Chapter II

TRADITION REVISITED: THE MAKING OF THE VIDEO EPIC

The tradition of Ramayana performance which existed in India since times immemorial experienced an unprecedented change in the late 1980s. The overpowering impact of television cast a spell over the entire generation; a new and a magnificent style was adopted for performance. Ramanand Sagar, just like Valmiki or Tulsidas, created an epic for his age. The screening of one of the most famous and revered epics of India on the television was no less than the formation of a new epic. The creation of Ramayana on the television was in itself an 'epic undertaking' (this phrase has been used by Lutgendorf in his article “Ramayan: The Video” 127).

With the performance and recitation of the Ramayana in multiple ways it has almost become a culture in itself. If we try to explore the various levels at which this epic is embedded and the transformations faced by the epic at these various levels, we would not hesitate to call it a living event. The living events are always and already changing as they are (re)performed; and this is quite easily visible if we consider the performing and further re-performing of the epics like Ramayana; with varying performing styles.

Sanskrit texts like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, among others, were recited by sages and priests at religious sacrifices or narrated by teachers to their students. They entered the local tongue when professional storytellers known as ‘kathavachaks’ retold individual stories to the general public. Since these recitals continued for several days, the storyteller interspersed the main narrative with the folktales he collected on his journeys, which also became a part of this shared tradition. Other mediums through which these stories circulated were folk theatre, songs and dances, as were murals on temple or palace walls or the printed fabric backdrops used by storytellers to illustrate their narratives.
Katha or the story telling tradition in India exists from times immemorial. Right from the beginning, Aryans were storytellers and this tradition continued. Storytelling is a popular performing art in India. In India each region has developed its own style and tradition of story telling in various regional languages combining musical compositions between the narrations. Epics and Puranas (the ancient stories of wisdom in Sanskrit) are the common story material for all or most of the regions of India. Such performances were held in temples, weddings and other religious or social functions. The storyteller is looked upon as a teacher who is a scholar in ancient texts in Sanskrit and other vernacular languages. He interprets the religious and mythological texts of the past to the present and the future generations.

In the various States of India there exist three different traditions of storytelling. The first is the Purana-Pravachana, which literally means, "expounding the Purana". The Purana-Pravachana was narrated by the Pauranika, who was an expert in such an exposition; these expositions are solemn and serious. The second tradition, Kathakalakshepa, is a Sanskrit term meaning, "Katha" - story, "kala" - time, and "kshepa" - throwing away; in total it means spending time listening to stories. Kathakalakshepa is unique because the story is carried through various songs and compositions in different Indian languages like Sanskrit, Tamil, Marathi, Telugu, Kannada and Hindi. This is a one-person theatre where the performer has to be versatile in the aspects of exposition, singing and histrionics, and be able to interestingly narrate humorous anecdotes as well. The third is a folk art, prevalent in Andhra Pradesh (a State in South India), called Burrakatha. Burra is a drum that is shaped like a human skull (Burra means skull). In this tradition, gypsies narrate stories beating the drum. In Tamil Nadu the folk story tradition is called Villu-pattu, viz., the bow-song.

This art tradition linked with story telling has its roots embedded in the Ramayana; in the introductory cantos of the Sanskrit Ramayana we find the poet Valmiki taking an existing story and transforming it into an elegant poetic composition. However, story telling or the katha tradition lies embedded in the epical (Ramayana) story itself. We can say that, story telling comes inherently with the Ramayana. Almost in the entire Ramayana (Valmiki) story there are stories narrated by people within the (main) story, in close approximation to a narrative within a narrative. While reading the Ramayana we witness countless tales which are
embedded in the *Ramayana* narrative, narrated by a sage or a devi (goddess) or even an ordinary man.

Below are presented a few such storytelling incidents from the *Ramayana* story. The first incident talks about the association of storytelling tradition with the *Ramayana* and acquaints us with the origin of poetry by the chance utterance of verses by the great sage Valmiki. While Valmiki was about to go for his bath in the Tamas river he saw:

'A pair of healthy *kraunchas* dallying in amorous sports and singing in melodious notes. At this moment suddenly a wicked fowler appeared and killed the male bird,.....(sic.)'

'O Fowler! since thou hast slain one of the pair of *kraunchas* while engaged in love, thou shalt never attain any fame.'

Having uttered this curse Valmiki was struck with wonder, and repeatedly asked to himself, 'what have I just now uttered being afflicted with grief for the bird! (sic.)'

Then, addressing Bhardwaja, the sage said, 'these words I just uttered are of equal feet and of even measure, and are capable of being sung in accompaniment to a stringed lyre. And since it is born of my *Shoka* (grief) let it be known as a *Sloka* (or verse).'

When Valmiki returned to his hermitage after having a bath, the four faced god, glorious Brahma, the creator of heavens and earth, appeared before Valmiki. Then Brahma spoke in joy, 'O thou best of the hermits, see thou hast unconsciously made a verse. It was done at my instance. Now, the work should no longer be delayed. Those verses of yours shall be immortal, and I ask you, O thou best of the saints, to celebrate the life of Rama in your verse. Relate the sacred story as you have heard it from Narada about pious and intelligent Ram, Lakshaman and Vaidehi and about the *Rakshaśś*, including all that is hitherto known or unknown. Even what has been omitted by Narada, will come to your pen at the time of writing and no words of yours should contain any untruth. So long as the mountains and seas exist on earth, the sacred history of the *Ramayana* shall endure, and you will enjoy a double life both in Heaven and on Earth' (Sen 5-6).
The above text provides an account of the origin of poetry and Valmiki owes the credit for the composition of the epic Ramayana in poetic verse. Hence, the epic (Ramayana) provides us with a living example of the story telling tradition. This tradition has been continued through the ages (by means of a kathavachak, Ramayani, saints and guru) and has been eternalized in the epic renderings. Further in the story we find Lav and Kush reciting the story of Lord Ram like a kathavachak narrates it.

‘Having composed the poem, Valmiki thought of the means of communicating it to the world. When he was thinking about the means of its publication on earth, came in Kusa and Lava, two royal princes, dressed in hermit’s dress and touched his feet. Valmiki, seeing those two brothers pure in character, endowed with sweet voice and good memory and capable of appreciating poetry, taught them to interpret the Vedas, and along with it the whole of Ramayana dealing with the destruction of Ravan and of Sita’s life in full (sic.)’ (Sen 7).

This confirms the point that the katha or the storytelling tradition, in an indirect manner springs up from the Ramayana itself; in the text (the Ramayana story) itself we find the recitation of the same story by Lav and Kush.

When a kathavacak is preparing to expound the Ramayana, care is always given to the seat he occupies, which must be purified in order to be worthy of the divine sage. Since the Ramayan serial became a form of katha or ramlila for millions of families, the television screen became the new seat of the storyteller and ritual stage for the lila. Television therefore, occupied the place of the new ‘kathavachak’ or the ‘Ramayani’ narrating the Ramayana; or it can be referred to as the new seat being occupied by the storyteller.

Be it the narration of mythical stories, religious epics or granny’s stories, all have been a part of the Indian story-telling tradition. Ramanand Sagar adopted, executed, and exploited the technique of story telling in a new and appropriate form. On watching the Ramayan (Sagar’s), in the very first scene we find the actor Ashok Kumar describing the sacrosanctity attached to the epic, the morals taught by the story which are now presented in the serialized form for the devotees. The actor glorifies the Ramayana and enshrines the moral values presented in the text:
Ramayana is not only a religious scripture but a cultural document which transcends colour, race, culture, nations and it is so important in our lives that it teaches every man to live his daily life. This is the only reason that it has been translated in almost all the languages of this world. In Germany, France, Europe, Russia, Canada, Iran, Thailand, Indonesia Ramayana is very popular (Sagar Ramayan, episode 1).

Ramayana is a story with (sub)stories embedded in it. In the entire narrative we find one character or the other narrating one of the prior happenings (or the so called story). A few examples of how the narratives are embedded in the single narrative Ramayana are presented in the following text. One morning Ram, Lakshman and Vishwamitra crossed Ganga and reached the city of Vishala. Ram wanted to know something about the city. The great ascetic Vishwamitra said, “O Rama, listen to what befell this city. In ancient times........” (Sen 35) and then Vishwamitra started narrating the story of Diti and Aditi to Ram. Another example of storytelling is the story told by Manthara, to Kaikeyi “O queen! There is a city called Vaijayanta in Dandakaranaya in the south. There lived once an Asura named Timidvaja, otherwise known as Samvara...... ” (Sen 63).

Throughout the text we find stories being narrated; King Dasaratha narrates to Kausalya the story of killing a hermit’s son, “when in my youthful days, I learnt the art of archery, I could then hit a thing from the mere direction of its sound without seeing the thing itself. During these days, I committed a great sin through ignorance, but a poison never ceases to act because a child has drunk it through ignorance” (Sen 111).

