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On Transgressions and Transformations: Space as a Subversive Site in the Events Leading Up to the Abduction of Devī Sītā in “Aranyakāṇḍa” of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

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Abstract

The paper would be an exploration of how space, particularly the forest of Dandakaranya, becomes a site of subversive expression of not only the characters but also their attendant actions, beginning with the forest itself where Rama observes “...birds did not chirp,” (*Ramayana* 508). The paper would primarily focus on the three main incidents that are at the heart of this *kaṇḍa*. First, the encounter with the raksasa Viradha, a first for the triumvirate Rama, Sita and Lakshmana in Daṇḍaka forest, happening as it does at the onset of the *kaṇḍa*, foreshadowing what would transpire towards the end of the *kaṇḍa*, namely the abduction of Sita by Ravana. Secondly, the Surpanakha incident where Surpanakha’s unreciprocated desire and subsequent, aggressive pursuit of first Rama and then Lakshmana leads to the cutting off her nose by Lakshmana. Thirdly and lastly, Ravana’s perception of the act itself – the nose being held as symbol of a family’s honour in many South-east Asian cultures in general but especially Indian culture – and Surpanakha being his sister, his taking of the act so meted out to his sister, rightly so, as an insult to his family’s name and lineage, leading to his response and revenge with the act of abducting Sita. Spatial theory has been mainly used as a means of analysis and interpretation for the topic explored in the paper.

Keywords: Spatial theory, Daṇḍakāraṇya, Aranyakāṇḍa, the *Ramayana*, Liminal Space

Edward Soja, in his groundbreaking work *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996), while acknowledging the “simultaneity and interwoven complexity” (3) of “historicality and sociality” (2) of history and society respectively, that comprises human life, also appends a third element, namely, “the spatiality of human life” (2) as equally “intrinsic” to the creation and comprehension of said human life and culture thereof. Literature in general and literary texts in particular are a constant re-engagement and re-negotiation with, what Soja would call the “three-sided *sensibility* of spatiality-historicality-sociality” (3; my emphasis) of a place or space, history and society located within the text, by individual readers through their engagement with the text: readers, who themselves are bound within a socio-temporal location. Nowhere is this phenomenon more pronounced than in the text of the epic of *Ramayana* where history, society and space continue to acquire diverse spectrum of connotations both within and without the text. If one is willing to accept that premise, then it would not be an exaggeration to contend that the *kanda* or canto most pivotal to the story of the *Ramayana* is the “Aranyakanda”. It is important because “Aranyakanda” becomes a liminal space, on one end of which exists the princes Rama and Lakshmana, and princess Sita, and on the other end exists ascetics Rama, Lakshmana and Sita, punished to wander the Dandakaranya or the forest of Dandaka for fourteen years, forsaking their primary identities as glorious warrior-sons of king Dasharath, and the virtuous daughter of the great sage-king Janaka.

Forests have always been represented in literature as liminal spaces, the boundaries of which simultaneously define and distinguish between the ordered existence of a society as created by man and the chaos as created by nature as its oppositional double. In his article entitled “The Ramayana: Analysis of Setting”, Carl L. Bankston III notes that Dandakaranya is the “Forest. Wooded

region between holy Ayodhya and its evil counterpart, Lanka, in which Rama undergoes his most important transformations. In Hindu mythology, forests are magical places that represent the nonhuman, supernatural world” (par. 2, line 3). Furthermore, Michel Foucault, in his essay “Of Other Spaces” (1984) while deliberating upon the concept of “heterotopias”, defined them as “counter-sites” (24), that is, real, physical spaces that pose a challenge to society by contesting and inverting its normal, ordered space. Dandakaranya is both a liminal space and a counter-site, a heterotopia. In this sense it acquires a subversive position. It is subversive because it refuses to remain a mere a ‘forest’. Dandakaranya resists any attempt made to arrive at a simplistic and confining definition that the sign ‘forest’ evokes in the mind. At this point it becomes imperative to understand the meaning of the word Dandakaranya. Bibek Debroy, in the “notes” section of the second volume of his translation of Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, summarises the “story of Dandakaranya” (847) thus:

