

## Rituals and Bodies in Spatial Reconstruction of Past

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### Introduction

*The increasing* displacements of populations between nations, and the changing distributions of racial and ethnic populations within nations have created a search for a new identity. Old maps of identity- national, cultural and individual are being re-drawn. Soja in 'Postmodern Geographies' writes about Los Angeles being a theme park of World Space, "There is a Boston in Los Angeles, a Lower Manhattan and a South Bronx, a Sao Paulo and a Singapore." (Soja, 1989). This seems to be a result of nostalgia arising from estrangement or alienation.

*If we look* at the phenomenon of the search of a lost identity, recreation of the past, reconstruction of a recognizable environment based on a nostalgic past, we find that it is not true for the contemporary city alone. Being nostalgic is a part of human nature and hence we find its reflection spatially, in some of our very old cities too. Varanasi in India, a city two thousand five hundred years old, is such an example. Here residents construct their Lord's city every year, based on a 16<sup>th</sup> century text, through rituals. During the performance residents in a liminal phase, inhabit a reconstructed environment, where they remake their identities and find linkages with their past. This environment becomes a ground where the city of the past and present

coincide. It becomes a metaphor for the textual city.

*Contrary to* this we evidence a more politically driven nostalgia leading towards a borrowing of image driven and traditional architectural forms. In this process of 're-construction of past', the focus is totally on visual surface, creating instant urban-scapes lacking in depth, memory and ritual. Pronounced visual character is an important aspect of such spaces. Their design relies on the visibility of people and things and whatever is contained in them. "We build on the basis of papers and plans. We buy on the basis of images. Sight and seeing, which in western tradition once epitomized intelligibility, have turned into a trap: the means whereby, in social space, diversity maybe simulated" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 75).

*Ritualized* spaces, on the other hand, do not rely solely on vision. Here all senses are kept alive by total bodily participation. Ritual acts as a mediator in linking the body to the space not only physically but also at a metaphysical level. Because the space acquires a meaning due to the rituals, it is not the things which can be only seen in the space that matter, but what that space represents becomes crucial.

*This paper* takes up an urban space in Varanasi and aims to see how the performance/ritual mediates between the textual and the physical space leading to a liminal phase in which the performers start experiencing the past environment.

The physical space is nature, the existing built-up fabric. Textual space is the space as described in the text. Residents have the space imprinted in their minds by reading those texts and hence it can be termed as the space of the mind. Liminality is a phase in the performance, in which the spectators start believing themselves to inhabit the past environment because of the common spatial codes between the physical and textual space. It is here that the city of the past and the present collide.

### Textual Space

*Ramcharitmanas* was composed by Tulsidas in the sixteenth century. Its familiarity to the people of North India equals that of King James version of

the Bible for the English speaking people. *Ramcharitmanas* has acquired its mass audience primarily through oral performance. This includes reciting the text in ceremonies, folk singing and theatrical representations. "It offers a vivid portrait of one community's interaction with its favorite text and the way in which it functions as a flexible and evolving medium for cultural expression"(Lutgendorf, 1991, p. 2).

*For Indians*, Ramcharitmanas structures the whole sub-continent. The movement of the characters in the episode start from North India, move South reaching Sri Lanka. After defeating the King of Lanka the journey is retraced back North towards the home city Ayodhya. This same movement pattern is followed in Varanasi during a 21-day period, when the whole text is performed. The streets and squares in Varanasi are appropriated to represent different places in India where the sequences of the episode took place. The city is thus mapped by bodily movement.

*The paper* focuses on one particular performance episode called Bharata Milap, the reunion with Bharata. Lord Rama, victorious over Ravana (King of Lanka) has returned to Ayodhya, his own kingdom after fourteen yeas of exile. He meets his beloved brother Bharata and the brothers embrace. This is one of the big movements of the epic.

### **Physical Space**

*Ramlila* (the play) is staged in an environment that are spread over distances that make the spectators move from place to place by following Rama in order to attend to his story.

