

Encountering the Ramlila of Ramnagar: From Fieldnotes in 1978 and 2013

Richard Schechner

Author's Note, 5 May 2017: Because I transcribed these observations verbatim from my handwritten fieldnotes, I have kept the spelling, numeration, and punctuation as I wrote them. Any explanatory additions to the notes are contained within brackets thus, []. © Copyright Richard Schechner. All rights reserved.

1978 9 September

We're set now to go down to Banaras. ["We" are Linda Hess and I.] We are told it is very flooded, 7 feet of water at least over the entrance to the University [Banaras Hindu University], Lanka, Sankat Mochan temple where I lived when I was in Varanasi last, Assighat where Linda and I have our flat, Dasheshwamed, the main ghat. Should we go at all? I am torn in two directions: between a wish to go where the action is, where my work is, and a fear of cholera, typhoid, flood, disaster—not having enough food, etc. Then as we talk, I realize that of course the flood would be along the river and we could always flee inland. So my fear is overcome. Then I begin to wonder whether the Ramlila would go on as scheduled, and if so, how would it go on—and what would the people think of the Ramlila this year, this particular year, because it seems the worst flood in memory, the worst flood on record—coming right as Ramlila is to start. There always is some crisis that an incarnation of Vishnu resolves, the struggle finally resulting in Ramraj. Or something like that. [. . .]



September 1978, arriving in Varanasi. Linda Hess, my partner in the Ramlila research at that time, wades through a Varanasi street on the way to our apartment. Photograph by Richard Schechner.

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Here in Delhi the so soft early morning, still dark, the sky full of stars. I see the Belt of Orion. Even here at the heart of New Delhi a few blocks from Connaught Place there are many trees, the air is sweet-smelling in the morning before the hideous traffic takes over. I hear crickets and early morning birds. Nowhere in India are we far from the countryside. The scavenger crows are up and working, I see one hopping around a tree. I hear chanting over a loudspeaker—maybe a mosque. Near the YWCA guesthouse taxis are parked, their drivers asleep by the side of them: reminds me of Westerns where the cowboys sleep next to their horses.

From the plane: Delhi—Kanpur—Allahabad—Varanasi. [. . .] Over Allahabad the sangam is flooded, water almost up onto the bridge. The flood looks lazy, not surging—there is water in vacant fields and on both sides of the river channels. [. . .] It's impossible to tell where any one river is—it's simply a series of lakes, an inland sea. In the midst I can see trees and houses coming through. I can't tell how deep it is, probably from 4 to 20 feet deep. It's that way everywhere—we're up 15,000 feet and it's that way all over. [. . .]

The river is a snake exploding out of its skin leaving a trace of its former shape on the ground behind. [. . .] The river snake is one to four times its usual width. [. . .]

The flood stretches out many miles. Orchards are flooded. Villages with only rooftops showing. Some with roofs under the water. [. . .] A whole colony underwater. Cattle standing on the dry land but the rest of the place underwater. We're now flying over village after village after village, a mass of land where it's just dots of trees barely above the water, little cloudbursts or explosions of green. We're coming in for a landing—we need a seaplane—there's water as far as I can see to the north. On the south, the flood seems fairly contained.

We're low enough to see that the river is in spate—it's moving twisting flowing turning fast.

Now we're on the dry side. The fields are green green green. Villages normal. Cattle lounging, people walking their bicycles. Everything is dry. Here just a few hundred yards from the flood everything appears normal, beautiful, calm, and peaceful.

10 September

Here I am in Kashi, Banaras, Varanasi—across from Ramnagar. [. . .] When we got here, we made our way to the Cantonment and checked into the Tourist Dak Bungalow. Riding in from the airport we asked how things are. “Hanumanji is taking a bath!” our driver told us, meaning that even Sankat Mochan temple—a couple of kilometers from the Ganga—is underwater.

