Introduction.

The Ras Līlā theatre of Vrindavan (Vrindaban, Brindavan 90 K.M. southeast of Delhi) is one of the famous forms of traditional Indian theatre, which enacts episodes from the story of Hindu mythical God Kṛṣṇa. Ras Līlā-s have attracted the attention of scholars both such as Norvin Hein (1972), Vasant Yamadagni (1980), Shyamnarayan Pandey (1980), Ramanarayan Agrawal (1981), John S. Hawley (1981& 1992), Varadapande (1982) and Prabhudayal Mital (1983), who have done several kinds of analysis about them.

The problem of research.

Presently, the following features of Ras Līlā performances are being taken up for study: (i) The performers perform and the audience watch the Ras Līlā-s over and over and again and again without showing a pinch of feeling of monotony or boredom. (ii) The Ras Līlā performers perform as ‘playfully’ and as involvedly as children do. (iii) In spite of absence of any extraordinary quality of acting talent, these performers succeed in transporting the audience into the realm of the content of their performances. (iv) The whole performance is, in fact, a collective participation by the audience-crowd, producers, directors and the actors. The demarcation between the performers and the audience is almost invisible as the audience converse directly with the directors and the performers on the stage and vice versa, apart from the audience moving on to the stage, participating in the stage activities. (v) Audience break into uncontrorollable wailing with incessant outpouring of tears over the cheeks. At times they shout loudly with raised hands at the appearence of Kṛṣṇa and other characters, uttering their names.

These features of Ras Līlātheatre distinguish it from other kinds of theatre. Here, an attempt has
been made to get an insider's view of the participants of RasLīṅga-s, to comprehend these features.

It may be noted that the insiders do not like the use of the word Drama or Nāṭaka in reference to their theatre and prefer to call it as Līṅga. For example, Fateh Krishna, the director of a leading troupe of RasLīṅga performances, argues, as long as Līṅga is considered as Drama or a Nāṭaka one will not be able to understand it. Neither will one be able to do any research on Līṅga. It can be seen that for Svāmi Fateh Krishna, the notion that Drama and Nāṭaka are just the English and Hindi words for any theatre and thus can be used to talk about US is wrong’ (Fateh Krishna, Director of Svāmi Fateh Krishna Ras Mandali).

Taking a cue from the words of Svāmi Fateh Krishna, it makes sense to look at (i) the Western theatre, beginning from Classical Greek Tragedy to the modern experimental plays; (ii) traditional Indian theatre, covering mostly the Sanskrit plays composed by poets like Kalidasa, Bhasa and so on; and (iii) RasLīṅga-s of Vrindavan, as different kinds of theatre, and to identify ‘Drama,’ ‘Nāṭaka’ and ‘Līṅga’ as three different categories covering three kinds of theatre, respectively. A careful scrutiny reveals that more appropriate word for traditional Indian theatre would be Natya rather than Nāṭaka. The word Natya in the most popular sense appears as a reference to traditional Indian Dance. But a knowledge of Sanskrit poetics, especially, of works like Bharata’s Natya Śāstra, will help in understanding that the word Natya refers to the traditional Indian theatre which includes dance elements and has a Vedic cultural background. Though what Fateh Krishna expressed is the articulation of an insider and not the sophisticated analytical statement made by a researcher, it gives a hint that to be true to an insider’s point of view and to get its complete understanding, Līṅga must be viewed in contrast to ‘Drama’ and ‘Natya.’

In fact, such an insider’s view is well articulated in a theoretically elaborate form by scholars such as Rupa Goswami (1489 - 1564) in Bhakti Rasamrta Sindhu and Ujjvala Niśāman and Jiva Goswami (1503 - 1598) in his books SatSandarbha and so on. These authors and books belong to Gauḍīya Vaishnava tradition, a particular tradition among several traditions participating in Līṅga (for example, Fateh Krishna belongs to Nimbarka tradition). Rupa Goswami and Jiva Goswami were the disciples of the
famous saint Chaitanya (1486-1523) and developed Gaudiya Vaṣṇava philosophy based on his teachings. Gaudiya Vaṣṇava poetics of Līlā themes, which helps in understanding the Rāṣṭ Līlā performances takes from where the Natya Losl ends, in the sense that it presupposes the knowledge of the Natya Śāstra discourse from its readers and runs into polemics with it compelling a clear distinction between Natya and Līlā. An uncritical application of the category of Natya to the Līlā theatre of Vrindavan leads to confusion, because though Līlā shares the Vedic background of Natya, it has its locale in the bhakti (spiritual devotion) culture (see Ch.3).

