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A (Thin) Boundary Not to Be Crossed, or *Lakṣmaṇ-rekhā*

SUMMARY: This paper discusses the concept of *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* that originates in the later *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition and for centuries has functioned as a metaphorical expression denoting a strict (moral) boundary that should not be crossed, as its transgression inevitably exposes one to danger. It has featured prominently in Indian public discourse on female chastity and is also very much present in different socio-cultural and political contexts, often vocalised in literature, works of art, etc. In the concept of *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā*, one of the most basic and at the same time most important functions performed in culture by symbolic boundaries is manifested—the function of delineating the known, familiar, safe and permissible from the unknown, unfamiliar, dangerous, impermissible. Significantly, these boundaries have inherent moral weight and help individuals as well as whole societies to structure and regulate the universe they live in, on the micro- and macro-scale.

In this paper, first I discuss textual evidence that can be found in well-known Hindi *Rāmāyaṇa*s such as the *Rāmcaritmānas*, the *Rāmcandrikā* and *Rādheśyām Rāmāyaṇ*, as well as in the *Sūrsāgar*. This analysis of literary material is meant to contextualise various levels of explicit and implicit meanings of the concept of *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* that emerge from traditional sources in Hindi. In the second part of this article, I offer a survey of relevant Hindi dictionary entries and then focus on modern non-literary (and not only Hindi) usages of *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā*. Finally, I place the previously examined literary and linguistic material in the context of the findings of contemporary social scientists on the concept of symbolic boundaries (Epstein 1992). It is hoped that this study that gives emphasis to structuring and regulating (but not only) aspect of boundaries can contribute to our understanding of how broadly

understood safety and values are negotiated in contemporary Indian society by way of drawing (ethical) boundaries and what happens if they are compromised.

KEYWORDS: female chastity, Hindi literary tradition, North Indian ethos, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Rāmcaritmānas*, *Rāmcandrikā*, *Rādheśyām Rāmāyaṇ*, *Sūrsāgar*, symbolic boundaries

> ...always on the other side of a boundary—whether we call it a seema, a lakshman rekha or kalapani, (...), or simply a wall—lies a fear and danger.
>
> (Nair 2010: 282)

1. Introductory remarks

The concept of *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* (lit. 'Lakṣmaṇa's line; a line [drawn] by Lakṣmaṇa')[1] for centuries has functioned as a metaphorical expression denoting a strict (moral) boundary that should not be crossed, as its transgression inevitably exposes one to danger. It is very much present in different socio-cultural and political contexts, often vocalised in literature, or works of art, etc., and also forms an important element in public discourse on female chastity.

This concept originates in the later *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, in which the episode of drawing *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* is very common. As it seems, the earliest Indian text that it can be traced to is the *Mahānāṭaka* (Act 3, 65), a Sanskrit narrative drama, or more precisely its eastern

[1] Due to different pronunciation and transliteration/transcription rules with respect to Sanskrit and Hindi words that are written in the same way in the Devanāgarī script, throughout my paper I use Sanskrit forms in the case of the names of (literary) characters and places, in order to avoid confusion and multiplying different forms of words. Otherwise I follow the transcription commonly used for Hindi, in which short 'a' is usually dropped in final and certain intersyllabic positions. Thus, I write *Lakṣmaṇa* but *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā*, Rāma but *Rāmcaritmānas* and *Rāmcandrikā*.

edition by Madhusūdana Miśra (10–14th century).[2] Among vernacular *Rāmāyaṇa*s the Telugu fourteenth-century *Dvipada Rāmāyaṇa*, commonly known as *Raṅganātha Rāmāyaṇa* after the name of its assumed author,[3] comes to prominence not only because of its relatively early date. In this version, Lakṣmaṇa, before he leaves Sītā alone, draws as many as seven lines around their hermitage instead of a customary one line (3.18).[4] Among other works there are: the Sanskrit *Ānanda Rāmāyaṇa* with the *terminus ad quem* in the first half of the 16th century (1.7.100) that proudly claims the authorship of Vālmīki,[5] the famous Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* by Kṛttivās Ojhā, probably of the late fifteenth century,[6] or the sixteenth-century *Bhāvārtha Rāmāyaṇa* by the Marathi poet Eknāth,[7] the oldest and most respected *Rāmāyaṇa* in western India (Bulke 1999: 358).

