

The Liminal on the Battlefield of Laṅkā in the Imagery of the *Rāmcaritmānas*

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Abstract

War positions societies, as well as individuals, in the transitional moments between the past and the future, between life and death as well as the spaces beyond, between the known and the unknown – both in the socio-political and the devotional and/or theological sense. According to Victor Turner's classical definition, this means that during wars they enter the liminal phase, that «interval, [...] when the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance». In my analysis, based on Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas* (1574), I focus on the elements of time, space, actors and artefacts that structure the imagery of Laṅkā battlefield as the liminal space, the “betwixt and between”. Different functions performed by these elements in the narrative of the poem are also addressed.

Keywords: *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Rāmcaritmānas*, war in *Rāmcaritmānas*, battlefield as liminal space.

1. *Introduction*

In the life of any society and of an individual, war positions them in the transitional moments between life and death and the spaces beyond. According to Victor Turner's classical definition¹, this would mean that wars situate both societies and the individuals that constitute them in the liminal phase, in that «interval [...] when the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has

1. Turner 1974, 75.

not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance». In other words, we can say that the old, structured reality is suspended and the new one has yet to materialise².

In this paper, we propose to analyse selected elements of the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative concerned with the Laṅkā war as it is presented in the sixteenth-century Hindi epic and a major Hindi Bhakti text, Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas* (1574)³. In our analysis, adopting Turner's approach, we will deal with different dimensions of this conflict and address not only its temporal perspective, so prominent in Turner's considerations, but also the spatial one, remindful of the fact that liminality «designate[s] a space or state which is situated in between other, usually more clearly defined, spaces, periods or identities [...] [it] might be disruptive of dominant discursive frameworks: it defies boundaries and erases the differences upon which regulatory frameworks depend»⁴. Such a perspective seems optimal for envisaging the events of the Laṅkā war that are, in one way or another, a transformative experience for all the actors involved in it, and especially for the people of Laṅkā who are directly exposed to it, and for Rāvaṇa, their ruler. Let us observe here that in the case of Rāvaṇa's opponent, Rāma, the most prominent actor in the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative, transformation does not seem to be an issue at all. Of course, this has to do with Rāma's status: he is the all-pervading Lord who controls the Universe and as such he stands beyond all restrictions, of time and space too. What is noteworthy in this context is that his people are far away from Laṅkā, safe in Ayodhyā, living their day-to-day life. Until very late into the conflict, they were not even aware of the war in Laṅkā. It is Bharata, ruling as a regent during Rāma's banishment, who first learns about it from Hanumān, whom he shot down when Hanumān was flying over Ayodhyā on his way back from the Himalayas with herbs for Lakṣmaṇa wounded by Meghanāda (RCM 6. 54. 4-62. 1, esp. 6. 58-60 *ka-kha*⁵).

2. Cf. Turner 1986, 93.

3. Due to different pronunciation and transliteration/transcription rules with respect to Sanskrit and Hindi words which are written in the same way in the Devanāgarī script, throughout my paper (except for transliterated passages), in order to avoid confusion and multiplying different forms of words, I use Sanskrit forms in the case of the names of literary characters and the technical terms that originated in Sanskrit literature. Otherwise, I follow the transcription commonly used for Hindi, in which short 'a' is usually dropped in final and certain intersyllabic positions. Therefore, I write Rāma but *Rāmcaritmānas*.

4. Cuddon 2013, 398-399.

5. All references to Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas* (abbreviated in references as RCM) are to the vulgate text edited by Hanumānprasād Poddār, published in the Gita Press edition. Unless otherwise stated, the translations are all mine.

In order to get the most complete picture as possible, I will focus on these elements of time and space as well as on the actors and artefacts that structure the imagery of the Laṅkā battlefield as a hiatus, the liminal space between the known and the unknown, both in the socio-political as well as in the devotional and/or theological sense, carved out of the present here and now.