Soon enough, we knew we had to go to Assighat. After dicking around over the price, we hired an Ambassador, one of those chunky ubiquitous unstoppable cars. Off we went. But we didn't get far. At the Cantonment rail crossing, we got stuck in a great traffic jam. The road across the tracks was flooded. So we paid the driver Rs.20, ditched the Ambassador, and set off toward the river on foot, stopping first at the railroad station for cold drinks and some oranges. After walking a while, we hired Kallu, a bicycle rickshaw walla. He was to become our companion and guide for 2 days. Sleepy now—will resume tomorrow a.m.—or even late tonight if I wake.

11 September

We set off to see the city. Peddling past the half-finished Anand Marg Temple, Linda told me this sect was deadly—Manson-like—its leader ordering the slaughter of followers who had defected. Imprisoned, he lost adherents, and his temple was abandoned. Like so much in

Varanasi, the half-finished building did not seem out of place. Here much is unfinished, on the way up—not yet built; and much is half destroyed, on the way down—not yet abandoned. As the buildings crumble into the soil they grow green at the foundation where moss grows, and green halfway up the walls where shrubs, vines, grass, and even trees sprout. Some shrines next to or under or in trees have achieved the union between peopled and natural. Varanasi is growing from and mulching into the soil she rests on, roots in, and thrives with. It is all deeply and logically connected to the Ganga.

She—this river Ganga who the Puranas say came rushing out of the sky, her great fall to earth softened by coursing through Shiva's hair, his hair's many strands breaking and dispersing her powerful flow. As Shelley says: "Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass, stains the white radiance of eternity" or—as I redact it—the great white dome of eternity is shattered into the many-colored shards of experience; so the symphonic Hindu panoply-continuum of myriad gods converge to express the single force of life. In the process of forcing life to become manifest, the balance, the poise, and the stillness of the uncolored unmanifest absolute is dispersed into the ups and downs, the ins and outs, the hots and colds, the livings and dyings of my experiences, and yours. This is the great clothesline on which is hung all philosophy and art, and all else we do or imagine or think.



The Ganga River during the crossing from Assihat to Ramnagar in September 1978. Photograph by Richard Schechner.

Coming down to the river on the bicycle rickshaw we passed a corpse bundled in white silk—tied from head to toe like some terrific Christmas present; but tied so tightly that the forms of the body from the round head to the upright pointing of the 10 toes plainly show. With flowers under the head. All bound to a palanquin made from big green bamboo shoots and branches—a mattress for the corpse not unlike a charpoy that the living sleep on. Carried by 6 men chanting and sometimes laughing, not grieving—that is for later, at the burning ghat or for the nearest relatives. I remember meeting a weeping old man at Manikarnika Ghat in 1976. He told me he was weeping because his son had died. "He should be cracking my skull, and I will be cracking his." The order of nature was disrupted and inverted—a mistake had been made—or bad karma was working itself out—the tears were not against death but against injustice, this cosmic payback.

Linda now wondered what would happen to the corpses during the flood. There is no way to get through to the burning ghats. The bodies are now just dumped into the Ganga. “Why not burn them someplace else?” she asks Kallu. “And be deprived of paradise?” To be trusted to the Ganga—that is the important thing. It is good to be burned, but if that’s not possible without leaving Ganga’s shores than the bodies will not be burned. It was at this time—riding down toward the Ganga that we noticed the lack of panic. There were no great crowds fleeing from the direction of the river; there were no trucks rolling in with soldiers and supplies—there was none of the activity associated with disaster—no loudspeakers or hovering helicopters or inquiring reporters. Later we read that more than 35,000 villages are flooded. What a story! How the US press and TV would play it, almost creating the panic and crisis it was describing; hourly bulletins giving the impression that something that needed hourly updating is occurring. But that was not the sense we felt as we bicycled down to Assighat.