If we talk of the significance of the katha tradition in its ancient structure to the present times we discover various similarities in the connotations of the tele-serial Ramayan and the katha. In Vaisnava Katha (narration or story telling), a performer, usually called a kathavacak is invited by an individual patron or community, for a discourse on a sacred story; the performer who specializes in Tulsidas’ Ramcharitmanas (the most popularly used text for katha in North India today) is sometimes called a Ramayani. The discourse is sometimes limited to a day’s program whereas, at other incidents it extends over to months. In both the styles the source text serves merely as the anchor for an improvised verbal meditation that may include
almost endless digressions and elaborations, interspersed with relevant quotations from any part of the epic as well as from other revered texts. Another characteristic of *katha* is its tendency to domesticise the epical characters through the re-telling of incidents and the presentation of the characters in a highly colloquial style and with details absent from the source text.

All the traits of the *katha* tradition, were present in the serial *Ramayan* as well. Sagar’s *Ramayan*, following the *katha* trend was also equipped with the ability to domesticise the epic. It brought Ram-Sita to every house, in fact the entire nation. In addition in the serial, the religious nuances are carried on as they were before. Similar to the *katha* performance the tele-visual *Ramayan* also remains a principal form of both religious instruction and popular entertainment. The serial presented the teachings, instructions and moral codes laid by the *Ramayana* in the form of a presentation which served as a means of entertainment.

Almost all the elements of *katha* were manifested in the television *Ramayan* (by Ramanand Sagar). Here, instead of the *Ramayani* narrating the story we have Ramanand Sagar narrating the incidents of the epic after specific intervals. We find Ramanand Sagar narrating the forthcoming events to us in advance; before every episode we find him sitting cross legged or sometimes standing, in a temple or some other old piece of architecture describing and at times justifying his (presentation of the) story.

Whatever else he may be – a movie moghul and a shrewd businessman – Ramanand Sagar appears to have a genuine enthusiasm for the *Ramcharitmanas* and a taste for *katha*. His reported participation in an ongoing study group must have exposed him to many interpretations of the text, and his interest in the popular expounder Morari Bapu is reflected in his use of excerpts from the latter’s performances to introduce several of his marketed cassettes. As the serial unfolded and as he prepared a permanent edition for international release Ramanand Sagar became increasingly concerned with his own role as a story teller, frequently appearing in the introductory or concluding portions of each cassette to comment, (in typically rambling *kathavacak* style) on the events being presented. Like *Tulsidas* he sought to place himself in a long tradition of *Ramayana* narrators, claiming little originality for
his screenplay (the credit for each episode cite ten *Ramayanas* in various languages) (Lutgendorf “Raghu Family” 228).

In the picture below we find Ramanand Sagar narrating the forthcoming events in the traditional *kathavachak* style. Examining the style in which he projects himself in the serial, with his hands folded, it seems as if he is inclined more towards establishing his popularity as a sage than the presentation of the story. In the distinctive *kathavachak* style we find Ramanand Sagar sitting cross-legged in front of the camera in a saintly white garb, with his hands folded and sometimes moving in action (while discussing the plot). He usually presents himself seated in the temple premises; even in the picture given below, we find a temple courtyard shown in the background.

![Ramanand Sagar narrating the events of the story](image)

Ramanand Sagar realized that he was creating a powerful, independent retelling. He was aware of the fact that presenting one of the India’s most revered epics on the television was almost like writing a new *Ramayana*; it was similar to writing the new epic with the help of the camera. Moreover, acquainted with his achievement he almost elevated himself to the position of a sage or in fact a deity. Therefore, in the final extravagant episode of July 31 (1988) he took the ultimate step of placing himself in the narrative, hovering cross-legged on a lotus in the sky above Ayodhya to join assembled deities in singing the praises of the newly crowned Ram.
Though this act of placing himself along with the deities has been dismissed by critics, but the viewers had no apprehensions on this act of Ramanand Sagar.

Progressing from the oral (katha) tradition (the mode of recitation), the Ramayana travelled in the form of dance dramas. These were enacted in or around the temple premises in the form of songs, narrative, dance and recital. All the stories and themes used by these performers were drawn from the religious epics like the Ramayana or the Mahabharata. Hence, in this new form the Ramayana entered the temples. However, as the audience grew, these ‘dance dramas’ moved out of the temples and formed the street theatre.

Vatuk tells us that India has a dramatic tradition, both literary and folk, of many centuries duration. Bharata Muni discusses the art of drama in his Natyashastra, a work supposedly composed in the second century B.C. when some of the best Sanskrit plays were already in existence. Speaking of the origins of the dramatic art, he asserts that drama represents the panchama veda (fifth veda), created by God himself in order to impart the instruction in religious behaviour to the members of the lower classes who were not allowed access to the other Vedas. Hence, according to Bharata’s Natyashastra drama existed or was created to impart religious instruction. This myth of the deliberate, divine creation of the drama would suggest that in fact the Sanskrit drama as a literary form must have developed out of a prior folk dramatic tradition (32).

The Sanskrit drama was so polished in its conventions, so linguistically refined, that the mass of people could not have enjoyed it, and it is therefore likely that throughout history the two traditions, folk and literary, developed side by side, mutually influencing each other. In modern India, each region can be found to have its own characteristic forms of folk drama. Prominent, for example, are the khyal of Rajasthan, bhavai of Gujarat, sangit or tamasha of Maharashtra, and bhagvat mel of Andhra. In most cases, several distinct forms of folk drama co-exist in a single area. Uttar Pradesh has ras, nakal, nautanki, bhand, ramlila, sang and others. These are all different in many respects. However, all have some common features. The stories they portray are derived for the most part from the same myths, tales, and epics, and from the lives of Indian religious and folk heroes. Most use poetry, and wherever prose is employed, poetic elements such as rhyming, and elaborate figurative speech are prominent. All use music and song as an integral part of the performance, so that it
is appropriate to call them folk opera. Yet despite this underlying similarity in content and technique, it must be stressed that all Indian folk opera is not identical. In the part of the western Uttar Pradesh and eastern Punjab several types of folk drama and folk dramatic troupes are to be found at the present time. One of the best known folk dramas is the ramlila, a performance of about fourteen days duration in which the important episodes in the life of lord Ram, as related in the Ramayana and in the improvisations of local writers, are recited and acted out. Under the term ramlila are included two kinds of performances. The local ramlila is performed yearly during September or October at the festival of dashahara and is organized by a committee in each city. Another ramlila is performed by independent professional troupes, without regard for the season.

Though all Indian folk opera is not identical, there are some components which are identical. A few of them constitute the essential parts of all kind of drama. Bharata in his Natyashastra discusses every aspect of theory and practice of drama, which for him is a composite art. He has laid down the aesthetic concepts and has conceived the art of the actor in a four fold scheme namely – vachik (speech), angik (bodily movements), aharya (costume, make up and scenic design) and sattivika (psychic states). Performance tradition, taking advantage of Bharata’s four fold scheme of abhinaya (histrionic art) created many performance modes by maximizing or by minimizing one or more of these aspects. Any performing art is constructed by means of visual, aural, and linguistic components that are manipulated in numerous ways. We cannot take apart the totality of the performance experience and interpret how that was assembled. Bharata conceived two ways of stage behaviour of the performer as well namely, lokdharmi and natyadharmi, having the traits of theatrical behavior that is stylized. He also conceived four vritties, that is, the style of performance. Finally, he developed his supreme aesthetic concept of ‘rasa’ or flavour, of aesthetic experience which organizes and integrates all these disparate concepts. Rasa is essentially a theory of communication and for its realization an initiated and responsive audience, termed as rasik, is required.

In Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan, all the components of an actor’s art like speech, bodily movements, costume, make up, scenic design, and sattivika have been incorporated. The language used by actors or the God swarups was sanskritized Hindi; therefore, presenting the viewers a ‘vachik’ well acceptable in the spirit of the
performance. All the characters were deeply rooted in the parts played by them: Ram presented in a calm and peaceful attitude throughout the serial, Lakshman’s tone and speech presenting his aggressiveness to the viewers. Sita has been presented as a meek, docile, submissive shadow of her husband; she speaks in a childlike, soft and polite voice. The stage behavior of the performer has also been taken care of by Ramanand Sagar in his presentation. Ramanand Sagar while producing his magnum opus, the Ramayan resorted to both the forms of stage behavior ‘Lokdharmi’ as well as ‘Natyadharmi’. Hence, Ramanand Sagar complies truly with all the concepts laid down by Bharata in his Natyashastra.

Bharata’s supreme concept of rasa was fulfilled truly and thoroughly in Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan. This is proved and established by the devotion and admiration with which people viewed Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan. Observers quote that more than 80 million people in India watched the weekly telecasts, and the serial had viewership throughout Asia. Since Ramayana is one of the most revered epics in Asia. Hence, the flavour of aesthetic experience can be elucidated in terms of the viewing population (though other reasons cannot be neglected), most of the people viewed Sagar’s Ramayan out of their devotion and bhakti attached to the epic.

Gargi writes when, after the tenth century, the classical Sanskrit language splintered into vernaculars and took root in the form of regional languages, the Sanskrit drama, petrified for many centuries - was replaced by the growing folk theater. It was by means of the folk theatre that the aesthetic concepts of rasa are fulfilled. Old legends, Puranic tales, mythological lore, philosophy, and stories of Sanskrit plays were popularized by the present folk theater. Hence, in this epoch the Ramayana and Ramayana stories circulated in the form of folk theatrical practices.

