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## Enactment of Elderly Care in the Ramlila at Ramnagar: Foundation of Societal Values

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### ABSTRACT

Rama traditions in oral and performance art cultures have bred many varied cultural environments over a long period in India, Southeast Asia, and beyond. Centrifugal forces have operated in two ways, helping propagate Rama traditions. A Ramlila is a light play of Lord Ramlila. Ramlila of North India is an essential theatrical medium that provides a space for young and old, rich and poor, to congregate for 16 to 20 days prior to Dussehra to witness this grand spectacle of human beings. After the Banaras Ramlila, Maharaja Udit Narayan Singh brought the Ramlila to Ramnagar in the first half of the 19th century on the pattern of the Ramcharitmanas. The Ramlila is similarly a moral and cultural compass to Indian society. In-built into the narrative are enduring strong values of truthfulness, responsibility, compassion, and regard. Of these, the virtue of caring for older individuals is an essential but extremely widely disregarded pillar. With the assistance of the likes of Dasharatha, Rama, Kaikeyi, Bharat, Lakshman, Ravan, Kumbhakaran, and the like, the Ramlila teaches us powerful lessons about the rightful respect and duties towards our elders, reminding us why being so nurturing is a pillar of human society. The Ramlila is an invitation to turn back to our roots. It instructs us that caring for the elderly is not only a responsibility but also an ethical obligation, a gesture of gratitude, and a reflection of our integrity. Valuing their presence, respecting their experience, and ensuring their well-being are enduring values of a caring community. I would like to put forward the bedrock episodes of old-age care, i.e., Rama's Obedience to Dasharatha, Kaikeyi and the Dilemma of the Role of Elders, Bharata's Abjuration of the Throne, and Lakshman's obeisance to Ram, etc.

**Key-words:** Ramlila, performance, old age care, cornerstone, Maharaja, etc.

The couplets and quatrains of the *Ramacharitmanas* provide an immediate solution whenever our Hindu society goes astray in life. Goswami Tulsidas composed the Ramcharitmanas during the Mughal Empire era, at a time when the caste, religion, community, respect for elders, and other problems were perturbing our Hindu citizens. Then he wrote this book, aiming to preserve Indian culture and tradition. Ramlila was started by Tulsidas at Assi Ghat in Banaras to make the audience understand Maryada Purushottam 'Ram's behavior.

Assi Ghat Ramlila is considered the world's first Ramlila. Almost half a dozen other Ramlilas are being produced and performed in Banaras currently. Now I am going to talk about the act of Ramnagar. Maharaja Udit Narayan Singh has initiated the Ramlila in Ramnagar, motivated by Banaras's Ramlila on the Ramcharitmanas. We do not know the precise year, but tradition has it that Ramlila at Ramnagar was staged for the first time in 1912, and the tradition has been unbroken ever since, except during the years when, because of the Corona pandemic, the Lila remained unperformed. Even during the Spanish flu in 1918, the Lila was staged. The Lila commences on Anant Chaturdasi of the Shukla Paksha of Bhadra Month based on the Lunar Calendar and concludes on Purnima of the Shukla Paksha of Ashwin Month (thirty to thirty-one days) every year. Ramlila is enacted in September and October, according to the Gregorian calendar. The majority of the scenes in this Ramlila represent remedies for the most urgent problems of the day, such as Rama's Obedience to Dasharatha, Kaushalya's Sorrow, and Rama's Comfort, Bharat's Devotion towards Mother Kaikeyi, etc. Thousands of audiences revere their elders after watching these Ramlila scenes. In this article, I want to narrate the experience of care for the elderly in the Ramlila of Ramnagar.

**Selection of the five main actors** – Five main criteria of the selection of five main actors called *svarupas* (Ram, Sita Bharat, Laxman, and Shatrughana) in the Ramlila- Age, Voice, Caste, Height, and they should not belong to the locale of Ramnagar town. The boys' heights are in accordance with the characters—Rama, the eldest, is the tallest; Sita, his better half, comes second; and his brothers, Bharat, Lakshman, and Shatrughan, are listed in decreasing height order.



The five svarupas (Ram in the middle) selected during 2015 Ramlila at Ramnagar sitting on the saint's shoulders.