Ikshvaku’s¹ youngest son was Danda. Since he was wicked, his father exiled him. Danda went to the region around the Vindhya mountains and built a kingdom there, with a capital in Madhumanta. Danda consorted with the demons there and became the disciple of Shukracharya, the preceptor of the demons. However, he molested Shukracharya’s daughter and was cursed by him. Madhumanta was destroyed and the area came to be known as Dandaka, *danda* also being punishment. The southern part of Dandakaranya, to the south of Madhumanta, was known as Janasthana. While Madhumanta was cursed, the southern part was exempted from the curse. Therefore, people began to reside in Janasthana,

though Madhumanta was deserted. Ravana made Khara the ruler of Janasthana. When Rama entered Dandakaranya, with a desire that Rama should destroy the demons, the sages continually urged him towards the south, towards Janasthana. In the process, an area that was once under the Ikshvaku empire would again be brought under it. (847)

Hence Dandakaranya is both a magical place and a cursed place. The magic is cursed and thus corruptive and corrosive: Dandakaranya being a junction of two words, namely, ‘danda’ meaning ‘punishment’ and ‘aranya’ meaning ‘forest’. One cannot help but draw the inevitable comparison between a forest named Dandakaranya and the trio who enter the said *forest*, after Rama’s banishment, as a place of exile, to execute their *punishment*. This three-pronged connection between Dandaka (the forest), danda [punish(ment)] and dandit (the punished, that is, the trio), serves to establish Dandakaranya as something more than a just a geographical place. It becomes an emotional space demarcating those that remain within its cursed ambit and are equally cursed and those that arrive as outsiders yet come under the purview of the forest and are not exempt from the susceptibility of being influenced by the cursed magic of such a place. Thus, any act committed by the ‘outsiders’ Rama, Lakshmana and Sita against what the forest perceives as ‘insiders’ becomes an act of transgression unto itself.

In the “Aranyakanda”, the events that play themselves out within the space of the kanda have a two-fold function. First, much like the canto of any epic, the kanda allows the narrative to spill over to the next kanda for the story to continue forward following the narratological imperative as set by its plot-points. Secondly, and more important to the purpose of the present deliberation, as the kanda comes to a close, the abduction of Sita by Ravana

ends Rama and Laxmana's *entrapment in* and therefore *escape from* the ensnaring foliage of Dandaka forest: a place as equally enchanted as it is accursed. It is indeed the 'space' that is Dandaka which, in the words of the omniscient narrator, is "impenetrable" (*Ramayana* 507) and which subverts – as the paper would attempt to establish – the actions of, and resultant consequences for, the characters, irrespective of the intentions from which they stem forth. For the purpose, three events from the text, which are pivotal to the plot, have been chosen to showcase how the actions of the characters, often transgressive in nature, transform not only the fates of the characters themselves but also the direction of the story.

The first among the three events is the trio's encounter with the rakshasa Viradha. Upon their entering the forest, the event that follows is Sita's abduction by Viradha. This relatively small event foreshadows the larger event of Sita's abduction by Ravana at the end of the kanda. The similitude between these two events cannot be missed by the reader. Viradha "gruesome, malformed, tall, hideous and horrible to behold" (*Ramayana* 508), "grasped Vaidehi in his lap" (*Ramayana* 508) and as Rama and Laxmana watch in horror, Viradha announces, "This beautiful woman will be my wife" (*Ramayana* 508). This act of transgression – taking someone against their will, especially if that 'someone' is a woman, a woman who is married to Lord Rama, Rama's woman – does not go unpunished. Laxman and Rama, together, easily subdue him by each cutting off an arm of the culprit, whereby the rakshasa finally reveals his real identity, freed as he was finally from the curse that transformed him into a rakshasa. Addressing Rama, Viradha confesses, "I assumed this rakshasa body because of an extremely terrible curse. I am a *gandharva* [emphasis translator's] named Tumburu and was cursed by Vaishravana...Through your favours, I have now been freed from that terrible curse and will go to my own abode" (*Ramayana* 509). As he lay dying, he beseeches "O Rama! Fling me into a pit...This is the eternal dharma for

rakshasas who have lost their lives" (*Ramayana* 509).

Erich Auerbach, in his critical essay "Odysseus' Scar" contends that narrative style of epics incorporates what he calls "direct discourse" in which a character's "speech" serves "to manifest, to externalize thoughts" into action "...in a *definite place*" (7; my emphasis). Viradha's "speech" or spoken words externalise themselves into the resultant action of him being flung "into the pit" that is within the space of Dandakaranya. This is significant because the *speaker* or character, who is also the actor upon whom the *action* is being enacted, and the *place* where the action is being enacted or executed, all three of these are inextricably tied to the singular entity of the space that is Dandakaranya. One would be remiss if one did not take into consideration that it only after his cursed form of a rakshasa – a form that Tumburu was condemned to – is thrown in a pit *in* the Dandakaranya, can Tumburu leave the equally accursed forest. It is *not* the 'rakshasa' Viradha, fearsome and feared that gets saved and gets to leave the forest of Danadaka. On the contrary, Viradha "...roared in a *terrible tone*" (my emphasis) as he "was flung into a pit" (*Ramayana* 509) into the very the belly of Dandaka and is thereby consumed by the forest. Viradha had to relinquish his very identity, that is, the identity of a rakshasa feared by ascetics and animals alike, in order to escape Dandaka. Thus, from the very onset of the "Aranyakanda", Dandaka becomes a space subversive.

