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THE SITUATION OF RĀVAṆA'S LANKĀ

THE LATE RAI BAHADUR DR HIRALAL, B A , D.LITT

It is a somewhat curious event that Ceylon should have been credited with the seat of Rāvaṇa's capital for centuries together, in spite of the clear indications of its situation, which the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa and the Purāṇas afford. The point attracted the attention of various scholars years ago with the result that they with cogent reasons discredited the popular belief so deeply rooted and endeavoured to lay the scene of Rāvaṇa's activities in places so far apart as Assam, Maldives and Malaya Peninsula. All these have however presented difficulties, which cannot be easily explained. A new theory, however, started about 15 years ago locating Laṅkā on the Amarakantaka peak of the Mekala range of the Vindhya mountains in Central India appears to be the most natural one and shows that Rāma who was banished for 14 years to live in jungles spent the whole of that time in Chitrakūṭa and the adjoining Daṇḍaka forests without going out of it during the whole period of his exile. It was in that forest that his wife Sītā was abducted by Rāvaṇa and it was within its limits that the great battle between him and Rāma took place, with the help of the leading aboriginal tribes inhabiting that wild region. Apparently the latter was divided into several *Janapadas*, a glimpse of which may be obtained from the Matsya¹ and Vāyu Purāṇas. Amongst the dwellers

¹ मालवाश्च करुषाश्च मेकलाश्चोत्कलैः सह ।

औपड्रा माषा दशार्णाश्च भोजाः किष्किन्धकैः सह ॥५२॥

स्तोशला कोसलाश्चैव त्रैपुरा वैदिशास्तथा ।

तुमुरास्तुम्बराश्चैव पद्गमा नैषधैः सह ॥५३॥

of the Vindhya mountains (विन्ध्यपृष्ठनिवासिनः) the mention of the Mekalas and the Kishkindhakas is very important in view of the part they played in the Rāmāyaṇa. The identification of these *Janapadas* was never critically examined, especially that of the latter, which in fact furnished the key to the location of Rāvaṇa's habitat. The cue was taken not from the Purāṇas referred to above, but from the statement of the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa itself, which Rao Bahadur Sardar Madhava Rao Kibe of Indore was the first to detect. He pointed out that Sugrīva, the Lord of Kishkindhā, while giving instructions to his Vānaras to go in all directions in search of Sītā after her abduction ordered the party going to the south to look well into the Narmadā, the Godāvarī, Mekhala, Utkala and a host of other rivers, mountains and countries.² From this the conclusion was unavoidable that Kishkindhā, the residence of Sugrīva, whence the order was delivered, lay to the north of the Narmadā. The Matsya and Vāyu Purāṇas corroborate this location, in that Kishkindhā was associated with Mekhala or Mekala, still going by that name and described in the latest Imperial Gazetteer as 'a range of hills in the Central Provinces and Central India. It is the connecting hill between the great hill system of the Vindhya

अरूपाःशौण्डिकेराश्च वीतिहोत्रा अवन्तयः ।

एते जनपदाः ख्याता विन्ध्यपृष्ठनिवासिनः ॥५४॥

—Matsya Purāṇa, Chapter 113

These very ślokas are found in Chapter 45 of the Vāyu Purāṇa (see verses 132 to 134) with slight variations due to misreading of the text

² सहस्रशिरस विन्ध्य नानाद्रुमलतायुतम् ।

नर्मदा च नदी रम्या महोरगनिषेविताम् ॥८॥

ततो गोदावरी रम्या कृष्णा वेणी महानदीम् । :

