, earning obeisance during the playing of the drama, their performances vary from venue to venue. In a few venues, such as Palmiste, actors are allowed to improvise some of their own dialogue, often for comic effect or to link the drama to local issues (see Richman 2010, in this issue). Performances also include clowns, often cross-dressers, whose function is to circumambulate at the fence, teasing and entertaining the audience throughout the show. For the most part, however, the acting consists of three kinds of movement: (1) persistent circumambulation; (2) four specific dance steps; and (3) gestural pantomime. The circumambulation establishes the directional axis of the grong between Ayodhya in the North and Lanka in the South. The four steps include: (a) the *swaroop pad*, or god walk, the four-beat journey step of Shiva and Parvati as they circumambulate, lifting each knee high in a controlled and precise gesture at every step to simulate the notion of walking essentially on air; (b) the *yaatra pad*, or journeying step, a skipping step done by the actors (swaroopas and paatras) as they move, often together, through the grong, with their warrior troops; (c) the swing step, similar to the *yaatra pad*, but swinging from side to side to suggest a longer journey, often rhythmically raising their bows, usually to the accompaniment of tassa drumming; and (d) the *prati-chala*, or reverse step, of the *yaatra* style (Vahini 2009b; Raviji 2009).

The formal movements and steps often seem beautifully choreographed, even when they are not rehearsed before the performance (see further discussion in the First Felicity case study below). However, the miming is, from the perspective of performance, mostly literal, simple, gesturally small: sit down, stand up, point, make an angry face (facial expression is prominent). Lacking the precision of trained mimes, the small gestures are often swallowed by the epic space of the grong. Seen from the perspective of the entire enactment, however, the miming serves the larger purpose of the drama by redirecting focus to the *vyasa*. The narrator directs the action, while emphasizing the moralizing lessons that personalize the Ramleela for the gathered “devotees,” completing the process of realizing Ayodhya here, at once collapsing, expanding, and localizing the space. And finally, it is the *vyasa* through whom the discourse of Sri Ram is interpreted for the local audience.

The Ramleela ordinarily ends in a raucous final night when the seemingly endless battle scenes from the *Lanka Kanda* (Battle Book) of the *Manas* are portrayed. Typically, Ravan’s

rakshasas, dressed all in black (or sometimes dark blue or green), fight Hanuman's monkey troops, all in red, in playground style free-for-alls. The troops are often portrayed by children, who are allowed the freedom to chase, fight, die, then rise again, and carry on the battle in a gleeful playful fashion, while participating in a performance that has as one of its aims the education of its youth. The audience—often very large on the last night—patiently anticipates the burning of the massive effigy of Ravan that in all but a few venues occurs on the last night of performance.

*Expanding the Grong:*

*One Common Experience of Devotion for Actors and Audience*

While the consecrated inner sanctorum is the locus of the leela, it does not constitute the full Ramleela grong. Again according to Balkaransingh:

Ramleela is everything. You do not sterilize the event, or clinically extract the sanctified space from the stalls and the other recreational things that are taking place [outside the fence]. You can't say 'This is the Ramleela and that is something else.' All of them comprise the unitary festivity of Ramleela. (2007)

Both audience and actors jointly participate in the cosmic drama, the entire Ramleela grounds constituting the essential *theatrum mundi*. It is customary to refer to the grounds outside the bamboo fence as the mela, the place of community participation. To use the Maya-Leela concept, in which the leela represents the creative play of the gods and the maya the relative, illusory experience realized on Earth itself, one may think of the enclosed, sacralized inner space as the locus of the leela, with the less intense maya experience realized in the mela, in which there are gradations of viewers and listeners. The *bhaktas*, the devotees who are tuned into the consecrated ground, are the primary seers; they surround the fence, with few distractions. Next are the *rasikas*, those who "taste" the drama, tuned to the aesthetics of performance and the *bhaava* (feeling) of the devotional mood through *darshana* (seeing) or *shravana* (hearing). Those who wander the food stalls, or allow their children to play on the rides that are sometimes in the grounds, come to the grounds for *satsangh*, to be in good company. All are participating in the Ramleela. Only food permitted during the fasting period of Ramleela is sold in the stalls, and while the games and conversation may appear as distractions, all those who attend engage in the larger act of community. According to Raviji:

The space inside and the space outside the circle [comprise the playing field of the drama]. For one thing, we establish that leela happens only on earth [*samsara*]. Inside the inner sanctorum (the center of the leela kshetra or playing field) is sanctified. Since leela can only happen on earth, it needs to have the whole of life surrounding it. Then it represents the sacred thing happening on Earth. The performers are inside, both the pastras and swaroopas. Across the dividing bamboo are the bhaktas and rasikas, who are together known as darshakas, literally the "seers," the people turned toward the fence. They are the first line of outsiders. And then the others who may be tuned in by ear. Those who go to the melas and all that: that is where the *sansaar* takes place. To be in good company, Holy company, because saints are gathered and deities are congregated. To be there is a kind of pilgrimage. Some of the others come just to be part of the mela; they also imbibe from the environment. The whole place is part of leela kshetra, though not all is equally consecrated. (2008b)

As Sat Balkaransingh pointed out:

There is logic in [this sense of the whole], because on the 11th day the whole village [in this case Felicity] becomes the performance ground. The little space has now grown. You have defined the Ramleela space by the whole village [...] The last night when [Ram, Lakshman, and Sita] come back does not begin in the ground. It begins in the neighbor-



hood. That is the performance space; there is then no performing audience because the audience then become actors in the procession. The space is not identified as the performance grong but is now the community. (2007)

What Balkaransingh describes as a community procession on the last night in the Trinidad village of Felicity takes place in another, atypically urban venue, organized by the Knox Street Sports and Cultural Organization, on Knox Street in the City of San Fernando, on the opening night of a three-night performance of Ramleela plays, which in 2007 ran from 19 through 21 October. There the entire cast and audience collectively process through the neighborhood surrounding the concrete park area where the grong is located, before the opening of the play takes place, again marking the neighborhood itself as the ultimate space of the performance.<sup>30</sup>

*Expansion Inward:*

*The Internal Geography*

Not only is the performance space of the Ramleela expanded externally beyond the inner sanctorum to include the full grounds with their food stalls and other kinds of “playing” space—extending even into the surrounding neighborhood—it also expands inwardly to become a drama of the “seeing soul.” The Sanskrit phrase “Yatah pinde tathaa brahmaande” literally means “what is in the macrocosm is in the microcosm” and Raviji explains how this concept applies to Ramleela:

Rama appropriates and consecrates the space. All that happens outside in the map of the Ramdilla grongs happened at the time of Ram and in an ongoing way happens in the geography of the heart.<sup>31</sup> Ayodhya is the city where there are eight *chakras* or mystical points and nine gateways [that parallel] the nine gateways of the body: two ears, two eyes, two nostrils, one mouth, one anus, and one urinal exit. (2008b)

The notion of the story of Ram as a guide to the devotee’s inner journey—with a consequent symbolical reading of the mytho-historical narrative—is echoed throughout the performance tradition in Trinidad. Because the epic geography is also the geography of the soul, with the name of Ram himself, as Mahatma Gandhi has described it, “inscribed in the heart,” the narrated story has immediate personal value (see Gandhi 1992, 1993, 1994; also Gooptar 1994). Providing the necessary guide for daily living, the mytho-historical narrative and characters are imbued with allegorical qualities, thus scripting the Jahajee return to Ayodhya as a personal spiritual story. In *Avocat*, for instance, where Pundit Balroop Roopchan is responsible for the script, I was told that each character among the forces of Ravan “characterizes one negative attitude,” while Ravan himself characterizes “all the negative tendencies, opposite to good” (Roopchan 2006). Consistently in many venues, the story of Ram, who willingly embraced his exile rather than cause his father to break a vow, and his brother Bharat, who refused the throne offered to him because of his loyalty to Ram, are identified as symbols of loyalty and allegiance within a family.

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30. This venue differed from all others that I saw in that it was in the middle of a city on a paved section of a public park. The inner playing arena was not separated by a barrier from the seats of the audience, which were under a large tent; and while the space itself was sacralized, it was not entirely off limits. Shoes were worn while crossing it, and children from the crowd ran through the playing area throughout the performance. Regarding the use of shoes, I was told that concern for health and fear of infections modified in practice the access to the consecrated area. This was the most urban of the Ramleela venues that I attended in Trinidad (for more information on Knox Street, see Richman 2010, in this issue). A similar kind of neighborhood procession takes place in other venues, as, for instance, the Matilda Road group in Princes Town (see Ahn 2009).

31. The medieval Catholic tradition has a precise parallel. By building what was variously called a “castle in the hert” or an “Abbey of the Holy Gost” (see British Library n.d. [mid-1400s]), 15th-century European lay contemplatives reinforced the notion that the life of the Soul occupied an interior space within the self that was thought to be a condensed map of the universal “macrocosm,” with the same rivers, tributaries, hills, and valleys.



Figure 7. *Baal Ramdilla*. Paying homage to Baby Ram, played by Amrita Ramroop, a baby girl, carried by her mother Feeroza Ramroop, accompanied by Sandhya Jadoo. Paying homage are Vishma Sookdeo and Goita Sankar. Amarnath Ranjitsingh, in red, white, and black Trinidad costume, in the background. October 2007. (Photo by Jeffrey Chock)

The audience is crucial. The vyasa frequently refers to the devotees, giving the plays something of the quality of a moralizing kathaa (or story) or a direct and somewhat authorial moral lesson. The vyasa becomes a moral Master before the *sbrotas* (listeners within the context of the religious performance tradition). His lessons are aimed primarily at the bhaktas who listen and “see” with reverence, but they have wider application throughout the crowd and the community. The plays, thus, work both as historical narratives and as parables that teach contemporary moral lessons, reaffirming the basic values of home, family, community, as well as religion and devotion.

By thus writing the story of the Ramayana as a private, interior, symbolical, moral narrative as well as mytho-poetical-religious-historical tale, the Ramleela engages its viewers in a complex, mutually dependent way. On the one hand, the audience is necessary to the drama, as devotees as well as viewers. The audience—particularly the darshakas—complete the drama through their own personal devotion. The actors need this circle of response for their process of enactment, without which their own devotion as well as their performance would be incomplete.