The second is the trio's encounter with Surpanakha as they start living the hermetic life in Panchvati, on the recommendation of sage Agastya. In the opening sarga or section fourteen, Panchavati is depicted by the narrator as a place "...which was full of many predatory beasts and herds of deer" (*Ramayana* 525). This contradictory turn of phrase to describe the place strikes an ominous tone which

serves as a premonitory warning to the reader on the events that would transpire.

In sarga sixteen, Surpanakha approaches Rama first because it is *he* whom she saw first and got “...flooded with desire” (*Ramayana* 528). Rama, as we all know, declines the offer of being her “husband” (*Ramayana* 528) and redirects her to Laxmana, stating, in the very next section, that is, sarga seventeen, “He’s without a wife and desires one.” This is an act of transgression on Rama’s part because Lakshmana is a married man. However, Surpanakha, having no prior knowledge of Lakshmana’s marital status redirects her advances towards Laxmana. Consequently, Laxmana, in rejecting Surpanakha’s advances, becomes unnecessarily cruel and compares her to Sita: an unfair comparison to be made. He insults her, a guest, in their abode, thereby breaking the dharmic code of treating guest as godly²; that is an act of transgression, committed by Laxmana. Surpanakha, as observed by the narrator, “...did not know about jesting and took those words to be the truth” (*Ramayana* 529). What follows are actions begetting reciprocal actions with devastating consequences, transgressive in nature, committed and acted upon – violently – especially on the body of a woman, be it Surpanakha or Sita. This would bring us to the third event, namely, the abduction of Sita.

This finally brings us to the third and final event, that would conclude the argument as teased out by the paper. Sita after seeing the golden deer, desires to keep it as a pet and hence requests Rama to go and bring it for her. This is despite Rama’s caution that it might be a mirage or worse yet a rakshasa that has transformed and taken the guise of a golden deer. This act by Sita is itself a transgression from her own principle, whereby in sarga eight, she says to Rama, “You should never permit the act of picking up the bow and arrow and turn your mind towards enmity and slaying the rakshasas who have found refuge in Dandaka.” (*Ramayana* 516) This gives Ravana the ‘golden’

opportunity, quite literally, to transform into an ascetic who then transgresses the code of an ascetic, that arrives at the doorstep asking for alms.

In Sita’s defence, gullible though her character appears in both the instance of her belief in the existence of a golden deer, and a lone ascetic coming to her doorstep, asking for alms in the middle of a dense thick forest like Dandakaranya, one must take into consideration the space that is Dandakaranya, one which evolves into an entity unto itself within the space of the narrative. This is why the imaginary space or the second space that takes shape in Sita’s mind, while interacting with the real place or first space that is Dandakaranya, allows for the creation of the third space of Dandakaranya, magical and cursed in equal parts, where a Sita can believe that a golden deer *does* exist and an ascetic could come and ask for alms in the middle of a dense forest. The transgression is not of Sita but of a place that conspires to be subversive through its very existence. Sita’s fault lies in her ignorance and resultant failure to recognise the transgressive nature of a place as subversive as Dandakaranya.

From this, we may come to the tentative conclusion that indeed Dandaka, dense “impenetrable” accursed remains untouched while all the fates and furies vested upon the characters play themselves out leaving Dandakaranya alone, undefeated, unchallenged, and hence untrammelled: a space as transgressive as it is subversive.

End Notes:

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¹. In the “Introduction” to the first volume of the translation of Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, Bibek Debroy denotes Ikshvaku as the “first proper king of the surya vamsha” or solar dynasty and “. . . the *Ramayana* is a chronicle of the solar dynasty,” (15) while the *Mahabharata* is the chronicle of the chandra vamsha or the lunar dynasty.

². In M. N. Dutt’s six volume edition of *The Dharma Shashtra*, the “*Aachara Khanda*” within the Manu Smriti in the early volumes lays out the specific dharmic, ethical, and social obligations for welcoming and caring for guests.

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