Looking at the Natya Śāstra from the point of view of philosophy behind it reveals that there are several philosophical problems in the interpretations of this work. Traditional scholars who follow different schools of philosophy accepted or rejected a separate status for the aesthetic pleasure given by LIB which is called bhakti rasa. Review of these polemics have been done by modern scholars such as VRaghavan (1975) by not delving into the different philosophical backgrounds of both Natya and Līlā. But when the philosophical backgrounds of the different stances are taken into consideration each of these stances can be found to be correct from within the background on which the stance is based.

A new reading of Natya Śāstra from the point of view of philosophy behind it also reveals that there are several philosophical problems in the English interpretations of poetics of the Natya Śāstra. Scholars like R.L. Singal (1977) have viewed Natya as just a kind of theatre like Drama. This is evidenced by their uncritical application of the elements of Natya such as vibhāva and sāṅta rasa, among others, to Drama (see 2.6.3). Though the word Drama is often used to describe a play, a critical overview reveals its locale in the Western literature and Western culture. Hence it can not be uncritically applied to describe either plays like Kalidasa's Abhijñāna Sākuntalam or to Līlā-s.

Similarly, instances of reading the elements of Drama into Us can also been noted in the English
interpretation of the themes of Uli which is the content of flb Uli-*.' An instance of uncritical application of the notions of Greek Drama to Lila-s is found in Sudhir Kakar’s (1981) psychoanalysis of Lila-s (the pastimes of Krsna, which are the content of Ras Lila-s). Kakar applies psychoanalysis to infer the impact of descriptions of the activities of Krsna on the readers/audience. He considers Krsna’s dalliance with the cowherd damsels of Vrindavan (see 4.3.5.2.II) to be libidinous.’ He further asserts that the activities of Krsna propose utter freedom and ‘instinctual exhileration,’ which, for him, is akin to the Dionysian element in Greek mythology (also associated with Greek Drama). He does not take into account the fact that within Lila-s, there is textual evidence to show that the essential feature of the concept of Love in Lila-s is its trans-erotic quality (see 3.5 & 4.3.5.2.II), while the Dionysian element found in Greek Drama is predominantly passionate. This example dearly illustrates the theoretical problems that can emerge from not taking into account the distinctions that exist in the worldviews inherent in the Lila and Drama.

All this leads to see that as a conceptual category, Lila needs to be distinguished from Drama on the one hand and from Nātya on the other. The categorization of theatre helps, not only to understand UliS from the insider’s point of view, but also to be close to the truth of what Uli is. The present dissertation is an attempt to show how this justification is available in the theories of Drama, Nātya and Lila and in the reality of the UliS tradition in Vrindavan. This distinct understanding of UliS vis-a-vis Nātya and Drama answers the question about the distinctive features of UliS such as repeated performances of the same themes, total dissolution of performer-audience demarcation and intense emotional expressions and so on. It also helps to trace the sources of confusion which led to seeing ‘instinctual exhileration’ and so on, into UliS (see 4.3.5.3.II).

Previous scholarship.