मेखलानुत्कलाश्चैव दशार्णनगरायपि ॥९॥

—Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Kishkindhā Kāṇḍa, Sarga 41

and Satpuras forming respectively the northern and southern walls of the Narmadā valley. Starting in the Khairāgarh state of the Central Provinces, the range runs in a general south-easterly direction for the first 46 miles in the British territory and then entering the Sohagpur pargana of Rewah state, terminates 84 miles farther at Amarakaṇṭhaka, one of the most sacred places in India, where the source of the Narmadā river is situated. Unlike the two great ranges which it connects, the Mekala forms a broad plateau of 880 square miles in extent, mostly forest country inhabited by Gonds. 'Local tradition relates that in the 4th and 5th centuries A. D., during the Gupta rule, this plateau was highly populated and the Rāmāyana and the Purāṇas mention the Mekalas as a tribe of the Vindhya range.' With the Mekalas thus identified it is now easy to find out the position of Kīshkindhā somewhere in the Bilaspur district, as it was almost contiguous to the former. This explodes the popular belief that Kīshkindhā lay on the banks of the Tungabhadra near the famous Vijayanagara, bordering on the southern-most corner of the Nizam's dominions, some 500 miles away to the south of the Narmadā. The whole of the Vindhya mountains and forests, in fact the whole of the Daṇḍakāraṇya which covered a major part of the present Central Provinces was inhabited by aboriginal tribes, chief of whom were the Gonds, the Oraons and the Śābaras, of which the last find mention even in the Vedic literature. Gonds exceed 20 lakhs in the Central Provinces alone and are closely connected with Rāvaṇa, to whom they trace their origin. In the Census of 1891, when sub-castes were ordered to be recorded, several lakhs of Gonds returned themselves as Rāvaṇa-vaṁśīs and the greatest Gond king who ruled about 400 years ago inscribed his name on gold coins as "Śrī Sangrāma Shāh, Paulastya-vaṁśa," thus mention-

ing prominently his connection with Rāvaṇa, as Paulastya-vaṁśa is an alternative name for Rāvaṇa-vaṁśa. Eaters of offal of almost every kind including kine, which they even up to day kill by way of an offering to the manes of their dead and do not hesitate to use cows for ploughing, which is extremely repugnant to the Hindus, combined with shocking uncleanness, as they still in certain wild tracts continue to clean with a stone without using any water after easing themselves, there is nothing to wonder at the Aryans calling Goṇḍas as Rākshasas or demons. This was accentuated by their personal deformity, which was aggravated by their ornaments of horns, which they still use by way of decoration in the Bastar state on occasions of rejoicings, dances, etc. So it is clear that Rāvāna was the king of these Rākshasas, which attendant circumstances confirm. For instance, Rāvāna had his armies stationed in the Daṇḍakāraṇya under Khara and Dūshana and even his female relative like Śūrpaṇakhā and Tādakā were found wandering in that jungle, whose audacity compelled Rāma to engage with them. If Rāvāna had no connection with Daṇḍakāraṇya and lived in Ceylon why should the royal ladies and armies have been found tramping a forest like this? Daṇḍakāraṇya was not the frontier of his kingdom, which, if it was Ceylon according to the popular belief, was over 800 miles away from the island and there is absolutely no proof that the intervening Madras Presidency and Nizam's dominions were ever under his sway.

The fact that he was called king of Laṅkā has been the source of all the confusion in locating his capital and country. Laṅkā really means a high place, an elevated ground and as such an island. It is still found used in this sense in the Uṛīya and Telugu countries. The peak of a mountain is as much a *laṅkā* as an island in the sea.

Therefore there is nothing inappropriate in calling the highest peak of the Mekala range, *viz*, Amarakaṇṭaka as Laṅkā, which finds a mention even in aboriginal songs³ For instance, the Korkus found only in the Betul and adjoining Amraotī districts, speaking a Muṇḍārī language, sing a song the purport of which is.—“ Rāvaṇa has come from Laṅkā and is standing on the village wrestling ground, ‘ Mothers and sisters ! come out and see ’ ‘ We have no proper ornaments and clothes, how are we to come out ’ ? ” The implication is that Rāvaṇa being their king, they could not appear before him without proper dress and ornaments Had he been a foreigner, they would not have cared to observe such an etiquette It is curious that in these tracts an annual ceremony called Meghanāda, after the name of Rāvaṇa’s son, is still performed and is reminiscent of the cruelties of the Crown Prince “ It consists in swinging a man in the air A high pole is erected and a cross-bar turning in a socket is secured to the top of it The Bhumkā (village priest) is tied to the cross-bar and ropes are secured to it and held by the people, who pull the cross-bar round five times in a circle in its socket In former times the Bhumkā was swung round suspended by a hook fixed in his back and the ceremony is supposed to exercise an important influence in the direction of securing the success of the crops⁴ Many persons who wish to get issues or similar other objects undergo a similar ordeal, which is now toned down to a mockery and of which the underlying idea was the performance of a penance whose efficacy increased in proportion of its severity Hook-swinging seems to have originated from Meghanāda,

³ For the actual song and its translation see Linguistic Survey of India. Gramophone records of Languages and Dialects spoken in the Central Provinces and Berar, supplied by the Central Provinces and Berar Administration, 1920, pp 24-25.