The folk theatre is different from the classical in many ways. The folk has mass appeal and caters to the lowest common denominator, the ordinary man. Folk art (singing, dancing, acting) crosses the borders of class, religion, and country. The classical often imposes these barriers because of its esoteric nature. The relationship between the classical and the folk theatre is complex. They are not antitheses of each other, they coexist; borrow and lend from each other.

The folk theater inherits many of the classical conventions. The Sutradhara (Stage Manager) of Sanskrit drama appears in vernacular folk forms as the Ranga, the
Bhagavatha, the Vyās, or the Swami. The Buffoon, the counterpart of the classical Vidushaka, is the darling of the folk theatre. He speaks in rustic prose. He has the freedom to connect the past with the present and relate the drama to the contemporary scene. He also acts as liaison between the audience and the players. Some of the folk theaters also use a benediction at the end of the play. They employ music, dance, stylization, verse dialogue, exaggerated make-up, and masks with the same lavishness as the classical drama. Scenes melt into one another. The action continues in spite of changes of locale and scene.

The folk play is performed in a variety of arena stagings: round, parabolic, horizontal, square and multiple-set stages, with different types of gangways and flower-paths. The spectacle, by the telescoping of time and space, speeds the action of the drama. The naked stage achieves spacelessness. The Sutrādhara, like a film editor, builds up a montage of varied dramatic episodes. The same spot is transformed into a different place by a word or an action. The folk actor uses very few props. He creates palaces, rivers forests, battle scenes, and royal courts by the sorcery of his art.

The most crystallized folk theatre forms are: Jatra of Bengal, Nautanki, Ramlila and Raslila of North India, Bhavai of Gujarat, Tamasha of Maharashtra; Therukoothu of Tamil Nadu; Yakshagana of Kerala; and the Chhau mask dramas of Seraikella. These forms give a glimpse of the richness of folk theater and folk culture and the passion of the people for life and drama. All these dance dramas and the forms of folk theatre contain Ramayana themes and enactments from the episodes of the Ramayana.

The existing societal set up created new ways for popularizing the epic and the mythological stories. The religious fervor was now circulated, admired in a new way, the dance drama forms. The religious teachings took a new turn; there occurred a merger between entertainment (in the form of dance) and religious astuteness. A dance form known as ‘kathak’ came into existence. This traditional dance form is based essentially on the vaishnava sect of the sanatan dharma. The word “kathak” is derived from the root word katha, closely but not accurately meaning a story, not in the colloquial sense, but rather narration of mythological stories with the primary purpose of educating people. Mostly, these stories are an expression of the joys and torments of life portrayed through characterization of the virtuous against evil, giving
an understanding of the ideals of living and the philosophy of life cycles, based on the
教 of ancient Hindu scriptures and treatises. The thematic abstracts from the
ancient epics are rich in knowledge of all kinds, including philosophy and spiritual
science. The term “kathak”, therefore, also signifies a male actor-dancer talented in
the art. Teachings took a new style of narration through music and dance, primarily
belonging to the Brahman kathak caste, and involved in the artistic profession of this
story telling dance genre, which presumably derived its name from the caste (Shah 2).

The production along with the usage of various folk traditions existing in India
has also referred to the folk dances or dance forms. The nuances of each emotion were
very vividly described in Sagar’s televiual Ramayan, each ‘bhaav’ even the slightest
of the emotion is conveyed visually and this has been copied from the classical/ folk
dances. The camera focuses on the character’s facial expressions to keep an account
of the slightest change visible on the character’s face. In kathakali for instance, the
gestural discourse is closely related to and is the product of verbal discourse, but it
also retains its autonomy and provides its own channel of communication and the
same happened with the serial Ramayan.

Commenting upon Ramanand Sagar’s reliability on the earlier existing dance
dramas Lutgendorf writes,

though appallingly overstated by contemporary western standards, this
technique is consonant with the mime or abhinay of indigenous
genres like kathakali and bharat natyam, in which the audience is
expected to focus intently on the performer’s facial expressions and
gestures (“Raghu Family” 230).
The narration of the Ramayana took a new turn with the evolution of the ramlila, a new form dealing with drama as well as narration. Ramlila is a performance of the Ramayana epic in the form of a series of episodes that include song, narration, recital and dialogue. Henceforth, with the advent of ramlila the Ramayana narrative tradition continues to exist in a renewed form, the dramatic form accompanied by dance and dialogue.

This popular form of folk theatre emerged in the northern part of India. “Ramlila” literally means, Ram’s sport. Hein discusses “that “sport” represents a technical term in Hindu theology which is full of special meaning. A major tradition of Hindu thought described as “sports” comprises the whole of the divine acts in space or time” (The Ramlila” 279). Dramas called Ramlilas are produced by several different kinds of troupes and are always based upon the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas. They cover the main incidents narrated in Tulsidas’ Ramcharitmanas in a series of performances lasting for many days, and employ an unusual stage technique which combines recitation of the sacred text with simultaneous acting and dialogue. Dramas which Hindi usage consents to call Ramlila are sometimes produced by travelling companies of professional actors. The great Ramlila of north India is a distinct social institution, an annual feature of the dashahra holidays which begin in latter part of September. Unlike the other traditional forms of drama found in Mathura district, the Ramlila is a strictly local production. It is organized, financed, and staged in each town under the supervision of a committee selected. It is the Ramlila which touches the experience of the average person who grows up in north India. The communities differ in the organization of the play. The actors are recruited from the communities in which they perform. Lutgendorf tells us:

In both Katha and Ramlilas, performers enter a consecrated condition. The oral commentator, no less than the young Brahman actor, purifies himself through dietary and devotional practices and performs rituals before ascending the expounder’s dais, where he is garlanded and worshipped as a temporary incarnation of Veda Vyas, the archetypal orator of the sacred lore (“Raghu Family” 229).

Hein tells us that there are special eligibility requirements for the role of Ram, his wife and his brothers. “The actors who represent these divine persons must be
Brahmans by caste, since, when they appear in costume and crown as the very 
embodiments (swarups) of the divinities, even Brahmans will bow down to them and 
worship them.” (“The Ramlila” 279-80). A Brahman boy may begin acting at the age 
of about ten years, when he may take the role of Ram, Bharat, Lakshman or 
Shatrughan, one of the king Dashratha’s children. On attaining the age of eleven or 
twelve, such a boy may be selected for the role of Sita. At thirteen or fourteen, if 
talented and fortunate, he may be entrusted with the part of the grown up Ram. He 
holds this place for three or four years at the most. “When hair appear on his upper 
lip, an inexorable law of the Vaisnava stage demands his career as a swarup come to 
an end. A younger actor must be found to take his place.” (“The Ramlila” 280).

Ramanand Sagar differed from the existing ram-katha performances 
(Ramlilas) as far as the age of the actors and the rituals practiced by them is 
concerned; but he followed them as far as the performing tradition was concerned.
Sequences resembled choreographed dance versions of the ramlila traditions. Many 
sequences or episodes in the Sagar Ramayan represented and resembled the ramlila 
traditions. For example, the dance sequences which adorned the Ramlila stage were 
required in the ramlila performances, accounting to this time being utilized for the 
costume and make up required by the ramlila artists. But in television Ramayan these 
did not hold much of an importance. As in plays in which actors perform against a 
curtain, in some scenes images were superimposed on a still background (something 
very common in the ramlila). As early as the first episode itself; we find different 
saints portrayed against the images of different temples in the background. Many 
scenes incorporated a stylized art of acting and resembled the performative traditions 
of indigenous theatre. While I asked different people about their views regarding the 
serial’s presentation, some people were copiously in favour of the serial’s production 
while there were others who were profusely against it. For instance, Dr. Akshay 
Kumar, a scholar with great interest in Indian mythology described the “war scenes” 
which combined computer simulated graphics with ramlila type depictions of battle: 
“those war scenes they were atrocious. They showed the bows and arrows going – 
which used to take hours to just show the two arrows crossing each other. And it went 
so slow. The scene didn’t come to an end.” Similarly Mrs. Kavita Mahajan, a 
housewife based in Punjab, found the serial “artificial” because it was too “stagey.” 
Yet, the stylized acting and tableaux like sequences were exactly what appealed to her
as well as many other viewers. The serial evoked nostalgia in some viewers for the
tales they had heard and the folk performances they had watched as children. For
instance, Dr. S.K Sood, an intellectual who otherwise disapproved of the serial,
informed me that he enjoyed the “gaudy” sets and melodramatic performances in the
serial because they reminded him of the village ramlilas he had seen as a child. The
serial was also a huge success among the children I interviewed: the escapades of the
war scenes, related with all the special effects of Hindi films, kept them enthralled.

But even the ramlilas have drifted apart from the traditional set up; they have
started becoming diluted and are trying to ape the modern television. Unfortunately,
for survival, the Ramila organisers have started accommodating film-songs, their
parodies, cheap interludes, titillating dances and even violence. True, benefitting from
the services of trained directors, Ramlilas are becoming technically more advanced,
but this gain is at the cost of what used to be the Bhakti-Rasa. Of course, the process
of change is nothing new. In fact, Ramila, as we know it, originated no earlier than
the 16th century while the Ramayana on stage has been there for thousands of years —
possibly since Ram’s own time, when Lav and Kush presented Valmiki’s epic in the
court of Ayodhya. The current Ramlilas follow Valmiki only in a broad way, the
staple base being Ramcharitmanas. Tulsi, too, was not the originator of Ramlila; he
himself refers to Raghunayak Lila and Hanuman Natak in his works. Touring
extensively, he got the chance to pick up ideas from the various Rama theatricals that
he saw here and there. On return, he sowed the seeds of a new tradition in the mind of
a disciple, Megha Bhagat, who started the practice of different performers reciting the
chaupais of Ramcharitmanas. Thereafter, when the Western brand of theatre was
imported by the British there grew in India the vogue of Parsi theatre.