The selections for the Svarupas are held every year. However, the boys are recast sometimes. For instance (in the above figure), Sonu Pandey (14 years old), a resident of Varanasi played the character of Rama in 2014-2015; Saksham Tiwari (11 years old), a resident of Bichiya Khurd from Chandauli essayed the role of Sita in 2014-2016 and Rama in 2017, and Harsh Tiwari (11 years), a resident of Narayanpur from Mirzapur performed the role of Bharat in 2015 and Rama in 2016. After the selection and the first Ganesh puja, Raghunath Dutta Vyasa (trainer and guru) gives the svarupas notebooks containing their dialogues from the pothi in the Dharmasala at Ramnagar, and they rehearse the dialogues four times a day along with physical exercise. The svarupas 'Laxman and Shatrughana' are mentored more on pacing and movement than on dialogue delivery, since they are assigned fewer dialogues. Also, being the youngest, they are expected to show reverence towards their elders. Every time they sit in front of Rama, they touch their crown with their hand, bend and offer respect to the eldest brother. The act of prostrating, hugging, battling, etc., is rehearsed.



The svarupas are rehearsing under the guidance of Raghunath Dutt Vyasa

During fifty-six days of rehearsal, the svarupas live their life under the instruction of the vyasas in the Dharmasala, thus forming a guru-shishya (teacher-disciple) relation. This training is observed during the Ramlila.

**Day: 1 (Chaturdashi of Shukla Paksha of Bhadra Month)-** After the pre-rehearsal at Dharmshala, and a long preparation for the Ramlila, the performance of the Lila starts on the auspicious day of Anant Chaturdasi (the fourteenth day of the waxing moon in the month of Bhadra). An elderly member of the Ravana family is portrayed in the opening scene of the first episode, as the birth of three demon brothers and Lankini (a deity of Lanka) takes place. Their birth is symbolically represented. The characters playing these roles change their clothes behind a curtain and then arrive on stage, which signals their birth. In the next scene, Ravana, with his brothers, enters, sits on stage in front of the sacrificial fire, and begins the ritual to please the gods. Pleased with their devotion, Lord Brahma tells them to ask for a boon, "Ask a wish, sons, for I am pleased. The ten-headed one bows humbly, clasping his feet, and petitions him: "Lord of creation, let none be able to slay me, save the two species of monkeys and men. Lord Brahma says, "So be it, for your asceticism is great." After this, Lord Shiva, seated on the bullock puppet, is brought before Ravana, and He says, "Let it be." Kumbhakarna comes to Lord Brahma, and when He sees him, he begins to wonder, "Were this villain to eat every day, my whole creation would be consumed." So, he induces Sharada (goddess of knowledge) to addle his wits, and he asks to sleep for six straight months. In the next scene, Vibhishana comes in front of Brahma on the stage, and he requests pure, ardent love for the lotus-like feet of the supreme Lord. He grants him the boon as He is pleased with his extreme rigour in asceticism. Next, Lord Shiva exclaims, "Let it be!" and plays his damru (small two-headed drum). The nemis chant "Har Har Mahadev" excitedly and repeat it, this time looking towards the prince, because, in the tradition of Benaras, the king of Ramnagar (commonly referred to as the Kashi Naresh) is believed to be an avatar of Lord Shiva.



**Ravana sitting in the elderly row with his brothers during the Ramlila of the first episode.**

**Day: 3** (Purnima of Bhadra Month/First Day of Krishna Paksha of Ashwin Month)- The episodes enacted on the third day of the Lila are: Muni Vishwamitra's coming to Ayodhya, Taraka-Vadh, Ram and Lakshman's protecting of Vishwamitra's 'yajna', Ahilya-Taran, Ganga Darshan, Mithila-Pravesh, and Ram-Janaka Meeting and Ram-Laxman serve Vishwamitra in Mithila. The performance of the episodes is based on the first quatrain of the two hundred and sixth doha to the two hundred and seventeenth doha of the Balkand. In the *Ramcharitmanas* and other tellings of the Ramayana, when Shri Ram and Lakshman accompany Vishwamitra to Mithila (Janakpur), they remain deeply devoted to their guru. At Janakpur, where King Janaka's ashram and court are located, both brothers show exemplary service to Vishwamitra. They treat Vishwamitra not just as a teacher but as their spiritual guide (*sadguru*). Every word of his is received with folded hands and humility. They bring water, arrange seating, and make arrangements for offerings in the ashram so that the sage is at ease. Lakshmana keeps a particularly vigilant watch, expecting the slightest whim of the sage, and Ram merges obedience with restrained dignity. In Janakpur, Vishwamitra leads them to the city, to Shiva's bow, and then to King Janaka. The brothers obey each instruction with devotion, knowing well that service to the guru is service to God. Their service provides the model for how the disciples are to behave—without pride, fatigue, or hesitation.