The episode of drawing *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* forms an inherent part of a longer series of events devised by Rāvaṇa that ultimately lead to the abduction of Sītā. It is an important element in his revenge on Rāma for the mutilation of Śūrpanakhā and assumes

[2] *Mahānāṭaka* 1969. The *Mahānāṭaka*, or the *Hanumannāṭaka*, originated in the 10th or 11th century but continued to grow at least until the 13th or 14th century; its western version by Dāmodara Miśra is considered to be earlier than the eastern version by Madhusūdana Miśra (Bulke 1999: 163, 358; Brockington 1985: 249 and Brockington 1998: 490).

It should be noted that the episode is also popular outside India and can be found in the Khotanese Rāmāyaṇa dated to the 9th century CE and the *Rāmāyaṇa*s of South-East Asia; Bulke 1999: 358.

[3] Bulke 1999: 178, Brockington 1985: 276 and Rao 1995: 59.

[4] Cf. a Hindi translation of *Raṅganātha Rāmāyaṇa* 1961: 153. For more on the episode itself and the number of lines, see the next two paragraphs of this article.

[5] Its date is uncertain but it was known to Eknāth (1533–1599), one of the most important Bhakti poets (on Eknāth, see the latter part of the sentence); Bulke 1999: 134, 358.

[6] Smith 1994: 30 and Bulke 1999: 189. Dušan Zbavitel is of the opinion that it was composed at the beginning of the 15th century; Zbavitel: 1976: 135, 141.

[7] Tulpule is of the opinion that it was composed in the latter part of Eknāth's life, left incomplete and probably finished by one of his disciples; Tulpule 1979: 354–359; Brockington 1985: 285–286.

different narrative shapes in different *Rāmāyaṇa* renderings but the core structure of the episode that takes place in the forest of Pañcavaṭī can be summarised as follows.

Rāma, at the request of Sītā, sets off after a golden, jewel-studded deer, who in fact is the demon Mārīca playing an instrumental role in Rāvaṇa's scheming. Rāma leaves Sītā in their hermitage under the protection of his brother Lakṣmaṇa and, chasing the deer, goes away from their dwelling. When his arrow hits the deer, Mārīca imitates Rāma's voice and calls for Lakṣmaṇa to come to his aid. Sītā hears his cry, panics and insists that Lakṣmaṇa goes to help Rāma.

Two points are worth noting here. On the one hand, Rāma orders Lakṣmaṇa to stay in the hermitage with Sītā and take care of her. On the other hand, Sītā, despite knowing her husband's command and its implications for Lakṣmaṇa, in many versions adopts a line of argument which is often seen as very unfair towards him and implies a despicable picture of him. She accuses Lakṣmaṇa of being interested to get her in the absence of his brother, and this trait can be found in the text of Vālmīki's version:

> I think you would be happy should some disaster befall your brother. You have no affection for him, so you stand there calmly with the splendid prince gone from sight. For with him in danger and me here, how could I prevent what you came here with the sole intention of doing? (...) I feel certain you are pleased with all this, and that is why you can talk the way you do. It is nothing new, Lakṣmaṇa, for rivals to be so evil, cruel rivals like you always plotting in secret. You treacherously followed Rāma to the forest, the two of you alone: You are either in the employ of Bharata or secretly plotting to get me. (3. 43.8–7, 20–22)[8]

Thus, Lakṣmaṇa is a 'double hostage' to his brother's command and to Sītā's demands. He tries to defend himself but at last reluctantly concedes to her pleading and sets out, disobeying thus Rāma's command.

[8] In Pollock's translation: *Rāmāyaṇa*: 177–178.

Before he leaves, with his bow or, depending on a rendering, with an arrow, he draws a line around their dwelling and solemnly swears to gods that whoever violates this line, trying to go inside the circle, will lose his/her life.[9] When Sītā stays alone, Rāvaṇa in the guise of a wandering mendicant approaches the dwelling and asks her for alms. First, she panics, not being sure how to attend his request. Finally, she offers him hospitality in a manner befitting a holy man, but when she extends her hand over the line to give him water/food, Rāvaṇa grabs Sītā's hand and abducts her.