And yet, as I observed during a heavy downpour in the village of Felicity in October 2007, even when virtually the entire audience disappeared in a run for cover, the swaroopas carried on with their mimed, choreographed enactment exactly as if the fence were thronged by observers. Again, one can say that the external was internalized, but in this case by the performers as much or more than the audience. They cannot imagine the performance without the devoted seers in attendance, and yet when they disappear, the drama carries on unabated as if they were still present.<sup>32</sup>

#### *Kālu: Time*

Time, like space, is liminal (see Turner 1969:94–95; see also Schechner 1993). It is in the threshold where past meets present, where the then is realized in the now, and where epic history becomes more than a memory that the Trinidad Ramleela finds its niche. The Tulsidas text, particularly the multilingual version in common use in Trinidad, provides the basis for the modern appropriation of the story. However, embodying the Ramleela *through performance* fuses the mythical, historical, theological, and metaphysical senses of time. The narrative simultaneously engages the audience directly as witnesses to the birth, life, exile, and return of Sri Ram, and as local Trinidad citizens. That is, the audience is in a sense transported into a subjunctive

32. Eventually this performance was cut short by perhaps a half hour. As Paula Richman has noted in her companion article in this issue (2010), because Ramleela occurs during the rainy season, venues must often deal with heavy rain and muddy fields. Sometimes they carry on, as at Felicity; at other times, they cancel the performance for the day. This difficulty has led to some talk of rescheduling Ramleela performances at some other time of year, an innovation indeed (see Pundit Bownath Maraj 2009; see also Sushain Maraj 2009).

or conditional past/present mode, with oblique local references, as for instance to the burning of local mandirs or to the Trinidad Prime Minister's antics, insinuating the here and now into the historical story, simultaneously collapsing, expanding, and localizing the time frame of the drama.

In Ramleela, time has an annual seasonal dimension, as well as geographical and historical liminality. The seasonal time frame for Ramleela performances is traditionally the Dussehra or Navrátam period in the latter part of the year, as determined by the association of the two principal constellations, the sun and the moon. The ritual of preparation begins with cutting and collecting the bamboo, which must take place somewhat earlier, before Pitra Paksh, the period of venerating the ancestors that precedes Dussehra. Significantly, in Trinidad the true ending of Ramleela comes not on the last night in the grongs across the island but shortly after, during Divali, the festival of lights that celebrates the return of Ram (see, for instance, Klass 1961:61; Crooke 1915:28). The only Hindu holy day that is recognized as a national holiday in Trinidad, Divali draws huge crowds: all the citizens come out with lights to welcome Ram. Ultimately, Ramleela's most pervasive practice is this lighting up of the kingdom. Celebrating light over darkness, Divali draws from the Ramayana its name as the festival of light over dark, knowledge over ignorance, signified by the return of Ram to Ayodhya.

On a more literal level, the constraints of time have altered the performance schedule in Trinidad, reflecting the current circumstances and conditions of the Jahajees themselves. In a period when the Indo-Trinidadian community is no longer primarily agrarian, the structure of the Gregorian workweek hampers community participation, except on weekends. The convention now is to end with Ramleela on a Sunday, in response to the local situation, thus resulting in variable performance schedules across the island. Moreover, the time of the event has shifted from the afternoon to the evening with a change in the work habits and life habits of the participants (see also Richman 2010, in this issue).

#### *Samau: Circumstance or Condition*

The variable conditions and circumstances of the Indo-Trinidadians have determined the patterns and trajectories of the narrative that they brought with them from northern India. Primary among the changed circumstances is the shift from being a largely agrarian population to a denser, more cosmopolitan lifestyle (see Khan 2004:77–78). Indeed, Chagaunas, the thriving market borough at the heart of the central, Indo-dominated area in Trinidad, is said to be the most quickly developing urban area in the West Indies. Families now drive to work; children are driven to school. Increasingly, there is need for double salaries, with a consequently smaller number of parents who stay at home with the children.

All of these changed conditions have radically altered the practices and performances of Ramleela. Initially, a greater sense of cosmopolitanism seemed to draw Indo-Trinidadians away from Ramleela, with the resultant falling off of the drama for a period of perhaps 20 years. Then, coincidentally at the time when an Indo-Trinidadian government had come to power in the mid-1990s, a resurgence of interest led to a Ramleela revival, but with significant differences.

The schedule of performances has shifted from the afternoon to the evening to allow for work and family schedules. Because most devotees now drive to the event, but are afraid of driving at night because of increased crime on the island, some venues dramatize fewer episodes, condensing ten nights into five or even three, and ending earlier, even in venues when the performance cannot start until around dark.

The most significant change, however, is in the level of self-consciousness with which the Ramayana is now used as the foundational narrative for Indo-Trinidadian identity and, consequently, for overtly educational purposes. There is now, for instance, a more direct emphasis on education, not only seeing Ramleela as allied with the school curriculum in several venues (see

Sangre Grande below) or as having its own school (see Baal Ramdilla below), but also being generally aware that the play itself teaches history as well as provides moral exempla for children growing up in Hindu families with Hindu traditions. In hybrid religious families, such as those of some Indo-Trinidadian Christians (particularly, Presbyterian families), Hindu rituals are also practiced for both religious and cultural reasons (a fairly common feature of Trinidadian hybridity, not limited to Hindus). Thus, families who are not exclusively Hindu—or in some regions not Hindu at all—now also participate in the performances of Ramleela. The results, emphasized in the case studies below, have altered the narrative itself to begin with ordinary leelas, such as a Tulsidas leela or a leela of the Jahajee passage across the Kalapani, bringing the precious *Manas* with them to Trinidad. Such episodes now frequently open the Ramleela in selected venues.

Part of this concerted educational effort that reflects the specific conditions of Trinidad—and particularly the primary racial and ethnic split between the Indo-Trinidadians at 41 percent and the Afro-Trinidadians at around 39 percent of the population—has been a program of education relating to Ravan himself. Because Ravan is dark, his costuming associated with either black or very dark blue (occasionally green), it was customary for Africans to see themselves symbolized both in his demonism and his downfall. Indeed, this perception still exists to some extent among Afro-Trinidad populations, perhaps echoing historical and geographical implications of Ramleela in India, where the drama of north and south, and the movement from light to dark have racial and geographical as well as mythic implications. In Trinidad, a concerted effort of education, at including non-Indians in performance and in symposia and other educational ventures, has countered this lingering association, at least to some extent (see, for example, Maharaj 2001; also see more discussion in the Sangre Grande case study below).

In this respect, the colonial situation has again impacted the performance tradition, first by extending some assumptions that might have come with the Ramayana from India to the racially conflicted Caribbean. Initially, as argued earlier, Ravan was identified with the Colonial authorities themselves. Then, especially during the period of independence, that identification yielded ground to the Afro-Trinidad assumption that the 10-headed “dark” demon, so spectacularly burned at the conclusion of Ramleela, was an emblem of the African. In the more reflective education-minded moment of the present, when tensions still run fairly high between the Afro- and Indo- populations of the island, producers of Ramleela attempt through education to displace those assumptions in the name of broader inclusiveness and a greater and more heterogeneous sense of community.<sup>33</sup>

#### *Samájú: Community*

Obviously, while current Ramleela organizers welcome those beyond their immediate ethnic base, the aggregate function and effect of establishing the Jahajee Ramleela is to sustain a sense of community among the Indo-Trinidadian Hindus. There is a sense of solidarity among Indo-Trinidadians, partly created by the politics of the island that tend toward race and ethnic division, with the two major parties largely divided along Afro- and Indo- lines; and partly created by the larger sense of isolation and alienation that the Jahajees themselves have periodically felt in the culture of Trinidad.

At the same time, there is more than one Hindu community in this large and diverse population. The Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, a group committed to education, is one such large organization (for a brief history of this group, see the Sangre Grande case study below).

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33. There are, however, those—like Rawle Gibbon, the playwright and scholar who founded the Centre for Creative and Festival Arts at the University of the West Indies—who claim that because of the northern/southern division in India itself, Ravan is literally the African god, not necessarily in Trinidad but in the tradition overall, because he came from the South, close to, or possibly even in, Africa (Gibbon 2009). The fact that he was initially a Brahman of great distinction counters this assumption, but the issue remains.

There are many others, including youth organizations, Hindu councils, and Yoga centers. Among the several hundred mandirs of the island are communities that are more or less conservative and traditional, those that are willing to modify traditional practices, and a variety of both urban and rural collective groups that keep the larger Jahajee identity alive, through active controversy as well as harmonious cooperation.

Within this large, complex Indo-Trinidadian population, the function of the *Manas* has been overall to reinforce the sense of community and common notions of identity, based on the appropriation of the Ramayana as a tool of education for the young as well as a vehicle for establishing continuity and preserving endangered traditions. One group that has built its credo around this function of the Ramleela is that of the Swaha Hindu Centre (the Sukh Shanti Bhakti Mandali, founded in 1993 as a full-fledged centre of SWAHA International) in St Augustine. Under the direction of H.H. Pundit Hari Persadji, *Shankaracharya* (Spiritual Head) and founder of Swaha, who died—or in the terms of his obituary “entered *maha samdhi*”—in April 2008, the Swaha Hindu Centre

was built in what was then a depressed low-income community. From its inception, [Pundit Hari and his sons] mobilised the educated and affluent, including former minister Christine Sahadeo, to work with him to reach out to and to transform the community and its inhabitants [...] His aim was to build a magnificent Hindu centre, to not only serve as a sanctuary, but also to inculcate a sense of purpose and confidence of the great possibilities and potential of the sense of community spirit and togetherness. (P. Persad 2008a; see also P. Persad 2008b)

I attended the performance of the Swaha Ramleela with Paula Richman in October 2006, at the Warner Street venue (one of several established by Swaha), where we were hosted by Kamalwattie Ramsubeik, then President of the National Ramleela Council. This was an unusual performance. Occurring over only a three-day period, the performances took place on a small, curtainless proscenium playing station. Entrances and exits were from a set of stairs at stage right, where the narrator and musicians were also located. Students participating in the Ramleela were not all Hindu, and in keeping with the Swaha mission, the main thrust of the performance was not so much mytho-historical as morally pedagogical. That is, rather than drawing moral lessons from the chronological narrative, the organizers chose discrete episodes that would best reflect the community and family values emphasized by the mission of Swaha leader Pundit Hardeo Persad, as quoted and summarized by his daughter Seeta after his death:<sup>34</sup>

“Although the Ramayan was written more than 5,000 years ago the teaching applies today. And while many may enjoy the songs and the poetry, one has to take a look at the lifestyle of the lord himself—Lord Ram and his father, King Dasharat” [...] pundit must work diligently to build society and to ensure that people adhere to the spiritual values outlined in the holy texts. “When the family disintegrates, society disintegrates”; [...] in keeping the family unit intact the villages and the country become a better place to live. [C]hildren learn to respect their parents and then every other individual they may come in contact with throughout their lives. (in S. Persad 2008)

The viewers at Swaha, as at each of the Ramleela venues across the island of Trinidad, are, thus, engaged in witnessing a play, in an act of religious worship, and in the pedagogy of a theatrical religious “school” where the lessons of the Ramayana are dramatized for their edification, and particularly that of their children, who in this way are both learning and practicing their most sacred traditions. To the extent that the theatrical space encapsulates the world itself, the actors and audience alike become players in the larger mytho-poetic drama that concludes with the annual return to the new Ayodhya.