Merchants are in their shops, those open boxes so much like the box sets of modern realistic theatre. People moving in all directions in that multiplex surge of pedestrians, bikes, rickshaws, scooters, cows, water buffalos, goats, Ambassadors, and Fiats. The riot of metropolitan India. Amidst all this, chai was being served in small clay mugs dashed to the ground after one use; lunghis were being sold; plastic lunchboxes displayed; and freshly deep-fried samosas and other chatt bubbled in boiling oil. Everything seemed—no was—normal. Kallu told us the flood was high—but he pedaled toward it jauntily, turning his head over his shoulder to inform us of this or that. Sometimes I peered down a side street and saw water: Ganga was moving her fingers through Varanasi’s hair. And I realized that this was no flash flood—no breaking of dams releasing a wall of water, no tsunami. Here the river rose centimeter by centimeter, hour by hour, just coming on in her own way. At the center of the channel I knew the water would be swift—but by the shore, it would just be. I recall now the great Brahmaputra in flood at Guahati [Guwahati] in 1976: how at the center of that massive channel a couple of miles wide whole segments of land— islands with trees—rushed by in a brown seething whirling deluge as if a great angry patriarch had ripped Assam up roots and all and flung the land into the water. But the Ganga is no patriarch. She is strong, persistent, and sustaining. Her flood is unstoppable but subtle. She does not need to impress these people who live on and near her; who worship her. They know her force. She just comes on as she needs to, rising to where she will go.

When we got near Assi, we realized the flood was not as bad as we imagined it would be. The entrance alley up to Tulsi Mandir and Tulsighat was open. I was in the full flush of knowing that Ganga, having been assured that Sam [my one-year-old son] would someday see her, was now beginning to go back to bed, to recede. Linda ran up the alley—we dismounted from Kallu’s rickshaw—and shouted. She was in ecstasy. I walked forward knowing Tulsi Mandir was on a small hill. When we got there, it was high and dry, barely. The big tree’s trunk was out of the water, but its eastern bows were tickling Ganga’s waters. As we got near to Tulsi Mandir, we heard kirtans being sung to Hanumanji. The repetitive almost screaming voices, the clash of symbols, the thud of the drum. We entered and saw that the water was within 4 inches of the murti, up to next to the last step—but Ganga hadn’t entered. Later [Mahant Professor Veer Badra] Mishra showed us how the high water level was, about 10 inches higher than the high flood mark of 1948, the previous record flood. He pointed out how the water today was within a few inches of his ground floor. “But up till now nothing here has been flooded.” He pointed to the stones. “This is all foundation—there is no room under here.” Other houses were not so lucky—other architects were not so wise.

We look down the street toward Assighat and saw water. But we decided to wade in and visit Linda’s flat. We would put her stuff on higher ground if it was not already flooded. “This morning the water was this close,” Mishra said, squeezing an inch or less between his thumb and

forefinger, “but not in your flat.” Linda was very excited. “I thought for sure the water would be up to the ceiling.” We borrowed a sari for Linda; I had bought a lungi on the way so my jeans would not get wet. Still wearing my Adidas running shoes, we set off. [. . .]

Everywhere we went in this neighborhood Linda knew people. She greeted them, and they greeted her with love, with surprise, with wonder. At last I understood the signs I had seen around: “Europe and America returned.” These were not just a kind of street diploma but a statement of faith in the country. As if someone would return from those lands from whose bourne no travelers return. To be born in India is one thing, to visit it another, to visit, leave, and return, still deeper. To be an expatriate and then return to India still more substantial. To choose India—and especially this special Kashi—probably the oldest of humanity’s still dwelled-in cities—is truly “something else.” And to return when the flood publicity is scaring everybody away, even me, for I wanted to stay in Delhi until the floods passed. I’d made every argument in that direction: what good could we do, we’d be a burden, we might get trapped, disaster was no fun, there were floods still coming, and diseases, etc. But Linda insisted, and deep inside I was excited and wanted to go. Nissar Allana looked at us sharply; he is a doctor and knows the danger—but he wanted us to go. “There is where your work is, this is why you came to India.” So we went.