**Day: 5** (Second/Third Day of the Dark Fortnight of Ashwin Month)- The episodes enacted on the fifth day of the Lila are—Dhanush-Yajna (Sita's svaymvara) and Parashuram-Lakshmana Samvad. The episodes are based on the fifth quatrain of the two hundred and thirty-ninth doha to the two hundred and eighty-ninth doha of Balkand. In the last episode of the day, Ram, as an elderly person to Laxman, balances Sage Parsurama's furiousness. In the next scene, an angry sage Parashuram enters the stage, challenging the audacity of the person who had broken "Shiv ki Dhanush Pinak". Lakshman and Parashuram have a heated argument from the first quatrain of the two hundred and sixty-eighth doha to the fourth quatrain of the two hundred and eighty-fourth doha of Balkand. In the Ramlila, the scene at Janakpur where Parashurama arrives after the breaking of Shiva's bow (Pinaka) is a powerful moment. Lakshmana, fiery by nature, initially speaks sharply to Parashurama, mocking his anger and challenging his authority. But here, Rama intervenes and teaches Lakshmana the importance of reverence and humility toward great sages, even when provoked. Rama gently restrains Lakshmana, reminding him that Parashurama is a venerable Brahmin and a great sage, deserving of respect regardless of his anger. He explains that the duty of a Kshatriya is not only valor but also humility before rishis and Brahmins. Rama shows that true strength lies not in answering insult with insult, but in honoring the greatness of elders and saints.

**Day: 6** (Third /Fourth Day of the Dark Fortnight of Ashwin Month)- The three episodes—marriage procession from Ayodhya to Janakpur, Janvasa, and marriages in Janakpur are enacted on the sixth day of the Lila. The performance of the episodes is based on the first quatrain of the two hundred and ninetieth doha to three hundred and twenty seventh doha, and fifty-five lines are inserted in the pothi to contextualize wedding rites and rituals of the Lila to the Bhojpuri folk culture. The performance of the day portrays many elderly care scenes, which are followed in the daily lives of the spectators.

In the first episode of Lila, Bharat and Shatrughan come and sit on the wooden stools beside the King, and on Bharat's request, the King re-reads the letter. In the next scene, the king orders Bharata to decorate the elephants, horses, and carriages for the baraat (marriage procession). In the next scene, Vashisht Muni sits on a chariot drawn by a blue horse, symbolizing his virtuousness; and Sumant, his minister, sits before the king as a charioteer. Bharat and Shatrughan are carried on the shoulders of two sadhus as they follow the chariot.

Post-sandhya Lila starts with the episode in which King Janak, along with his minister Satanand and other courtiers, arrives in the Janvasa to welcome the baraat. King Janak courteously hugs King Dasarath, and his courtiers present sweets to the baraat as breakfast. In the next scene, Munni Bai dances with her companions to entertain the audience. Rose water is sprinkled on the characters, and the audience beams with happiness as they receive drops of the water as blessings from God. Betel leaves are given to King Dasarath and other courtiers. The dance, sprinkling of rose water, and offering of betel leaves resemble the traditional system of entertainment in marriages in North India, and the janvasa showcases the cultural traditions of the Bhojpuri region.



**Guru Vishwamitra, Vashistha Muni, King Dashrath and Sumant Ji sitting in elderly row in the performance of Janvasa at Ramnagar Ramlila**

In the next scene, sage Vishwamitra, along with Lord Rama and Lakshman, arrives in the janvasa. King Dasarath and Vashistha Muni bow courteously before Sage Vishwamitra; King Dasarath hugs Lord Rama and Lakshman; the four brothers bow to each other in succession. In the next scene, the swarupas wear the ceremonial dresses in the changing room with the help of the vyasas. Satanand ji announces the auspicious time of the marriage ceremony and invites them to the wedding hall.