Some Ramlilas are still struggling to retain the devotional core of yester-ages.
The most conspicuous in this context is the Ramila of Ramnagar in which thousands
of sadhus become a part of its month-long recitative proceedings. What happens there
is by no means high theatre. Instead, here we have a dozen Ramayanis reciting the
Ramcharitmanas chorally; when they have recited one chaupai, one of the two
Vyasa prompts the relevant performer(s) to say the same thing in modern prose in a
manner indicated by him. While the Swarupas (representing the divine characters)
must speak in a flat tone, the others may adopt a more dramatic tenor. There being no
lights or sound system, to the thousands of people present there, the performers
remain both invisible and inaudible. Still, the devout audiences feel gratified—having caught a glimpse of their deity. The distinctiveness of Ramlila of Ramnagar lies in its using the environments of several buildings and localities (spread over 6 square miles) as the locales of performed action. In fact, the performance spots are permanently named after the mythical locales — Ayodhya, Janakpur, Lanka, Chitrakut, Panchvati, etc.; actual water features (like tank, lake, etc.) are used symbolically for action related to water bodies like river and sea. Moving from one locale to another, the performers and the audiences walk several miles every day. “A casual visitor may find the ‘shows’ unexciting, untheatrical, even cumbersome and he might declare the make-up of the swarups (studded with stars, sequins, mica, etc.) odd but for the devout every thing is perfect and the visit a blissful pilgrimage” (“Ramlila Still Charms” para 4-5).

All the Ramlilas differ in their style of presentation with a few being modernized and using the latest technological equipment available (like the ballet Ramayana in Delhi produced by Sri Ram Bharatiya Kala Kendra) and the others still clutching to the roots (like the Ramnagar production), something common to most of the Ramlilas is the effusion of Tulsidas’ and the religious fervour. A lot of religiosity and devotion has been attached to the Ramlila, but with changing times even the religious conviction is getting diluted. The viewers witnessing Ramnagar’s ramlila watch the daily proceedings as a religious ceremony whereas for the audience occupying the cushy sofas at the performance halls of Shriram Bhartiya Kala Kendra it is a form of entertainment, the religious feelings are totally abandoned.

**Conviction attached to the Ramlila Shifts to Sagar’s Ramayan**

There occur abundant analogies between the Ramlila and Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan. One amongst them is the religious fervour. Common people held a lot of conviction for the Ramlila; a similar experience was witnessed by Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan as well. I viewed the Ramlila (two major ramlilas enacted in Pathankot), for the first time not just as an entertainment drama but keeping in mind my research. While I had a few discussion sessions with the actors prior to the performance, to my surprise I found out that once the actor is ready with his costume and jewellery he is worshipped by all. All elders, even his parents would touch the feet of the young actor
because it is believed that at this time Ramji’s swarup is in him and he is treated just like an incarnation of Ram.

Below I present a few relevant excerpts of my conversation with the actors while they were preparing for the show backstage:

Priyanka: As the old tradition believes, are the ‘swarups’ really seen as Gods by the people?

Actor: The tradition is no more followed religiously by the general public; but all of us (the performers) adhere to the folk traditions established since ages.

Another actor: Even the crown and the costume are worshipped before they are worn by the actors.

Priyanka: What difference do you find in the behaviour of the audience which comes to view the ramlila performances these days?

Actor: A lot of difference has been experienced in the nature of the audience, in their devotion towards the performance over the years. The audience these days views it just as a form of entertainment and not religious enactment. Earlier people considered viewing the ramlila as the darsan of the God (an incarnation of god). There are many other customs and traditions which are followed in the Ramlila till date and are respected.

As Balwant Gargi mentions in his book on folk theatre, “the actors have to be consecrated boys and in case of adult actors they are supposed to abstain from sex, sleep on the floor, abstain from drinking, meat eating and smoking” (Gargi 94). Most of these customs and rituals are practiced with sincerity in most of the ramlila committees till date. The serial can be seen as the copy of the Ramayan as far as the reverence and respect attached to it is concerned. The Ram Swarups were worshipped in the Ramlila and the same thing occurred once again in the twentieth century when Ramanand Sagar produced the Ramayan; the swarups, Ram and Sita (Arun Govil and Deepika Chiklia, in the serial) were worshipped all over India. Through this Ramayan not only the customs have been reiterated but, even the public response to the serial is similar to the Ramlila. The way the Ramlila actors were treated like gods, a similar welcome was given to Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan and its actors.
The ram-katha performing traditions now travelled throughout India. In most of the parts of India special grounds were built (usually in or around the temple premises) for the performance of the ram-katha, popularly known as ramlila. These grounds still maintain their names as ‘Ramlila Maidans’. Therefore, Ramlila became a mega event; with special ramlila grounds constructed in every city. In every city we can find grounds used just for the purpose of ramlila stagings. These were exclusively used for the presentation of Ramlila in the months of September-October. The ramlila production in every city/village was watched with great pomp, show and in a festive mood.

As regards the new, technologically advanced form of ramlila, ‘Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra’ is the first name to be mentioned. ‘Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, Delhi’ started its production of the ramlila in 1957 which is today known as Ram – a three hour ballet on Ramayana which is being transformed over the years. For more than five decades Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra has been promoting and producing the Ramayana story and nurturing India’s finest traditions in dance, music and folk theatre. The impact of this ramlila was so grand that it was the first one to be televised and telecast by Doordarshan and BBC. Since then it has been yearly telecast on the national television (DD). Due to the overwhelming popularity of Ram’s story, another ramkatha choreographed by Yogesunder Desai was telecast in the late 1950s on the Doordarshan. Ramanand Sagar cashed on these upcoming ventures and produced a teleserial on the Ramayana story in a fashion almost similar to the ramlila. On analyzing Sagar’s Ramayan we find that the entire serial is almost embedded in the ramlila tradition. There are many similarities between ramlila and the television Ramayan.

Reciting of the Ramayana (in the Ramlila) picked up by Ramanand Sagar

In every ramlila presentation the Ramcharitmanas is heard being sung in the background. A few ‘dohas’ are recited/narrated from the Ramcharitmanas which are then enacted by the actors and explained in their local tongues. The same style has been picked up by Ramanand Sagar as well but with a different raison d’etre.

The Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas is the subject matter of the Ramlila. The function of ramlila is to mediate the words and meaning of this Ramayana to the Hindu public through musical recitation of the text and through acting which makes
the meaning of the recited text clear and vivid. In technique, the Ramlila harmonizes the requirements of cantillation with that of drama. In the Ramlila production the Ramayana recitation has the priority and determines the structure of the play (sage). The central person in all the stage proceedings is the chanting pandit. From a prominent vantage point on or near the stage, he sings out to audience and the actors, a line of the sacred text. Sometimes he sings all the verses without omission for several pages together; then he may skip over many pages, pick out a verse or two here and there to serve as a bridge for the narrative, and pass on to a distant episode that has been selected for intensive dramatization. If an undramatic passage of some length fell unavoidably in the middle of an evening’s program, the singers proceeded through it in subdued voice while the audience kept pleasantly amused by a dance or farcical interlude (Hein, “The Ramlila” 281).

The same thing was repeated by Ramanand Sagar as well but the reason behind it was quite different. Ramanand Sagar did this to cater to different cultures, make his presentation acceptable to the present society and meet the expectations of people from the televised epic. In Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan we find song sequences; these have been directly picked up from the traditional drama. Ramanand Sagar knew that he was catering to a public accustomed to the nautanki and street theatre tradition in India and therefore tried to make the Ramayan (television) resemble the traditional theatre as much as possible.

Comparing Sagar’s Ramayan to Ramlila

Ramnagar Ramlila Day 1

ACTION:

Ravan is born, subdues the world. The Gods assemble and Brahma prays to Vishnu to save them. Brahma addresses Vishnu from one high tower and Vishnu answers from an even higher one, with the audience in between: “For your sake I will take on the form of a human. I will rid the earth of its burden.” Then the scene shifts to a large tank (artificial lake) on which floats Vishnu reclining on the 1000 headed serpent Ananta (endless) who floats on the ocean of milk. This is one of the best known of Hindu icons representing the universe in its unmanifest state (Schechner and Hess, “The Ramlila of Ramnagar” 55).
Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan Scene I

ACTION:

We find a very similar telecast in the television Ramayan as well. First, all the Gods reach for Brahma who finally goes to Vishnu and prays to the saviour to save them from Ravan’s ruthlessness. On the television screen we find Brahma and other Gods fleeting in the sky (a hint towards the special effects; heightening the divinity of the gods) and lord Vishnu resting on the ‘ananta naag’ (1000 headed serpent) and Lakshmi sitting besides him. The only difference is that instead of towers (as seen in Ramnagar ramlila) we can see Brahma floating in the sky, seated on a lotus flower (thanks to television and its special effects). Hence, the basic set up for the scene remains similar in all the respects.