[. . .]

17 Sep 1978

First 2 days [of Ramlila]. Yesterday I mapped out 11 days of the Lila. Got a sense for the first time of its scope and interconnectedness. Began to see it all in my mind’s eye. There is an internal symmetry to it. Exile through the small settlements of low caste people. Processions through the main streets. “World sites” in specially constructed areas outside of where people live.

The first day pre-capitulates the whole 31-day drama. The RL [Ramlila] story does *not* = the *Ramcharitmanas*. The RCM tells everything including its own frames of telling. But Ramlila is really the story of two figures/forces: Ram and Ravan.

First scene. Ravan performs tapas in the Himalayas and Brahma agrees to grant him boons. Each of Ravan’s brothers picks something. Then Ravan picks not to be killed by any except men and/or monkeys. Second scene: Ravana takes over Lanka. Puja break. After dark, Ravana conquers the three worlds—Kailash, Indra’s capital, etc.

Ravan’s taking of the gods’ wives is staged nicely. Ravan arrives at the 3 worlds in a big open cart. More and more women, male performers, climb in the cart with him. He laughs. He taunts. He forbids the reading of the Vedas. He orders all sacrifices to be destroyed. He proclaims the killing of cows and Brahmins. He upsets the world order. Spectators laugh at Ravan. Why? At his arrogance, they say. But I detect some rebellious laughter too—a touch of Milton’s Satan. Enjoyment at violating all the laws.

This scene would have been played on day two, but because 16 September is an eclipse of the moon, an inauspicious time for Ramlila, the scene was played on day one.

A crowd of 5,000–10,000 gathers around two sides of the very large tank at the end of which is ancient Durga temple. Some say it is more than 300 years old. There are a few sadhus, about 25. “More will be coming,” I’m assured. But the floods have made travel hard this year.

In one tower at the corner of the large Rambag (garden) are Vishnu and Lakshmi, played by the boys who will play Lakshman and Bharat. Afloat in the middle of the tank, in a boat made out to be Shesha, the 1000-headed cobra—are Ram and Sita. Ram is sleeping, lying prone, in the pose of Vishnu sleeping. Sita sits at his feet. Narad with his veena is there. And at the prow of the boat—Garuda, slowly flapping his wings.

Brahma, played by a very old man, addresses Vishnu in the tower begging him to incarnate himself and save the world. In a very beautiful singing voice, Vishnu replies. It is not the boy playing the swarup who sings but another person. The voice can barely—but still clearly—be heard across the tank—like a light breeze falling on my shoulder. The large crowd is totally silent—a very unusual state for an Indian audience.

Vishnu sings that he will incarnate himself as Ram and save the world. The great drama begins to unfold. Arati is performed by Brahma from the tower—and the red and white flares light up the swarups in the boat.

Then it's over for the night. Suddenly, abruptly, as the final white flare fades, a terrific crush of people getting out of the tank area. From one side all have to press through an opening of less than 4 feet. Now the crowd is typical. Someone shoving and cursing next to someone muttering "Sitaram Sitaram Sitaram."

Totally exhausted when I get home. Heat exhaustion, headache, cold sweat. I gulp salt, drink drink drink. And sleep.

Earlier I broke my prohibition against unbottled water. I drank at the mela. Today I read in the paper that 20 cases of cholera were reported from Varanasi. But the implication is that there are more—not all the hospitals were asked to report. And there is a shortage of vaccine. Legacies of the flood.

During the day of the 16th, we map out some of the lila sites. I'm trying to get a sense of the space. Also to find the total mileage covered in the 31 days. It's hard. Difficult to get Indians to understand that I want to go in order—even if place L is next to place B—I want to go to the sites in the sequence of the story—kind of running a film fast forward—time lapse—so that I can feel in one day the whole tirtha Ramlila. We don't do what I want exactly. But enough for me to get the sense of the enormity of it, its cosmic scope. But also its existence as a neighborhood thing, as the whole world and these specific places at the same time. Maybe one of these days I'll do it totally in sequence. We map up to a half of the 11th day. Will resume today.