2. *Of Time*

First, let us visualise the Laṅkā war in temporal terms, as a liminal period/state in which the Laṅkā society remains *de facto* from the war's commencement till its end, *i.e.* for seven days (RCM 6. 39-103). This is the state when many, if not all, aspects of the normal functioning of the Laṅkā people are suspended, although the text of the poem does not address this problem directly.

As is well known from tradition, Rāvaṇa literally pushes to go to war with Rāma despite a number of mediation attempts, with the best-known mission being that of Aṅgada, sent to Rāvaṇa's court as Rāma's envoy (RCM 6. 17. 1-35 *ka*, 38. 2-38 *kha*) and the very earnest though futile efforts of Rāvaṇa's relatives and advisers (*e.g.* RCM 6. 5. 1-10. 3; 6. 36. 1-37; 6. 48. 3-49. 3). They do not speak directly about all the consequences of the imminent war, although the main message of their warnings is Rāvaṇa's inevitable defeat at the hands of Rāma. Especially outspoken is Rāvaṇa's wife, Mandodarī, who tries to dissuade her husband from entering into battle with Rāma. She says:

Lord, be hostile to that one whom
You can defeat with intellect and strength.
As indeed, between you and Raghupati the difference
Is such as between a firefly and the sun.
[...]
Don't oppose him, my lord,
The one in whose hands [rest] Death, Fate and life [of all]!⁶

Rāvaṇa is deaf to all her pleadings and does not accept any counsel. He is forgetful of everything, also of the inhabitants of Laṅkā for whom the obvious logical result of the defeat and the death of their ruler will be, as we shall also see, the uncertainty

6. RCM 6. 6. 3-5: *nāthā bayaru kije tāhī sō / budhi bala sakia jīti jāhī sō // tumhahi raghupatihi antara kaisā / khalu khadyota dinakarahi jaisā // [...] tāsū birodha na kijia nāthā / kāla karma jiva jākē hāthā //*.

of a new life in the world yet to come and finally a transformation, first of all in socio-political terms but not only.

In the case of the warriors of both warring parties, whose duty is to fight for their ruler and defend him and his people, the war – which does not only concern the suspension of the routine of everyday life – can be seen as a doubly transformative experience. This happens because wars, even if they are long, do not last forever and so, in this sense, they are not a day-to-day experience even for soldiers. When they perform their obligation towards society, they stand right on the front line, and, in fact, in the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative they are the only ones who also directly enter the zone between life and death, while the others wait in fear and trepidation. This is especially true during the daytime, as according to tradition, the fighting between both armies only takes place then⁷; combat ends after dusk and the armies retire to their stations where they remain until the next morning which means another suspension in the war narrative (e.g. RCM 6. 42. 2; 6. 44. 2; 6. 72. 2-4; 6. 77. 3-78. 1; 6. 99. 1-100. 3).

3. *Of Space*

When we think of the Laṅkā war in spatial terms, it is worth paying attention to the fact that the text does not speak of any specific, clearly defined battlefield, even if it is often depicted as such in paintings illustrating the *Rāmāyaṇa* war⁸. It is the city of Laṅkā and its surroundings that are the actual arena for the battle: fights take place right there, close to the city walls guarded by four gates (RCM 6. 39. 1) and the fort, and, later in the conflict, inside the city.

The fact that the arena of war embraces the whole of Laṅkā has important implications for the analysis of the *Rāmcaritmānas* narrative. This practically means that when we speak of the war, orienting ourselves towards its temporal dimension, we cannot isolate this perspective from the space in which it takes place: both the temporal and spatial dimensions of the events in Laṅkā are almost inextricably intertwined and practically inseparable. What is more, this dual spatial-temporal approach proves even more constructive in view of the fact that

7. See also Stasik 2016, 204.

8. See e.g. the paintings from a richly-illustrated seventeenth-century manuscript referred to as the *Jagat Singh Ramayana*, *Mewar Ramayana* or *Udaipur Ramayana*. Its four books (2, 4, 6, 7) are held in the British Library and are available at: <https://www.bl.uk/turning-the-pages/?id=68b0d8eb-787f-4609-9028-8cd17ff05c96&type=book> (last access 30.07.2022).

