Public folklore: Pursuing cultural democracy in the 21st century

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Where is public folklore heading in the 21st century? Much of what has become ‘public or public sector folklore’ in the United States grows out of the experience of the Smithsonian Institution’s folklife program founded in 1967 and now known as the Centre for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Examination of that program is revealing of where public folklore has been, and where it might be heading. While the Smithsonian program has exhibited a continuity of basic values and philosophy, it has also changed over time. In general terms, its origins are found in an appreciation for and desire to properly recognise particular folk traditions—largely performative and decorative. As the program has matured, activities for the representation and presentation of those traditions have expanded and become increasingly institutionalised. The future seems to point in the direction of considering a wider scope of cultural production than typically engaged by folklorists, advancing theoretical and analytic work through the examination of practice, seeing folk traditions at the intersections of contemporary political, economic, and artistic life, co-operating with increasingly varied congeries of civic and community partners, diversifying fiscal sources for support of institutional work, and developing more strategic means to help diverse cultural communities to persevere and even flourish in an age of globalisation.

Origins

The Smithsonian program was spearheaded by Ralph Rinzler who put together a new, broad coalition of diverse cultural workers, scholars, politicians, and institutions in the most dramatic of ways to coalesce a field of practice. In 1967 he developed the Festival of American Folklife, now renamed the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, in the heart of the U.S. capital, on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Drawing about one million visitors annually and extraordinary media attention, this massive exposition of musical performances, crafts and cooking demonstrations, workshops and celebrations presented by traditional performers and aided by scholars proved instrumental in the public appreciation of folk culture, and its official recognition. It led to the creation of programs in a variety of national and state institutions, as well as local and private organisations. It encouraged cultural practitioners in various communities and has provided a common experience for two generations of folklorists, ethnomusicologists, and others, from around the United States and indeed, from around the world, to hone their skills and ideas of public cultural representation.

Rinzler was motivated by an ideal of cultural democracy drawn from such teachers as Woody Guthrie, Charles Seeger, and Alan Lomax and incubated through the folk music revival and the Civil Rights movement. Guthrie’s songs like “This Land is Your Land” expressed an American populist and participatory democracy. Seeger, the founder of ethnomusicology and a public documentarian, found in America’s communities a diversity of cultural treasures embodying wisdom, artistry, history, and knowledge that could not be delegitimized because of considerations of wealth and power. Lomax saw the growing problem of ‘cultural gray out’—the worldwide spread of a homogenised, commercial, mass culture at the expense of most local and regional cultures. Rinzler saw the problem of cultural disenfranchisement, as people lost touch with and power and control over their own cultural products. He saw that in rural Appalachia and in Cajun Louisiana the spirited performances by old-timers of superb musical skill were under-appreciated by their descendants. Ironically, with the ‘folk music revival’ these same music achieved popularity among youth in New York and other cities. He saw the strength of cultural enfranchisement in the powerful role music played in the Civil Rights movement, where it mobilised people in community churches, on picket lines, and in the streets for a great, moral battle. For Rinzler, the grassroots creation and continuity of culture in contemporary society was a building block of democracy. The democratic force of culture was raised to a new level on the National Mall when the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., led the March on Washington in 1963.

In the 1960s, while serving as research director for the Newport Folk Festival and carrying out his own fieldwork, Rinzler drew these strands together and created a plan. For Rinzler cultural work was empathetic, studied, advocacy for the traditions of varied communities. Though invited to the Smithsonian Institution, the national museum of the United States, to design the content for a folklife festival as a popular attraction on the National Mall, Rinzler envisioned a project of cultural conservation and recovery, through which, with the efforts of people like action-anthropologist Sol Tax and the leadership of then-Secretary S. Dillon Ripley, endangered cultures and traditions could be revitalised and the larger society educated. The Festival was inserted into the national museum with all the challenges and opportunities it entailed. Rinzler enlisted folklorists Roger Abrahams, Henry Glassie, Kenny Goldstein, Archie Green, and Bess Lomax Hawes, key African American and American Indian cultural workers like Bernice Johnson Reagon, Gerald Davis, Clydia Nahwooksy, and Lucille Dawson, and a variety of those specializing in a diversity of cultural treasures embodying wisdom, artistry, history, and knowledge that could not be delegitimized because of considerations of wealth and power. Lomax saw the growing problem of ‘cultural gray out’—the worldwide spread of a homogenised, commercial, mass culture at the expense of most local and regional cultures. Rinzler saw the problem of cultural disenfranchisement, as people lost touch with and power and control over their own cultural products. He saw that in rural Appalachia and in Cajun Louisiana the spirited performances by old-timers of superb musical skill were under-appreciated by their descendants. Ironically, with the ‘folk music revival’ these same music achieved popularity among youth in New York and other cities. He saw the strength of cultural enfranchisement in the powerful role music played in the Civil Rights movement, where it mobilised people in community churches, on picket lines, and in the streets for a great, moral battle. For Rinzler, the grassroots creation and continuity of culture in contemporary society was a building block of democracy. The democratic force of culture was raised to a new level on the National Mall when the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., led the March on Washington in 1963.