34. In the fall of 2006, kidnapping of prominent Indo-Trinidadians was a major issue in the news, prompting heightened levels of fear among the Hindu community. Thus, Swaha intentionally reduced the emphasis on the kidnapping of Sita, seeing in that narrative a negative model for Indo-Trinidadians at that moment in history.

## Four Case Studies

Despite all that they have in common, the Ramleelas of Trinidad differ markedly from each other, configuring *desh* (space), *kálu* (time), *samau* (circumstance), and *samájú* (community) individually. Each production reflects the character of its village, *mandir*, and organizing committee. Without consideration of these differences, no study of Ramleela in Trinidad could be complete. Four case studies—of two of the oldest Ramleelas, of one that is distinguished by its direct link to the Maha Sabha and its particular mentoring mission, and one that is designated for children and affiliated with a summer training camp—will suggest some of the rich variations in a complex tradition.

*Dow Village:*

*An Extended Family Affair*

*Boochoonoo blood is in this boy. It affected me because I have such reverence for the boy.*

—*Raviji (2008b)*

The oldest continuous Ramleela performance on the island of Trinidad, performed annually at Dow Village located in the central western coastal town of California for almost 130 years, grounds performers and viewers alike in a rooted sense of place.<sup>35</sup> It also binds them through a kinship network that is at once familial and more broadly communal. The memories of those who have participated in the Dow Village Ramleela for the past half century remind us that the Trinidad vernacular narration evolved at roughly the same time that the exclusive caste system—through which actors, particularly *swaroopas*, were designated—yielded to a more democratic structure.<sup>36</sup>

Legend has it that the first Ramleela performances took place around 1880 in the area of a silk cotton tree on the outskirts of Dow Village. As Ramleela committee member and organizer Harripersad Sookhai now tells the story, after a couple of years near the silk cotton tree, the performances moved to a sugar estate lower down in the village area (2007). Sookhai reports that, according to Mahant Babu BoochoonooSingh, a man named Simon, who was in charge of the estate, was passing the area with his wife in a Victorian buggy. Someone told him that there were lootings going on in the estate—a rumor spread out of spite among the villagers to attack the Ramleela. As a result, the site was moved. Then, it is said, Mr. Simon, passing again and seeing for himself the benign, even beautiful, nature of the performance, questioned the people of Ramleela. Realizing that this was a good thing, he gave them permission, in the words of Sookhai, to “go back and have their Ramleela where they started” (2007).

This legendary narrative reflects the cycle of hostility, ambivalence, and apparent acceptance of the *Jahajees* that re-cycles over and over in Trinidad. In this context, claiming one’s own space takes on a particular significance. And thus it is in Dow Village, where not only has the Ramleela been performed at its current location since 1916, but having been granted the title to the land by the first (and so far only) Indo-Trinidadian government in 1997, the Dow Village Ramleela and Cultural Association also uniquely owns the land and the permanent buildings of the site.

### 1. *Desb*

The location is on Railway Road in the heart of the village. At 20 by 80 meters, the rectangular grounds, though relatively small, have been uniquely developed with an impressive, permanent portal on Railway Road, at the northern end of the *grong*, and covered concrete stands that range along the eastern side. There is also an oblong concrete building in the south, which already by 1992 contained “much needed facilities for change rooms, toilets, pavilion, feeding space, etc.”

35. The claim of having performed Ramleela continuously since about 1880 is also made by one other Ramleela group in Trinidad: that of Cedar Hill.

36. For a link between sustaining Brahminhood while crossing the *Kalapani*, see Mishra (2007:33–34).

(Bhagaloo 1992), and which now houses the boat and other Ramleela props throughout the year (fig. 8). The command stand for the vyasa and musical accompaniment for the Ramleela are on the porch of this building, rather than in the East, the natural logistics of the setting determining and slightly skewing the epic orientation.<sup>37</sup> Because of the proximity and the relatively stationary nature of the seated audience, the players and the viewers seem to integrate interactively with each other. Indeed, when I first visited on 12 October 2007, children thronged the bamboo fence that separated the darshakas from the performers.



Figure 8. Dow Village permanent building at the south end of grong, view from the north, with porch and door of storage area visible. October 2008. (Photo by Milla Cozart Riggio)

## 2. *Kálu*: Of Time and the Seasons

According to the President of the Association, Jagessar Ganesh, “going to the bamboo patch and doing prayers and such things before we cut” was an important memory from his childhood. Because the bamboo cannot be cut during Pitri Paksh (the memorial period of remembrance of the departed souls), which comes before Dussehra, and thus Ramleela, it has to be cut

some three or four weeks before Ramleela. We build the fence—make rings with it and tie the steel and bamboo (bamboo can bend, you know). The grounds are barred around with bamboo poles with steel railing. That is just for the players. The palaces are built—the huts, Lanka, everything built with bamboo, though with pieces of iron sometimes to get it stronger and stiffer. (Ganesh 2007)

Today’s lokas echo the past. However, unlike today, men and women were once separated during Ramleela, the separation linked by some to the polar opposition of energies that characterizes the epic geography:

The spectators were behind the bamboo; the vendors had their sheds and so. But there used to be a pushcart; a glass case with an old woman selling sugar cake and things like that. [...] On the last day they used to have Ravan on the southern side. [...] There were restrictions. When it came to the men and women mixing together [...] there would be men on one side and women on the other. There is a spiritual aspect to this separation. The [palaces] stood in separate places: Ayodhya in the North and Lanka in the South. I think it has a lot to do with the sun traveling in the North; it has a more positive energy. A good sign for the soul. (Bickramdass 2007)

## 3. *Samau* and *Samájí*: Changing Circumstances and Evolving Notions of Community

The pride of ownership is matched in Dow Village by the mythos of family and the evolution of community. In 1983, roughly a hundred years after Ramleela began in Dow Village, the Dow Village Ramleela and Cultural Association was formed.<sup>38</sup> This Association has resulted in many

37. In a one-time experiment in 2007, Ayodhya was placed directly across from the audience, in the West, to increase the sight lines for viewers.

38. A committee was formed in 1982, which resulted in the formation of the Cultural Association in 1983. The information contained in this narrative was taken from interviews in 2007 and 2008 with the current President Jagessar Ganesh, Pricilla Bickramdass (the granddaughter of Mahant Babu Boochoonosingh), and Chitral Baraan, who does much of the current narrating. The transcripts of these and other interviews were verified by Shamagne Bertrand and Florence Blizzard.

changes: in performances in English rather than in Hindi and in the development of a “pre-written” script based on the *Manas*, which is tweaked but used year after year. Most significantly, however, the Association has produced a much more broadly based group of players than previously existed.

As remembered by Jagessar Ganesh and others, the period of, say, the 1950s was a time when the Dow Village Ramleela was controlled by “the caste system,” with those whose family names belong to one of two castes—the Brahmins or the Kshatriyas—taking the major roles (for a history of the development of caste influence through the 1950s, see Richman [2010], in this issue). As Ganesh explains:

For me, going to school as young children in the 1950s, from about age 8 to 10, we started to play minor roles. What used to happen long ago, it was the caste system, so that the Maharajs and the Singhs used to get major roles, and with all the other Singhs living in the village, we never got major roles. The people with the major roles would go and sleep in the Dow Village Temple. For the whole 10 days. The Sadhus [ascetics who lived in and took care of the mandir] used to cook food for them, even before I was born. They took care of the players. Pundit Siewdath was associated with the Ramleela in the 1950s. It was a great honor to sleep in the temple, where they would participate in the fasting. (2007)

The Maharajs are the Brahmins (the priestly caste mythically produced by the Mouth of God) and the Singhs, or sometimes the Gosines, are Kshatriyas (the warriors or rulers, who provide strength, produced from the arm of God). Anyone with these names could be given major roles, dominating the production at that time.

The Singhs were the most numerous; of all the Singhs, one family lineage would notably pass the Ramleela mantle through five successive generations. That is the family known as BoochoonooSingh. The name “BoochoonooSingh”—an ancestral given name that became a surname—carries the mystique that began with a pair of brothers, Gaja and Sukal Boochoonoo Singh, the great grandfather and great granduncle of the clan and legendary founders of the Dow Village Ramleela. Their line passed through Mahant Babu BoochoonooSingh, the august grandfather whose name is most closely tied to the Ramleela history and who was nationally honored in 1991 for his services to the development of Ramleela. The third generation includes Jairajsingh BoochoonooSingh, who at 68 years of age had played for the “past 50 or 60 years” (2007).

If the father passes the mantle to the son, that process can sometimes be reversed. In 2007 Jairajsingh, who had ceased playing, resumed because his son and Babu’s grandson, Akash BoochoonooSingh, now plays Ram and has played Bharat, among other roles. Akash explains what taking on the family mantle has meant to his own personal growth:

I did not remember my grandfather or father playing. I did not start so young [because I was shy...]. You have to build the courage there [...]. I am still shy, but I am overcoming it. The spotlight is the thing. You can’t hide [...]. The whole thing is the power of good defeating evil. It is a great responsibility to play God. I don’t eat any meat for, say about a month or two before it starts. Before the bamboo is gathered. I go into the temple more often to make prayers. I offer to the sun. I say my guru mantra. There is a very big responsibility of playing Ram [...]. I get emotional when someone bows at my feet. I am playing the role of Ram [...] I get the spiritual aspect of it, the loss of the Kingdom. I have to obey my parents; I can’t let them down in any way. (2007)

Akash and his father sum up the BoochoonooSingh’s legacy. For Akash, being the great grandson of Mahant Babu BoochoonooSingh “is a great privilege.” His father, who began by playing Sita long ago, explains that “the people look at me different—religious-wise. Even in school, anywhere. That is Singh. Even though you don’t want to play, you have to play” (2007).