The scholars mentioned above tried to give a picture of UliS in various different ways. The origin, the
performance structure, the literature, the contribution of poets, music and other aspects of Rās LAM have been discussed by Vasant Yamadagni (1980), Ramnarayan Agrawal (1981), Prabhudayal Mital (1983) and others. Norvin Hein in his book, The nmr-le plays of Mathura (1972), has dealt with the different kinds of theatrical performances that take place around Mathura (which is the district in which Vrindavan is located) and translated the Uddhava Us which is one of the most prominent Līlā-s. John S. Hawley translated four major Līlā-s: The Birth of Krishna (Ch.2), The theft of the flute (Ch.3), The Great Circle Dance (Ch.4), and The Coming of Akrūr (Ch.5), with an introduction to each chapter in his excellent work At Play with Krsna : Pilgrimage Dramas From Brindavan (1981). He also separately dealt with one of the most popular themes from the Līlā stories, Kṛṣṇa as the Butter Thief, in his book, Krishna : The Butter Thief. Varapande in his book The Krishna Theatre (1982), discussed Rās Līlā theatre, placing it under the broad category of theatre with Kṛṣṇa themes in different places in India. He also translated a US called Sri Kēvat Līlā (the pastime of boatman). All the scholars mentioned above, have attempted to take meticulous care in their translation, not to miss the delicate aspects of the worldview of Līlā-s.

David Haberman (1988), who observed that the Gaudīya Vaśnava poetics of the Līlā themes presupposes the knowledge of the poetics of Natya, has done a penetrating analysis of bhakti rasa vis-a-vis Natya rasa in his book Acting as a mode of salvation : Rāgānuṇḍa Bhakti Sādhana. But as he limited his scope to the study of bhakti in Gaudīya Vaśnava tradition, he has not dealt with the philosophical foundations of the poetics of Natya and Līlā. Since the aim of the present work is to show the difference between traditional Indian theatre as known from the Natya Śāstra and Ulīlā theatre of Vrindavan, which is a product of bhakti traditions, this work analyses those foundations.

Though Agrawal and others have, to some extent, dealt with the topics like the emotional experience of the audience of Līlā, they have not elaborately discussed the nature of this experience and the reason behind such an intense experience. Many more questions such as the
difference between the emotional experience of Lie. Nātya and Drama, the cultural background of those who participate in these Līlās, which makes such an experience possible, are left behind.

This created the scope for the above mentioned intellectual journey from Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava poetics, through the poetics of Nafta (centered around nātya Sum), to the theories of Drama. The forthcoming discussion is the end product of such a journey.

Methodology.

There are several ways in which Drama, Nātya and Līlā can be compared. Any comparison needs a common axis. The common axis of comparison that can be found suitable for the comparison of these forms is the (issue of) the presentation of the "self" and its "fulfilment."

The word 'self is popular in English literature on Indian phisology as a translation to the word atman, which is a metaphysical and spiritual notion. But, here, it is being used in the sense in which Irving Deer and Harriet A. Deer, in their book on Drama, Selves : Drama in perspective (1975), have used : the human personality/ human individual/ human subject. Interestingly, this notion of human subject has a clear elaboration in the philosophy of Nātya and Līlā too and along the way of this elaboration, has a conceptual link to the above mentioned idea of self (ātman) as a metaphysical and spiritual concept. This makes the notion of self, the best choice for the axis for the comparison of Drama, Nātya and Līlā being taken up here.

For the purpose of fulfilling the requirements of performance study and ethnography of the topic of the present research, a purely fieldwork based qualitative empirical method of data collection, observation and analysis has been adapted. The present study is done through a stay in Vrindavan for more than three hundred days spreading over a period of three years, closely examining the Vrindavan culture (popularly called as brāj culture) in general and the Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava culture in
particular, by participating in and observing the performances and noting their nuances and at the same time taking guidance from the great Gaudiya Vaishnava guru (spiritual teacher) Haridas Shastriji and the modern Gaudiya Vaisnava scholar Satyanarayanadas and several other scholars.

The stay includes following the daily routine of the Brajisi-s (the inhabitants of Vrindavan) and participating in the Lila-s along with the traditional audience by becoming completely one among them. Nevertheless, this participant observation is optimally complemented by the non-schedule based interviews conducted with the performers, the organisers of the performances, patrons and the audience. The descriptive categories of US have been gathered emically from the participants of the Lila-s. The texts of the Lila-s are inevitably collected from the performance context.

End note:

Since Chaitanya took birth in Bengal which is also called Gauda region, his philosophy is called Gaudiya (Bengal) Vaisnavaphilosophy.