The 1976 Smithsonian Folklife Festival—lasting for three
months and including over 5,000 artists from all over the United States and from 35 nations—was a centrepiece of the American Bicentennial celebrations. The Festival provided a redefinition of America’s cultural heritage in the face of European nationalist and American elitist models. American culture has its multiple levels and interpenetrating sectors—national, regional, local, ethnic, religious, occupational, folk, popular, elite, community-based, commercial, institutional, and official. Most importantly, American culture could be seen as diverse, vital, and continually creative, situated in a larger economy, a larger society, indeed, a larger world of technological and social transformations. Rather than recreate an older world of utilitarian crafts or purgse music of electronic media, or reconstitute the nation or world into villages the Festival’s message was to move the contemporary world towards more culturally democratic institutions. Older aesthetic traditions, forms and systems of knowledge, values, and social relationships did not have to inevitably fade away, but rather could be used by people to design and build their own futures. The village might get bigger; the forms of communication more wide-ranging, the systems of exchange more complex, but skill, knowledge and artistry based in human communities could still remain and prosper. If voices that could contribute to cultural democracy became silent, everyone would lose.

Persisting Programs and Ideals

The Centre continues to produce the Smithsonian Folklife Festival which to date has had more than 35 million visitors over the years, involved more than 25,000 artists and musicians from the United States and some 76 nations, relied on the efforts of more than 1,000 folklorists and other scholars, generated more than 20,000 media stories, numerous policies, laws, and spin-off organisations, events ranging from local and state folkife festivals to Olympic arts and presidential inaugural festivals, an archival collection of photographic images and recordings, and a healthy number of scholarly papers, articles, and books. The Centre also publishes Smithsonian Folkways recordings include an incredible range of American and other folk musics and verbal arts. To date, some 300 new recordings have been produced over the past decade, joining more than 2,000 other recordings published by the historic Folkways Records and other labels acquired by the Centre. Millions of recordings are in print in a cultural conservation project that supports research and documentation, collections acquisition, archival preservation, and broad distribution. Recordings are used in a variety of ways, in schools, for example, to teach history, or by American Indians to maintain their heritage, or by Indonesians to understand the diversity of their island nation. Recordings have generated millions of dollars in royalties that return to musicians. The Centre also produces museum and travelling exhibits, documentary films and videos for television and lecture halls, symposia, educational materials, and several websites, all encouraging people to take an active role in accurately and respectfully studying, understanding, and representing their own cultures, and those of their neighbours. The Centre’s archival collection, developed through the Festival, Folkways, and other projects, is a resource annually used by scores of fellows, researchers, and educators. The Centre advises a variety of multinational and national government agencies, service groups, and community organisations on folklife and cultural heritage theory and practice. The Centre’s involvement is of broad scope. In 2001, the Centre worked with almost 300 community cultural groups in the United States and abroad. These included local artist cooperatives, organised groups of elementary school teachers, and a variety of cultural advocacy organisations. The Centre enlists a host of people from a variety of sectors—the arts, government, entertainment, and academia—to help with its projects. Such have included Hilary Clinton, the Dalai Lama, Yo-Yo Ma, B. B. King, Bob Dylan, Mickey Hart, Pete Seeger, John Hope Franklin, and many, many others.