Not all the BoochoonooSings are male. The fourth and fifth generations have added a different tone to the family lineage through a pair of daughters and their sons: Davanand Praisingsh, the second daughter's son, at about 12 years old ordinarily plays Shatruhana, though because of his forthcoming exams, was in 2007 only intermittently "jumping up," as he put it, borrowing a term ordinarily associated with Carnival (2007).

Pricilla BoochoonooSingh Bickramdass and her son Shiva Sanjeet Bickramdass further extend this generational story. Pricilla (fig. 9), who sits on the podium with the vyasa and for four years did the female narration (though she has never played), is a certified chartered accountant (a member both of the British parent association ACCA and the Trinidad ICATT). Participating in Ramleela as a female narrator, she describes her enhancements of the script "to make it a bit more exciting" as "not local or topical but according to the spiritual aspect, based on the character, such as Manthra [or Manthara, a deceiving servant]." She describes the adjustments a narrator has to make when players improvise their action. But most of all, Pricilla feels her own role now to be the steward of her young son, the natural heir of the BoochoonooSingh's tradition:

Even before this season, he would be getting dreams. The son would make his mother walk with the shawl, from as early as I could remember, this is what he would do. Walk with the shawl. He loves the Indian way; we would call him Swami because of that [...] He adores Sri Ram and Lakshmana and has total fondness for Hanumanji. He has been there since he was two years old. That's when he knew what Ramleela was. It's because of him that we get really more into it. (2007)

While revering and building on this Singh legacy, the Dow Village Ramleela and Cultural Association has since its origins in 1983 transformed the base for playing in Dow Village, partly at the insistence of Mahant Babu BoochoonooSingh himself. Put simply, the caste system does exist but is not exercised as before. Where once the major roles were limited to Maharaj or Singh, now Rampath, Ganesh, Baaran (the current primary narrator) are familiar names. Jagessar Ganesh explains that when Babu BoochoonooSingh had reached the age of 102 without being either sick or suffering any complaints, a sign of a true spiritual leader, he "called us and told us that he would not like to see Ramleela die in Dow Village" (2007). It was because of Babu that the Association was formed. But now the Association has spread the mantle far beyond the Singh lineage. The Dow Ramleela continues to be a family affair, but that family now embraces the village; the tradition that was once exclusive has become inclusive.

*First Felicity:*

*When Leela Embraces Maya*

*Felicity! What a gentle Anglo-Saxon name for an epical memory.*

—Derek Walcott (1992)

Since at least the early 1920s, Ramleela has been performed on the Felicity Sports Ground, or as it is now called, the Green Park Recreational Ground, on Boundary Road in the village of



Figure 9. Pricilla Bickramdass, granddaughter of Babu BoochoonooSingh in the Dow Village *grogg*. Bickramdass sits on the podium with the vyasa and for four years did the female narration. October 2008. (Photo by Milla Cozart Riggio)



*Figure 10. Sri Ram (Omkar Balgobin), Lakshman (Dion Dally), and followers in synchronized motion, shooting their bows with attendant children, illustrating the swing step variation of the yaatra pada step. Felicity, Trinidad, October 2007. (Photo by Jeffrey Chock)*

Felicity on the outskirts of the bustling market borough of Chaguana.<sup>39</sup> The First Felicity Ramleela and Cultural Group chose its name to set itself apart from other local groups (Saith n.d.:1; see also Gooptar 1994); and the group has a history of determination, continuity, and triumph over adversities that could have ended their long tradition. The performative precision of the leela combines with the festive offerings of the mela to establish the distinct character of the First Felicity Ramleela, drawing too on the power of the Jahajee presence in the village, which Nobel Prize-winner Derek Walcott identified as ironically having the “gentle Anglo-Saxon name” of Felicity.

#### 1. *Desh*

Walcott’s tribute both to the place and the people in his 1992 Nobel Prize speech evokes some of the magic of First Felicity:

Felicity is a village in Trinidad on the edge of the Caroni plain, the wide central plain that still grows sugar and to which indentured cane cutters were brought after emancipation, so the small population of Felicity is East Indian, and on the afternoon that I visited it with friends from America, all the faces along its road were Indian, which [...] was a moving, beautiful thing, because this Saturday afternoon Ramleela, the epic dramatization of the Hindu epic the Ramayana, was going to be performed, and the costumed actors from the village were assembling on a field strung with different-coloured flags [...] and beautiful Indian boys in red and black were aiming arrows haphazardly into the

39. In a report entitled “History of Ramleela in Felicity—1920’s,” Kelvin Saith, the Treasurer of the First Felicity Ramleela and Cultural Group claims that “this [unspecified] year [around 1997 or 1998] marks the 90th year of celebration” (n.d.). This would place the origins at somewhere around 1907 or 1908, several years before the end of indentureship; however, somewhat inconsistently, this report elsewhere concurs with the memories of Pundit Budharat and others that consistent performances began in the early 1920s.

afternoon light. Low blue mountains on the horizon, bright grass, clouds that would gather colour before the light went [...] The saffron flames, the bright grass, and the hand-woven armatures of the fragmented god who would be burnt were [...] part of a ritual, evergreen season that, like the cane-burning harvest, is annually repeated, the point of such sacrifice being its repetition, the point of the destruction being renewal through fire. (Walcott 1992)

As I observed in the performance 15 years later in 2007, *First Felicity* exemplifies the synergy that links the leela of performance to the mela of the observers. As in *Sangre Grande*, the consecration ritual is distinctive. The day before the first day of the leela, the pundit, with others from the Ramleela Committee and cast, circumambulated the grounds. Worshipping Mother Earth, they sprinkled rice and water. They invoked the 10 cardinal points: East, West, North, South, Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, Southwest, Up, and Down. And they invoked God. The consecrated inner playing circle, surrounded by a largely non-bamboo fence (with a few symbolical bamboo sections), retains the epic geography of the drama, with palaces of Ayodhya in the North and Lanka in the South, both substantially decorated but uncovered structures. In the heavy rains on 14 October 2007—the third night of the production but the first night I attended with Trinidadian photographer Jeffrey Chock—the Swaroopas in Ayodhya sat in their palace under umbrellas. The viewers who usually stand along the fence, sit in their own folding chairs, or wander the elaborate mela area, had on that night fled for cover.

On arriving at the grong, the first impression is of a festive gathering in a large park. Encircling the playing grounds on two sides are perhaps a dozen individual food stands, which now sell only food where once they apparently sold children's toys, such as the small windmills (pinwheels) that were for a longtime favorite playthings for Trinidad children. A distinctive feature at *First Felicity* are the two children's rides—a baby Ferris wheel and a chair plane (a ride with widely flying chairs)—owned and operated by Carol and Sam Rampersad, who have been coming to *First Felicity* for the past 15 years, in 2008 raising their price per ride from TT\$2.00 to TT\$3.00 (roughly, US\$.40–.50). Though the Rampersads, whose great grandparents came from India, appear to be far removed from the enactment of the Ramleela, they testify to its power: “The way they act, it is almost like it's real. Almost like it's happening now” (2008; fig. 10).

## 2. *Kālu*

Intriguingly, 1992, the year that Walcott delivered his address, was a time when the *First Felicity* Committee was dealing with the worst dilemma of its history, the defection of the “resident pundit.” The Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha and its Secretary General Satnarayan Maharaj appointed a committee “to make recommendations for the improvement of the Ramleela in the country” and, according to their report, the defector “took with him costumes, paintings and even props belonging to the group.” Having sought assistance from “the outside,” the *Felicity* Ramleela Committee mounted its 1992 performance with a visiting narrator, a “very impressive” well-educated young woman named Mayawati Maharaj (now Mayawati Vahini), a student of Raviji, to whom the committee had turned for counsel (Bhagaloo 1992:2, 1, 3).

*First Felicity* has through the years undergone some of the same transitions as, for instance, *Dow Village*, though, unlike *Dow*, many families have “moved on due to relocation of households, some due to death and other various reasons.” Earlier, “the Lutchman Maharaj family portrayed the major roles and characters” (Saith n.d.), reflecting the implicit privilege accorded a few dominant family names, such as Maharaj or Singh. The cast lists for 2007 and 2008, as in *Dow*, reflect a broad range of player names, including Fareed Hossein, from a hybrid Muslim-Hindu family. In addition to the range of family names of the officers—Ranc Kanhai, President; Jeevan Nanack, Vice President; Meena Mahabir, Secretary; Kevin Saith, Treasurer; and Sundar Jookoo, Public Relations Officer—there are many families represented in the cast: Balgobin, Dally, Dubhu, Santo, Heeralal, Manbodh, Ramnesar, Ramoutar, Lutchman, and Ramsubhag



Figure 11. Pundit Budharat (Sham) Yankatasu narrating Ramleela. In *Felicity*, the *Manas* is established on the actual reading stand before the Pundit, rather than in the *gong*. *Felicity*, Trinidad, October 2007. (Photo by Jeffrey Chock)

(First Felicity Ramleela Cultural Committee 2007, 2008). The drama is directed and narrated by Pundit Budharat [Sham] Yankatasu, who is from a nearby town and drives into Felicity to participate. Pundit Budharat, who performs “on behalf of Raviji,” his mentor, accompanies himself on a harmonium as he chants chowpai at the beginning of the pooja with the initiating aarti (fig. 11). For the first time in 2008 his 16-year-old son Sanjaya Yankatasu, who attends the Chinmayananda School, brought his six-member tassa group, Shooting Stars, to provide the percussive accompaniment. Ranging in age from 12 to 16, these players had no need to practice with the Ramleela troupe because, according to Yankatasu, it is in their blood. As the pundit’s son, he learned the Ramleela

beat “by listening from the time I was small.” The play teaches them “how to live life; be more tolerant” (Sanjaya Yankatasu 2008).<sup>40</sup>

### 3. *Samau*: The Kinetic Memory of the Ancestors

First Felicity is one of the venues that begins its narrative with a Jahajee leela, dramatizing the journey across the Kalapani, carrying the Ramayana. Pundit Budharat makes the point that throughout the narrative, they recurrently go beyond the *Manas*. They begin, as the multilingual version of the *Manas* does, with Valmiki, and, at various points, they include material from other writings traditionally attributed to Tulsidas, as well as the consistent English narration. Balkaran-singh describes the opening rituals performed the first night I attended in 2007, which was the third night of an 11-night series:

The first pooja was of the Ramayana itself, the auspiciousness of the story of Ram, with a sense of *jai* [victory] for the forces of good; the invocation included references to the loss of light at this time of year. The second invocation was to Ganesh, to remove obstacles, to Saraswati as the patroness of fine arts, and to Ram as the quintessential embodiment of the virtues of justice and righteous living. Then there was a prayer to Durga for the principle of female energy implicit in the existence of Mother Earth. There was finally an invocation dance, as a prelude to the night’s performance. (2007)

The episodes included the Sage Vishvamitra katha, following the Sage’s request to King Dasarath to let the young Ram and Lakshman defend his ashram from the attacks of the rakshasas; even before arriving at the Sage’s ashram, Ram and Lakshman encounter and defeat the demons Mareecha and Subahu in a fierce battle. First Felicity also on this night enacted the birth of Sita. Rarely portrayed in Trinidad, the beautifully dramatic story of her mystical origins takes its details mainly from folk sources.