the spatial dimension, as more evident or visible, is easier to express in words. In fact, it seems to be better supported by the textual evidence, providing us with more productive insights into the problem of liminality in Tulsīdās's imagery of the battlefield of Laṅkā, largely founded on situations characteristic of the specific spatial and temporal passageway between what may be broadly understood as war and peace. It lets us better envisage the Laṅkā war in terms of the space between the known and the unknown, the space in which transitional beings⁹ and phenomena become an objective reality at a given moment in time. Thus, these are the moments when the preternatural, *i.e.* something that is beyond what is expected or normal¹⁰, comes to the fore. This category encompasses all the episodes which are concerned with the results of the *māyā*, understood as illusory, magical power (Avasthī 1991, 866), especially as used by *rākṣasas*, or demons, different fabulous weapons, special sacrifices – one by Meghanāda (RCM 6. 75. 1-76. 1), the other one by Rāvaṇa (RCM 6. 84-8) – and different kinds of demonic and ghostly creatures that populate the horrifying battle scenes (RCM 6. 87. 1-88. 4).

Let us focus first on *māyā*, the preternatural power of illusion, one of the tools used to build the battlefield narrative by means of a radical change in the course of imminent events. *Māyā* is particularly often resorted to by *rākṣasas*, especially the most important *rākṣasa* actors, and, of course, it is a prerogative of Rāma whose power of illusion, as we shall soon see, should also be understood as “delusion”, or a skillful counteraction of the illusion created by demons. What is important in Rāma's case is that the ability to use *māyā* effectively helps him to keep control of the entire Creation, to which demons unsuccessfully aspire and strive to seize from him.

The episodes in which *māyā* is employed should be seen as a kind of last resort after standard courses of action have failed; these episodes constitute key moments in the narrative, when one of the warring parties realises that the foe is gaining an advantage. An instant result of the use of *māyā* are unusual phenomena evoking curiosity and awe (*kautūha*) in those who witness them. The ensuing state of awesome senselessness suspends the normal functioning of such individuals, excluding them from fighting for some time, until the effects of *māyā* are finally broken by the mighty Rāma or his allies. The poem abounds with such images (*e.g.*

9. Turner 1986, 94.

10. This is the basic understanding of ‘preternatural’ applied in this paper: something beyond what is expected or normal. It can otherwise be understood as that which «stand[s] in the liminal space between the known world and the inexplicable», which is the meaning displayed on the website of the journal *Preternature. Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* (http://www.psupress.org/Journals/jnls_Preternature.html [last access 9.10.2021]).

6. 57. 1-58. 3, 6. 72, 6. 76. 6-8, 6. 88-89 *chand*, 6. 100); here let us take a closer look at three of them (RCM 6. 46. 5-47, 6. 51. 3-52 and 6. 73. 5-74 *ka*).

On the first day of fighting, when the demons realise that they are losing ground, their generals (Anipa, Akampan, Atikāya) take recourse to *māyā*. In an instant, complete darkness falls and the rain of blood, stones and ashes begins to fall. The distressed monkeys of Rāma's army, unable to see anyone, start calling to each other in fear. It is Rāma who dispels the darkness by shooting one of his arrows and bringing back light, thus restoring order to his ranks and their will to fight (RCM 6. 46. 5-47). Another example illustrating the narrative function of illusion is an episode that takes place on the second day of combat. Rāvaṇa's son, Meghanāda, attacks Rāma who deflects his assaults with great ease. Therefore, Meghanāda resorts to *māyā*. First, he causes a shower of hot coals to pour from heaven and jets of water to gush from the earth. All kinds of demons (*nānā bāti pīsācā pīsācī*) appear, dancing and shouting, inciting their comrades to fight. Then Meghanāda rains down excrement, pus, blood, hair and bones with intervening showers of stones. Finally, by causing a shower of dust, he brings about such darkness that nothing is visible at arm's length. Rāma, realising that all the monkeys are terrified, blows away the darkness by shooting one of his arrows and restoring brightness, which, in turn, returns the monkeys' will to fight (RCM 6. 51. 3-52). From a narrative and theological point of view in particular, the most interesting example is the episode in which the arrows shot at Rāma by Meghanāda, due to the power of his *māyā*, become snakes. They coil around Rāma and ensnare him, he who is 'independent, infinite, one and not subject to change' (*svabasa ananta eka abikārī*, RCM 6. 73. 6), who is well known as Time/Death himself (*kālarūpa*, RCM 6. 48 *kha*; *kālabhāṇa*, RCM 6. 56. 4) and yet has to be finally set free by Garuḍa¹¹ (RCM 6. 73. 5-74 *ka*).