2. The textual evidence in Hindi literary tradition

The episode can be found in a number of well-known *Rāmāyaṇa* tellings in Hindi, though it is absent as such from Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas* (1574), the most influential *Rāmāyaṇa* in North India. Nevertheless, the concept of *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* is well known to its author and is vocalised by Mandodarī, who strongly rebukes, even derides, Rāvaṇa for his overconfidence when he does not want to give Sītā back to Rāma and thus pushes for war with him. Mandodarī tells Rāvaṇa:

> [Oh my] beloved, please come to senses, get rid of this folly.
> War with Rāma does not befit you.
> His younger brother had drawn a thin line
> Which you could not [even] cross—such is your manhood!
> (6.36.1)[10]

The episode of drawing *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* finds its place in other well-known *Rāmāyaṇa* renderings belonging to the Hindi classical tradition. It also forms a part of the *Sūrsāgar*[11] in its most popular and

[9] In Dāmodara Miśra's version of the *Mahānāṭaka*, this is Rāma himself who draws the line, while in some renderings, this is Lakṣmaṇa who draws three lines symbolising three gods: Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva; Bulke 1999: 358.

[10] *kanta samujhi mana tajahu kumatihī | soha na samara tumhahi raghupatihī || rāmanuja laghu rekha khacāī | sou nahi nāghehu asi manusāī ||*

[11] For more on the authorship and history of the *Sūrsāgar*, see Hawley 2005: 194–207 and Hawley: 2015: vii–xxiii, especially xii–xv.

widespread Nāgarī Prācāriṇī Sabhā edition (Sūrdās 1958: 205–206), though it is absent from the edition based on the oldest known manuscripts of Sūrdās's poems, including the Fatehpur manuscript dated to 1582 (Surdas 2015). In the Nāgarī Prācāriṇī Sabhā's Sūrsāgar, the episode's elliptical, highly-contextualised form testifies to the fact that its details are well-known to North Indian audiences:

> Then Mārīca acquired the form of a deer, and that wretched one went off, coming into view time and again.
> Śrī Raghunātha took a bow in his hand. When the arrow hit [Mārīca], he reached his final fate.
> Jānakī, hearing a cry 'Oh, Lakṣmaṇa!', got very disturbed and restless and was about to rush [to Rāma].
> [Lakṣmaṇa] drew a line around [their] dwelling [and set out, crying] 'Oh, Raghuvīra, where are you, brother?'
> At once Rāvaṇa smeared [his body with] ashes and approached [Sītā], saying 'Mother, please give me *bhikṣā*.'[12]
> Recognising him as [a *sādhu*] in need, coming to her senses, she paid him respect and offered him *bhikṣā*; he abducted her... (9.59)[13]

In Keśavdās's *Rāmcandracandrikā* (1601), commonly known as *Rāmcandrikā*, the entire episode comprises fifteen stanzas (12.6–20). It takes place after Sītā hears the cry, as she thinks, of Rāma, and demands that Lakṣmaṇa leaves her and goes to help his brother (12.15–18). It is noteworthy that the poet devoted considerable attention to a heated exchange between Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa. Before he finally set out,

> He drew a line with his bow and taking gods as his witnesses, [said]:
> 'Any living creature, good or evil, who crosses it, will be burnt to ashes.'
> Taking the opportunity [that Sītā was left alone],
> The wily lord of Lanka came.

[12] *Bhikṣā*—here: food asked as alms.

[13] *...mṛga-svarūpa mārīca dharyau taba, pheri calyau bāraka jo dikhāī | śrīrāghunātha dhanuṣa kara līnhau, lāgata bāna deva-gati pāī || hā lachimana, suni ṭera jānakī, bikala bhaī, ātura uṭhi dhāī | rekhā khaîci bāri bandhana maya, hā raghubīra kahā̃ hau bhāī || rāvana turata bibhūti lagāe, kahata āi, bhicchā dai māī | dīna jāni, sudhi āni bhajana kī, prema sahita bhicchā lai āī | hari sītā lai calyau.||*

> Jānakī considered him to be a [humble] mendicant;
> He called her [to give] him generous alms.
> That rouge abandoned all diffidence
> And [returned to] his terrible form.
> He grabbed her into the sky as Rāhu does with the crescent Moon.[14]
> (12.18–19)[15]

Finally, let us scrutinise one of the most popular Hindi *Rāmāyaṇa*s composed by Rādheśyām Kathāvācak (1890–1963), commonly known after its author's name as *Rādheśyām Rāmāyaṇ* (written probably in the 1920s). It may be noted here that till the present day, this work is well-known and used during devotional gatherings as well as in Rāmlīlā performances and its popularity added significantly to the stabilization of the standard form of modern Hindi.[16] The entire episode[17] has an elaborate form comprising two hundred and twenty-four verses interspersed with three songs influenced by the style of the popular Parsi theatre for which Rādheśyām worked (Stasik 2009: 167). It is the longest and the most detailed elaboration among the renderings analysed for the purpose of this paper. The climax of this narrative is as follows:

> While parting, he had enough sense
> To draw a line all around Sītā.
> He said: 'Mother, now I am going. [Please] take care and behave cautiously!
> I [have] remained a servant true to a command,
> [Please] stay within this circle.

