

Anna Trynkowska
a.trynkowska@uw.edu.pl
(University of Warsaw, Poland)

The Metaphor of Boundary Crossing in Classical Sanskrit Literature

SUMMARY: The paper deals with the metaphor THE NON-PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES ARE PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES in Classical Sanskrit literature (*kāvya*), especially in the *mahākāvya* (*sargabandha*) or the court epic genre. Several selected instances of the usage of this metaphor are analysed here in detail in their various contexts. In the stanzas discussed in the paper, the metaphor is skillfully elaborated by the authors: a man staying within/breaking/crossing the boundaries of law and/or propriety (*maryādā*) is most frequently metaphorically conceptualized as the ocean, normally staying within the boundaries of its shoreline (*maryādā/velā*) but violently overflowing them during universal destruction (*pralaya*).

KEYWORDS: *kāvya*, *mahākāvya*, *sargabandha*, metaphor, boundary, *maryādā*, ocean

“Crossing boundaries” in the topic of the present volume may be understood literally; therefore, the contributors could devote their papers to the representation of travels, commerce, military campaigns, etc. in Indian literature and art, as suggested by the editors themselves. Metaphorical interpretations of the expression are possible as well; thus, papers on various non-physical boundary transgressions as represented in Indian literature and art could also have been expected. My paper takes yet another approach and deals with the powerful metaphor of boundary crossing in its own right. I present here several selected instances of its usage in Classical Sanskrit literature (*kāvya*), especially in the *mahākāvya* (*sargabandha*) or the court epic genre, which is my special field of research; they are analysed in detail in their

context. Speaking here of a metaphor, I mean the conceptual metaphor as defined by cognitive linguists (see Lakoff and Johnson 2003; see also, e.g., Lakoff and Turner 1989, Kövecses 2002, Kövecses 2007);¹ in the present paper, I use the terminology and methodology of cognitive linguistics throughout.

In Indian culture, the metaphorical conceptualization of non-physical boundaries in terms of physical boundaries is deeply entrenched. In Sanskrit, this manifests itself, for example, in the well conventionalized metaphorical meaning of the word *maryādā* ‘a frontier, [...] boundary, border, bank, shore’, but also ‘the bounds or limits of morality and propriety, rule or custom, distinct law or definition’ (Monier-Williams 2002: 791); similarly, the word *sīman* means ‘a boundary, border, bounds, limit, margin, frontier (lit. and fig.)’ (Monier-Williams 2002: 1218) and the word *sīmā* means both ‘a boundary’ and ‘rule of morality’ (Monier-Williams 2002: 1219).

In Classical Sanskrit literature, this metaphor is present from the very beginnings. In the second canto (*sarga*) of Aśvaghōṣa’s court epic poem *Saundarananda* (1st century AD²), King Śuddhodana is extolled in the following manner:

¹ As I wrote elsewhere: “In brief, in the cognitive linguists’ view, metaphor is a mental process, in which certain aspects of one conceptual domain (as any coherent organization of knowledge is called), usually more abstract and elusive, referred to as target domain, are comprehended in terms of certain aspects of another conceptual domain, usually more concrete and better known, referred to as source domain; to be more precise, metaphor consists in a set of correspondences, referred to as mappings, between the constituent elements of a source domain and the constituent elements of a target domain. Many metaphors also map our additional extensive and detailed knowledge about source domains onto target domains; such mappings are referred to as metaphorical entailments. These conceptual metaphors, as they are called, manifest themselves in metaphorical linguistic expressions. Some conceptual metaphors seem to be universal; others are culture-specific” (Trynkowska 2013: 24–25; based mainly on Kövecses 2002: vii–xi, 3–13, 93–105).

² According to Warder 1990a: 144.

*na tenābhedi maryādā³ kāmād dveṣād bhayād api /
tena satsv api bhogeṣu nāsevīndriyavṛttitā // S 2.42*

He never offended against the rules of propriety
from passion, hatred or fear,
and did not indulge his senses,
though possessed of the objects of enjoyment. (trans. Johnston 1932: 12)

The king “never broke any boundaries” (*na tenābhedi maryādā*), which is obviously meant to be understood metaphorically, and hence Johnston’s translation.

