

**Festival of Ramkatha - 12th - 15th March, 2008**

## **Ram Katha in Performing Arts: Documentation Workshops at IGNCA**



Ram Varta, Dungari Bhil, Gujarat

The Indra Gandhi National Centre for the Arts under the project on Ram Katha in Oral Narratives and Folk Performative Traditions of India organized several artist-workshops to audio-visually document performative traditions of Ram Katha belonging to the different folk and tribal groups in the country. Besides, massive documentation work in the field has been initiated. The communities and groups that have already been documented are from Assam, West Bengal, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Rajasthan and Manipur, yielding several CDs and DVDs, and rich archival material, audio-visual, textual and ethnographic objects.

The first in the series of these workshops commenced on 27th November 2007, which comprised of Dungri Bhils from Gujarat. They performed Ram Sitamani Varta. The performance of Ram Katha among the Dungari Bhils is closely linked with harvesting and seeds. It is performed twice a year in the months of Magh and Bhadron. The performances last for the entire one month period. Ram Varta is performed to bring in auspiciousness.

The second group was from Majuli, Assam. It belongs to the 'Sattrā' tradition founded by Shankardeva the medieval saint poet who wrote many dramas among which Ram vijay is very popular and is based on Madhav Kandali's Ramayan. The plays are performed in Ankia Bhaona style. These are musical dramas with active participation of gayan (singers) and bayans (musicians).

The third group was from West Bengal. It comprised of Puppeteers and scroll painting artists. Puppets used are rod puppets (dang putul). It was not just the puppets on stage, but also the puppeteers back

stage who gave rhythm to the puppets by performing passionately. Puppeteers write their own plays, which are heavily influenced by the Jatra tradition; the musical compositions are influenced by folk tunes, popular songs and film music.

The artist or the Patuas (scroll paintings) are Muslims, They have two names one Muslim and one Hindu. They sing and paint simultaneously. Scroll (ptas) created by them are unique in style and composition. The fourth group came from Himachal Pradesh and performed from the 3rd Jan'08 till 10th Jan' 08. This group comprised of six sub-groups: Gaddi (Chamba Bharmaur), Sanskar Geet (Kangra), Barlaj (Shimla), Chhari (Phagu), Ramayani (Kullu). An 82 year old lady bard from Kangra sang songs of Ram and Sita, which are sung at the time of various rites and rituals associated with birth, marriage and any other auspicious occasion. The Ramkatha performance in Himachal is accompanied by songs, dance, ritual and communal feasting.

The fifth group came from Rajasthan. It comprised of Muslim Jogi community from Mewat and Manganiars who are also Muslims from the deserts of Rajasthan. The Jogis sang 'Lanka Chadai' a composition of Poet Nizamat Meb, who died some 360 years ago. These songs are not written and have been transmitted orally from generation to generation. The Manganiyars sing the Ramayan in the form of Ram Bhajans, owing their inspiration to the works of Kabir, Surdas, Mirabai and Tulsidas.

The next was the Wari Leeba tradition of Manipur. It is a narrative form of story telling and is performed in Meiteilon (Manipuri). This narrative art form of Manipur, which was once popular among the Meities and performed on various religious, social, or festival occasions in the presence of the king, is gradually losing its importance due to the passage of time. However, among the few spirited youngsters who are keen to preserve the tradition of their age-old gurus, Wari Leeba still enjoys popularity.

The Last group that was documented in IGNCA was from Pauri Garhwal. Three district traditions were documented : Ramlila in drama form; Ramvarta – singing of Ramvarta accompanied by Drums, Dhol-damaun and folksongs revolving around Ram that are sung accompanied by dance on different occasions. The repertoire that was documented is known by the name of thadya chaufla which is performed on Basant Panchami, when the plough is put to oxen marking the beginning of new agricultural cycle.

Under the project a 105-year-old artist of Ramlila was documented. He could not sing himself, but a lady singer read his lips and sang. Soon after the documentation this artist passed away. But we are fortunate to have documented him audio-visually.

A film based on Sita mela of the same region has been made. It is popularly held that Sita disappeared under the earth at this spot and to honour her memory the mela is held every year at this spot. Besides these artist workshops in Delhi, documentation work is in progress in different states. A film has been commissioned to document Rama katha tradition in the north-east. Under this different styles from Assam, Mizoram, Manipur, Arunachal are being documented, including the Buddhist Ramayan of the Khamtis.

Gonds from Madhya Pradesh have their own Ramkatha, which reflects their local traditions and is closely linked with their oral narrative repertoire. Gonds are also known for their distinct folk painting tradition. The entire Ramkatha has been transferred on to the canvas by the Gonds for the exhibition to be held at the IGNCA. The Gond Ramayani has been translated in Hindi and 500 folk songs based on Rama theme have been documented in Madhya Pradesh with the support of Adivasi Kala Parishad, Bhopal.

Scroll paintings based on Ramkatha from West Bengal have been also acquired and presently a workshop of Mithila painters is in progress at the Centre. They have put to canvas episodes.

Masks, puppets, costumes, musical instruments, headgears and other ethnographic material is being

acquired to put up this exhibition.

The documentation work will continue in the year 2008 as well. Groups that would perform at IGNCA during the year are from Kerala, Tamilnadu, Andhra, Karnataka, Bundelkhand, Mathura, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Maharashtra, Goa etc.

At the end of this IGNCA will have one of richest archives on folk and tribal Ram Katha Traditions in the country. It would reflect the plurality and diversity of tradition and mobility of the text across a vast geographic span. Scholars, performers and lay public all can make use of these rich archives.



Ram Vijay, Kamlabari Satra, Majuli, Assam