⁴ Russell’s Betul District Gazetteer, pp 56-57

whose name it continues to bear. Close to the Betul district where Korkus of Muṇḍā origin (and as such predecessors of the Dravidian people like Goṇḍs) live, lies the district of Nīmar with a sacred place Māṇdhātā on the banks of the Narmadā, which has been identified with Māhishmatī, the capital of Sahasrārjuna Kārtavīrya, who was a contemporary of Rāvaṇa. The former had once captured the latter and kept him bound for a considerable period. He finally let him go on the intervention of others. This points to quarrels which usually arise between neighbouring states and incidentally indicates the western limit of Rāvaṇa's kingdom.

Now let us examine the question with reference to the wanderings of Rāma and their indications. On leaving Ayodhyā Rāma went to Chitrakūṭa and stayed there for some time before entering the Dandaka forest, which lay to the south of Chitrakūṭa. He proceeded from one Rishi's *āśrama* to another Rishi's, until he reached Sutikshna's hermitage where he stayed for some time, as apparently he had a liking for it, in as much as he returned to it once more after an absence of several years. On leaving it a second time he proceeded to Agastya's *āśrama*, which was only 5 or 6 *Yojanas* away. There he was shown a suitable place for dwelling at Pañchavaṭī on the Godāvarī, only about two *Yojanas* from Agastya's hermitage. Rāma's party built a hut at Pañchavaṭī, from where Sītā was later on abducted by Rāvaṇa. From the distances and indications given in the Rāmāyaṇa it is clear that Sutikshna's *āśrama* lay about 30 miles from Chitrakūṭa and Pañchavaṭī was 48 miles further on. Kishkindhā was situated 18 miles still further. Thus the distance from Chitrakūṭa to Kishkindhā could not have been more than a hundred miles. This tallies well with the description given in

the Rāmāyaṇa, that Sītā was carried by air route weeping and throwing out ornaments and clothes which were picked up at Kīshkindhā and shown to Rāma, when he reached there in search of his wife. The one difficulty which presents itself in this connection is the absence of the Godāvārī, in the tract where Pañchavaṭī stood, 18 miles to the north of Kīshkindhā. It is this which led to its location at Nasik or Parṇasālā in the Bastar state, the latter situated just on the bank of the Godāvārī, separating it from the Nizam's dominions. With this location Kīshkindhā had to be placed at the southern end of the Haiderābād state in order to justify the course of events, which followed the abduction of Sītā as narrated in the Rāmāyaṇa. But this was all unnecessary in view of the fact, that there is still a Godāvārī, 11 miles from Chitrakūta, which has now lost itself in a well, like the Sarasvatī which originally flowed up to Allahabad joining the Ganges and Jammā at the Trivenī, but has now lost itself in the sands of Rajputana. It is very probable that the Godāvārī of Chitrakūta flowed past the Pañchavaṭī or a grove of five banyan trees where Rāma built his hut and subsequently changed its course and accidentally fell into a pit or well. It thus carried its waters through some sub-terrestrial passage to some unknown place. Its former channel during the march of centuries of course disappeared and the river thus became *gupta* (hidden), which its present name "Gupta Godāvārī" most appropriately represents. The great Godāvārī passing through Nasik and Parṇasālā is situated about 400 miles away from Agastya's *āśrama*, which was within 10 miles of Pañchavaṭī.

Another difficulty which oppresses the minds of the diehards is the absence of a *Sāgara* over which Rāma built a bridge to reach Laṅkā. The nearest *Sāgara* in the sense of a sea to the south is the Indian Ocean which

necessitated Laṅkā to be placed on the Ceylon or Siṃhala island, though Varāha-mihira and others clearly mention them as two distinct *dvīpas*. The last designation seems to them to further confirm their notion as they think a *dvīpa* cannot exist out of the sea. But both these ideas are incorrect. A *sāgara* does not necessarily mean a sea. It is also applied to any big reservoir of water, tank or lake, for instance, the *Kirāta-sāgara* of Mahobā, a tank built by Chandellās, the *Lachhamana-sāgara* of Bilahri, excavated by a Kalachari Rājā, whose name it bears, the *Sāgara* or tank which has given its name to a town and district in the northern-most corner of the Central Provinces and so on. AmaraKaṅṭaka even at the present day retains a big marsh on its southern scarp, while on the northern side there are marks of ripples formed on the rocks showing the existence of long standing water contact there. Geological investigations show that formerly a sea existed separating Northern India from the southern peninsula, of which the Rajputana desert is shown to be a remnant. But whether this sea existed or not during Rāma's time there can be no doubt about the existence of a large collection of water on the northern side of AmaraKaṅṭaka peak, while the southern side, was protected by marshes, etc., and the eastern by the sea-like expanse of the Son river which rises from the peak it protected. Any of these apparently could not be crossed over without the help of a bridge. Rāma was compelled to build one in order to reach Laṅkā. It is worthy of note that AmaraKaṅṭaka abuts on the Chhattisgarh Division of the Central Provinces. The latter is a land of water, full of tanks of which, 1400 existed in its former capital. Many have disappeared, but they have left names which are significant, like Mahāsamunda (Head-quarters of a tahsil of that name in the Raipur district). Nearer to Amara-