The Centre for Folklife and Cultural Heritage has about 45 permanent staff, including 15 Ph.D.-level scholars and curators, and a complement of production support and technical staff. They are annually joined by some 30-40 temporary staff, 75 interns, 10 fellows, and more than 500 volunteers. The Centre’s programs are strengthened by distinguished advisory groups. Collaborators with the Centre in any one year include more than 1,000 traditional culture practitioners, 200 lay and academic scholars in a wide variety of disciplines, as well as numerous cultural heritage and advocacy groups, and scores of governmental, cultural and educational organisations, foundations, corporations, and small businesses. The Centre’s annual budget is roughly $14 million, with about $1.2 million from the U.S. Congress, about $1 million from the Smithsonian, approximately $5 million generated by gross sales revenues through recordings and Festival concessions, and about $6 million in grants, gifts, contracts, and in-kind support for Festival programs, educational, research, and archival projects.

The Centre’s philosophy continues to encourage cultural democracy—so that people can access their own culture, represent themselves, develop their own cultural heritage, and benefit from their efforts. The Centre works as a partner, joining high-quality scholarship with strong community engagement and an active, entrepreneurial spirit. This has led to activities that have affected policies and practices at local, national, and international levels. Programmes and products have earned community respect around the world, serious scholarly review, popular acclaim, broad media attention, and professional recognition in forms such as Academy, Emmy, and Grammy Awards.

The Future

The Centre recognises that cultural democracy is threatened in today’s world on a variety of fronts—ecological, political, and socio-economic. The environmental degradation of ecosystems destroys the infrastructure supporting many traditional peoples and cultures. Displacement, famine, lack of economic viability drastically changes ways of life. People die and cultures with them. In other cases, local, regional, ethnic, and other forms of culture are suppressed by state authorities. Despite major gains in democratic and human rights achieved in the last part of the 20th century, much of the world still lives under authoritarian and repressive national governments. Those governments often seek to limit or destroy cultural diversity within their borders. Globalisation in the form of the unprecedented worldwide spread of mass commercial cultural products, forms, and sensibilities also threatens local cultures. Many see their own ways of national, regional, or local life threatened economically, socially, aesthetically, and even morally, by the availability, popularity, and packaging of global mass culture. They also witness the appropriation of their own commodifiable traditions by outsiders without adequate compensation or benefit to the home community.
The Centre recognises its limitations with regard to influencing ecological systems, the rule of nations, and the forces of the world economy. But it does seek to work with a numerous and broad range of cultural organisations and communities to affect conditions, circumstances, and consequences in ways that do justice to diverse human cultures—so that they may persevere and flourish. How best to do this is always a subject of discussion and debate. Despite the grave challenges, there are positive signs for cultural democracy on the horizon. There is an increasing institutional consciousness that healthy ecosystems are necessary for economically viable communities. International and local policies increasingly recognise possessing culture and practising traditions as legal human rights. Many governments, faced with the prospect of representing multicultural nations, are increasingly searching for peaceful means of social engagement. And while cultural production is increasingly managed in the corporate business sector, the marketplace is becoming democratised with the entry of cultural enterprises initiated and controlled by members of culture-producing communities.

We are proud to be engaged in the work of cultural democracy, in which we find many allies, friends, and collaborators. We are encouraged by civil society groups who have connected cultural advocacy to political democratisation and economic opportunity. We are hopeful that academic initiatives that address cultural policy issues from a research-based perspective can bring new vigour to ways of studying cultural communities, examining public policies, and figuring out how cultural resources may be preserved and best utilised for broad benefit. We are heartened to see that organisations in the culture industry and the legal profession are wrestling with questions of who owns culture and benefits from its products. These debates over copyright and cultural ownership are a healthy development and can provide a basis for fair national legislation and international accords. Economic approaches to cultural democracy also abound. Small non-profit organisations are trying to appropriate contemporary global technologies—the World Wide Web and networks of markets and communications—for local benefit and with local involvement. Other, larger multinational organisations are developing globally linked programs for utilising local-level cultural industries to stimulate economic and political development. The desire for a diversity of flourishing local cultures exists not only at the institutional level, but also at the personal. A number of individual artists, scholars, advocates, philanthropists and others are strongly committed to the fullest range of human cultural achievement. The realisation of that goal would maximise not only humanity’s chances of future survival but also the quality of life we might hope to enjoy.