*The site* of the re-union is a rectangular field containing a huge Tamarind tree (Imli) from which the area Nati Imli gets its name (figure 1). It is a commercial node at a neighborhood level with residences at the top. At one end is a small temple. Just next to it is a stepped platform, which is connected by a paved pathway perhaps a hundred yards long to another stone platform. Every year, before the performance, the platforms are cleaned and white washed, the ground is cleared, and a processional path is laid for the King of Varanasi

and his retinue, who approach from one of the side streets.

*On the day* of the performance the area is barricaded (figure 2). Hundreds of policemen line up to control the crowds, which fill the surrounding streets for lengths in every direction. Roof-tops of the surrounding buildings are leased off before hand and become an area to accommodate the dignitaries and VIPs of the city.

### **Performance**

*Based on* Lutgendorf's description in 'The Life of a Text' the re-union episode is carried on in sequential scenes.

1. Action: An enormous wooden Palanquin, representing the flying chariot of the defeated king of Lanka, now being utilized by Rama comes in view. It is carried by members of the milkmen community wearing red turbans, and rests on the smaller platform (figure 3).

Soundscape: Chants of "Jai Sri Rama"

2. Action: King of Varanasi seated on an elephant enters along with his retinue. The focus of the crowd shifts towards the king and moves with him as he circumambulates Rama's palanquin and takes his place on one side of the ground (figure 4).

Soundscape: Chants of "Har Har Mahadeva"

3. Bharata and the youngest brother lie prostrate on the higher platform. Rama and his other brother start walking and then break into a trot towards the higher platform (figure 5a).

Soundscape: Ramayanis (people well-versed in Ramcharitmanas) who surround the higher platform start chanting the mantras. Public is absolutely silent in anticipation.

4. Runners, after reaching the higher platform, climb the steps and after lifting up their brothers lying prostrate on the ground, embrace them. Flowers are thrown on them by the people surrounding the platform.

Soundscape: Loud cheering with ringing of bells, gongs and conches (figure 5b).

5. The four brothers form a line, arms around one another's waist, face straight and rotate 45 degrees, pause and thus take two complete rounds in eight directions (figure 6).

Soundscape: Acknowledging roar from the appropriate sector.

6. Performers descend and are taken back to the organizing committee's headquarter. Royal elephant moves towards the waiting limousine that takes the king back to his palace (figure 7).

*How are ritualized bodies and places produced by this public visitation of Lord Rama?*

### **Liminal phase and the production of ritualized bodies**

*The red* color in the drawings denotes the liminal phase in which the performers and spectators enter in various scenes. In scene one it is just the performers and the people who are carrying them who are within the red blob. Both the performers and the people associated with them are initiated into this phase many days before the actual performance. The boys chosen to play the part of Lords are trained and start living in a separate place away from their homes many days before the performance. During the twenty-one day cycle of Ramlila they are treated as Gods themselves. "They are not merely blank screens on which devotees project the God of their imaginations; 'attributes are of essence here, and the ones that the boys possess – innocence, physical attractiveness, Brahmin hood – are essential ingredients in what they become. The boy possesses by virtue of his attributes, the authority not merely to represent but to become Lord Rama the right moment'"(Lutgendorf, 1991).

*In the same way* there are different roles for different communities in Ramlila. Beautifiers, who supervise the costumes and makeup, represent the community of Gujarati silk merchants of Varanasi and claim their privilege to beautify the 'Lords'. The carriers of the 'flying chariot' are the 'milkmen' of Varanasi and the Ramayanis are the rector from the text. In scene six nearly all the spectators enter in this liminal phase. The spectator in the first scene becomes a performer in the sixth. Resident of Varanasi transforms into a resident of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century City of Rama and it is then that the city of the past is recreated. Each body is ritualized where

it not only performs a role as a beautifier or a rector or a resident of Rama's city, but also becomes one.