The lord of birds seized the swarm
Of illusory snakes and ate them all.
When all the illusion was dispelled,
The entire monkey host rejoiced¹².

11. The mount or vehicle (*vahana*) of Viṣṇu, the king of birds, and an ardent enemy of serpents.

12. RCM 6. 74 *ka*: *khagapati saba dhari khāe māyānāga barūtha / māyā bigata bhae saba haraṣe bānara jūtha //*.

Let us make it clear that the seemingly contradictory image of Rāma used in this passage is part and parcel of his *līlā*, or the divine play (cf. *e.g.* 6. 101 *kha*).

Māyā is often supported or destroyed by different kinds of ordinary weapons mentioned by generic names simply as bows, arrows, spears, etc. But there are also preternatural weapons with remarkable properties, known by their proper name and/or origin, which are reserved for radical interventions, such as Viṣṇu's bow Śāṅga in Rāma's possession (*e.g.* RCM 6. 67. 1-68; 6. 86. 5-86 *chand*), or Brahmā's spear (*brahmadatta sakti*; RCM 6. 83. 4-83 *chand*) used by Rāvaṇa. For example, Śāṅga is used by Rāma in the final phase of the war, when Rāvaṇa, realising that the monkey army has gained a definite advantage and will soon win, resorts to *māyā*, thanks to which his true self becomes invisible. After a while he multiplies himself, and there appear as many Rāvaṇas on the battlefield, as there are Rāma's monkey and bear troops – the host of Rāvaṇas overshadow the daylight. Rāma's entire army and almost all the gods are terrified and take flight. Rāma reaches for Śāṅga and with one shot of its arrow restores everything to normal (RCM 6. 96. 1-97. 2). In this context, it seems justified to see the appearance in the poem's narrative of Rāvaṇa's monstrous, terrifying brother, Kumbhakarṇa, in terms of a miraculous weapon. However, as in the case of other interventions instigated by Rāvaṇa, it is doomed to failure (RCM 6. 62. 3-71).

In the war narrative, an important function of the battlefield imagery is performed by different ghostly beings and demons other than *rākṣasas*, such as *pīśācas*, *bhūtas*, *betālas* and *joginīs*. They are all the most characteristic dwellers of Indian epic battlefields who feast on fresh blood and other bodily secretions, corpses and bones, and are usually assisted in their sumptuous repasts by scavenger birds and animals¹³. It is worth noting that these creatures are also made to appear by means of *māyā* as part of special spectacles meant to frighten the opponents and prevent them from fighting (*e.g.* RCM 6. 52. 1).

Occasionally, moments of suspension in the narrative and more or less panic during fighting are discontinued, when the actors become aware that they are in the very state between life and death and this awareness begins to act as a stimulus, driving them to fight. This happens, for example, in the case of the aforementioned Kumbhakarṇa. Seeing the demon host crushed in an instant, he manages to gather together enough fresh strength which allows him to fight with Rāma's army for a while longer (RCM 6. 69. 1-71. 4). Another example of this can be found in a duel between Rāma and Rāvaṇa on the penultimate day of the war.