A scene from Ramanand Sagar Ramayan

The Ahalya episode

Ramnagar Ramlila DAY 3:

The sage Vishvamitra comes to Ayodhya and asks Dashrath to send Ram and Lakshman with him so that they can go into the forest and rid it of demons who have been destroying the sacrifices of the rishis. Dashrath is scared that his little boys will be killed. Vishwamitra reminds the king that Ram is no ordinary boy. The princes and the sage set out into the forest, followed by the audiences; demons are killed, a woman who was turned stone by a curse is released (Schechner and Hess, “The Ramlila of Ramnagar” 55).
Above mentioned is the episode of the stone woman Ahalya released from her curse as presented in the traditional and authentic Ramnagar Ramlila. Even other Ramlilas do not pay much attention to the presentation of this story. Hence, the ramlila performers give a slight mention of the cursed Ahalya and the pious sage Gautam. In Tulsidas’ Ramcharitmanas there is very little mention of Ahalya, whereas the story of Ahalya is mentioned in varying contrasts in the different versions of the Ramayana. Following the pattern laid by Tulsidas, the local ramlilas (since they are based on Ramcharitmanas) also make a little mention of the episode and it is almost done away with very quickly, so does Ramanand Sagar.

Ramanand Sagar Ramayan

In Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan we find a Tulsi plant sprouted from a huge rock which then turns into a beautiful maiden, Ahalya. The episode questions the widely celebrated authenticity of the serial. This kind of description is not found in any of the proclaimed Ramayanas. Ahalya story is variedly written in different versions of the existing Ramayanas. Describing in detail the Ahalya story in various versions of the Ramayana, below are given texts from the Valmiki and Kamban Ramayana.

The Ahalya Episode: Valmiki

‘men pursuing their desire do not wait
For the proper season, O you who
have a perfect body. Making love
with you: that’s what I want.
That waist of yours is lovely.’
She knew it was Indra of the Thousand Eyes
in the guise of the sage. Yet she,
wrong headed woman, made up her mind,
excited, curious about the king
of the gods.
And then, her inner being satisfied,
she said to the god, ‘I’m satisfied, king
of the gods. Go quickly from here.'
O giver of honor, lover, protect
Yourself and me.’

Thus after making love, he came out
of the hut made of leaves.
And, O Rama, as he hurried away,
Nervous about Gautama and flustered,
He caught sight of Gautama coming in,
The great sage, unassailable
By gods and antigods,

Seeing him, the king of gods was
terror struck, his face drained of color.
The sage, facing Thousand Eyes now dressed
as the sage, the one rich in virtue
and the other with none,
spoke to him in anger: ‘You took my form,
you fool, and did this that should never
be done. Therefore you will lose your testicles.’

At once, they fell to the ground, they fell
even as the sage spoke
his words in anger to Thousand Eyes.

Having cursed Indra, he then cursed
Ahalya: ‘You, will dwell here
Many thousand years, eating the air,
Without food, rolling in ash,
and burning invisible to all creatures.
When Rama, unassailable son
of Dasaratha, comes to this terrible
wilderness, you will become pure,
you woman of no virtue,
you will be cleansed of lust and confusion (Richman, Many Ramayanas 25-27).

The Ahalya Episode: Kampan

Ram asks Viswamitra why this lovely woman had been turned to stone. Viswamitra replies to Ram’s query (the story telling tradition is also hinted, while we go through this style of narration):

Listen. Once Indra, Lord of the Diamond Axe, waited on the absence of Gautama, a sage all spirit, meaning to reach out for the lovely breast of doe-eyed Ahalya, his wife. (545-551)

wearing the exact body of Gautama whose heart knew no falsehoods. Sneaking in, he joined Ahalya; coupled, they drank deep of the clear new wine of first-night weddings; and she knew. Yet unable to put aside what was not hers, she dallied in her joy, but the sage did not tarry, he came back, a very Siva with three eyes in his head. Gautama, who used no arrows from bows, could use more inescapable powers of curse and blessings. When he arrived, Ahalya stood there,
stunned, bearing the shame of a deed that will not end in this endless world.

Indra shook in terror, started to move away in the likeness of a cat. Eyes dropping fire, Gautama saw what was done, and his words flew like the burning arrows at your hand:

‘May you be covered by the vaginas of a thousand women!’

In the twinkle of an eye they came and covered him. Covered with shame, laughing stock of the world, Indra left.

The sage turned to his tender wife and cursed:

‘O bought woman! May you turn to stone!’ and she fell at once a rough thing of black rock. (551-556)

(Richman, Many Ramayanas 29-30).

The above given text from two different versions sums up the variation between the two tellings; by the great sages Valmiki and Kamban. In Valmiki’s text Indra looses his testicles whereas in Kamban’s Ramayana Indra is shown to have developed hundreds of vaginas over his body in order to teach the world and Indra himself a lesson. Not much attention is paid to ‘Ahalya episode’ in Ramanand Sagar’s
Ramayan, though this incident has been explicitly dealt with in Valmiki, Kamban and a few other popular versions of the epic. The reason for this can be attributed to Ramcharitamanas and the Ramlila where there is only a slight mention of the Ahalya incident. Following the Ramlila trend the episode is seen almost missing in Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan as well, with just a slight mention of the episode. However, Sagar has presented the episode in a very different manner, we find the sacred Tulsi plant at that spot instead of the cursed stone woman. This is quite paradoxical – showing a Tulsi plant, a sacred plant (revered by Hindus) representing the stone woman Ahalya (unpious) who is disloyal to her husband. Therefore, the short and quick presentation of this episode though altered by Sagar, confirms his loyalty towards following the Ramlila traditions.

**Interpolations to the Story**

The bulky editions of the Ramecaritamanas used by the pandits contain a good deal of material which was not written by Tulsi Das. Printed for religious rather than scholarly use, they include a number of interpolated stories (ksepak) which one cannot find in critically edited editions. These interpolations are a result of the regional and folk renderings of the epic. The roots from where these interpolations originated cannot be traced but these must be the folk tellings which have formed a part of the prevalent Ramayana story. One such interpolation elaborates into an episode, the episode of Shabari, the jungle woman who offered Ram her best hospitality. Shabari, the tribal woman offered wild fruit to both the brothers, ripe and sweet berries were selected by Shabari after tasting. Lakshman didn’t like having berries which had already been tasted by this jungle woman whereas Ram (the lord) enjoyed his devotee’s true love in the form of the berries. Hein discusses about another interpolation is the story of the Sati (Sulocana), the wife of Meghnad, and the extended episode of Ahiravan carrying off Ram and Lakshaman into Patala, and the beloved passages in which Hanuman proves by tearing open his chest that the name of Ram is written on his heart. These interpolations provide for several of the most popular episodes of the ramlila performances (“The Ramlila” 282). The occasion of the coronation of Ram on the royal throne (Rajgaddi) is another interpolation. After fourteen years of exile, Ram is seated at last upon his rightful throne, amidst the rejoicing people of Ayodhya. Brahmans chant the Vedas before their sovereign and
depart with rich rewards. Brahma and Shiva pay their respects and take their Leave. Farewells are being exchanged, and Ram is thanking his helpers and allies of the late war and dismissing them with gifts (Hein “The Ramlila” 284).

The interpolated story of Hanuman tearing his chest and showing the name of Ram written on his heart to all the people in the gathering makes a popular episode in most of the Ramlilas and even the television Ramayan. Below are presented excerpts from the recording:

Bystander: O look! Why is Hanuman here breaking this necklace of gems in this way?

_Chant 12_
They began to say, each in his own mind,
“To one who has no fitness
Please do not give such a thing,
or see the same sad state of affairs!”
Then some king cried out,
“What are you doing, Hanuman?
Why are you breaking the necklace—
the beautiful jewels—O Wise One?”

_Chant 13_
Hearing the speech, the Son of the Wind said,
“I am looking for the joy-giving name of Ram.
The Name is not to be seen in this;
that is why I am breaking it, O brother.”

_Chant 14_
Someone said, “One does not hear anywhere
that the name of Ram is in all things!”

_Chant 15_
Said the Son of the Wind, “What hasn’t the Name on it,
isn’t of any use at all.”
Chant 16
The same person said, “Listen, O Abode of Strength! does the name of Ram exist in your body?”

Chant 17
Hearing the speech, the Son of the Wind said, “Certainly Hanuman’s noble name is in my body!”

Chant 18
Having spoken thus, the ape tore open his own heart. On every hair’s breath were the infinite names of the Lord. Seeing the name of Ram stamped everywhere, all became astonished at Hanuman’s heart. There was a rain of flowers, shouts of “Victory!” in the sky. Raghunath gazed with gracious glance. Hanuman’s body became as hard as the thunderbolt again. At once the Lord rose up; With his body a-tingle and tears in his eyes he took Hanuman to his heart (Hein, “The Ramlila” 284-87).