The Felicity Ramleela also includes some modern touches that connect directly with the audience, though without the overtly local political references one might find in Palmiste or the Baal Ramdilla (fig. 12). Naresh Ramesar as Shurpanakha, in the episode in which this demonic temptress, the sister of Ravan, tries to seduce both Ram and Lakshman (performed on my

40. There are various Ramleela tassa beats, as I learned from interviewing the Sangre Grande tassa group: there is a Rawan beat, a swaroopas beat, etc.

second visit three nights later), attempted to lure the royal brothers with the gyrating energies of the local pelvic twisting dance known as wining, identified with Carnival, a festival associated by many Hindus with darker and more profane sources of energy than those of Ramleela. Part of the strategy of engaging the audience comically also included a raggedly clad, ambiguously gendered village jester who circumambulated the fence with a live puppy. Even when the crowd thinned during the heavy rainfall, the jester kept to his/her performance, teasing invisible audience members with the same energy s/he had given to the crowd earlier in the evening.



Figure 12. In *Felicity*, demons are masked, as here, where there is a combination of built and purchased masks. *Felicity*, Trinidad, October 2007. (Photo by Jeffrey Chock)

The most impressive aspect of this Ramleela was the focused precision of the actors, the synchronization of the various Ramleela steps—the god walk, the journey skip step, and others. Visiting with the major actors after a performance in 2008, a half block from the venue at the home of Tanty Balroop, where the troupe dresses before and gathers after performance, I confirmed that the precision does not come from rehearsal.<sup>41</sup> The performance *is* the rehearsal. Ram and Lakshman had, in fact, experimented with new, unexpected variations that night, which each of the warriors followed without missing a beat. The professionalism, training, and precision of this group of players were striking, all the more so given their insistence that they had mainly learned their dances, their steps, and their roles from years of attending and watching Ramleela rather than from any formal training. According to Balkaransingh, who is both advising First *Felicity* and studying it as part of his doctoral dissertation, “this process reflects and evokes ancestral memory” (close to what Joseph Roach in *Cities of the Dead* [1996] has called the kinesthetic memory of the body), that is, in the words of Balkaransingh, a “memory of the ancestors within ourselves—a race consciousness, but a consciousness that is inbuilt; it could be genetically” (2007).

#### 4. *Samájú*

Beyond the Recreational Ground on which the grong is established, the larger community, through which the procession takes place on the 11th and last night of the epic, establishes the *samsara*—the world—before which and for which the sacred drama is enacted. Ramleela engenders a multilayered engagement that depends as much on the unspoken as on the articulated response. Unlike the pundit, the actors in First *Felicity* are largely local. Visiting with them, I discovered two dozen relatively young people, most of them men, for whom the honor of playing in Ramleela is a major factor in their lives. They have an extraordinary sense of esprit, energy, and commitment, which they eagerly shared with a stranger. They rival each other for

41. This lime (Trinidad term for a relaxed but engaged conversation) took place after a performance in October 2008 at 13 Clarke Road, *Felicity*. Among those who participated were Leon Balroop (Ram), Omar Balroop (Lakshman), and Sunar Jokhoo (Hanuman). See also First *Felicity* Ramleela Cultural Committee (1993), where preparation is identified with religious practices, not rehearsal.

singular honors, and they bring to this sacred performance as much focus and dedication as one would expect young people to give to any competitive activity, sports or otherwise.<sup>42</sup> Beyond that, they abide by the rituals of cleanness, fasting, and praying with a level of dedication that is in itself a model.

As much as any other venue, First Felicity illustrates that both performing in and attending Ramleela, whether as a bhakta or rasika tuned into the performance or one enjoying the opportunity to share with others the evening's experience, is an act of homage, of community affirmation, and of religious devotion and cultural solidarity. Even those who may think they only come out to socialize or to buy food bring their children or encourage their teenagers to attend on their own. They thus tacitly affirm the function of Ramleela in establishing both familial and cultural continuity.

*Sangre Grande:  
Mentoring and Moving*

*Sanatan Dharma ki jai ho [Praise, victory be unto Sanatan Dharma, the eternal right path]*

—“*Kaho Eka Baar*,” a *Maha Sabha* theme song

*It goes back to the old folks: What they believe in [...] Our concept was to tie it into the school curriculum.*

—Premnath Gooptar (2009)

As part of a larger effort to revive Hindu culture in 1990, there was an attempt after a hiatus of almost 30 years to resurrect Ramleela performances in Sangre Grande, a bustling urban market borough in Trinidad. That effort was aborted by the attempted coup, led by Abu Bakr, which brought the country to a standstill for a few days. A year later in 1991, the Sangre Grande Ramleela Committee did revive Ramleela, with the help of the Pierre Road Felicity Ramleela organizers,<sup>43</sup> using a model that led Sangre Grande in atypical directions. In its turn, the Sangre Grande Committee, which consists largely of educators and school principals, has effectively linked Ramleela to the school curriculum in the Sangre Grande Hindu School, and, through mentoring other groups, across the island. Whereas the story of both Dow Village and First Felicity is a narrative of sustained continuity for close to a century or more, the success of Sangre Grande is tied to the educational emphasis of the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, consolidated as the major Hindu organization in 1952 and still the largest single Hindu organization in Trinidad, under whose auspices this Ramleela was organized from its renewal in 1991 through 1995.<sup>44</sup>

42. They had in 2008 undertaken a large recruitment effort that had brought numerous additional children into the performance; this is a tradition that promises to continue.

43. This is a second Felicity Ramleela Committee and venue, different from First Felicity, already discussed.

44. It is difficult to provide an accurate history of the Sangre Grande Ramleela without the history of the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, which having been consolidated out of two pre-existing organizations was incorporated in 1952, and its role in forming the National Ramleela Council in 1991. The Maha Sabha has established 43 primary schools and 5 secondary schools, including one in 1952 at the Sant Nagar Hindu Temple. The history of these organizations is a crucial part of the story, including the role of Satnarayan Maharaj, Secretary General of the Maha Sabha, in gaining funding from the Ministry of Culture to support Ramleela, channeled to participating Ramleela organizing committees in the 1990s. In 1992 the National Ramleela Council established a review committee, which visited Ramleela sites and reported on their level of preparation, their facilities, their audiences, and so forth, cited several times in this article. That review group noted that in 1992, “only the second time in thirty years that Ramleela was being celebrated in these parts,” the daily crowds at the well-funded Sangre Grande Ramleela reached into the thousands (Bhagaloo 1992:32). The National Ramleela Council broke its formal ties with the Maha Sabha in 1995, but the links remain very strong. Mr. Gooptar, who was President of the National Ramleela Council from 1991 to 2005, has remained an executive member of the Maha Sabha as well as President of the Sangre Grande Ramleela Committee. (See also Richman 2010, in this issue for more on the role of the Maha Sabha and its history.)



*Figure 13. The approximately 60-foot effigy of Ravan towers over the grong. The raised platform in the center is identical to the platform in the Harlem Village Ramleela, which was mentored by the Sangre Grande Ramleela Committee. Sangre Grande, 2006. (Courtesy of Premnath Gooptar)*

If the family relationships in Dow Village and Felicity are extended throughout the community, the essential Ramleela unit in Sangre Grande is that of teacher with students, who together with the committee and the adult actors form an extended Ramleela family.<sup>45</sup>

The Sangre Grande pattern is to coproduce a Ramleela with another community, liaising with the Cultural Committee in the host village to plan a Ramleela together for a year (fig. 13). For that first year, Sangre Grande provides the pundit to narrate and direct, with some of the actors; the host community offers the venue, most of the audience, and fills in with actors of their own. In 2002, for instance, Sangre Grande assisted Rio Clara, which now has a thriving tradition. In 2007, the year I first visited this venue, the Sangre Grande Committee worked with Harlem Village, Caroni, to establish a Ramleela grong beside the Seetaram Mandir. Approximately 20 students or roughly one-third of the actors came from Sangre Grande, about 40 young actors, or two-thirds of the total from Caroni.<sup>46</sup>

In 2008, Sangre Grande returned to its own grong beside the Hindu School on Picton Street, leaving Harlem Village to sustain its fledgling effort. The physical layout of the playing space, the ceremony of consecration, the relationship of the sanctified playing arena to the mela outside the fence and of audience to performance: all these bear the stamp of Sangre Grande, and particularly of its eloquent vyasa, Pundit Bownath Maraj, and Premnath Gooptar, former long-term President of the National Ramleela Council, executive member of the Maha Sabha, and Chairman of the Sangre Grande Ramleela Committee.

45. In Sangre Grande, Ramleela is tied in to the school curriculum either through drama, as Pundit Maraj does, or by using the Ramleela performances directly as a teaching guide, for instance, to mathematics (calculating the measurements of the grong), as the basis for essays, the subject of history, or an occasion to develop artistic skills (sketching the grong and other Ramleela scenes), as Mr. Gooptar and others have done.

46. Generally, about 150 actors participate in the Sangre Grande Ramleela, approximately 100 of whom are students, with many of the remaining adults recent graduates, often of the Sangre Grande Hindu School.