It is thus perfectly reasonable to assume that the metaphors of breaking physical boundaries, crossing physical boundaries or staying within physical boundaries underlie numerous passages of Classical Sanskrit literature. It will be interesting, I think, to examine the contexts in which they are employed by *kāvya* authors. It will also be interesting to see if the authors follow Aśvaghoṣa in being satisfied with a simple and straightforward manner of using one of these metaphors, not differing from how ordinary people use them in their everyday life, or if they rather extend them in their works, elaborate them, question them or negate them, or combine them with other metaphors, as poets normally do.⁴

Let me begin with a remarkable stanza from a poem which is my main research focus, i.e. Māgha’s *Śiśupālavadha* (7th century AD⁵). The third canto of this famous *mahākāvya* contains a description of the city of Dvāravatī, the coastal capital of the Yādava tribe and the residence of the hero Kṛṣṇa, as observed and admired by him while he rides out, accompanied by the army of the Yādavas, to attend Yudhiṣṭhira’s *rājasūya* sacrifice in the faraway Indraprastha (ŚV 3.33–63). Dvāravatī is depicted here as an ideal city: situated amidst the rolling waters

³ In Johnston’s edition: *māryādā*. The correction is mine.

⁴ See Lakoff and Turner 1989, Kövecses 2002: 43–55, Kövecses 2007b: 100–101, 259–264.

⁵ According to Warder 1983: 133.

of the ocean, which showers it with treasures, encircled by high golden walls, with sky-high palaces of gold and jewels, jewels amassed at the bazaar and lovely women; in short, inaccessible, wealthy and beautiful, a real heaven on earth. In stanza 3.57, we learn that even the streets of Dvāravatī are ideal; this is a city:

*yasyām ajihmā mahatīm apaṅkāḥ sīmānam atyāyatayo 'tyajantaḥ /
janair ajātaskhalanair na jātu dvaye 'py amucyanta vinītamārgāḥ // ŚV 3.57*

... in which its people, never stumbling, always walked a good path:
straight, devoid of filth and leading very far
without going beyond the great boundaries;
even though there were two kinds of these paths.⁶

The streets of the city (*mārga*) are well-built and well-kept (*vinīta*⁷), straight (*ajihma*), free from mud and dirt (*apaṅka*); people are thus able to walk them safely and comfortably, without stumbling (*ajātaskhalana*). The streets are also very long (*atyāyati*), even if they do not go beyond the boundaries of the city (*mahatīm* [...] *sīmānam* [...] *'tyajantaḥ*), as it evidently covers a large area.

Obviously, this is only the literal meaning of the stanza. Another, metaphorical meaning is very easy to notice; additionally, the author explicitly points out that the paths (*mārga*) about which he speaks here are of two kinds (*dvaya*), just in case we miss it.

In the metaphorical reading of ŚV 3.57, the inhabitants of Dvāravatī prove to be ideal as well: without erring (*ajātaskhalana*), they always choose decent ways of life (*vinītamārga*), which are honest (*ajihma*), free from moral impurity and sin (*apaṅka*), never go beyond the boundaries of propriety (*mahatīm* [...] *sīmānam* [...] *'tyajantaḥ*), and thus secure a long future (*atyāyati*).

⁶ All translations from ŚV are mine. Cf. Hultzsich 1926: 31, Dundas 2017: 101 and Rajendran 2018: 69.

⁷ Glossed by the commentator Mallinātha (14th century AD according to De 1923: 228, or 15th century AD according to Kane 1923: CXIX) as *suracita*.

The metaphorical conceptualization of the rules of proper conduct in terms of the boundaries of a prosperous and well-kept large city, the boundaries within which one can lead a long, safe and comfortable life, unless he/she crosses them and steps outside, forms a truly appealing mental image. A skilful combination of this metaphor with the very common metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY⁸ takes away a sense of confinement with which the image might have been permeated otherwise. The persuasive effect of the stanza is powerful indeed.

Interestingly, as we already know, the hero of Māgha's poem—Kṛṣṇa—who watches and admires Dvārāvātī in ŚV 3.33–63, will not remain within the boundaries of the city any longer, as he is about to set off, together with the army of the Yādavas, on a long journey to Yudhiṣṭhira's capital Indraprastha. This is not a military expedition; still, the hero will cross many physical boundaries, natural and political, on the way. It seems to me that we are faced here with a question: will he stay within the boundaries of propriety during his travels, or will he cross them as well?