In the serial Ramayan Ramanand Sagar has also presented the viewers with a similar episode which is not a part of any of the authentic Ramayanas. And this happens to be one of the most popular episodes in the entire serial. We find the actor (Dara Singh, who plays Hanuman in the serial) tearing apart his chest and showcasing the picture of Ram and Sita in his heart. Below is given a pictograph of the same.
Another interpolation suggested by Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayan* is Hanuman writing Ram’s name on the stones of the monkey-bridge which is not told by *Tulsidas* or any other popular *Ramayana*. Nal and Neel, the architects or the engineers of that era were known to have a divine power of making anything (even a huge boulder) float on water. The episode of Nal and Neel constructing a bridge over the sea to Lanka for the monkey army to cross it has been transformed by Ramanand Sagar. The variation is added to it by showing Hanuman writing the name of Ram on the stones. This is an interpolation added to the existing story by Ramanand Sagar.

The presence of all the accepted changes (interpolations) in Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayan* which were otherwise not a part of the Valmiki or Tulsidas’ *Ramayana* (the major sources Sagar borrowed from) confirm the influence of the folk tellings and the *Ramlila* on this television series of the *Ramayan*. It was not only by means of interpolations to the story that the folk theatre influenced Sagar’s re-telling of the epic. The folk theatre also contributed to the presentation of the story in diverse ways. The facial expressions, the style, the classical dances, costume and make-up used by Sagar all emulate the folk theatre in one way or another. If closely noticed, the *bhaav*, the expressions on the face of Sagar’s Ravan and Ram have a distinct resemblance to those of the theatrical actors.

Below are given the pictures of Arvind Trivedi and Arun Govil, Ravan and Ram of the serial respectively and below these pictures are shown photos of the actors.
performing as the Rakshas (Devil) and the Dev (God) in the folk theatre. The similarity in these two sets of artists might seem a remote one with no similarity in costume and make up which covers the face of the performers in folk theatre. But, if we try to make a comparison of the expressions visible on their face we find a lot of similarity. The artists of both the pictographs appear almost similar; the facial expressions, the ‘bhaav’ on their visage, the eye movement all have something in common.

In the above pictures the faces of the Folk Theatre actors are painted very meticulously; the real face is not visible at all. The Rakshas, if carefully noticed is painted with black colour whereas the God is painted in green. On close examination
of the Rakshas we find a red strip painted in the form of a band on the forehead, eyebrows elevated and three lines appearing on the central part of the forehead. In addition, he has furious eyes and the cheeks are painted with a red paint in the shape of a moustache. If contrasted, these facial expressions which form a part of the theatre artist’s make-up are present in the television Rakshas (Ravan) as well. Arvind Trivedi (playing as the Rakshas - Ravan) appears similar to the Rakshas of the folk theatre. The folk theatre actor has attained this look with make-up, whereas the television actor manages to resemble the folk theatre artist without make-up itself. The infuriated look in the eyes, eyebrows elevated in rage, three lines on the forehead and a thick moustache: almost every expression on his face seems to resemble the folk theatre artist with make-up. Similarly, if the Dev of the folk theatre is contrasted to television’s Dev one witnesses a similar scenario. The calm expression on the face and the eyes, a ‘tilak’ adorning the forehead, compassion in the eyes and a faint smile on the lips; everything adds to give that perfect expression of grace on the lord’s face. The above given description is applicable to both the pictures – the folk theatre artist (Dev) and the television artist (Ram, Arun Govil) which hints at the folk theatre importations in the making of this legendary Ramayana telling.

A few of the above mentioned interpolations have been a part of the Indian folklore and the regional tellings of the epic: whereas, there are others which have been suggested by the popular iconography used in Calendars or supplementary God Posters found in almost every north Indian house. There have been some variations followed by Sagar which were proposed by the ‘Amar Chitra Katha’, the popular children’s book series, while there are still others advocated by the bollywood. There have been many scenes, episodes which are nowhere present in the widely acclaimed authentic Ramayana texts but are present in the screening and these have been picked up from the mythological cinema. The interpolations and styles of presentation imitated from all the above mentioned sources are discussed in detail in the following pages. To start with, the interpolations copied from the mythological films and the so called ‘bollywoodisation’ of Sagar’s Ramayan have been discussed.
MYTHOLOGICAL FILMS

The mythological films have been a popular genre in the Indian cinema since early years of the 20th century. By means of these religious films which formed a substantial segment of Indian cinematographic culture the religious minded Indians were lured by the filmmakers. These films were easily accommodated in the crazy salad of the popular genre called the ‘social films’. As can be easily observed Ramanand Sagar has been greatly influenced by this genre; it was the early black and white cinema which provided the preliminary aid of assistance required by Ramanand Sagar in the formation of this epic serial. Many movies were produced on the Ramayana theme. Some movies have as less as a single Ramayana episode forming the plot for the entire movie. A few of the popular movies based on the Ramayana are: Sampoorna Ramayana by Babubhai Mistry, Ram Rajya by Vijaya Bhatt, Lanka Dahan by Dadasaheb Phalke, Lav Kush by Homi Wadia, Ram Bharat Milap by Ratan Mohan, etc. All these films aimed at the bhakti-ras and were portrayed in a highly devotional element.

Talking of interpolations, the mythological films have been a major source of suggesting interpolations to Ramanand Sagar’s epic. An interpolation introduced in the epic story by Ramanand Sagar is queen Kaikeyi’s behaviour. During the emotional assembly scene, the camera repeatedly scans the queens’ faces as they listen to Bharat, Ram, and Vashishtha debate the terms of the exile, until at last, unable to restrain herself, Kaikeyi speaks up – as she never does in Valmiki or Tulsi – to declare publicly her own willingness to withdraw the boons (Episode 24). This is an interpolation introduced in the Ramayana story by Ramanand Sagar. Kaikeyi withdrawing the boons was never heard of in any of the versions of the Ramayana (Lutgendorf, “Raghu Family” 235).

The above interpolated episode is found in the movie Ram Bharat Milap by Ratan Mohan. When Bharat accompanied by the gurus, ministers and all the three mothers reaches the forest and pleads Ram to return to Ayodhya Kaikeyi speaks of withdrawing her boons. In the film on finding Bharat and Ram not being able to reconcile she intervenes by saying that, ‘Ram went on exile due to the promise given to me by the king; it all happened due to my boons and I withdraw the boons.’ Sagar executes the episode almost in a similar manner where Kaikeyi speaks:
Ram... I am not worthy of it... But I beg your forgiveness before everyone today. Forgive me, Ram...... The late king had granted me two boons. He was promise bound to me. Today, before these elders I rescind the promises I had taken from the king. And I release you all from those promises (Episode 24).

If carefully noticed in Sagar’s *Ramayan* we find Ram bowing to Kaikeyi first and then the other two mothers (Episode 24). The similar kind of behaviour was found in the mythological film *Ram-Bharat Milap*. In this film it is only Sita who can be seen bowing to all the three mothers when they come to the forest. Sita bows to Kaikeyi first followed by Sumitra and Kaushalya. Whereas when Ram returns back to Ayodhya after the exile (Episode 78) he leaves behind Kaushalya and Sumitra in a row and bows to Kaikeyi first.

Another interpolation suggested by the Episode 53 of Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayan* is Hanuman writing Ram’s name on the stones of the monkey-bridge. Sagar got the cue for this episode from the popular Bollywood mythologicals. In one of the mythological films *Lav-Kush* by Homi Wadia, we find the monkey army throwing huge boulders to form a bridge to cross the sea; all these rocks had Ram’s name written on them. Sagar must have been inspired by this presentation style which would install more devotion and reverence for the lord in the minds of the viewers. The episode has been similarly crafted by Sagar in his serial format of Ram’s story. To show the contrast among both the episodes I have presented below pictures from both the screenings: ‘Lav-Kush’, the mythological film and Ramanand Sagar’s tele-series.

*A picture from Lav-Kush*  
*A picture from Sagar’s Ramayan*
These types of episodes have been added to the tale by Ramanand Sagar after regular intervals and they serve as a means of increasing the devotional vein of the series. Sagar’s main aim behind this screening was the revival of bhakti in the minds of the Indian public.

The scene when the monkey god Hanuman hovers over the burning Lanka has been crafted meticulously by Ramanand Sagar and is exemplary of his craft of direction. This scene also seeks inspiration from the mythological movies. The execution of this scene matches the one used by the religious films. The entire style and structure seems analogous to the mythological films once ruling the Indian cinema.

The style of architecture and sets used to depict the tale of Ram-Sita by Ramanand Sagar also seems to be an imitation of the religious cinema. The sets used for Sita’s Swayamvara are carried out similarly as done in the Hindi mythological films. Below we can see pictures from a mythological movie showing Raja Janak’s court during Sita’s Swayamvara, Raja’s palace, the set and the architecture shown all resemble the one used by Ramanand Sagar. These pictures have been taken from the film- Lav-Kush.
Ram and Sita’s costumes and the entire get up (in Sagar’s Ramayan) are also an imitation of these movies. Though a few of these movies show Ram differently there are still others which depict both the principal characters dressed in the style later picked up by Ramanand Sagar. Those lacy, gaudy and layered costumes, the headgear, armlets, waistband, the kundal and strings of pearls hanging through the neck, all these formed an exemplary format of costume for the gods and was emulated by most of the future mythology based television tellings.

Ramanand Sagar even borrowed the costumes used by Ram-Sita during exile. Below are pictures from a mythological movie, showing Ram and Sita during exile.