What then are we likely to see more of in the public folklore practice of the future? We will see a tendency for particular cultural communities—whether they are of a locality or ethnicity, or of a religious or occupational group—to increasingly assert control over their own cultural futures. This means more training for local, native, or indigenous folklorists, and more scrutiny of the values, orientation, expertise, and work product of ‘outsiders.’ Since issues of culture and traditions will become increasingly tied to questions of political and legal rights, folklorists will need better training and more experience in those realms—dealing with conventions, laws, and intellectual property rights. This will extend into the economic realm as community members seek fiscal gain from their cultural products—whether they are songs, handicrafts, local herbal cures, or whole regions visited by tourists. Folklorists need to be trained in cultural economics, and well-versed in different ways of modelling, enabling, and analysing sustainable cultural enterprises. The range of what is included under the purview of local culture is likely to expand. Expertise in music, crafts, and tales needs to expand into areas of local ecology, medical care, architecture, and a tremendous variety of occupational skills and knowledge systems. Folklorists themselves will have to become more skilled at representing the ‘folk.’ They will need to enhance their own brokering skills, as well as work on ways of transferring folk cultural practices and expressions in digital media to broad audiences. Folklorists will have to work with the educational establishment in a much stronger way than heretofore to ensure the transmission of knowledge to the younger generation. Folklorists, if they are to play a role, will have to gain expertise dealing with radio, television, Internet site and other producers; they will have to deal in increasingly common and complex ways with commercial purveyors of culture—Hollywood and Bollywood, theme park operators, and the entertainment industry.

The difficulty will be that folklorists face a number of disadvantages based upon their own lack of institutionalisation and support. Folklore has suffered as an academic discipline and in the United States is on the verge of extinction at the doctoral level. The advanced, demanding, interdisciplinary training needed to adequately work with cultural communities is generally unavailable. This means that, at least in the United States, the roles, at the highest levels, will fall to others coming out anthropology, history, arts and cultural heritage management programs who will need a great deal of on-the-job training. The situation in public cultural institutions in the United States is not much better. Public fiscal support for culture is at low levels. Generally speaking, public folklorists labour in one or two person operations. Even at the national level, overall support is quite inadequate for the task; such organisations, such as at the Smithsonian, the Library of Congress, and the National Endowments are always seeking foundation, corporate and other support for their activities. Private non-profit units have been inventive in generating resources through grants and contracts for their project work, but continue to exist on the edge of sustainability. So while the needs and opportunities are great, the resources are scare.

This situation is not dissimilar to that found in other nations. A few years ago I analysed a survey of public folklore policy and practice sent to all member states of UNESCO. The bad news for the future was that so little public folklore was being done. Training was largely inadequate, archives needed great help, education programs needed funding, public programs at festivals and in exhibitions were always a struggle to support. The good news was that public folklore programs of all types were very widely distributed. The ability to act was not correlated with a particular level of GNP or literacy or industrialisation or urbanisation. The latitude for action was great, and nations and people, large and small, rich and poor could indeed, through strong will and effort, put into place high quality programs that did justice to their cultures. Perhaps, one day, they will.
A maharajah’s festival for body and soul

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RAMNAGAR, INDIA A king, his prince and his couriers ride in full pomp atop richly caparisoned elephants. They, along with tens of thousands of spectator-devotees, their hands pressed together in the Hindu prayer-salute, admire and worship the gods Vishnu and Lakshmi in their incarnations as Rama and Sita. Titanic battles pit human-size gods against 50-foot-high demons. For a whole month there is a continuous theatre, 31 daily episodes of love, war, exile, intrigue and adventure. The stages for this performance of great magnitude are locations dispersed, filmlike, throughout Ramnagar (literally, Ramatown), a midsize settlement across the Ganges River from the holy city of Benares in the north Indian province of Uttar Pradesh. Ramnagar is the seat of the Maharajah of Benares, Vibhuti Narain Singh2 still revered by multitudes of Indians more than 50 years after losing his crown and his kingdom when the Princely State of Benares was dissolved into the Union of India in 1949.