2013 **13 October**

Varanasi's extraordinarily awful roads full of deep holes that are more than potholes; uneven surfaces of cobblestone or mud, no sidewalks. Riding these roads is an experience of extreme bumps, swerves, continuous horn blowing because in many places there is no room for two-way traffic no less the multiple crush of trucks, buses, cars, bicycle rickshaws, auto-rickshaws, cows, buffalos, a few goats, some wild dogs, and pedestrians. All jostling for space and pride of place. Along the side of these horrible roads, many "box shops," corrugated metal-roofed 10x10-foot cubes raised a foot or two off the ground to forestall flooding. Open in front with goods laid out on a table and within. The owner or stall-keeper sits or stands or sometimes squats in front. Added to this, plenty of street carts and wagons. The fruits and vegetables piled on tables look

luscious and local: bananas, mangoes, oranges, tomatoes, eggplants, potatoes, broccoli, cauliflower, some local veggies I don't know the name of. Lots of men with small trident-supported peanut stands where the roasted nuts are doled out by weight on a balance scale. A small fire in the middle of a metal pan provides continuous cooking of the raw nuts. Other shops sell cloth, electrical stuff, shoes, hardware . . . the list is very long: everything that a modern society needs, except that the means of display are not modern, or at least not up-to-date. Mixed in with all this are doctors' offices, dentists, computer repair shops, schools for young children, English language courses, and any number of other services. From time to time there is a modern looking establishment plop in the midst of all this color and chaos, a Batta shoe store with a gleaming glass front, a Fiat automobile dealership.



A main road with shops in Ramnagar, 2013. Photograph by Richard Schechner.

There are some used-to-be magnificent buildings whose facades from the 19th century show Moghul delicacy and beauty, somewhat like New Orleans Garden District and French Quarter. These buildings are mostly derelict. One such between Samneghat and Lanka on our way to Sankat Mochan Temple had a plaque on it, which I read some of as I was pedaled by on a bicycle rickshaw. A former guesthouse of some kind, notable enough to earn public notice. It sported arched doorways and many balconies. But peering through where windows were on the second floor, I could see tumbled bricks, masonry, and daylight. I thought that here was an opportunity for someone with money to fix it up as a hotel. Most of the good hotels are in the Cantonment, far from Varanasi's real life along the ghats. [. . .] It could be a lovely city if its buildings were restored and maintained. But to do this effectively would take well-paved streets and sidewalks, street lights, secure electricity, plumbing, and public transportation.

I don't know what I would do about the cows and buffalos. They are so much a part of life here—actually and ritually—that it is hard to conceive of Varanasi without them. At the same time, there are piles of cow and buffalo shit underfoot everywhere. And of course, these animals slow the traffic. There are a couple of cows, one brown and one black, who sleep regularly in the little nook of driveway at the front of Jnana-Pravaha. I recognize them.

The dogs don't really come out until deep night, when the traffic has gone from the streets. One night after the lila we took the boat back to Assighat. Once we got off, it was scary. No one around. A few people sleeping in doorways. Very few street lights. No police. Cows sleeping scattered on the road. The dogs were awake, barking, howling, snarling. They were on the prowl. I didn't want to get near any of them. The dogs are preternaturally skinny—underfed, starving, desperate. They have no owners. They skittered away from me when I got close—as if they had learned their lesson not to trust people. At the same time, I knew there was a range when a dog would stand its ground and take a Shylock out of my leg. Rishika and I felt scared in those streets even though by day we knew the district well. [. . .]