Moreover, I am rather convinced that the question, although not explicitly expressed, is intentional on the part of the author, as the matter, and a similar, if not identical, metaphor reappears in the twelfth canto of his poem, which is the last of its *sargas* describing the hero's journey:

*niḥśeṣam ākrāntamahūtaḥ jalaiś calan samudro 'pi samujjhati sthitim /
grāmeṣu sainyair akarod avāritaḥ kim avyavasthāṃ calito 'pi
keśavaḥ // ŚV 12.36*

Even the ocean leaves its proper place
and, moving forward, covers the whole earth with its waters.
Did Keśava, although also on the move, unstoppable,
do anything out of place in villages with his armies?⁹

⁸ See Lakoff and Turner 1989: 3–4, 9–10, 60–62, Kövecses 2002: 3–4, Kövecses 2007b: 123–127.

⁹ Cf. Hultzsich 1926: 125, Dundas 2017: 395 and Rajendran 2018: 229.

This is, of course, only a rhetorical question. Obviously, neither Kṛṣṇa nor the Yādava troops committed any improper acts while on the march.

In this stanza, the ocean, although normally remaining in one location, leaves it at the time of the universal destruction (*pralaya*),¹⁰ and, overflowing, floods the whole surface of the earth. Most of the words referring here to the ocean have more than one meaning: *sthiti* means ‘staying’, ‘remaining’, ‘place’, ‘fixed abode’, but also ‘constancy’, ‘settled rule’, ‘settled practice’, ‘custom’, ‘virtuous conduct’, ‘propriety’ (Monier-Williams 2002: 1264); *cal* means ‘to move forward’, ‘to depart’, ‘to go away’, but also ‘to be disturbed’ (Monier-Williams 2002: 391);¹¹ *ākram* means ‘to step upon’, but also ‘to attack’, ‘to invade’ (Monier-Williams 2002: 128). Thus, in a metaphorical reading of the first half of the stanza, the personified ocean abandons propriety in rage and invades the whole world.

With such an ocean, Kṛṣṇa is here compared and contrasted favourably. The hero has also left his abode, is on the move as well and covers the whole earth, too, although not with waters but with armies; he is as powerful and unstoppable as the ocean. However, he is not enraged, does not attack anyone, and certainly does not do anything out of place, i.e. anything unlawful or improper (similarly to *sthiti*, *vyavasthā* means ‘abiding in one place’, but also ‘constancy’, ‘law’, ‘rule’; Monier-Williams 2002: 1033) during his expedition.

Thus, in ŚV 12.36, improper conduct is metaphorically conceptualized in terms of leaving or acting outside a designated physical location. This is not the same metaphor as the metaphor conceiving of transgressing the rules of proper conduct in terms of crossing a physical boundary, but similar enough.¹²

In Classical Sanskrit literature, the most frequent elaboration of our metaphors of staying within physical boundaries or breaking and

¹⁰ ‘At the end of a *kalpa*’ (*kalpānte*), as Mallinātha explains.

¹¹ Mallinātha glosses *calant* as *kṣubhita* ‘agitated’, ‘enraged’ (Monier-Williams 2002: 331).

¹² Mallinātha actually glosses *sthiti* as *maryādā* and *avyavasthā* as *amaryādā*.

crossing them seems to be nothing other than the powerful metaphor of the ocean, which, in spite of its periodic tides, normally stays within the boundaries of its shoreline (*maryādā* or *velā* ‘boundary of sea and land [...], coast, shore’; Monier-Williams 2002: 1018) but violently overflows them when the *pralaya* begins.

Let us have a look at a few selected instances of its usage.

In the thirtieth stanza, ascribed to one Suvarṇarekha, of the thirty-third section (*vrajyā*) of Vidyākara’s anthology *Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa* (12th century AD¹³), which is devoted to *anyāpadeśa*, literally ‘pointing out something/someone else’, i.e. ‘allegorical epigrams’,¹⁴ the personified oceans, literally and metaphorically deep and firm, remain calm (*na kṣubhyanti*), staying within the boundaries of their shorelines, as well as within the boundaries of law and propriety (*maryādā*), and the world is better for it, as the consequences of breaking these boundaries by the agitated, enraged oceans would be disastrous indeed; after all, they are possessed of ‘unmeasured water’/‘unmeasured strength’ (*amitarasatā*):