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[14] A reference to a Hindu mythological belief that Rāhu, one of the nine planets (*navagraha*) in Vedic astrology, depicted as the head of a snake, swallows the Sun and the Moon causing their eclipses.

[15] *cāpakīya rekha khẽci deva sākhi dai calai | nākhihaĩ te bhasma hohĩ jīva je bure bhale || chidra tāki chudrabuddhi laṅkanātha āiyo | bhakṣu jāni jānakī su bhīkha kõ bulāiyo | soca poca mocikai sakoca bhīma bheṣa ko | antarikṣa hī harī jyõ rāhu candrarekha ko* ||; Keśavdās 1996: 286.

[16] For more about *Rādheśyām Rāmāyaṇ*, see Stasik: 2009: 167–171.

[17] Rādheśyām n.d., 3.11: 5–16.

Whoever transgresses this line
And enters [our] hermitage,
I, Lakṣmaṇa, swear that
He will be burnt to ashes on the spot. (3.11, pp. 11–12)[18]

Finally, when Sītā is left alone, Rāvaṇa approaches her in the disguise of a wandering mendicant (*jogī*,[19] *fakīr*[20]). He has an *iktārā*[21] in his hand and sings a pious song, then he asks Sītā for food.[22] She wants to give him the fruit which is in the hermitage. Rāvaṇa moves forward to take it but stops when he sees a line between them that changes colour and which, when he tries to go ahead, seems to blaze with flames. Rāvaṇa realises that crossing it will mean death for him, so instead of trespassing it, he tells Sītā that holy men never take this type of 'bonded alms' (*bādhī bhikṣā*[23]), i.e. the one that is given (as if) against the principle of free will of the donor. Sītā is unwilling to get out of the circle but at the same time frantic with worry how to avoid insulting a *sādhu* and to fulfil *dharma* by entertaining a guest. Seeing no other solution, she compromises on her safety and decides to cross the line. The moment she does so, Rāvaṇa takes on his true appearance and abducts her.

3. Modern usage

Dictionaries of modern standard Hindi, such as *Bṛhat hindī koś* and *Mānak hindī koś*,[24] gloss *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* as a boundary, which under no circumstance can be crossed. *Bṛhat hindī koś* defines it as 'a boundary,

[18] *jāte jāte bhī unhẽ, itnā rahā vivek–| sītā ke cārõ taraf rekhā khĩcī ek || phir bole– 'jātā hũ̃ mã̃ ab tum sāvadhān hokar rahnā | ājñā ke bhītar dās rahā tum rekhā ke bhītar rahnā || is rekhā kā ullaṅghan kar, jo parṇkuṭī āegā | hai ān use yah lakṣmaṇ kī, vah vahĩ bhasm ho jāegā* || (...)'

[19] E.g. Rādheśyām n.d., 3.11: 12.

[20] E.g. ibid., 3.11: 13.

[21] A one-string traditional instrument often used by wandering holy men.

[22] Rādheśyam n.d., 3.11: 12–13.

[23] Ibid., 3.11: 14.

[24] It should be noted that the monumental lexicographical work *Hindī śabdsāgar* does not contain this phrase; Dās 1965–1975.

a limit or a rule that can be neither violated nor transgressed,'[25] and *Mānak hindī koś* supplements this definition by saying that it is 'such a border in the form of a line that by no means can be violated and crossed.'[26] Though neither of these glosses explicitly says so, this is also understood that crossing the line is at one's peril and leads to undesirable consequences. What is more, the gloss of *Bṛhat hindī koś* features the noun *maryādā*. Apart from its common literal meaning 'limit, boundary', it is also much more often used in its metaphorical meaning 'bounds (of law, usage); custom; convention; correct behaviour; decorum; norm(s); code of conduct; honour,'[27] which is deeply rooted in North Indian ethos, in the Hindu as well as Sikh (in the concept of *rahit maryādā*) socio-cultural milieus.[28] And this is this meaning that has a lot of bearing on the entire concept of *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* practically viewed, as we will see in a moment, as synonymous with *maryādā* in its figurative meaning.[29]

The phrase *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* functions in common parlance in different contexts and forms a constituent element (though sometimes evoking controversies) of the discourse on symbolic boundaries. Let me give just a few illustrative examples chosen from among a multitude of its occurrences in books and the media, in which this concept has been used by different authors referring to varied, vital social issues.