Knowing all this doesn't stop me from returning here, again and again. Our brief visit to Sankat Mochan Temple [SM] helps explain why. SM is near Lanka, just south of Samneghat. We took an auto-rickshaw from P-P to Lanka and a bicycle rickshaw from there to the temple. Last night it rained hard, so the roads were muddy with lots of pools of water. But the air was washed clean, the sun was bright and hot. We entered the crowded temple. What a contrast to Vishwanath Temple downtown. There the people were squeezed into a tiny galli, pushing, shoving, shouting. Here there were two neat lineups for close-in viewing the murti and blessing of prasad. One line for men, the other for women. There was a counter where one gave money for a ticket and down the line a row of servers who exchanged the tickets for different kinds of prasad. [. . .] I decided to buy prasad and give it away. Next to the prasad stand was a place to buy malas of marigolds. [. . .]

The Hanuman murti at Sankat Mochan is a great work of art, a focus of devotion, and a powerful “thing.” It is abstract. A luminous orange oval, more or less, tilted so that the top of Hanumanji's head is angled a little to the viewer's right. A crescent-laying-down marking on the forehead indicates Vishnu. Two large black circles signify the monkey god's eyes. No mouth. This strong figure is/is not a vision of Hanuman. It is the incarnation in stone—if I may be permitted that contradiction—of a force, a power, an energy. Not a “picture” or a “representation.” Like the swarups of RL, Hanuman in Sankat Mochan is living immanence. I did not want to wait in line for my prasad to be blessed. I do not care for the services of priests. I stood on an 18” high marble platform with a few others. I closed my eyes. I chanted both my yoga mantra and the Shema: these are my usual prayers at the end of yoga. I thought of Mahant Mishraji. I prayed for him. I prayed for Carol, Sophia, Sam, Mara [my immediate family], Rishika [Mehrishi, my research assistant], the whole world. I stood there face-to-face with Hanumanji for a long time measured by my interior clock but only 5 minutes or so by ordinary time. Then I descended.

We walked the red brick pathway through the small forest of monkeys. Outside atop a wall I saw a giant male monkey with bright orange colored balls. Did someone Hanuman him or was this preposterously his native state? Inside the mini-forest were plenty of monkeys. One mother had two really tiny ones running up to her, then away, then up for security again, then away again up a chain-link fence that separated the path from vegetation. To keep the humans out, not the monkeys who pay no attention to fences. Rishika hid the box of prasad inside her umbrella. She was really afraid that she would be jumped by a monkey. I remember Carol and the big monkey tugging on her kurta when she walked on this very path on her only visit to Varanasi. I looked up and saw the temple guesthouse where Joan and I stayed in 1976. It was the last year of our marriage (not legally, but actually). Sankat Mochan speaks to me, and I listen.

19 October

We arrive at Rambag where a big crowd is assembled. We weave through the mostly seated multitude and take our places right at the raised concrete platform on top of which is the new Rambag gazebo. The new structure is ugly and gross—too “big” with its concrete foundation, its concrete pillars. But it is not as bad as I thought it would be. If the pillars were painted gold and the ceiling blue, it may be acceptable. There is wood filigree paneling as there was with the old gazebo. That one was of marble, delicate and beautiful. Navneet says that it now is in a hotel in the Cantonment. “People are sitting in it having drinks,” he says contemptuously. I agree: the old gazebo should never have been moved. The MR [Maharaja Anant Narain Singh] told me he did it because he feared theft. But how to lift a whole big marble structure? He didn’t say disfigurement, which was more of a possibility. At the same time, it had not been disfigured all these years. So.

The crowd is merry, not at all restless. The afternoon is warm and the sky clear. This is the way RL ought to end, with a full moon and high spirits. Ram is victorious: Sita and he are queen and king of Ayodhya, Ramraj has begun. After coronation, the first thing Ram does is teach. I will not summarize the teachings. They are available both in the *Manas* and the *samvads*. The lila begins when the maharaja arrives by car. He is with his young son, the rajkumar. The MR takes his place in a corner of the gazebo, facing Ram at an angle. Right behind the MR is the rajkumar. They both are dressed in white, wearing gold and white Nehru caps. Me and mini-me. The rajkumar is about 8, wears glasses, and does a very good job of staying awake most of the time. It is about 6 p.m., and he has a long night ahead of him. On the concrete platform outside the gazebo, but very close to the MR, are the Ramayanis. They are directly to my left.