### **Ritualised space**

*Centrality* becomes a key component that is common to both the spaces as described in Ramcharitmanas (textual space) as well as in Nati Imli (physical space). The two platforms and the runway connecting them are positioned centrally on the north south axis and their very scale enhances the interaction between the performers and the spectators. Performers exit and enter from amongst the spectators. Spectators can touch them, garland them and thus are in a close proximity with them. *This centrality* of axes also promotes a three-dimensional zoning of the space with respect to the status of Varanasi residents. The zones move on from a lower status at the ground level to a higher status on the rooftops. Though opposite to that in the text in which the space is zoned from a higher to a lower status towards the periphery, what matters is the creation of a spatial-social hierarchy, where each person is able to perform as per the zone he/she inhabits. Positioned in the particular zone gives a clue for the bodily action.

*The square* is not seen in isolation but is linked to various other streets and squares of Varanasi. The narrative is actualized because of the movement from one theatrical environment to the next. Production of a ritualized space thus depends on the codes common in the textual and physical space, which are picked up by the mind during the performance.

### **Conclusion**

*"The body* believes in what it plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief. It does not represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, it *enacts* the past, bringing it back to life" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 73). Scene six becomes a point of convergence of representation, imitation and transformation, not only of the performers' and spectators' bodies but also of the space. There is a collision of the existing or real space, represented and transformed space. "The performance/ritual does not just represent a meaning, but is *lived* through the performer's

experience of her or his body *in place*”(Martin and Kryst, 1998, p. 224). The performance and setting work together to produce ritualized bodies and ritualized spaces. Here meaning is not separate from material. This can not be said about the theme-parks or environments designed on the basis of aesthetics only, where as suggested by Baudrillard, the referents have disappeared completely such that style (or simulacra) has become everything. (Baudrillard, 1975). Ritual, on the other hand, does not create this difference between signifier and signified, between meaning and material. It brings the body in a close relationship with the space where the “boundaries between self and environment are blurred, allowing one to experience, feel, become, and embody certain qualities of that place”(Martin and Kryst, 1998, p. 225).

*According to* Lefebvre, “social space can not be reduced to a ‘form’ imposed upon phenomena. It is revealed only when the mental space becomes indistinguishable from the physical space” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 27). Thus a focus on to the physical aspects of the space in isolation is not what we aim here. The ‘re-construction’ is complete only when boundaries dissolve between the mental (textual) and physical space and also between the body and space.

### References

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figure 1

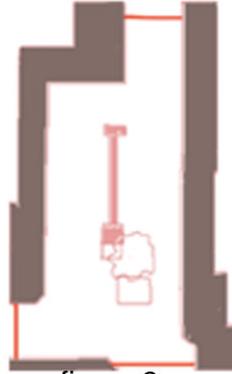


figure 2

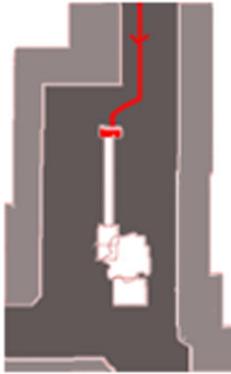


figure 3

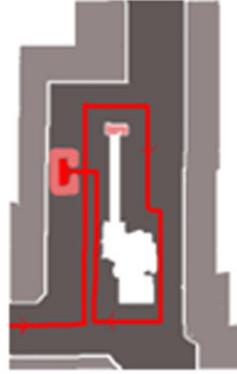


figure 4



figure 5a

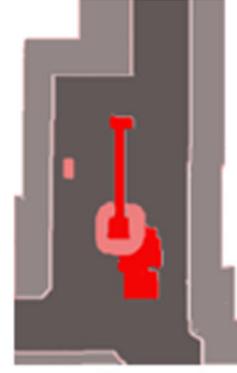


figure 5b

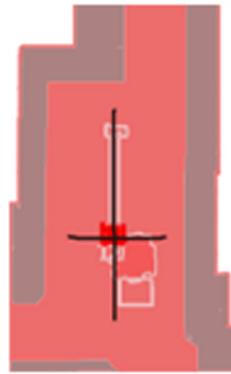


figure 6

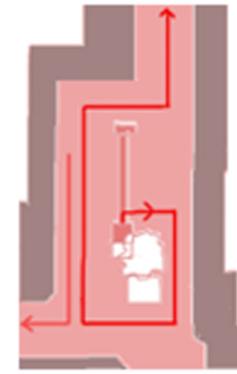


figure 7