The above pictures almost form a model for the depiction of Ram and Sita by future mythology based screenings. Hence, the mythological films form an essential base for Ramanand Sagar’s telecasted version of the Ramayana.
CALENDAR ART

The calendar art, the posters, icons and images present around us (which existed prior to the tele-serial Ramayan) is another major reason accounting for the serial’s popularity. These posters and pictures contribute not only towards the popularity of the serial but also its acceptance in our society. In the form of posters and calendars hung in almost every house and every shop (rich or poor) these images had already been imbibed by the Indian public. Hence, accepting Ram heavily bedecked with jewellery, in a silken dhoti and the golden crown with studded gems was not at all difficult. Similarly, Sita shown adorned with gems and jewels from head to toe, in brightly coloured costume was also already fixed in the minds of people prior to the screening of the serial. The prevalent tradition of calendars and posters influenced Sagar’s Ramayan heavily. The calendars and posters were an integral and important way of circulating the religious art.

I have tried to present a few pictures from the calendar art prevalent in India. These calendars present the glimpses of our mythology and are significantly influenced by the regional tellings of their respective areas. Consequently, all the calendars are portrayed in a different manner hinting at the local flavour of the particular area. These calendars represent different scenes and incidents of the Ramayana and are descriptive in their style of presentation.
The calendar shown above is steeped in mythology and compares favourably with most of the prevalent beliefs about our epical heroes. This typical specimen of calendar art depicting the ‘Ram Darbar’ subtly follows the concepts laid out in the well accepted mythology of the land. It presents the holy trinity – Brahma, Vishnu (incarnated as Ram) and Mahesh. The calendar also shows saint Narad the messenger of the Gods who is supposed to travel in the three worlds and have first hand knowledge of all the major happenings.
Ramayana’s heroic characters Ram and Sita are shown seated on a heavily ornated throne supposedly made of gold and inlaid with jewels. The throne has a predominantly depicted emblem of the Sun God, showing the lineage of the epical hero. The calendar is a visual depiction of the artist’s understanding of the Ram Darbar as described in the written version of the Ramayana. Simply put, the calendar artists through the ages have been pictorially presenting the scenes described (narratively) in the various (written) versions of the Ramayana. In other words, the Calendar Art is the pictorial presentation of the written word. The calendar art held much sway and influenced the public perception of popular religious iconography. The calendars served as religious – Godly – icons and idols almost in every household. Each shopkeeper would start his day with an ‘agarbatti-dhoop’ (incense stick) lit in front of one of the popularly established Calendar or the Poster Gods.

The makers of the television version sought not to question the prevailing iconographical trends and virtually played to the gallery by faithfully following the calendar art. The basic set up of the Ram-Darbar (in Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan) remains the same with a heavily adorned throne, bedecked with the emblem of Sun God prominently displayed in the background. The Ramayan series also shows Hanuman in a position almost similar to the one shown in the above calendar. The positioning of the three brothers around the main character is also exactly same with one of the brothers standing towards the right and the other two towards the left of the throne. The appearance of Brahma has been more or less imitated, showing a three-headed figure, all the three heads adorned with ‘mukut’ and the white flowing beard.

Focusing on Ram-Sita, and their costumes Ram is shown in a dhoti, with a waist band adorning the waist, an ‘angavastram’ placed at the shoulder curving in the other arm, ‘kundal’ in the ears, pearls and other jewels adorning the bare chest. Sita though is differently portrayed by Ramanand Sagar but keeping aside the dress (sari-blouse worn), the collective effect of the presentation of Sita remains similar as shown in the calendar. The jewellery, the waist band, hair accessories etc. everything seems emulated. Moving towards Hanuman, his ‘apelike’ form adorned with a headgear, a small piece of cloth covering the lower limbs, an angavastram and the tail protruding from waist band of the dhoti, everything has been precisely and accurately imitated by Ramanand Sagar. The Monkey God – Hanuman created by Ramanand Sagar appears like a replica of the calendar photos. Henceforth, the entire calendar seems to act as a
base for Ramanand Sagar’s presentation of the *Ramayan*, with a few characters being the replicas of the ones shown in the calendar while for the others the basic mode of presentation has been copied even if the finished form of presentation differs from the shown calendar.

Another presentation of ‘Ram-Darbar’ in the form of a Calendar is the picture given below. In contrast to the earlier depiction this one shows an indoor scene with Ram, Lakshman, Sita and Hanuman in the picture. In this calendar even the architectural pattern of the royal court can be observed and if compared and contrasted the carvings, the sculptures, the Sun emblem hinting at the royal ‘Suryavansham’ lineage are noticeably similar to Sagar’s presentation of the *Ramayan.*
The dresses adorning the Gods are almost similar to the ones depicted in the earlier specimens of calendar art. The beautifully adorned *mukuts*, the waist bands, the armlets, the precious stone studded jewellery everything is identical to the first picture (of calendar art shown) as well as to Ramanand Sagar’s dresses and presentation of characters. The only difference lies in the ‘angavastram’ being absent in all the three male Gods (Ram-Lakshman-Hanuman) shown in the picture.

The picture shown below depicts the ‘Swayamvara’ episode, a ritual in which Sita chooses to marry lord Ram after he successfully lifts and breaks the ancient bow of Shiva. This calendar pictograph inspires a lot of details shown in the episode of the televised version.

*A calendar showing Ram-Sita vivah*
The lavishly done-up, pillared hall of the palace appearing prominently in the tele-serial seems to be derived directly from the above shown calendar. The entire scene looks almost identical with Janak, Vishvamitra, Lakshman and Sita’s consorts seen in the background. The wheeled contraption on which Shiva’s ancient bow lies can be spotted in Sagar’s Ramayan as well and the basic configuration is similar in both the representations.

The costumes of the hero and the heroine, used in the Sagar Ramayan seem to be almost similar to the ones shown in the calendar. The dress worn by Sita (Sagar’s) is of special significance as it seems almost a copy of the one in the calendar. Sita is shown in a short blouse with her belly prominently visible, a ‘lehanga’ worn in the form of a dhoti with a cloth tied at the upper part near the waist. The dupatta or the head-scarf worn by Sita is a transparent one showing her nude body.

Below can be seen another specimen of calendar artist’s art depicting the Ahalya (the unassailable sage Gautam’s wife) katha; the artist has been very successfully able to narrate the entire episode with his brush. The picture shows princes – Ram, Lakshman, sage Vishvamitra and the beautiful Ahalya bowing to them. It is so much similar to the style and presentation used by Ramanand Sagar that the picture looks like a scene extracted from the Sagar Ramayan.
Therefore, one can surely conclude that Sagar’s borrowed extensively from the calendar art prevalent in India. The pictographs depicted in the calendar art functioned as perfect samples later used by Ramanand Sagar for the creation of a legendary history on television.

COMICS

Comics are another medium of communication which have enjoyed wide popularity amongst the Indian public (especially children). The comic books comprise mythological, historical facts (as done by Amar Chitra Katha), cartoon strips, hilarious themes and amusing children stories. Children throughout India use many tricks to read the comic books instead of studying the prescribed course materials. Kids enjoying one of the comic books slipped into their history books during school hours are nothing new. Among these widely popular comics were the Amar Chitra Katha (illustrated classic stories).

Amar Chitra Katha is a collection of illustrated classics that retell stories from the Indian mythology, history, folktales and legends through the fascinating medium of comics. Through a masterful blend of commentary, dialogue and illustration, Amar Chitra Katha presents complex historical myths, facts and intricate mythology in a format that would appeal to the children. These comics serve not only as a means of entertainment, but also introduce us to the cultural heritage of India.

Amar Chitra Katha (ACK), the comic books which provide an insight into the great cultural heritage of India has an immense bearing on the making of the serial Ramayan by Ramanand Sagar. A major portion of iconography used by Amar Chitra Katha has been adopted and used in the most effective manner by Ramanand Sagar in his presentation of the Ramayan story. If both the forms of presentation of the Ramayana are examined, we feel that the presentation which took place in the 1980s (the Sagar Ramayan) was almost an imitation of the Amar Chitra Katha. Taking one illustration in this category is Ramanand Sagar’s presentation of all living creatures more or less assimilated into the human species. Hanuman, as we have seen, theoretically has an “apelike” form, not only Hanuman but all the other chief monkeys as well are virtually speaking, human beings with statuesque limbs, tall, fair Caucasian flesh coloured hairless bodies, slightly convex faces and tails that stick out.
at unobtrusive angles from the waist bands of their *dhotis*. Female monkeys look even more human, with no tails at all.

BEFORE HANUMAN SET OUT, RAMA GAVE HIM A RING. IF ANVDNE CAN FIND SITA IT IS YOU, HANUMAN. TAKE THIS RING! IT WILL BE A SIGN TO HER THAT YOU ARE MY HANUMAN WENT SOUTHWARDS ACCOMPANIED BY ANGARA, THE CROWN PRINCE OF KISHKINDHA, JAMBAWAN, THE AGED AND WISE BEAR; AND MONKEYS OF GREAT STRENGTH.