Girja Kumar, in his book of 1997 on censorship in India, in a chapter devoted to a famous Urdu writer, Sadaat Hasan Manto (1912–1955), whom he calls 'the perpetual rebel', observes that 'The left/progressive

[25] *aisī sīmā, maryādā ājñā ādi jiskā ullaṅghan yā atikramaṇ na kiyā jā sake*; Prasād 2005: 974.

[26] *aisī rekhākār sīmā jo kisī prakār lā̃ghkar pār na kī jā saktī ho*; Varmā 2007: 542.

[27] Cf. Prasād 2005: 875; Varmā: 303; McGregor 1993: 794; Jagannāthan 2009: 382.

[28] It may be also noted here that in some respects it can be compared with the concept of *izzat* that operates as its functional equivalent in a number of, broadly speaking, North Indian contexts.

[29] See e.g. https://www.quora.com/What-is-Lakshman-Rekha-according-to-the-Ramayana# (1.09.2016).

lobby is the most powerful lobby in India in the field of art, media and academia. You are not only protected but also promoted, so long you are a part of it. In return, you are expected to operate within the circumlocution and never to cross *lakshman-rekha* laid down by political overlords' (Kumar 1997: 133).

Achyut Yājñik and Suchitra Sheth in their book *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva, and Beyond* published in 2005, while discussing the spatial segregation of Dalits, observe: 'In the traditional layout of both villages and cities, they always had separate colonies and this arrangement continues till today and one would scarcely find a Dalit in a Savarna housing complex. Even during the height of "Hindu unity", no attempts were made, from either side, to breach this Lakshman rekha' (Yājñik and Sheth 2005: 293).

In Ramachandra Guha's essay focusing on the obstacles to writing of contemporary history in India, one finds a very interesting formulation: '60 years after Independence, August 15, 1947 remains a "lakshman rekha" observed faithfully on either side of the divide. Historians of India do not transgress beyond that date. Sociologists and political scientists do not look back before that date' (Guha 2008: 192).

Madhu Purnima Kishwar remarked on what she called 'a moral advisory' issued in 2015 by American scholars to Silicon Valley professionals before a planned visit of the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, that they 'should boycott India as an investment destination because its current prime minister is allegedly a tainted man and is "almost certainly" going to misuse information technology for spying on its citizens.' She continues: 'This is not the first time American academics have crossed the *Lakshman Rekha* that divides honest, well-meaning criticism from witch-hunting for ideological reasons' (Kishwar 2015).

In mid-May 2016, the Indian media commented at length on the government embarrassment over some observations by the courts. Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, expressing concern over judicial overreach, said: 'Judicial review is (a) legitimate domain of judiciary but then the Lakshman rekha has to be drawn by all the institutions

themselves. (The) Lakshman rekha is very vital (…) executive decisions are to be taken by the executive and not the judiciary.'[30]

Since then the growing chasm between the judiciary and the Modi government has been vocalised a number of times on different occasions, one of them being Constitution Day celebrations in 2016, when the attorney general, Mukul Rohatgi, admonished judges not to cross their *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā*. He said: 'The Constitution sets out a *lakshman rekha* for all three organs of democracy (judiciary, legislature and executive). They all should be self-controlled and self-restrained. (...) The judiciary must realise that it has a *lakshman rekha* to follow. Greater the power, greater should be the circumspection, only then equilibrium will be restored.'[31]

And finally, let us focus on a chronologically earlier comment by Madhya Pradesh Industry Minister Kailash Vijayvargiya. In January 2013, a few weeks after a brutal gang rape in Delhi,[32] it stirred controversy by suggesting that if women breach their limits, they ask for punishment. This comment is especially important in the context of our analysis as it does not only use the phrase *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* but also the *Rāmāyaṇa* imagery, directly referring to the episode itself. Kailash Vijayvargiya said: 'There is one word—*maryādā*, a moral limit. If it is crossed, an abduction of Sītā happens. Everyone should abide by one's limits.[33] If they are transgressed, Rāvaṇa is just out there ready to kidnap Sītā.'[34] Vijayvargiya's remark agitated Indian women

[30] Courts Can't Substitute Executive, Must Draw Lakshman Rekha: Arun Jaitley, *The Indian Express*, 17 May, 2016.