13. For more on the feasting on the Laṅkā battlefield, and on food and eating imagery in the battle passages of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, see Stasić 2016.

Rāma ceaselessly cuts Rāvaṇa's heads with his arrow shots but they keep on growing back. At a certain moment, Rāvaṇa, fully aware that his heads multiply, stops thinking of death. Brimming with fury, he rushes to fight with his ten bows ready to shoot at once (RCM 6. 92. 4-93)¹⁴.

It is noteworthy that the Laṅkā war, understood in terms of the liminal experience of the moments between life and death and especially the spaces beyond (e.g. RCM 6. 45. 1-2; 6. 45. 1-2; 6. 54. 3), does not affect the soldiers of both fighting armies in the same way. In the case of Rāma's warriors, even if they lose their life, it is only temporarily – after the war, the god Indra restores them all to life at the instigation of Rāma (RCM 6. 114. 1-5), while *rākṣasas*, Brahmin-eating demons, die and become liberated by Rāma. This was the fate of such prominent *rākṣasas* as Kālanemi (Rāvaṇa's uncle), whose mission was to kill Hanumān to whom he actually finally fell victim (RCM 6. 56-58. 3), and Rāvaṇa's valiant son Meghanāda, killed by Rāma's brother Lakṣmana (RCM 6. 76). And, last but not least, Rāvaṇa, the mighty opponent of Rāma, is also liberated after death, being 'devoured by him' – literally 'his [life] energy has filled the mouth of Lord [Rāma]' (*tāsu teju samāna prabhu anāna*; RCM 6. 103. 5). As I have observed elsewhere, «In this multi-layered image, Rām figures as the all-devouring Time/Death, the Death of Death that stops the cycle of rebirths, bringing about liberation and allowing one to commune with the Lord in his abode»¹⁵. Here I shall not enter into the discussion of this tricky problem, which is not conclusive despite the great amount of attention devoted to it in the commentarial tradition (both oral and textual). I would only emphasise that in this way, Tulsīdās's poem conveys a profound devotional message: in the eternal all-embracing kingdom of Rāma there is a place for all – even unapologetic sinners can become united with Rāma after dying with his name on their lips¹⁶.

4. Conclusions

The foregoing discussion of the Laṅkā war seen from the perspective of a liminal, or inter-structural, phase in the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative culminating in it, reveals its multifaceted character, unfolding simultaneously on different planes.

14. RCM 6. 92. 4-93: *dasamukha deki siranḥa kai bāṛhī/ bisarā matana bhaī risa gāṛhī// garjeu mūṛḥa mahā abhimānī/ dhāeu dasau sarāsana tānī//*.

15. Stasik 2016, 211.

16. For more on Rāma's image as the all-devouring Time/Death, see Stasik 2016.

First of all, the war as a political event deeply influences the social dimension of the Lankan society that is directly exposed to it. Its disruptive and yet simultaneously transforming effect on the hitherto existing, or implied, structures of the *Rāmāyaṇa* world is beyond any doubt. Its transformative quality makes it possible for the Lankan society to return to normal life, of course in a new form and on new terms under the leadership of the new ruler, Vibhīṣaṇa (RCM 6. 106. 1-106 *chand*). It is no wonder that the poem that is a major Hindi Bhakti text also gives great voice to the devotional dimension in its war imagery. This is especially manifest in the case of *rākṣasa* warriors who, having died with the name of Rāma on their lips, even if only by chance, become liberated and thus transposed to another existential dimension. Whereas, as mentioned previously, the monkeys and bears who fell on the battlefield are all restored to life – now they can continue their existence in a postwar order under Rāma's supremacy.

Outside Laṅkā, on the more general narrative plane, Sītā is restored to Rāma who can return home with his companions and be installed on the throne of Ayodhyā. This opens the way for him to fully implement *rāmrajya*, his righteous rule, not only in his kingdom and its society but in the entire Creation that has finally been brought out of chaos and put in order.

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