This is Ramlila, or Rama’s play: participatory environmental theatre on a grand scale. Ramlila is theatre and it is religious devotion, pilgrimage, a festive fair and political action. Audiences range from a few thousand for some episodes to 100,000 for others. Every Hindu Indian, and most Muslims, know the story of Ramlila; it is always being presented in films, on television, as graphic art and in literature, ranging from great poetry to comic books. There are thousands of local Ramlilas enacted all over Hindi-speaking India and in the diaspora, too, from Trinidad to Queens. But the Ramlila of Ramnagar is different. It features the Maharajah of Benares as patron, director and player. It is many days longer than other Ramlilas. It is more skilfully produced theatrically. It draws much larger and more devoted crowds. And its future may be more precarious. During Ramlila, Ramnagar is transformed into a living theatrical model of the entire Indian subcontinent, from the Himalayan mountains in the north to Sri Lanka off the southeast coast. Nothing of Ramlila’s size, totality and intensity has been seen in the West since medieval times. Compared with Ramlila, the Oberammergau Passion Play and Peter Brook’s Mahabharata are small scale.

Like all great art, Ramlila changes its meaning over time. Nationalist sentiments, present mostly as a vague background 25 years ago, now operate openly, especially among many younger male spectators. And today’s Hindu nationalists, wanting to turn India into a Hindu state, hold Ramraj up as their ideal.

Under the watchful eye of the Maharajahs of Benares, Ramlila has been performed in Ramnagar every year since the early 1800s. But how long it will continue is no longer certain. The pressures of India’s ever-increasing population and the nation’s vigorous economic growth threaten this unique theatrical-religious cycle.

Ramlila needs lots of time and space scarce in today’s India. People who once would support Rama in his war against Ravana now run businesses that can’t be ignored for a month. At the same time, forests, ponds and open sites are being eaten up by housing and highways. Even finding younger actors and technicians to replace those already well past retirement age is proving difficult.

As an American theatre director who has studied Ramlila since 1976, I am fascinated by its scale, by the attention to detail in its staging, lighting, scenic design and costuming, by the acting and singing, and by the convergence of narrative, spectacle, devotion and politics. I have seen all 31 episodes twice and, along the way, interviewed the Maharajah, the Rajkumar (crown prince) and many participants and performers in the play, as well as a number of spectators. In September, I went to Ramnagar to see portions of this year’s spectacle, as I have in other years. Ramayana means Rama’s journey, and Ramlila suggests this journey literally. There are no seats. People sit on the ground, stand, watch from rooftops or perch on walls. When the action calls for it, the crowd moves from one location to another. Following Rama’s footsteps is fundamental to Ramlila. This movement is a kind of pilgrimage, a worship-in-action.

The festival itself transforms an area of many square miles. Some of the stages are enclosures in the middle of the town, others are deep in what was once forest and jungle, or on grassy hillsides and in open fields, or amid large gardens of fragrant blooming trees and temples and marble gazebos built by former maharajas. For one scene, the stage is the Maharajah’s own palace, known as the Fort, which it really once was. Each episode is called a lila. On most days, Ramlila begins at 5 pm and continues until 10 at night. Some episodes last late into the evening and one, Rama’s coronation, does not end until dawn. The staging is simple and iconographic, replicating images from temples, religious paintings and popular posters. The costumes are richly woven silks in resplendent gold and red. The faces of some actors are adorned with glittering jewels. Many colourful masks and large, brightly painted papier-mâché effigies animate
the performances. Certain roles are passed down in families and are usually played by the same actors year after year. This year, for example, Ravana was played by Kaushal Pati Pathak, a farmer living about eight miles from Ramnagar. When I first saw Ramlila in 1976, Kaushal’s elder brother, Swami Nath Pathak, shared the role with their father. But this tradition is no longer secure, though it has persevered for more than 100 years. Kaushal said he did not want his son to portray Ravana. “Life as a farmer is too hard,” he said. “The Maharajah has no money anymore. I want my son to work in the city.” The sentiment is heard frequently these days.