[31] Lakshman Rekha for Judges, *The Telegraph*, 27 November 2016 (https://www.telegraphindia.com/1161127/jsp/frontpage/story_121580.jsp#.WKjNI4XWJSQ, 18.02.2017; see also https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/lakshman-rekha-for-judges/cid/1485330, 20.06.2019).

[32] For an interesting analysis of this appalling act in the context of Hindu imagination, also referring to Vijayvargiya statement, see Brown and Agrawal 2014.

[33] Lit. 'There is a *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* drawn for everyone.'

[34] *Ek hī śabd hai—maryādā. Maryādā kā ullaṅghan hotā hai, to Sītā-haraṇ ho jātā hai. Lakṣmaṇ-rekhā har vyakti kī khĩchī gaī hai. Us Lakṣmaṇ-rekhā ko koī bhī pār karegā, to Rāvaṇ sāmne baiṭhā hai, vah Sītā-haraṇ karke le jāegā*. Women Crossing Laxman-rekha Will Be Punished: BJP leader, *Firstpost*, 4 January, 2013

and especially hurt the sentiments of women activists seeing in it not only an attempt to keep women in bonds of tradition but also a warning that women breaching them would be punished. What is interesting, the BJP disassociated itself from that statement and the minister finally apologised for his remark and stressed that it was not meant against women. 'Let me clarify that my statement was not women-centric and it is applicable to all in the society (...) politicians, media. But if it is being considered only against women then I have no problem in withdrawing it.'[35]

4. *Lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* at work: Conclusions

Before we proceed with a summary systematising the structure and meaning of this episode that is constructed in literary sources and is reflected in modern usage, in order to methodologically contextualise it, let us turn to the findings of contemporary social scientists on the concept of symbolic boundaries. This concept denotes cultural practices that sort and divide people and things and thus serves as a means of social demarcation—actual and symbolic. Its very neat exposition, well suited for the purpose of the present study, can be found in a seminal, oft-quoted article by Cynthia Fuchs Epstein—'Tinkerbells and Pinups: The Construction and Reconstruction of Gender Boundaries at Work' (Epstein 1992: 232–256). Epstein defines symbolic boundaries as the lines that include and define some people, groups and things while excluding others.[36] She also makes a very important observation: 'boundaries mark the social territories

(https://www.firstpost.com/politics/women-who-cross-laxman-rekha-will-be-punished-bjp-leader-578003.html, 18.02.2017).

[35] Don't Cross 'Lakshman Rekha,' Minister Tells Women, *The Hindu*, 5 January, 2013 (https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/dont-cross-lakshman-rekha-minister-tells-women/article4273131.ece, 17.07.2017). See also a cartoon below in this article that was published during that time.

[36] Epstein 1992: 232. Cf. Epstein's formulation with Lamont 2001: 172 as well as with Lamont and Molnár 2002: 168, where they state: 'Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality.'

of human relations, signalling who ought to be admitted and who excluded. Moreover, there are rules that guide and regulate traffic, and these rules instruct on the conditions under which boundaries may be crossed' (ibid.: 233).

In the context of the concept of *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā*, especially two constituent elements of Epstein's definition seem important. Firstly, the clearly delineated (social) territories and, secondly, the question of the rules that regulate traffic among them. They both are important as they lead us to a series of fundamental questions that are asked to date and receive contradicting answers.[37]

