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Bastar and the Ramayana: Tracing Myth, Memory, and Landscape in India's Dandakaranya

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the historical and cultural connections between the Bastar region of present-day Chhattisgarh and the ancient epic Ramayana. Bastar, identified with the legendary Dandakaranya forest where Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana spent a significant portion of their exile, represents a unique convergence of mythological narrative, historical continuity, and living cultural tradition. Drawing upon textual analysis of the Valmiki Ramayana, historical records, colonial accounts, and contemporary ethnographic studies, this paper argues that Bastar's identity is fundamentally shaped by its Ramayana associations, which continue to inform the region's cultural landscape, tribal traditions, and even its contemporary political conflicts. The paper explores how the epic's depiction of Dandakaranya as a space of asceticism, exile, and ethical complexity has resonated through centuries of regional history, from ancient kingdoms to modern state formation, and how this mythological inheritance intersects with the lived realities of Bastar's indigenous communities. By examining archaeological evidence, inscriptional records, oral traditions, and literary sources, this study contributes to the understanding of how mythological geography shapes regional identity and historical consciousness in South Asia.

Keywords- Bastar region, Dandakaranya landscape, Ramayana traditions, myth and cultural memory, tribal heritage

1. INTRODUCTION

The Ramayana, one of the two great epics of ancient India, is not merely a literary masterpiece but a living tradition that has shaped the cultural geography of South Asia for over two millennia. Among the many landscapes described in Valmiki's epic, the Dandakaranya forest holds particular significance as the setting for nearly thirteen years of Rama's exile. This vast forest region, described in the Aranya Kanda (Book of the Forest), has long been identified with the Bastar region of present-day Chhattisgarh, a densely forested area that remains one of India's most culturally distinctive and ecologically significant regions .

The identification of Bastar with the Ramayana's Dandakaranya represents more than a matter of geographical curiosity; it illuminates the complex relationship between myth, history, and identity in the Indian cultural imagination. This paper investigates how the Ramayana's depiction of Dandakaranya has shaped the historical consciousness of the Bastar region,

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influenced its political formations, and continues to resonate in its cultural traditions and contemporary challenges.

The significance of this investigation lies in its potential to bridge two often disparate modes of understanding: the literary-historical analysis of epic traditions and the ethnographic study of regional cultures. While the Ramayana has been exhaustively studied as a text, less attention has been paid to how its geographical settings have been appropriated, interpreted, and lived by communities inhabiting those landscapes. Bastar offers a particularly rich case study, as it is a region where the epic's presence can be traced through multiple registers—textual references, archaeological remains, royal genealogies, oral traditions, and contemporary political discourse.

This paper draws upon a range of sources: the Valmiki Ramayana itself, particularly the Aranya Kanda; historical and archaeological studies of the Bastar region; colonial administrative records; ethnographic accounts of tribal traditions; and contemporary journalistic and scholarly analyses. Through these diverse sources, I aim to construct a multifaceted picture of how the Ramayana's Dandakaranya has been imagined, inhabited, and contested over centuries.

2. DANDAKARANYA IN THE RAMAYANA: TEXTUAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 The Geography of Exile

The Ramayana's Aranya Kanda describes in considerable detail the forest landscape that Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana entered after leaving Chitrakoot. The term Dandakaranya itself is a compound of dandaka (referring to the demon Dandaka or the rod of punishment) and aranya (forest), suggesting a region characterized both by its demonic inhabitants and its punitive associations. According to the epic, this vast forest was once the domain of the demon Dandaka, who had been cursed by the gods and transformed the region into a wilderness infested with rakshasas.

The epic's description of Dandakaranya emphasizes its paradoxical nature: it is simultaneously a place of terror and sanctity, inhabited by malevolent demons and revered sages. As Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana journey through this forest, they encounter numerous ashrams of ascetics who have chosen this challenging environment for their spiritual practices. The presence of these sages establishes Dandakaranya as a space of tapasya (austerity), where the pursuit of spiritual goals takes precedence over worldly comforts.

The Aranya Kanda locates specific sites within Dandakaranya that have become pilgrimage destinations in the Ramayana tradition. These include Panchavati, where Rama established his hermitage on the banks of the Godavari River; the site of Shurpanakha's encounter with Rama and Lakshmana; and the locations associated with various sages whom Rama visited during his exile. The identification of these sites has been a matter of scholarly debate and popular tradition, with the Bastar region claiming connections to several of them.