The original Ramayana poem itself is never spoken because Sanskrit is a language very few Indians understand. Instead, what people hear is the Ramcharitmanas, a 16th-century Hindi version of the epic. The entire Manas, as it is called, is chanted by 12 men sitting each night in a circle close to the Maharajah. But even though at Ramila one can see dozens of people reading texts of the Manas, many others cannot understand its archaic Hindi. To enable everyone to follow the story, a maharajah in the mid-19th century, Ishwari Prasad Narain Singh, commissioned a group of poets and scholars to compose dialogue in vernacular Hindi for the Ramlila. Until that point, the performers mimed the action but did not have lines to recite. Today, the dialogue is spoken or rather, shouted with great vigour by the actors. It is necessary to shout because Ramila uses no microphones. This adherence to an earlier technology—kerosene lanterns and flares provide the lighting—is a major aspect of the production. Once, in the 1940s, microphones were used, but angry spectators stormed the stage and smashed the equipment. Ramila exists partly as a window in time, a conscious conservation of pre-Independence traditions.

Not only the techniques, but the underlying socio-religious structures of Ramila are extremely conservative. Tradition, of course, has its own role in the presentation of the epic. Virtually all of the Ramila actors are Brahmin men and boys, the highest Indian caste. The exceptions include a boatman and the small boys who play the monkey and demon armies. The roles of Rama, his brothers, Bharata, Lakshmana and Shatrughna, and Sita are enacted by young boys, usually between the ages of 8 and 13, whose voices have not yet changed and who have no facial hair. These children, it is believed, who are still innocent, are the only ones fit to embody the gods. When I asked why a girl might not play Sita, I was told that any female onstage would be considered by villagers to be sexually compromised. It is also said that any girl who portrayed Sita would never find a husband because the action in Ramila is considered real, including the wedding rites for Sita and Rama. Thus, “No one will marry a girl who has already been married.” When asked why the youth playing Sita does not face the same problem, my informant laughed: “He is a boy. He can’t be married to another boy.” The contradiction that what is true for a girl-as-god is not true for a boy-as-god did not seem an issue. As for Rama, no problem: a king can have more than one wife. The boys who enact the five most sacred roles of Rama, Sita and Rama’s three brothers are “gods for a month,” and people literally worship them by touching their feet, singing hymns in their praise, or simply staring intently at these divine beings. This intense gazing, called “taking darshan” of the gods, is adapted from Hindu temple worship, in which looking at images of the gods is thought to be beneficial. The actual felt presence of the divine is the core of the Ramila experience. At the other extreme, thousands of people come to Ramila mostly to enjoy everything from snacks to dinners and to obtain goods ranging from trinkets, posters of the gods, books and good-luck charms to marijuana and hashish. Ramila is a time and place of pleasure as well as devotion.

The largest crowds attend the final battle between Rama and Ravana. This occurs on the 10th day of the Hindu month of Ashvina, almost always in October. It is the occasion for a great theatrical spectacle, a moment of supreme religious fulfillment and yet excited festive celebration. First, the Maharajah ritually worships weapons and horses the symbols of his royal power. Next, he and his court mount magnificently adorned elephants and parade through the adoring crowd from the Fort to Lanka. The Maharajah then proceeds through the battleground and departs. “It is not proper for one king to witness the death of another,” the Maharajah told me. “Therefore, I do not stay to watch this lila.”

After the departure of the royalties, Ravana and Rama fight. Ravana’s death is marked relatively undramatically. The actor crosses the battlefield and touches Rama’s feet in humble surrender. A three-hour celebration ensues. The people are happy: Rama is victorious, Sita liberated, Ravana dead. It’s a great, happy picnic on a warm early autumn night. People are eating, singing, socialising, flirting and praying. Towering over the scene is Ravana’s giant effigy. About 10 p.m., in the words of Anuradha Kapur, an Indian theatre director and author of a book on the Ramila: “All at once, the effigy bursts into flames. Firecrackers explode, bamboo crackle, sprays of sparks shoot out. The customary five hot-air balloons ride into the sky. Ravana’s mighty spirit rises heavenward. The balloons soar into the clouds until they are no more than little yellow specks. The demon is liberated.” One group that always gains maximum pleasure and devotion from Ramila are the sadhus, holy men who have renounced worldly goods, live on alms and spend their days and nights singing praises to the gods. The Maharajah provides all sadhus with daily rations of rice and lodging. But despite this generosity, there are many fewer sadhus than before. “Who wants to renounce the world these
days?” a man asked me. And where there used to be lightly travelled paths leading into the quiet countryside, now there are streets clogged with diesel fume spewing trucks and buses, horn-blasting cars and motorcycles, not to mention bicycles, cows, water buffalo and goats. The deeply rutted dirt roads have not been filled or smoothed for years.