*maryādābhaṅgabhūter amitarasatayā dhairyagāmbhūryayogān
na kṣubhyanty eva tāvan niyamitasalilāḥ sarvadaite samudrāḥ /
aho kṣobhaṃ vrajeyuḥ kvacid api samaye daivayogāt tadānīm
na kṣoṇī nādrivargā na ca raviśaśinau sarvam ekārṇavaṃ syāt //*
SRK 33.30

Because they respect the proper bounds,
because their unmeasured strength is joined to depth and firmness,
the seas hold back their streams and break not forth.
Yet if some time they should break forth by turn of fate,
there then would be no earth, no mountains, sun nor moon,
but all would be an universal sea. (trans. Ingalls 1965: 309)

¹³ According to Warder 2004: 1.

¹⁴ I render this term into English after Ingalls. As he explains, “The characteristic of these verses is that the person and situation expressly described serve to suggest some other person and situation which are not mentioned but to which the moral or point of the verse applies” (Ingalls 1965: 297).

It is easy to notice that the real subject of the stanza, not directly mentioned but suggested, are powerful men, most probably kings, who are metaphorically conceptualized here in terms of the oceans.

Similarly, the true subject of stanza 37 of the same section of the *Subhāṣitaratnakōṣa*, ascribed to Lakṣmīdhara, again, not directly mentioned but suggested, is a king forced to renounce his royal status (*lakṣmī*) by some powerful evil enemy. The hapless king is metaphorically conceptualized here in terms of the ocean left by the goddess Lakṣmī when it was intensely churned by the gods and demons to obtain the nectar of immortality (*amṛta*). In spite of this, the poet points out, the ocean is still deep, the submarine fire still burns below its surface,¹⁵ clouds still fill themselves with its water, and it still does not overflow its shoreline (*maryādā*). The king is thus praised for preserving his profundity, beneficence and generosity, as well as remaining within the boundaries of law and propriety (*maryādā*), in spite of the adversities of fate:

*uccair unmathitasya tena balinā daivena dhikkarmaṇā
lakṣmīm asya nirasyato jalanidher jātaṃ kim etāvata /
gāmbhīryaṃ kim ayaṃ jahāti kim ayaṃ puṣṇāti nāmbhodharān
maryādāṃ kim ayaṃ bhinatti kim ayaṃ na trāyate vādavam //SRK 33.37*

What though the sea
through force of evil-working fate
being churned above, was forced to yield
its royalty in form of Śrī.
Does it lose its depth thereby
or no longer nourish clouds?
Does it break the law of shoreline
or no more guard fire? (trans. Ingalls 1965: 310)

¹⁵ See, e.g., Ingalls 1965: 302: “This is Aurva or Vādava fire, which would have consumed the earth had not the ocean consented to guard it. It lies now beneath the waters, unquenchable despite the whirlpool that ever pours into it from above.” Cf. Ingalls 1965: 337.

The metaphor of the ocean overflowing the shoreline at the time of *pralaya* also underlines, subtly but clearly, stanza 8.80 of Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa* (5th century AD¹⁶). The king of the gods Indra sends a heavenly nymph (*apsaras*) Hariṇī to disturb the sage Ṛṇabindu in his ascetic practices. Hariṇī tries to seduce Ṛṇabindu; she fails to arouse his passion but destroys his calm and incurs his anger:

*sa tapaḥpratibandhamanyunā pramukhāviṣkṛtacāruvibhramām /
āśapad bhava mānuṣīti tām śamavelāpralayormiṇā bhuvi // RV-K 8.80*

Then in wrath at this obstacle in his penance,
which rose like a wave bursting the barrier of his calm,
he cursed her 'Be thou a mortal',
as before him she displayed her wanton charms.
(trans. Devadhar 2005: 152)

The metaphorical conceptualization of the serenity of the sage destroyed by a sudden surge of violent anger, with dire consequences for the unfortunate nymph, in terms of the calm waters of the ocean where a raging wave of universal destruction (*pralayormi*) suddenly rises and violently overflows the shore (*velā*), with disastrous consequences for the world, is perfectly apt. The metaphor highlights the power of the sage and his ascetic energy (*tapas*).