## 1. *Desb*: Consecrating the Space

Following the practice of Pierre Road, as introduced by Ramdeo Barnarsi, Sangre Grande first ties the ground (consecrates and closes the space) when the bamboo is cut, weeks before Ramleela itself, with a *dee pooja*, “bursting” open a coconut (which as it is “living” represents a sacrificial fowl cock, according to Premnath Gooptar), puncheon rum (to feed the spirits), a biscuit, butter, a cigarette, and of course flowers. According to Gooptar, the *dee pooja*, which is rare in Trinidad Ramleelas, “goes back to the old folks, what they believed in. Barnarsi’s father believed in the *dee pooja*. If they were orthodox Hindus, they might have gone another way” (2009). Though traditional, this *pooja* appears to reflect non-Indian influences on the Hindu practice; because alcohol is forbidden for those fasting throughout the period of the Ramleela, the *dee pooja* is performed quietly to preserve the tradition, without the direct involvement of the pundit.

Following the teaching of Pierre Road’s Barnarsi, the consecration of the playing space after the lokas have been built again involves bursting a coconut rather than using jars: on the first night four coconuts are set out, one at each of the four corners (north, south, east, and west) with one coconut burst each subsequent day, invoking a blessing from Mother Earth, with appropriate circumambulation of the grounds and other rituals.

The grounds are laid out in the traditional way, following the epic geography with Ayodhya in the North, Lanka in the South, and the command stand in the East. However, Sangre Grande varies the layout by building a raised playing platform in the center of the grong, on which virtually all action takes place, except for those involving circumambulatory movement or a vehicle, such as Ram’s carriage or Guha’s boat (a boat called “Guha’s transport,” available for hire, as portrayed in this Ramleela). The platform faces the command stand, toward the vyasa, who directs the action as well as narrates the story. The vyasa opens the first night’s performance with a *pooja* with *aarti*, blessing the players and the occasion. He does this in Ayodhya, the holy city of Ram’s birth, rather than from the command stand. It is Pundit Maraj’s assumption that the opening and closing prayers and invocations should always be delivered in Ayodhya and that the journey to and from Ayodhya is an important part of the vyasa’s circumambulation of the grong.

In both Sangre Grande and Harlem Village, the mela area is relatively small; though the proceeds of the vendors are important sources of funding both for the sellers and for the Ramleela Committee, the devotees are neither encouraged nor forbidden to visit the vending stands during the performance itself. Particularly in Harlem Village the children in the audience largely remained seated with their parents. In fact, to encourage support for the food vendors, in 2008, the Harlem Village vyasa called for a “five minute intermission” in the play, directing folks to the food stands that were in front of the mandir.<sup>47</sup> By thus implicitly identifying Ramleela with plays in which the audience remain seated and silent while the playing takes place, an intermission in which viewers can purchase food and move about before returning to their seats signifies a radical break from a tradition in which the audience is differentiated by levels of engagement, from the *darshakas* who devotedly “see” the play, the *rasikas* who “taste” the drama, to others who move about the mela seeking *satsangh* and a continuous sense of community during the performance itself.

## 2. *Kálu*: Where Space and Time Converge

In mythopoetic terms, the Sangre Grande Ramleela parallels others on the island. Its organizers feel that they are collapsing then and now, here and there, by creating India in Trinidad: “What has happened in the homeland of our fathers is now enacted here. Visitors from India marvel when they come here. But we can learn Hinduism here in Trinidad because it is so

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47. I was told by several participants at this and other venues that this intermission was highly unusual, possibly a first in Trinidad.



much portrayed [...]. It is taking place every day, and the same with Ramleela too” (Pundit B. Maraj 2009).

Sangre Grande is one of the sites that has an 11-night performance. On the 10th and 11th nights, two processions that open up the space separate Sangre Grande from all other Ramleelas in Trinidad. The first takes place on the 10th day, always a Sunday. For this venue the effigy of Ravan is built, not at the site as is customary, but in a neighboring town, Sangre Chiquito.<sup>48</sup> The massive effigy is then transported in a procession of vehicles from Sangre Chiquito to Sangre Grande, in what Pundit Maraj calls a “big parade” with tassa drums, a “mic car” (a car with loudspeaker announcing the event), and a police escort (fig. 14). This “parade” not only expands the playing space by incorporating the several mile route of the journey, it also helps to swell the size of the Sunday night crowd, which annually is between 12,000 and 15,000 people.

By making the effigy of Ravan so visible in its opening years, 1991 and 1992, this parade catalyzed the simmering, always latent resentment of the Afro-Trinidadian community about the figure they sometimes mistakenly call the “Negro God,” who is spectacularly burned at the end of the performance. According to Gooptar, “When the Africans saw the effigy passing, there were curses and other things, including vandalism of the grong.” The mistake, says Gooptar, “has its origin in the cane fields. The Indians were seen as intruders, taking away the work in the cane fields [...]. Rawan was seen to represent the African” (2009).

This misunderstanding inspired Gooptar and Pundit Maraj’s “educational mission,” beginning at the Sangre Grande Hindu school where both were then teachers, to inform people that Ravan was a Hindu, indeed a Brahman. As a direct result of their efforts, the criticism at this particular site died down, and now participation in the Sangre Grande Ramleela includes a significant number of non-Hindus, including some Afro-Trinidadian children and adults, one of whom (Bartholomew Phillip) takes a major role.<sup>49</sup>

The second procession, on the eleventh night, begins at the mandir in Sangre Grande and ends at the grong on the Hindu school grounds, symbolizing the way that Sangre Grande, like the Maha Sabha itself, consistently links education to religion. This night signifies the “triumph



*Figure 14. Procession to bring Ravan effigy from Sangre Chiquita to Sangre Grande, complete with police escort, mic car, and a procession of vehicles. This several-mile procession is unique in Trinidad. Day 10 of performance, 1999. (Courtesy of Premnath Gooptar)*

48. Both Sangre Grande (“Big Blood”) and Sangre Chiquito (“Little Blood”) are named after battles between the Spanish and indigenous peoples, thus lending a level of irony to the construction and transport of Ravan from Sangre Chiquito to Sangre Grande for his last big battle.

49. This notion still lingers in Trinidad, as one hears popularly throughout the country (see for example Satnarayan Maharaj 2001).

of good over evil, positive over negative, light over darkness.” The Lord returns to Ahoydya after a procession in the streets, in which Ram, Sita, and their party ride in a chariot, with people “lining the streets. As the chariot passes, they throw rice and so forth” (Pundit B. Maraj 2009; see also S. Maraj 2009). The street is ablaze with deeyas, from the mandir to the school, to signify the “lighting of the kingdom” that the triumph of Ayodhya symbolizes. The procession, which also includes tassa drums and a microphone and loudspeaker to call to those along the street, begins at the mandir where all the players “who play in red” gather to perform and also to offer devotion. The black-costumed players, Ravan’s troops, do not participate on this night, as they have all been killed, though they do attend and perform technical assistance. Several crucial events of reconciliation, including the emergence of the “true” Sita through a trial of fire (fig. 15), take place in Lanka before the last minute mythically one-day dash to Ayodhya in the arial car, to establish the auspicious Ramraj.

On this 11th night, according to both Pundit Maraj and Gooptar, “the sense of the space has changed” (2009). The raised platform is moved closer to Ayodhya and a 20-foot section of the bamboo fence is opened up, allowing the audience to merge with the actors for the last night’s event, which includes a cultural program of songs and dances performed in front of Ayodhya. Since the final visarjan ceremony releasing the grounds has not been performed, the grounds are still consecrated, but the sense of unity with the community is such that at this site, the consecrated grong on the last night embraces the audience as well as the performers.<sup>50</sup> All are welcomed to sit at the foot of Ram, while Hanumanji kisses his feet, and Ramraj is established not only as a play act in the far away kingdom of Ayodhya but also locally, in Sangre Grande, Trinidad. Then and there, here and now have merged.

### 3. *Samau*

Unlike Felicity, which emphasizes the precision of movement, Sangre Grande’s performance tradition focuses on Pundit Maraj. Facing him, the actors take their cues entirely from his narration, effectively throwing the emphasis back on the vyasa. He instructs the gathered “devotees” with a level of clarity that has earned him a special reputation on the island. By contrast, Harlem Village, in their second year in 2008, depended on a rotating group of narrators, sometimes several in one night, and the raised central platform had been turned slightly to directly face the audience rather than the vyasa.<sup>51</sup>

Sangre Grande’s performance included recorded sound effects, such as the snoring of the citizens while Ram sneaked out of town to avoid conflict, and the sounds of weeping, first of King Dasarath and then of the entire community. But with Pundit Maraj as narrator, the focus throughout was on the oratorical power of the Pundit himself. He localized the drama by configuring the Kingdom of Ayodhya as a modern parliamentary structure. There was a “Minister of Public Utilities,” for instance, as well as other ministers with their “portfolios.” When Keikeyi was attempting to win Dasarath to her point of view, she described him as “globally renowned” and told him he would be laughed at “internationally” if he did not follow her will. Similarly, the vyasa used local dialect both to evoke laughter and to make his point.

Within the framework of the narrative and the chanted chowpai, Pundit Maraj directed both the audience and the actors: “Devotees, this is drama you are seeing. This is part of the school curriculum.” As a vehicle for education, Ramleela is used to teach mathematics, history, literature, and art. But primarily, it informs the drama of living. As an embodied version of the

50. A similar celebration, with community dancing inside the grong, takes place on the 11th night on Matilda Road in Princes Town (see Ahn 2009:40).

51. When I arrived at the grong during a performance on one night in 2008 with a copy of the multilingual *Manas*, I was asked if I had come to take a turn as a narrator.

discourses of Ram, it articulates the lessons that one needs to conduct a moral life, as it narrates the epic legends of Ram and Sita. The Pundit, who is solely responsible for the text, extrapolates these lessons himself, as he might do in the classroom.<sup>52</sup>

### 3. *Samájú*

Pundit Maraj, who has been the primary narrator since 1992, is involved in all the physical preparation of the grong, not just the consecration but, as he puts it, “the sweeping up.” This involvement, too, is part of the bonding process that melds teacher and students into a cohesive unit. The players are “mainly students in the Hindu school,” together with recent graduates and other adults. The design is partly to “keep them occupied in a healthful way” (Pundit B. Maraj 2007), free from alcohol and drugs, to teach them skills (as in the construction of the lokas), to create a positive environment for their learning, and finally, in the mentoring years to oversee the bonding of two separate communities in the two participating villages. Being part of the Ramleela team is a positive value that they carry beyond the performance arena. To this end (and also to counteract the charge that the portrayal of Ravan and the rakshasas is implicitly racist), the Sangre Grande/Caroni Ramleela emphasized the fact that good and evil are not absolute, though they are opposites within the moral universe of the Ramayana: the movement toward or away from the light provides a more mediated range of oppositions.