Why is the Ramlila enormous? The most direct answer is that since the early 19th century, the Ramlila has been the defining project of the Maharajahs of Benares. The current line was established in the mid-18th century and, caught between a failing Mughal power and an emergent British presence, was not secure on the throne. Sponsoring a large Ramlila was the way for the Maharajahs of Benares to shore up their religious and cultural authority at a time when they were losing both military power and economic autonomy.

Vibhuti Narain Singh ascended the throne in 1939 when he was a boy of 12. Ten years later, his kingdom was dissolved. But the Maharaja continued to rule, not in political fact but by virtue of his learning, his religious devotion and his patronage of Ramliila. Wherever he goes, people greet him with ringing shouts of “Hara! Hara! Mahadev!” (“Shiva! Shiva! Great God!”), because he is believed to be a manifestation of Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction and reproduction. Now 73 and frail, unable to walk unassisted, the Maharajah is doing all he can to pass the Ramlila on unchanged.

With the participation of Nissar Allana, a stage designer, and myself, the Maharajah is planning a Ramlila museum, which will take shape first as an Internet site with thousands of images, as well as sound recordings and scholarly and historical materials. Kapila Vatsyayan, one of India’s leading performance scholars, hopes to edit a facsimile edition of an early 19th century illuminated manuscript, a four-volume version of the Manas with hundreds of original illustrations in a style influenced by Mughal painting. I am helping to prepare a prompt book detailing all of the current staging a how-to-do-it manual that the Maharajah hopes will assist his son, Anant Narain Singh, who is now in his 30s, when it becomes his turn to oversee the Ramlila.

The Ramnagar Ramlila has thrived for nearly two centuries as a magnificent spectacle, a religious experience and a cosmic drama. But will it make it through the next 25 years? The crown prince has never known what it is to rule a state. Is his devotion as intense as his father’s? Can he command the same respect? He is a more modern man than his father. Is it an irony or a sign of the times that on several occasions when we have met, I was dressed in Indian kurta and pajamas, while he wore casual Western clothes? But succession to the throne is not the only uncertainty facing Ramlila. A bridge across the Ganges that opened this year funnels hordes of trucks close to the Ramlila stages. New housing overruns rustic Ramlila settings.

Meanwhile, money is a big problem. Environments and costumes are beginning to look rundown. Performers receive a few hundred rupees as a contribution to those who do sacred work. At one time, this money amounted to something, but no longer. Atmaram, the 80-year-old supervisor of props, sets, lights, costumes and special effects, was not sanguine about the future. “I am training no one,” he said. “After I am gone, who will know what to do?” Atmaram has been on the job for more than 50 years. The knowledge he carries in his head is not replaceable. Until now, few outsiders have attended Ramlila. It doesn’t make sense to go for one day, and Ramnagar does not have the infrastructure to accommodate longer visits, unless one is ready to rough it. For more foreigners to come or even for upscale Indians from Delhi and Calcutta Ramnagar will require extensive upgrading. The crown prince is studying the possibility of converting a portion of the Fort into a five-star hotel. Yet everyone recognises that Ramlilas uniqueness is a function of its nontourist Indianness, of its being theatre and more than theatre at the same time. Will increased attention from outsiders help preserve or further disturb Ramlila?

Notes

1. [www.nytimes.com/2000/11/26/arts/26SCHE](http://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/26/arts/26SCHE). This article was first appeared in the New York Times on November 26, 2000. We are thankful to Richard Schechner for permitting us to reproduce the edited version of the article—Editor.

2. On Christmas day 2000, Vibhuti Narain Singh died. Richard Schechner wrote: “News of his passing hit me hard. As hard, it seemed, as when my own father died in 1992. Within too few years both Jerzy Grotowski and the Maharaja were gathered and gone. Though my age is close to what theirs was, my sense is not of my own generation passing but of persons from an older, wiser time, a part of my heritage that I cannot express in words, especially in public, as any writing perforce is. I also sense the eternity of time, the timidity of mortality, and the grace of knowing great men.” (“TDR Comment”. In The Drama Review 45, 2 (T170), Summer 2001)—Editor.