**Four couples following the instructions of wedding rituals from elders in the vivah-mandap.**

**Day: 8** (The Sixth/Seventh Day of the Dark Fortnight of Ashwin Month)- The episodes enacted on the ninth day of the Lila are—going to the forest and meeting with Nishad Raja (the king of tribes). The episodes are based on the first quatrain of the fifty-eighth doha to the first qatarin of the ninety-fourth doha of Ahodhyakand. The first scene of the first episode takes place at the Ranivas, where Queen Kaushalya and Lord Rama repeatedly plead with Sita to change her mind about going to the forest with Lord Rama. However, Sita remains firm in her decision to be happy in the forest with her husband. This is the first-ever dialogue she has spoken in Ayodhya. In the next scene, Lord Rama requests Lakshman to stay back and serve his parents in Ayodhya, and a conversation between Sumitra and Lakshman follows, in which he asks his mother for permission to go with his elder brother, Lord Rama, to the forest. The next scene takes place in the *Kop Bhawan*, where Lord Rama, along with Lakshman and Sita, asks for blessings from King Dasarath before departing from Ayodhya. The distraught King takes Rama and Sita on his lap and expresses his sorrow.

**Day: 9** (The Seventh/Eighth Day of the Dark Fortnight of Ashwin Month)- The episodes enacted on the ninth day of the Lila are—going to the forest and meeting with Nishad Raja (the king of tribes) and Laxman serving his elder brother Ram, etc. The episodes are based on the first quatrain of the fifty-eighth doha to the first qatarin of the ninety-fourth doha of Ahodhyakand. At Nishadraj Guha's ashram, during the exile of Lord Rama, Lakshmana shows his devotion and service to his elder brother Rama in several ways, as described in the *Ramcharitmanas*. Lakshmana gathers leaves and grass to prepare a comfortable bed for Rama and Sita, showing his concern for their rest. He vows to stay awake and protect Rama and Sita during the night, refusing to sleep himself. This act symbolises his role as their constant guardian. Lakshmana never sits at the same level as Rama. He always stands with his hands folded, ready to serve. At Nishadraj's hermitage, he treats Rama's word as a command. Lakshmana's service is marked by selfless devotion, obedience, vigilance, and sacrifice, setting him as the ideal younger brother and sevak (servant).

**Day: 12** (The Ninth/Tenth Day of the Dark Fortnight of Ashwin Month)- The two episodes enacted on the twelfth day of the Lila are Bharat's crossing of the Yamuna and Rama-Bharat meeting at Chitrakoot. The second episode is the highlight of the day. The tableau of four brothers meeting on a decorated stage, lit by panchlights and matabis, draws a large crowd. This scene serves as an example of brotherly love. The episodes are based on the first quatrain of the two hundred and sixteenth doha to the second foot of the fourth quatrain of the two hundred and fifty-third doha of Ayodhyakand. After Dasharatha's passing, Bharat—grief-stricken and unwilling to accept the throne—sets out with ministers, sages, and citizens of Ayodhya to bring Ram back. When he

reaches Chitrakoot, he falls at Ram's feet with overwhelming devotion. This meeting at Chitrakoot shines as a perfect example of brotherly love, selflessness, and devotion to dharma.

**Day: 14** (The Eleventh/Twelfth Day of the Dark Fortnight of Ashwin Month)

The episodes enacted on the fourteenth day of the Lila are—Bharat's departure from Chitrakoot, arrival in Ayodhya and taking up residence in Nandigram. For the enactment of the episodes, the Ramayanis recite the first quatrain of the three hundred and seventh doha to the three hundred and twenty-sixth doha of Ayodhyakand. The highlight of the Lila of the day is *Chitrakoot Parikerama* (circling Chitrakoot ashram) because, before departing from the ashram, Bharat, with the help of Atri Muni, performs a circumambulation of the ashram to earn Lord Rama's blessing. Thousands of *nemis* also join the circumambulation as pilgrims, and they walk behind Bharat. After the heart-rending meeting at Chitrakoot, where Bharat pleaded with Shri Ram to return to Ayodhya and rule, Ram firmly yet lovingly placed His own *kharau* (wooden sandals) on Bharat's head and entrusted them to him. Bharat, though grief-stricken, accepted them as the true symbol of Ram's presence and authority. With folded hands, he bowed again and again, tears streaming down his face, pressing the *kharau* to his heart. He knew that Ram's command was supreme, and his own desire had to bow before dharma.