Though the families of the performers are, of course, consulted and the Ramleela presented with their approval, many Sangre Grande parents did not attend the performance in Harlem Village. The two donated Maxi Taxis (12-seat vans) that brought the Sangre Grande performers to Caroni could accommodate only the actors, not the parents. Once they returned home in 2008, the parents were more directly involved (for a parental testimonial in an earlier era, see L. Singh 1993). But the essential family of the Sangre Grande Ramleela is that established by the Guru and Shishaya Parampara

(the traditional guru/pundit student relationship in Hinduism). This sense of community is enhanced by the fact that some performers live at the site for the duration of the performance. Theoretically, as was true years ago in Dow Village and other venues, this is a privilege accorded only to swaroopas. However, since the major roles are often taken by children or young teenagers, this option has been extended in Sangre Grande to the entire cast so that



*Figure 15. The true Sita emerges from the fire test, replacing the false Sita before the final return to Ayodhya. Sangre Grande, Trinidad, 2003. (Courtesy of Premnath Gooptar)*

52. Playing in Sangre Grande has been opened up to girls, largely because the pundit's wife had requested that their daughter be allowed to play. The request was granted; she was dressed as a warrior, and the following year many girls volunteered. In Sangre Grande, as elsewhere, playing in the Ramleela is no longer restricted by gender. Pundit Maraj's entire family, including his son Sushain Maraj, whose interview has provided context for this analysis and who provided photographs, has been a central part of the Sangre Grande Ramleela. See Richman (2010) in this issue for a reference to female playing in Sangre Grande three decades earlier before performances died out.

there are some adults present on-site. Those who live there cook together with their large cooking pot placed inside the grong; they play cards to pass the time and, generally, create a tight bond. Overall, while the mission of Sangre Grande is to further education through Ramleela and to spread Ramleela throughout the island of Trinidad, creating a sense of community is an integral part of the process and the purpose of the Sangre Grande Ramleela Committee, so vital to the continuity of this tradition.

*Baal Ramdilla:*

*Empowering the Parents, Training the Children*

*Your child deserves*

*More than an education*

*More than a certificate*

—*A Sanskaar*<sup>53</sup>

*Play Baal Ramdilla*

—*Hindu Prachar Kendra Baal Ramdilla slogan, posted at the venue each year*

Baal Ramdilla is a relatively recent addition to the Ramleela family. It is performed at the Hindu Prachar Kendra, on the appropriately named Raghunanan Road in Enterprise, to the east of the market borough of Chaguanas. In 2003, after guiding Puerto Rican photographer Pablo Delano through Ramleela venues in Trinidad, Raviji, as President of the Hindu Prachar Kendra, vowed to carry out a five-year plan to develop the Ramyana epic tradition known in the Trinidadian dialect as Ramdilla. Toward that end, a summer camp was established to train children, both in understanding Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* and in the various performance arts required to put on performances of these plays, under the instructive title of Baal Ramdilla (Children's Ramdilla). As part of the developmental program for the Kendra, Raviji sought advice and counsel from international Ramlila scholar, performance studies theorist, and theatrical director Richard Schechner, whose lecture on Ramlila at the University of Trinidad and Tobago in 2006 was attended by several hundred practitioners and participants.

The October 2008 Ramdilla presentations fulfilled Raviji's five-year vow. The summer camp—initially four weeks but expanded to six weeks in 2008—now includes dozens of children learning from a variety of teachers. Mohit Marajah, the chair of the project since year two, is a Trinidadian who has returned from the US and is now settled in the locality. In 2007, there were 50 children learning from 10 teachers in all, 4 of whom had been trained in India, including Raviji and Mayawati (Mayaji) Vahini. Mayaji, herself trained in India, directs older students first in writing the narration and then in how to serve as narrators during the production.<sup>54</sup> Upon her return from India, Geetaji Vahini, who was anointed into the leadership of the Kendra in January 2009, has also assumed control of the summer Ramdilla camp.

Raviji has expressed his desire to continue his contribution to the Ramdilla project of the Kendra for another five years, subject to the approval of Geetaji and the Kendra's Ramdilla Committee. In terms of the functions Ramdilla is perceived to perform for children at the Kendra, however, the development plan has been extended through 2028. The expectation is that those now being trained "will become future organizers, performers, creative minds, and supporters of Ramdilla through *their* children, skills, influences, and resources" (Raviji 2008a).

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53. This is a slogan that is posted on signs throughout the summer camp and used to recruit students. It is also on a sign during the performance. "Sanskaar" is difficult to define. The word has its origins in Sanskrit, and it means, most simply, a kind of spiritual experience.

54. Mayaji served as narrator in First Felicity during the early 1990s, at a time when the local narrator was not available. She is regarded as the first female narrator of Ramleela in Trinidad.



Figure 16. The kidnapping of the Jahajees for deportation as indentured workers to Trinidad. In a grong that is never entered with shoes, the black boots of the enforcing officer (Williams) create a jarring testimony to the brutality of the kidnapping. Note Raviji in the background. Baal Ramdilla, *Enterprise*, Trinidad, October 2007. (Photo by Jeffrey Chock)

### 1. *Desh*

The layout of the Baal Ramdilla grong replicates the epic geography of the Ramyana, with the loka of Ayodhya in the North, Lanka in the South, and two large stands in the East, one for the vyasa and the musicians, most of whom are as yet adult singers and instrumentalists (there are plans to replace the adults with child musicians, now in training), and the other to accommodate the sound system engineers with a few seats for observers. The *Manas* text is established in the opening aarti beside these stands, inside the arena. Other ashrams, cities, forests, rivers, mountains, battlegrounds, locations of significant events, and worlds are constructed at assumed spaces, roughly following the journey of Ram from north to south and then south to north inside the arena as appropriate throughout the playing time. For the most part the audience stands or sits in folding chairs around the circular area, with the action moving constantly in a progressively directed circular pattern, so that the perspective shifts with the drama.

The space is traditionally consecrated, with access to the playing arena strictly controlled and limited to those who have obeyed the rules of fasting and who either have a role to play or a special function to perform, including such functions as authorized photography. The narration is led by Mayaji, as vyasa, but actually narrated by a series of young performers—mostly young women—who take turns standing beside Mayaji in the reading shed (both at microphones) and who have written the various segments of the episodic drama that they individually read. A tassa group is located in the West, across from the reading shed. The episodes performed are structured to take six or seven evenings, rather than ten or eleven, because parents are unwilling to allow the children—who have been involved since July—more than one week off from school for the performance. Outside the consecrated arena, there is space for parking cars, a locus where the effigy of Ravan (built in sections at the mandir) will be erected on the last night (conventionally a Sunday), and one long food shed, which constitutes most of the mela. The

field on which the playing arena is erected is diagonally adjacent to the Kendra itself, across a large field, but is approached only by the road. Each evening's performance is preceded by a dramatic procession not throughout the neighborhood, as in Knox Street or Princes Town or on the closing night in First Felicity, but more directly from the mandir to the grong. Led by the tassa drummers, the procession—which can be easily seen from the playing area—creates anticipation for those waiting in the grong for the evening's activities to begin. On the night of the Panchawati leela, the opening aarti and consecrating ceremonies begin in darkness, with initial illumination only from deeyas. The children have been trained to perform in a drill formation. Both the dramatic lighting and the precision of the drill not only add to the solemnity of the ceremonial occasion, but also enhance the theatrical dimension of the drama, which is given a high priority at this venue.<sup>55</sup>

## 2. *Kālu*

One distinctive feature of the Baal Ramdilla is that the sthaapana ceremony, which establishes the Ramayana on the stage, is integrated into an initial story directly linking Trinidad with the Ramayana through the arrival in Trinidad of the Jahajees from India. This brutal enactment follows the Tulsidas leela, in which the neglected and forgotten child grows into maturity as the legendary transmitter of the Ramayana narrative. As described by Raviji, the consecration itself:

follows from the reenactment of the kidnapping of people from Varanasi where Tulsidas wrote the Ramayana, who were listening to the Ramayana when the *Arkatiyas* (recruiters) kidnapped them and shipped them to Trinidad. At their arrival, a voice from the heavens—*Akaash baani*—said that they must not fear, but they must establish the Ramayana, continue singing the chowpais, live by the values of the Ramayana, and play Ramdilla to protect their dharma and identity. Following the instruction of the Akaash baani, the Jahajees secretly smuggle the *Manas* out of India with them [thus literalizing a process that historically might well not have involved the actual book]. Then they begin their first reading of the Ramayana in Trinidad. As they read, the narrator begins the narration and the performers begin their mime. The Ramdilla proper takes over from the story of the arrival of indentured workers. This day—with the reenactment of the kathaa of Tulsidas, the writing of the Ramayana, and kidnapping and shipping of indentured laborers to Trinidad and Tobago, their arrival, and the instructions from Akaash baani—is only performed at Baal Ramdilla, where the movement of the interpolation into the Ramdilla proper is seamless. (2008a)

By thus setting the stage for the performance not only of the epic play but more specifically of the Trinidad Tulsidas, Baal Ramdilla illustrates clearly the importance of this drama not only to Hindu teachings and devotions, but also to the lives of the Indo-Trinidadians, the heirs of the Jahajees. The enactment of the story of their journey from India, with emphasis on their virtual enslavement and their protection of the *Ramcharitmanas*, literally sets the stage for the drama of the Ramayana itself. The brutality of the kidnapping is emphasized in the performance by the heavy black boots worn by the kidnappers as they stomp on ground that is otherwise only entered barefoot by those who have been ritually purified (fig. 16).<sup>56</sup>

The sense of the Ramayana as a local story—imbedded in the term Ramdilla itself—is evident long before the production begins at the Kendra. This is illustrated in a painting entitled

55. The theatricality of Baal Ramdilla is evident, for instance, during the episode in the forest, where mechanization allows for flowing fountains and similar effects that enable the forest literally to come alive.