*A picture from Amar Chitra Katha (ACK)*

The above picture depicts monkeys in their normal, basic human forms. In the picture we can see monkeys walking, swimming, dressed and talking like ordinary human beings. Jambawant (the old, wise bear) can also be spotted walking and dressed like human beings in the picture. In the closet we can observe Hanuman, lord Ram’s devotee and the unassailable monkey God; his dress and the ornaments are noticeable and he is human like in form and shape. It is not only monkeys who seem to be in basic human form but the demonic *Rakshasas* also appear in the same form. The *Rakshasas* tend to be large, stout, crude looking, and hairy, ugly humans, often potbellied, sometimes with small fangs and wearing lion fur clothes. The *rakshasis* are similar, except that they frequently transmute themselves into beautiful and entirely human-looking women. Not only this all the other typical *Rakshasas* like Taaraka, the *Rakshasas* present in the sea, encountered by Hanuman on his way to Lanka, all have emulated the basic human like form.
If we closely examine the scenes portrayed in the above picture we find no striking contrasts in the ‘rakshasis’ (demoness’) and Sita (goddess) as far as the basic form is concerned, they are both presented in the humanoid form. The same stylization has been picked up by Ramanand Sagar; even in the television Ramayan we find rakshasis represented in human form. They look like ugly humans with protruding teeth, stout body structure, untidy – unkept hair, ill-shaped beads forming the necklace and the ear-rings.

The picture shown towards the right is another specimen of the rakshasis being portrayed in human form. This picture shows the demoness Taaraka who is identical to the other rakshasis, has protruding fang like teeth, bushy eyebrows and ugly looking ornaments but still resembles human form except her giantly stature. Ram, Lakshman and Vishwamitra appear as mere insects in comparison to the demoness as can be seen in the pictures given ahead.

There are two pictures given below the left one taken from Amar Chitra Katha and the right from Sagar Ramayan, both of them are identical in their presentation and hence one can rationally say that Sagar followed the presentation style used by Amar Chitra Katha which was already established in the minds of the general public.
In the Amar Chitra Katha, the nature Gods like “ocean” and “mountain” are also presented in the humanoid form. The Ocean turns out to have emerged from the waves, the head of the white haired gentleman with a curly moustache. The presentation of mountain God as done in Amar Chitra Katha and Sagar Ramayan has been shown below. In both the pictures we find an old man’s visage emerging out of the mountain structure.

The pictures given below serve as an example of the humanoid form of presentation as depicted by Sagar and before the Sagar Ramayan, the Amar Chitra Katha. The Gods: Agnee (fire), Samudra/Jal (water) all are depicted bearing a human form and dressed like human beings. Below are given pictures of agnee God
emerging from fire in both the presentations – Ramanand Sagar’s and Amar Chitra Katha.

We observe humanoid characters similar to the comic appearance in Sagar’s *Ramayan* as well; wherein as mentioned above the ocean god, the fire god, or even amongst the other clan- the monkeys or the clan of demons- Ravan (the demon king), Kumbhakaran (the giant beloved brother of the demon king), all are shown in a human garb. On comparatively studying the scene, as provided below it can be easily concluded that Sagar has tried to mimic the long established tradition of Amar Chitra Katha.

Ravan, with his ten heads so firmly established in tradition, presents a special case. The demon king with ten-heads was conventionally fixed in the minds of people; therefore it was inevitable for the Sagars to show Ravan with his ten heads for a major period in the serial. On the next page is presented a photo from the Illustrated Classics of India which shows Ravan, the ten-headed demon progressing towards the Ashok Vatika.
A few more episodes hinting at the extraordinary import of the existing style of production and staging in Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan are given below. In the next picture, we can witness Ravan’s court as depicted in Amar Chitra Katha; hardly any difference can be spotted between the courts of Ram and Ravan, the lord and the demon. The way the court is conducted and the style of the court and the courtiers everything seems similar to lord Ram’s court.
The style of presentation used by Ramanand Sagar resembles the Amar Chitra \textit{Katha} (Illustrated Classics from India) in its totality. If one goes through one of those colourful children’s books/magazines we find that the entire set-up, style of dressing, architecture, and presentation has been imitated by Ramanand Sagar without many modifications.

Below are presented the photos that give us a glimpse of the iconography used in both (Amar Chitra \textit{Katha} and Ramanand Sagar) the presentations of the \textit{Ramayana}. On critically analyzing both the presentations one can say that the Amar Chitra \textit{Katha} formed more than three-fourths of the fundamental framework required by Ramanand Sagar.
In the above pictures we can see the Shiva’s bow on breaking which Sita got married to Ram. The contraption used for placing the bow in Sagar’s Ramayan reminds us not only of the transporter used in Amar Chitra Katha but also of the calendar art picture (iii), the one showing Ram-Sita vivah (the calendar art pictograph has already been discussed in previous pages).

The mesmerizing presentation in Sagar’s Ramayan where the demon seizes Hanuman’s shadow while he flies towards Lanka (Ravan’s kingdom) also seems to have derived its style from the Amar Chitra Katha. Below are given pictures both from the Sagar Ramayan and the Amar Chitra Katha to provide an assessment of both the presentation styles.

In the pictures given below we find Hanuman entering the demon’s mouth bearing a minute form. A better example of Ramanand Sagar mimicking the Amar Chitra Katha is rare to be found.
Both the pictures shown are approximately similar; the impressive style of presentation used by the Sagars has been copied from the Amar Chitra Katha. The only difference lies in one being a television presentation while the other is a picture printed in the comic Amar Chitra Katha; one has real human beings as Ram and Lakshman and a more realistic style of presentation while the other is in the picture format. The same goes for the pictures given below.

The presentation of the Rakshas Kabandha in Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan also seems to be a carbon copy of Amar Chitra Katha style. The above pictures show the Rakshas with his long arms. The princes appear to have a minute structure in comparison to his huge form and long arms. The Rakshas is in the form of a huge round body with an eye located in the centre and teeth visible below the eye. Sagar’s presentation looks like a duplicate copy of the original ACK style.
At a very elementary level, 'tradition' in the nineteenth-century commercial theatre meant 'spectacle'. It provided the audience with new possibilities of adoring gods and mythological heroes in kinetic, technicolour setting. In its importation of theatre technology, there were trapdoors that facilitated supernatural ascents and descents, a 'fly system' that enabled apsaras to float rather precariously into the wings and, at a later stage, the novelties of the revolving stage, cloud machines and the cyclorama. All these techniques were employed by Ramanand Sagar in his television series on Ram's story.

Ramanand Sagar borrowed extensively from all the existing forms of presentation of the story, be it in the form of performance traditions, dances, folk tellings, theatre or ramlila. The serial can actually be seen as an extension of the earlier existing folk traditions. Even the critics have confirmed the influence of ramlila and other arts on the production of the serial: “The iconography of the serial combined ramlila conventions with the visual vocabulary firmly produced through a century of mass produced religious art. Also the conventions of the nautanki tradition catered to its production” (Lutgendorf “Raghu Family” 230). One can easily observe the great deal of impact of the performance traditions already existing, especially the katha, ramlila and the nautanki tradition upon the Ramayan (the serial). Looking at the extravagantly flashy sets the borrowings from the folk theatre are noticeable even to an uninitiated audience.

The television Ramayana, with its opulent sets, brightly coloured costumes, and the facial expressions of its main characters, also drew from the iconography of religious- calendar and poster art. Although some upper-class viewers complained that the Ramayan's sets, inspired by the tinsel and glitter of nautanki and the bright colours of calendar art, were kitschy and that its colours were gaudy, many lower middle class workers described the sets as “glorious” or “magnificent.” This was especially true of lower middle class north Indian viewers. Similarly, while upwardly mobile and English-educated audience complained that they were “bored” with the “plastic expressions” of Ram and Sita, the middle class public said: “what was amazing about the Ramayana serial was that Ram and Sita looked exactly as we had imagined” (Mankekar 191).
Ramanand Sagar created the *Ramayan* on television with due consideration of the audience he was catering to; his audience was India’s mass population who was well acquainted with the medieval ‘*nautanki*’ and ‘*tamasha*’ culture. To an audience used to and grown upon the *nautanki* tradition of the Ram’s story a televiusal broadcast of the same story might have appeared alien. Hence, Ramanand Sagar catering to the tastes of the audience carefully picked up *nautanki* and *tamasha* culture and incorporated it in the teleserial. The exaggerated dialogue, gilded sets, melodramatic picturisation and a screening too slow for the television were used as tools by Ramanand Sagar. He took rescue in those cinematic effects and colourful costumes which reminds one of Parsi Theatre. Today one might feel that the special effects used by Ramanand Sagar are outdated and not up to the mark but the public equipped with and customary to the *tamasha/nautanki* tradition could never have been able to acclimatize with a more high tech presentation of the mythical stories which were circulated orally at one point of time.

In this chapter I have tried to present the pre-textual elements which helped in the making of the serial. The trends borrowed by Ramanand Sagar from the mediums of presentation already existing in India have been discussed in this chapter. The chapter deals with the impact of the classical, traditional, the folk and the calendar art on the production of the serial. Purimna Mankekar very aptly remarks:

> the serial’s popularity rested at least in part on its combination of narrative strategies, including the cinematic techniques of popular Hindi film, performative traditions and choreography of folk performances (in particular, *ramlila* and *katha* conventions), and popular religious iconography (such as poster and calendar art) (189).

In the next chapter I shall attempt to concentrate on the textual aspects of the serialized presentation, i.e. how the techniques of the medium (the audio-visual) or the television affected the presentation.