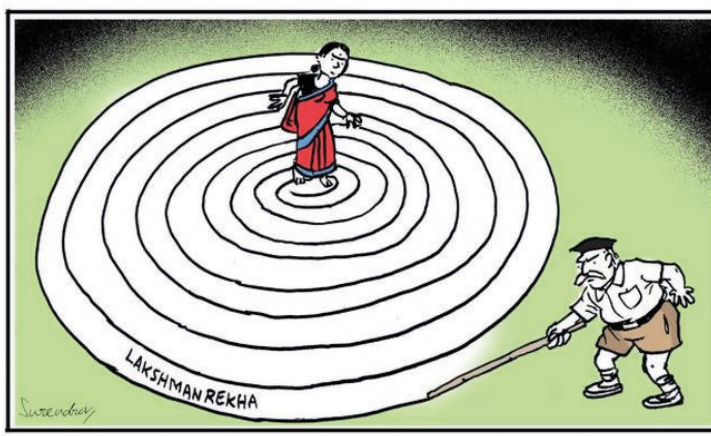
For whom has actually Lakṣmaṇa drawn his *rekhā*? For Rāvaṇa, or anyone else, who in view of the pledge made by Lakṣmaṇa cannot anyway cross it and enter the inner circle or else he loses his life? Or for Sītā, just to keep her (safe) within the circle? As is well known from the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, when she crosses the line, even if almost symbolically, i.e. by extending her hand over it, though she does not lose her life nevertheless she puts herself in danger and eventually is abducted by Rāvaṇa (Mehta 2012: 265). Is then *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* meant both for Rāvaṇa (as well as other 'outsiders') and Sītā (the 'insider')?

Using Epstein's phrasing, we can say that *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* delineates social (i.e. socially sanctioned) territories of human relations—it separates the known, familiar, safe and permissible from the unknown, unfamiliar, dangerous, impermissible; it also regulates traffic between them. Thus, for Sītā, symbolising (chaste) women, during the absence of her kinsmen and at her own will, there is no way out from the circle drawn by Lakṣmaṇa. In fact, this symbolises social supervision of women (aiming at controlling women's sexuality) and functions as a guard of the bounds of propriety as well as the exponent of the rules that govern it. When Sītā crosses the line, as we know not

[37] See e.g. a discussion 'What is the significance of Lakshman Rekha in Ramayan, for whom Lakshman Rekha was created? Was it for sita aur was it for ravana?' on https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-significance-of-Lakshman-Rekha-in-Ramayan-for-whom-Lakshman-Rekha-was-created (15.07.2016). Though its participants often err in their statements due to their evident lack of knowledge of the textual history of the episode, yet their opinions reflect contemporary notions of its meaning.

at her own initiative but at her peril, she pays a very high price. For Rāvaṇa, epitomising men with their yearnings and desires and danger as such, there is simply no way in ('authorised persons only')—such a possibility is not envisaged in the cultural *imaginarium*.

Thus, the overall structure of the episode, epitomised in the concept of *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā*, is expressive of the rules that regulate traffic between the inner circle, which refers us to a domestic/private sphere, and what is outside, i.e. the outer world/public sphere. It also conveys the message that even an unintentional breach exposes one to fatal or at least undesired consequences. It clearly delineates gender boundaries but also forms a constituent element of the discourse on women's social roles and conduct as well as (female) chastity. However, as the foregoing discussion has revealed, this concept cannot be reduced only to this. Its noteworthy feature is also that it is conceptualised both as a circle, according to the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, and as a straight line. Thus it can be, and in fact is, applied to delineate different types of boundaries with different moral weight among territories and time of social interaction, individuals and groups of people, competences: social, cultural, etc. and—what is very telling—is readily used by people hailing from different ideological backgrounds, not only from the Hindu right as implicated by a cartoon published in *The Hindu*.



The Hindu 8 January 2013
(http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/cartoon/article4283873.ece 17.07.2016)

Looking at the concept of *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* strictly from the point of view of socio-cultural values, we can say that inside, or on 'this', familiar side of the boundary, there are protected values as well as they carriers, while outside, on the other, unfamiliar side, there are those who (factually or only potentially) pose a threat to them. The way from inside is theoretically possible but is always charged with the risk of losing the values, and such a danger is almost inevitable. There is no doubt that the move from outside inside always means an attack, violation of the values (whatever they are).

When we look at the *Hindu* cartoon, also considering this point of view, we realise the bitter irony inherent in it. In fact, it does not only indicate an attempt at strengthening the values (in this case women's chastity), their better protection—its spiral form, and not of a single-line circle, also blurs the originally clearly-cut boundary.

I hope that in the foregoing analysis of the concept of *lakṣmaṇ-rekhā* I have managed to give enough emphasis to structuring and regulating aspect of boundaries, and thus to add to our understanding of how safety is negotiated in contemporary Indian society by way of drawing (ethical) boundaries and what happens if they are compromised.

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