56. This leela, of course, merges the literal narrative with tradition, implicitly linking the kidnapping to the brutal transport of African slaves as well as the capture of the Indians, and thus reinforcing the fact that indentureship was a modified form of enslavement. The leela does not portray any voluntary agreement to leave India; in truth, “deceit, fraud, coercion, and kidnapping were endemic” to this system (Ramdin 2000:18; for a fuller description of the leela, see Ahn 2009:51).

“Caribbean Tulsidas” that hangs in the mandir. Commissioned, conceptualized, and designed by Raviji, and executed by Rachna Treau, it shows an image of Tulsidas set against the tropical hills, trees, and other environs of Trinidad (fig. 17). Furthermore, throughout the production recurrent reminders bring the story home to the Trinidad audience, not only by making the moral imperative of the drama relevant to familial and social life but also by direct, recurrent references to the history of the Jahajees in Trinidad today.

For example, because so many of the performers are small children, one adult,

Amarnath Ranjitsingh, is designated as the “handler” of the children within the playing arena throughout the performances. Because this “character” has no official role to play in the drama, he serves as a constant choric reminder of the link to local history. He is costumed in red, white, and black, with a turban of the same colors, the colors of the Trinidad flag. And at appropriate times, as he continuously circumambulates the grounds, he carries placards that display statistics and other information from the history of indentureship (fig. 18). Current local events are also reflected in the narrative. In 2007, for instance, after Trinidad had the previous year achieved a place in history as the smallest nation ever to qualify for the FIFA (international football/soccer) World Cup, the importance of the event was echoed in the marriage episode of the drama. In keeping with the satire associated with the groom’s family and friends, a Maxi Taxi sporting the emblem of the Soca Warriors—the team that qualified in Germany and carried the nation to a fever-pitch of pride—was driven through the playing arena as the marriage was prepared, and anyone from the sidelines who wished to join in for the ride was invited. Thus, the Soca Warrior vehicle not only revved up the crowd, but also brought the local culture inside the sanctified space, though only as passengers in the Maxi. Meanwhile, a mic car was playing familiar wedding songs. Sita’s own marriage vehicle was a fully decorated and decked out modern car, again echoing the modern theme in a way that delighted the crowd, though without the overt satire of the groom’s vehicle.

Simultaneously, the androgynous clown who is part of this drama, as in many venues, circled the space in a dress generously padded in the appropriate sections to suggest buxom and big-bottomed femininity, an implicit if not conscious echo of the satirical Trinidad Carnival character known as the Dame Lorraine. S/he wore a sign advertising wedding services of a comically profane (though not sexual) kind, as she shook her large bumsee (i.e., bum or buttocks) at the audience.

Such episodes recur throughout the Baal Ramdilla, but the one that was most powerful in 2007 and 2008 resonated tragically rather than comically. Trinidad has a mandir popularly called the Temple in the Sea in Waterloo on the west coast of the island, a replica of a small mandir built by a Hindu laborer, Sewdass Sadhu, over several decades, beginning in the 1940s. His first mandir, which was built on sugar company waste lands, was broken down by the authorities;



*Figure 17. Caribbean Tulsidas (1997), conceptualized and designed by Raviji (painted by Rachna Treau), commemorates the 500th anniversary of Tulsidas’s birth. Tulsidas sits among Caribbean emblems, such as the Trinidad mountains and tropical trees. (Photo by Raviji)*



Figure 18. Amarnath Ranjitsingh, dressed in a turbaned costume bearing the colors of the Trinidad flag, carries a poster with dates from the history of indentureship, continuing the educational function of Ramleela. *Baal Ramdilla, Enterprise, Trinidad, October 2007.* (Photo by Jeffrey Chock)

was vandalized; this too was commemorated in the 2008 Ramdilla. The gathered audience was reminded of the sanctity of the temples and of their desecration, as this mytho-historical episode in the sacred drama cathartically touched their lives (fig. 19).

### 3. *Samau*: Training the Children

Not only do the children act in the Baal Ramdilla, but they are involved in most aspects of the production: acting, narrating, body painting, makeup, and assisting in dressing, and the senior students are involved as field directors, guiding children to the locations and whispering details to them. While the teaching tool at the Kendra, as elsewhere on the island, is the performance of the Ramdilla, the object is not, in fact, the performance itself, which remains a means to an important end. Approaching this venture “as a community worker,” Raviji sees the opportunity to have children “for extended periods to teach Ramdilla” (2009). The performance provides the attraction and generates enthusiasm and dedication for a teaching enterprise that has several important results. It fulfills Raviji’s “personal sadhana and dedication to [his] guru, Baba Tulsidas”; it also serves to engage parents at a particularly “difficult time,” when “the community lives in increasing isolation; parents are reaching home later and leaving before dawn; [there is] no time for evening domestic chores—that has been shifted to weekends—children who depend on parents to transport them are finding it difficult now, which impacts the kind of dedication needed” (2008a).

In 2007, there were also several foreign students, notably from Guyana, who attended this camp. For instance, Preya Singh, who celebrated her 18th birthday in Trinidad while serving as a narrator for one segment of the Ramdilla, returned to Guyana to work on Ramleela in that country. Raviji has hosted workshops on Ramdilla performance in Guyana, advising the Guyanese on their resurrection of the episodic epic play derived from Tulsidas.<sup>57</sup> Expanding Ramdilla beyond Trinidad is in keeping with the educational emphasis of this venue, a focus that the Baal Ramdilla shares with, among others, the Sangre Grande Ramleela Committee.

57. The president of Guyana, the Honorable Bharat Jagdeo, attended the panchawati kathaa, day four at Baal Ramdilla, on 9 September 2008, where he delivered an address barefoot inside the grong. Greeted by 11-year-old Narayan Shiva Shankar, who enacted the role of Bharat, he was presented with a pair of *kharawun* (a replica of the wooden sandals that Ram’s brother Bharat placed on the throne instead of taking the throne himself during Ram’s exile). Actualizing his role, the child actor instructed the President on how to use his namesake Bharat as a model, stressing the symbol of Ram’s *kharawun* as a guide for ruling Guyana, following the model of Ram and his brother.



Whereas in Sangre Grande education through Ramleela is designed to be linked directly to and supplement the school curriculum, at the Kendra, studying the Ramayana in preparation for producing Ramdilla constitutes a summer curriculum in itself, while at the same time serving as a form of community service, thus satisfying a basic aim of this community. Each year, initially planned for 2008 but now projected for 2009, there is to be a graduation ceremony, with students receiving a certificate in Ramdilla.

#### 4. *Samājū*

At the Kendra in Enterprise, the annual Baal Ramdilla—performed entirely by children—is designed to compliment the 30 or so other Ramleela venues throughout Trinidad. In terms of emphasis, the Baal Ramdilla not only reflects the use of the Tulsidas Ramayana as an educational tool, particularly in the summer camp, but even more centrally the involvement of the families (particularly the parents) of the performers, who provide the backbone of the organization. Rather than serving as the vyasa himself, Raviji from the beginning delegated the authority of the production to a strong but somewhat dispersed group of organizers with particular duties—teaching, costuming, supervision, etc.—preparing them to sustain this annual epic children’s theatre once the period of Raviji’s vow had passed. Now that the presidency of the Kendra has passed to Geetaji Vahini, with assistance from Mayaji, the sense of community throughout the Kendra, which remains rooted in the concept of family, has expanded to embrace the passing of the mantle from Raviji to his Indian-trained female disciples.

This community, like others, is at once local, grounded in the members of the Kendra; national, in that it reaches in its influence beyond itself; and international, not only in its sharing of its Ramdilla tradition with Guyana, but also in the way Raviji, Geetaji, and Mayaji conceptualize the relationship of their own community to the larger Indo-Trinidadian reality. It is a worldview established through the link with India and, most directly, through Tulsidas and the *Manas*. The book is used to go beyond the book, reaffirming its importance by, in a sense, denying itself, just as Tulsidas withdraws himself in deference to the story. By tradition, there are hardly any pictures of Tulsidas. People generally don’t reference him as much as Raviji does. Tulsidas humbled himself in his act of writing, and remains a submerged yet central part of Ramleela—just as the book, which is the actual source of the drama, rests quietly on its consecrated stand. Tulsidas’s “agitation about his own capability to write the poetry,” according to Raviji, “explains deep matters about himself and it betrays a lot about the nature of the deity and what the deity, or leela, is all about.”

For Raviji, as for Pundit Vishnu of Palmiste, Pundit Maraj of Sangre Grande, and many others, the deepest connections are finally manifest in the tripartite Indo-Trinidad Hindu identity:

Another way to say it: I am a Trinity—a Trinidadian, a Hindu, and an Indian. If you take one away from these three, you leave nothing. I have to be me by being the three at the same time. A lot of these things are discovered in the search. Not in the general Hindu



*Figure 19. The burning of a small ashram replica during Ramleela commemorates the vandalism of Trinidad’s Siewdass Sadhu and Kolahal mandirs on 4 August 2007 and 4 August 2008. Baal Ramdilla, October 2008. (Photo by Raviji)*

pursuit of something metaphysical. How do I be a Trinidadian? It led me to a journey and an explanation. Ram was born in the middle of the day; it was neither hot nor cold. In between. The main daily worship is ideally supposed to be at dusk or dawn or the middle of the day. The Hindus are supposed to do Sandhya pooja in the middle of the day—the period of in-betweenity, dawn or dusk or midday. That captures the essence of who we are as a people, and how we realize our own identity. (2008b)

The personality of Tulsidas reveals much about the personality of the text. This in turn is a revelation of the personality of Ram, whose humble acceptance of exile finally leads him home. The process of self-discovery depends on the recognition that living in-between can establish the grounds for a profoundly new identity. The people in India do not have to retrace the steps to self-discovery, but the Jahajees, also in exile, had to retrace those steps. That is why Ramleela and its vernacular equivalent Ramdilla remain important to them. Their state of in-betweenity is sharpened by being out of India and by the way in which they carried the Ramayana with them from India. To discover Ramdilla is to discover the nature of the *Manas* as it lives through the Jahajee experience and its continuing journey. The Ramleela finds its fulfillment in Ramraj; and Ramdilla finds its fulfillment in the Jahajees and their descendants both discovering and establishing their identity as simultaneously Indian, Hindu, and Caribbean. Performing Ramleela, they find themselves not only through their perpetual experience of the in-between, but also in their likeness to Ram and their annual return to the Ayodhya they have built in their Caribbean homeland.

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