When he turned back towards Ayodhya, the whole entourage—queens, ministers, citizens, rishis, and soldiers—followed in silence. The sound of weeping women, the lament of Ayodhya's people, and the stillness of the forest echoed together. Bharat walked ahead barefoot, carrying the sandals on his head like a crown, his eyes lowered, his heart burning with separation, yet firm with resolve. Thus, Bharat returned to Nandigram (near Ayodhya), where he placed the *kharau* on the throne, ruling as Ram's *sevak*, never as king. He lived austerely, wearing bark clothes, eating simple food, and governing only in the name of Shri Ram—waiting for the day of His return. The image here depicts Bharat as the highest devotee, who renounced personal power, embraced sacrifice, and became a living example of dharma and bhakti in his care for the elderly.



Placing Rama's *kharau* on the Throne Ayodhya, Bharata resides in Nandigram.

Nemi (Audience) of the Ramlila: The term *nemi* refers to a spectator who regularly visits Ramnagar and watches the Ramlila from beginning to end without fail. The *nemi* is a Bhojpuri word derived from the Hindi *niyamit*, meaning 'regular'. The *nemis* play a significant role in the Lila, as their enthusiasm and devotion make the Ramlila of Ramnagar different from other Ramlilas worldwide. They can be recognized from far by their get-up and conduct. Their journey to the Lila becomes at once physical, metaphorical, and spiritual. The lifestyle of residents of *Shiv ki Nagari - Kashi* (Varanasi) is quite distinct and often appears bohemian in food habits, rites and rituals, manner of speech, and *babriyalang*, much in the manner of Lord Shiva, with his habit of taking *bhang-dhatura* and *ganja*. The people of Varanasi are devoted to deities, and they have been visiting the Ramlila since its inception. Thousands of people from Varanasi travel to Ramnagar to watch the Ramlila as *nemis*. Thousands of *nemis* from different communities come to the Ramlila. They believe that watching the Lila with utmost devotion ensures their continued prosperity, keeps their family in good health, and leads to a happy life. Seventy-year-old Mithailal Jaiswal (died in 2017) was one such *nemi* with whom I have interacted in the Lila. He enlightened me about the background activities of the Ramlila besides the preaching of the Ramkatha. He was a resident of Prahlad Ghat and had two sons and six daughters. He owned a transport business in Macchodari, which his sons now manage. He had been watching the Ramlila for fifty years, and in his early years, he used to come by boat with Nanhaku Sardar and twenty-five others. Nanhaku Sardar was his father's friend. Then he came by cycle, and for the last ten years of his life, he came with his younger son, Lalu Jaiswal, on a scooter. He also used to do his *saafa-paani* at home, like bathing and taking *thandai*. His get-up was a white *kurta-pyjama*, a gamcha on

his shoulder, and a walking stick. He used to cup his ears to hear each samvad of the Lila. Over the years, he had become so well-versed in the Lila that even a slight mistake in samvad delivery, in the erection of the stages, or in the performance would not go unnoticed by him.

As a true devotee of the Ramlila, he compared four svarupas with four Vedas and said that if anyone watches the Lila with purity and devotion, then he would attain the knowledge of eternal truth and lead a peaceful life. He believed he had Janki Mata's blessing. He narrated an incident when she healed him with miraculous powers. Once, at the time of Lila, he met with an accident and had a fractured leg. He was confined to bed and was unable to attend the Ramlila that year. However, he prayed to the goddess at the Janki Temple in Ramnagar to be released from his earthly commitments, with great care for his son Lulu. He narrated the incident in these words- *aayni Lulu ke sathe Janki Ji ke mandir mein, pair par gir ke royalin, kabalin ki Mata ab toh jevan kayalin okar ta dand hame mil gayal, magar lila na chute humar!* He was miraculously cured, and he could see the Lila of that year. He passed away in 2017. His absence is keenly felt by his fellow companions and his son in the Lila.



**Mithai Lal Jaiswal attending the Lila with his son Lulu and his friend Vaikunth Jaiswal also attending the Lila in the costume of a *nemi*.**

Thus, the Ramlila of Ramnagar teaches deep lessons on elderly care, respect, and service to parents and elders. These values are woven throughout the Ramlila. *Pitru-matra* seva (service to parents) is the greatest dharma. Elders must be cared for with love, respect, and sacrifice. True dharma lies in preserving family honor, consoling elders in grief, and serving them with humility. The Ramlila of Ramnagar is a bedrock of our current livelihoods and society.

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