kaṅṭaka than Mahāsamunda lies the Lavana *parganā* with low lands suggesting its reclamation from water-clogged area, which may have been a part of the traditional Lavana Sāgara, within which Laṅkā was traditionally situated. Again a *dvīpa* in the Indian sense did not connote land surrounded on all sides by water, for instance, Śaka-dvīpa was an inland tract, the Jambudvīpa was bounded on its north side by a mountain, and so on. *Dvīpa* used for Laṅkā on the Amara-kaṅṭaka derived as it is from a source meaning anything surrounded by water on two sides, would thus satisfy the susceptibilities of even a scrupulous Sanskritist, though it is not necessary to do so, in view of the explanation given before.

Having now explained the main difficulties which one has to face at the out-set, and having shown that Laṅkā was really “कुमध्ये” or in the centre of land as stated by Varāha-mihira and not in the sea, I will now proceed to identify the local tribes that took part in the fight between Rāma and Rāvana. These as I have indicated before were Rākshasas or Gonds on the one side and Oraons and Śabaras on the other, whom Rāma took into his confidence. The whole country belonged to the Goṅḍṣ, once called Gondwānā after them. Their number exceeds 20 lakhs in the Central Provinces alone. To these must be added those living in the Rewa state in which Amara-kaṅṭaka is situated. The Vānaras are the present day Oraons who inhabit the neighbouring Bilaspur district and adjoining states and number about 9 lakhs. They are apparently the Bandarwas, who were described by Sir Richard Jenkins, Resident at the Court of the Rājā of Nagpur in 1827 A D, as residing in the hilly and woody country near Ratanpur (in the Bilaspur district). Says Sir Richard “They go entirely naked, are armed with bows and arrows, never build any huts,

or seek other shelter than that afforded by the jungles." Sir Charles Grant in his Gazetteer of the Central Provinces 1872 (see p 108) wrote that "a sub-division of them was addicted to living up the trees and to wandering about, both men and women, in a state of nature." The renowned anthropologist Rai Bahadur Sarat Chandra Roy of Ranchi who has written a big monograph on Oraons also holds the same view that their ancestors were the Vānaras of the Rāmāyaṇa. Their language shows that they are a Dravidian people like Goṇḍḥ. But they had a very strong reason to join Rāma's forces in view of the fact that Rāma had helped their chief Sugrīva in getting the Kīshkindhā throne. Śabarās numbering about 6 lakhs belong to the Muṇḍā stock and were ascendant before the Dravidians. They were apparently ousted by the Goṇḍḥ and were looking forward for an opportunity to wreak vengeance on their old enemies. This was afforded by Rāma's visit to Dandaka, for which they eagerly waited, as is evident from the devotion displayed by Śabarī, a woman of their tribe, who made preparations to welcome Rāma long before he reached her place, and received him with a warmth which secured for her the high honour of a Bhakta.

We have seen why the Oraons were classed as monkeys, but it is not known why Śabarās were put down as Rīkshas or bears, unless it was due to the comparative darkness of their colour accompanied with a comparative exuberance of hair on their bodies. It may be noted here that horns and tails assigned to the tribal people were not totally a myth. They really formed a part of the equipment of soldiers or warriors, as is still found to be the case amongst the Nāgās of Assam. Mr Hodson's account of the latter will convince any sceptic on these points. He writes "On gala days the costume of a warrior is most handsome. The cane helmet which is sometimes

covered with tiger or leopard skin bears a brass disc in front and thin crescents of buffalo horn tipped with red hair are fastened to it in front. I have seen a red and yellow painted structure made of thin lath worn on the helmet rising at least 2 feet above the peak of the cane helmet. This looks like a pair of horns which it may be intended to imitate. From the sides hang solid wooden discs decorated with red seeds, with the wings of the green beetle and with pendants of hair which also fringe the helmet at the back. The most curious ornament on these occasions is the caudal appendage with its curve upwards and a long hair fringe of the usual colours. The "tail" serves as a useful purpose, for it has a space hollowed out in which *pangis* (sharpened bamboo spikes) are kept by the warriors"⁵

⁵ The Naga Tribes of Manipur, p. 23
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