2.2 Sita's Ethical Intervention



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One of the most philosophically significant passages in the Ramayana occurs early in the Aranya Kanda, when Sita delivers a remarkable discourse to Rama on the ethics of violence and the responsibilities of kingship. As Rama prepares to begin his campaign against the rakshasas of Dandakaranya, Sita cautions him against indiscriminate violence and the moral dangers of wielding power.

In this passage, Sita identifies three grave evils that can afflict those in positions of authority: "the habit of telling specious words," "vile desire for other's women," and "cruelness without enmity"—the tendency to inflict suffering on those who have done no wrong. While acknowledging that the first two are absent in Rama, she warns that he must be particularly vigilant against the third. "That third tendency to torture others' lives without enmity," she says, "that which will usually be effectuated unwarily, has now suddenly chanced before you" .

Sita's warning extends to the potential for collateral damage in Rama's campaign against the rakshasas. She questions whether the inhabitants of the forest, both human and non-human, might suffer from actions taken against their demonic rulers. She argues that even rakshasas have a right to a dignified life and that Rama cannot harm them or intrude into their forests unless they commit an actual offense.

To illustrate her point, Sita narrates the story of a sage who was given a mighty sword by Indra to protect himself from wild animals. The sage carried the sword everywhere, and over time, "the constant association of the weapon" transformed him into an "infuriated" human, leading ultimately to his downfall. The parable serves as a warning about how power and violence can corrupt even those who begin with good intentions.

Rama ultimately disregards Sita's advice, arguing that he has already promised the sages of the forest to rid them of the rakshasas and that a kshatriya cannot break a promise. However, Sita's intervention remains one of the epic's most profound meditations on the ethics of state violence—a meditation that, as this paper will explore, has taken on new significance in contemporary Bastar.

2.3 The Forest as Moral Landscape

The Ramayana's depiction of Dandakaranya establishes the forest as a complex moral landscape. Unlike the idealized settings of Ayodhya or the dangerous wilderness of later sections of the epic, Dandakaranya exists in an ambiguous space between civilization and wilderness, order and chaos. It is a place where sages pursue spiritual perfection despite constant threats from demons; where Rama must navigate competing obligations to ascetics seeking protection and to the principle of non-violence; where Sita's wisdom challenges the martial values of kshatriya dharma.

This moral complexity has important implications for understanding how the region identified with Dandakaranya has been perceived throughout Indian history. Bastar, as the inheritor of this mythological geography, has been understood not simply as a physical location but as a space where fundamental questions about power, violence, and righteousness are enacted.



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3. THE HISTORICAL DANDAKARANYA: ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND INSCRIPTIONAL EVIDENCE

3.1 Prehistoric and Early Historical Settlement

The identification of Bastar with the Dandakaranya of the Ramayana is supported by archaeological evidence of continuous human habitation in the region dating back to prehistoric times. Excavations along the banks of the Indravati and Narangi rivers have yielded stone tools from the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic periods, indicating that the region has been inhabited by human communities for tens of thousands of years.

This archaeological evidence is significant for understanding the relationship between the Ramayana tradition and the actual history of the region. While the epic's account cannot be read as literal history, the existence of ancient settlements in the area provides a material context for the development of the mythological traditions associated with Dandakaranya. The forest landscapes described in the Ramayana were not empty wilderness but spaces inhabited by diverse communities whose presence is reflected in both archaeological remains and epic narratives.

3.2 Dandakaranya in Ancient Texts and Inscriptions

Beyond the Ramayana, the Dandakaranya region is mentioned in other ancient Indian texts and inscriptions. The region is referred to in the Mahabharata as part of the Kosala Kingdom, and later texts continue to refer to it as a significant geographical entity. Inscriptions from the early centuries of the Common Era provide additional evidence for the region's political and cultural history.

Of particular importance are the inscriptions of the Nala dynasty, which ruled parts of Bastar from approximately 290 to 950 CE. The Nala kings, whose capital was at Pushkari (modern day Podagarh in Bastar), left numerous inscriptions that shed light on the political organization of the region. One inscription from the reign of King Bhavadatta Varman records his invasion of the neighboring Vakataka kingdom around 450 CE, demonstrating that Bastar was not an isolated backwater but a politically significant region with connections to major powers of the Deccan.

The Nala dynasty was followed by other ruling houses, including the Ganga dynasty and the Nagas, each of which left its mark on the region's cultural landscape. The town of Barsur, located on the banks of the Indravati River, served as the capital of the Ganga dynasty and is famous for its temples and tanks, which represent some of the finest examples of medieval architecture in the region.

