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MAHĀMAHOPĀDHYĀYA
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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॥

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 Goṇḍs. 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 Goṇḍs 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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