The teachings are nested theatrically among the appearances of sages and Narad. He enters twice, both times singing very long songs. The sages—at least I think that’s who they are—are four boys wearing only saffron-colored loin clothes. The closest to naked I have ever seen in RL. Each of these sages has something to say, as does Lakshman. But most of the scene is Ram talking. Not knowing Hindi, the teachings are very boring for me. But they do hold the attention of the audience. There is very little fidgeting and almost no talking. The scene lasts about 1.5 hours. At the end of it, in his typical way, the MR simply gets up and leaves. There is ceremony, usually, to his arrival, shouts of “Hara! Hara! Mahadev!” But when he leaves there is only a ripple of shouting, the audience rising before the MR is into his car. The sandhya puja break has begun, although it is long past dark. I’d think the MR did his evening prayers before the teachings started; that this break is simply the long pause before RL’s final scenes, the Kot Vidai and final arati in Ayodhya. This is the only night with two aratis. The only night that the MR does not witness an arati. Just as Ravan leaves RL when his role is killed by Ram, so the MR leaves RL after Ram’s royal party leaves The Fort and returns to Ayodhya.

The Kot Vidai [Farewell, a scene performed only in the Ramnagar Ramlila] begins and ends in a marvelously visual way, with the swarups arriving from Ayodhya to The Fort on two large elephants. Lakshman drives the elephant carrying Ram and Sita, while a mahout drives the elephant carrying Bharat and Shatrughan. Before they mount these beasts who take up almost all of the west side of Ayodhya past the royal chamber, the swarups sit as many people—in the 1000s—take darshan of them up close, touch their feet, receive tulsi leaves and marigolds. I do not know if people leave dakshina, but I would not be surprised if they did. This is the last night of the swarup’s appearance in Ramnagar . . . until next year’s RL. The devotees want to get a strong last look; or maybe, for many, their only close-up darshan.

In the mean while, a few sadhus sing bhajans, many fewer than in previous years. Other people socialize, some are eating—the chatt stalls on Ramnagar’s main street are busy. Little kids have toys bought for them. The feeling is festive. Knots of people are talking. Jambavan comes over to Rishika and me. We talk, or rather they talk in Hindi. But he smiles at me, touches my shoulder. He is about 50, handsome, and always chewing pan. Some sadhus ask me to photo them—and one who attends Ram wonders why I have not brought him the pictures I snapped yesterday. He does not seem to understand the technology.

Shiv Dutt calls me to the pandal. I come up, look into Ram’s eyes, Sita’s eyes; I bend my knees and touch their feet. I look into their eyes again. Sita seems surprised; Ram remains beautifully blank. Shiv Dutt gives me a very large mala of tulsi leaves. I put it around my neck and descend to the ground. Then I take off the mala that has been blessed by Ramji and put it on a little girl about 9 years old. She is surprised, even more, shocked; and she is happy. But when I turn around to see her, the mala is gone. A man in a silk kurta has it. I take it from his hands. “This is for her,” I say in English gesturing to the girl. The man doesn’t respond, but he glares at me. I put the mala on the girl again. She is very hesitant, starts to take it off. “No,” I say. “This is for you!” Rishika does not want me to intervene. She thinks the whole exchange is improper. I think it is, too, from an anthropological and ritual point of view. But I am vehement about wanting the girl to have this very special thing. I stand between her and the man. She is glowing. Or at least I think she is. I tell her to go away, to get lost in the crowd, to take herself far from the marauding man. Finally, she melts into the crowd, still wearing the mala. I don’t know if I did good or bad. I did. That’s all I can say for sure.