3.3 The Kakatiya Connection and Bastar State

One of the most significant developments in Bastar's history was its incorporation into the kingdom of the Kakatiya dynasty of Warangal, a powerful Telugu dynasty that ruled much of the Deccan from the 12th to the 14th centuries. According to the genealogies preserved by the



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Bastar royal family, the state was founded in 1324 by Annamaraja, a brother of Prataparudra II, the last Kakatiya ruler.

While scholars have questioned the historical accuracy of this genealogy, noting that the documents claiming this connection date only from 1703 and that they record only eight generations spanning nearly four centuries, the Kakatiya connection remains central to Bastar's self-understanding. The royal family claims descent from the Kakatiyas, and the family deity, the goddess Danteshwari, is worshipped at the Danteshwari Temple in Dantewada, one of the shaktipeeth shrines associated with the goddess Sati.

The establishment of Bastar state in the early 14th century marked the beginning of a continuous political tradition that would endure until Indian independence. The state's capital was initially at the town of Bastar, from which the region takes its name, but was later shifted to Jagdalpur, where the royal palace remains a significant landmark.

4. COLONIAL ENCOUNTERS: BRITISH ACCOUNTS OF DANDAKARANYA

4.1 Glasfurd's Report and the Imperial Gaze

The British colonial presence in Bastar began in the mid-19th century, following the region's incorporation into the Central Provinces after the British victory over the Marathas. One of the most important early colonial accounts of the region is Captain C.L.R. Glasfurd's "Report on the Dependency of Bastar," based on tours he conducted in 1861 and 1862.

Glasfurd's report is notable for its explicit identification of Bastar with the Dandakaranya of the Ramayana. He describes the region as "the Gond-inhabited region of Dandakaranya, north of the Godavari River, mentioned in the Ramayana". This identification was not merely a scholarly observation but served to position Bastar within the British understanding of India's classical heritage. By connecting the region to the epic tradition, British administrators were able to assert their own role as inheritors and protectors of India's ancient civilization.

At the same time, Glasfurd's account reveals the colonial ambivalence toward the region and its inhabitants. On one hand, he describes the natural resources and strategic importance of Bastar; on the other, he depicts its Gond population as primitive and in need of civilizing influence. This tension between appreciation and condescension characterized much of the colonial writing about Bastar and would have lasting implications for how the region was governed.

4.2 The Princely State under British Paramountcy

Following the British annexation of the Central Provinces, Bastar became a princely state under British paramountcy, a status it maintained until India's independence. The British policy toward princely states involved indirect rule through local rulers, and in Bastar, this meant working with the existing royal family while gradually extending British influence over the region's administration.

The Imperial Gazetteer of India, published in 1908, provides a detailed description of Bastar state at the height of the British Raj. According to this account, Bastar covered an area of 13,062



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square miles and had a population of 306,501 in 1901, with Jagdalpur as its capital. The Gazetteer notes that the region was "traditionally ... mentioned as Dandakaranya in the epic Ramayana", confirming the persistence of this identification in official colonial discourse.

The colonial period also saw the emergence of new conflicts and tensions in Bastar. The region's rich forest resources became increasingly valuable to the colonial economy, leading to tensions between the state and local communities over access to and control over forest lands. These conflicts would intensify after independence and continue to shape the region's political landscape.

5. RAMAYANA IN BASTAR'S LIVING TRADITIONS

5.1 Oral Epics and Tribal Narratives

One of the most distinctive features of Bastar's cultural landscape is its rich tradition of oral literature, including epic narratives that circulate among the region's tribal communities. These oral traditions often incorporate elements from the Ramayana while reinterpreting them through local cultural frameworks.

The "Teeja Jaagar," an oral epic performed by women in the Bastar region, exemplifies this synthesis of epic tradition and local culture. Described as "the EPIC story for women by women," the Teeja Jaagar celebrates maternal power and female divinity, drawing upon both Ramayana themes and local goddess traditions. The performance of this epic, transmitted across generations, demonstrates how the Ramayana has been adapted and transformed within Bastar's indigenous communities.

Similarly, collections of tribal songs, ballads, and oral epics from Bastar reveal the ongoing vitality of Ramayana traditions in the region. These materials, documented by scholars such as Uma Ram and K.S. Ram, show how the epic has been integrated into local performance traditions, often with significant modifications that reflect tribal perspectives and values.