Let us now return to Māgha's *Śiśupālavadha*, with which we have started. In canto 8, on their way to Indraprastha, Yādava warriors and lovely women accompanying the Yādava army bathe and frolic together in a lake. While Kālidāsa's heavenly nymph Hariṇī did not succeed in seducing a sage, Māgha's Yādava beauties apparently have no problems whatsoever with arousing passion even in the surrounding nature, and causing a breach of propriety:

*gāmbhūryaṃ dadhad api rantum āṅganābhiḥ
saṃkṣobhaṃ jaghanavighaṭṭanena nītaḥ /
ambhodhir vikasitavārijānāno 'sau
maryādāṃ sapadi vilaṅghayāmbabhūva // ŚV 8.26*

¹⁶ According to Warder 1990b: 123.

This body of water, its face a blooming lotus,
 agitated by women seductively¹⁷ shaking their hips,
 although possessed of depth,
 immediately crossed the boundary.¹⁸

After our analysis of several stanzas on a similar theme, there is no need to examine ŚV 8.26 in detail. I would only like to make a few remarks.

Firstly, although it is a lake that literally overflows here and metaphorically transgresses the boundaries of propriety, I am convinced that the metaphor of the ocean overflowing its shore, which underlies the three previously discussed stanzas, inspired ŚV 8.26 as well. The author rather clearly suggests this, I think, by employing here the word *ambhodhi*, lit. ‘receptacle of water’, a frequent term for the ocean (Monier-Williams 2002: 84), to denote the lake; nowhere else in the eighth canto of Māgha’s poem the word *ambhodhi* is employed in this sense.¹⁹ Moreover, in the immediately preceding stanza, ŚV 8.25, the lake is explicitly compared with the ocean.²⁰

On the other hand, it could be argued that ŚV 8.26 is also based on the well-known metaphor LOVE IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER.²¹ The metaphor is very common in the cultures of the world and present

¹⁷ *rantum*, lit. ‘to play or sport, dally, have sexual intercourse with’ (Monier-Williams 2002: 867).

¹⁸ Cf. Hultzsch 1926: 79, Dundas 2017: 251 and Rajendran 2018: 149.

¹⁹ In the remaining stanzas of the *sarga*, to denote the lake, the words *saras* (13 times: ŚV 8.19, 20, 22, 25, 27, 28, 29, 41, 42, 46, 49, 63, 71) or *sarasī* (twice: ŚV 8.14, 52) are used instead, with one exception: stanza ŚV 8.47 uses the periphrastic expression *āśayo jalānām* ‘receptacle of waters’ in this sense; however, the compound *jalāśaya* is a frequent term for a lake, and not only for the ocean (Monier-Williams 2002: 416).

²⁰ The lake and the ocean are also explicitly or implicitly compared in ŚV 8.25, 49, 64 and 71 (the last stanza of the canto).

²¹ In English, this metaphor manifests itself, e.g., in the conventionalized metaphorical expression ‘she was overflowing with love’. On love metaphors, see Kövecses 2007a: 26–29.

in Indian culture and literature as well.²² Thus, such an interpretation of this rather charming stanza is certainly possible.

Summing up: Obviously, it is impossible to draw any valid conclusions only on the basis of the material presented in this paper. However, let me venture some tentative observations.

First of all, apparently, in Classical Sanskrit literature, the metaphor NON-PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES ARE PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES is employed in many different contexts: in the stanzas analysed above, we have encountered a god's *avatāra* riding out of his perfect city and on the march through the country with his army; kings reigning and stripped of their royal status; a sage disturbed in his ascetic practices by a seductive heavenly nymph, as well as lovers bathing and frolicking in a lake—i.e. a good sample of typical *kāvya* topics.

Similarly to the stanza by Aśvaghōṣa quoted at the very beginning of the paper (S 2.42), in all the other stanzas discussed here, the specific target domains are the boundaries of law and/or propriety. In the majority of the cases, again similarly to S 2.42, the breach of these boundaries is understood as caused by a strong emotion and is seen in a negative light; staying within the boundaries is strongly and persuasively recommended.

Unlike Aśvaghōṣa, all the other authors skillfully elaborate the metaphor THE BOUNDARIES OF LAW/PROPRIETY ARE PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES in their stanzas. Most frequently, a man staying within/breaking/crossing the boundaries of lawful and/or proper conduct is metaphorically conceptualized here as the ocean, normally staying within the boundaries of its shoreline but violently overflowing them during universal destruction—which is a powerful metaphor indeed.

²² See, e.g., AŚ 4 and 56.

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