5.2 Sacred Geography: Temples and Pilgrimage Sites

The identification of Bastar with Dandakaranya is physically manifested in the region's sacred geography. Numerous temples and pilgrimage sites throughout Bastar are associated with events and figures from the Ramayana, creating a landscape that serves as a living memorial to the epic.

The Danteshwari Temple in Dantewada is perhaps the most significant of these sites. According to tradition, this temple marks the place where the teeth of the goddess Sati fell when her body was dismembered by Vishnu, making it one of the fifty-one shaktipeeth shrines. The temple is the family deity of the Bastar royal family, connecting the region's political history to its mythological foundations.

Other sites associated with the Ramayana include the Chitrakoot Falls, often described as India's widest waterfall and associated with the Chitrakoot region where Rama spent part of his exile. The Tirathgarh Falls, located in the Kanger Ghati, is another sacred site with a Shiva-



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Parvati shrine, while natural caves in the region, such as the Dandak Cave, are associated with the epic's events.

These sacred sites serve multiple functions: they are places of pilgrimage for Hindus from across India, they are centers of local religious practice for Bastar's communities, and they are nodes in a sacred geography that connects Bastar to the larger Ramayana tradition.

5.3 Royal Legitimacy and Epic Heritage

Throughout Bastar's history, the region's rulers have drawn upon the Ramayana tradition to legitimize their authority. The claim of the Bastar royal family to Kakatiya descent, whatever its historical accuracy, serves to connect the dynasty to a prestigious lineage that itself had connections to the epic tradition. The worship of Danteshwari as the family deity reinforces this connection, as the goddess is associated with the Ramayana through her identity as Sati.

The royal palace in Jagdalpur stands as a testament to this tradition. Built by Raja Bhanj Deo, who was worshipped as a deity by his subjects, the palace reflects the integration of royal authority with religious practice. The continuing presence of the royal family in a portion of the palace, despite the formal abolition of princely privileges, demonstrates the persistence of these traditions into the present.

6. CONTEMPORARY BASTAR: THE EPIC'S SHADOW

6.1 Conflict and Violence in Dandakaranya

In recent decades, Bastar has become infamous as the epicenter of the Naxalite-Maoist insurgency, a violent conflict that has claimed thousands of lives and displaced countless more. This contemporary conflict has been interpreted by some observers as a tragic fulfillment of Sita's warnings about the consequences of violence in Dandakaranya.

The transformation of Dandakaranya from a sacred forest into a battlefield reflects the complex historical forces that have shaped modern India. The region's rich mineral resources have made it a focus of extraction and development, bringing the state, corporations, and local communities into conflict. The insurgency, which began in the late 1960s, has intensified over time, with both security forces and Maoist guerrillas committing serious human rights abuses. The irony is not lost on observers that the forest described in the Ramayana as a place where Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana lived in harmony with nature and ascetic communities has become a site of intense violence. As one journalist noted, "The land of pristine forests has been converted into a graveyard over the last four decades".

6.2 Sita's Warning Revisited

The resonance between contemporary events in Bastar and Sita's ancient warnings has been noted by scholars and journalists. In the Valmiki Ramayana, Sita cautions Rama that his campaign against the rakshasas of Dandakaranya may cause harm to innocent inhabitants of the forest and that "a mind that admires weapons becomes maligned with avarice".

In contemporary Bastar, this warning seems prescient. The conflict has drawn in not only the state and the insurgents but also the region's tribal communities, who have become caught



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between two armed forces. Some Adivasis have joined the security forces, others the Maoist guerrillas; many more have been displaced or killed in the violence. The weapons that have become ubiquitous in the region—AK-47s, under-barrel grenade launchers, and other military hardware—have transformed a forest once associated with asceticism into a war zone.

The ethical questions raised by Sita—about the use of force against those who have done no wrong, about collateral damage, about the corrupting influence of violence—have become pressing concerns in contemporary Bastar. The failure to heed these ancient warnings, some suggest, has contributed to the tragic situation that has unfolded.

6.3 Cultural Resilience and the Future of Dandakaranya

Despite the violence that has engulfed Bastar, the region's cultural traditions, including its Ramayana heritage, continue to provide a source of identity and resilience. Tribal communities maintain their oral traditions, sacred sites continue to attract pilgrims, and the natural beauty of the region—its waterfalls, forests, and caves—remains a source of wonder and spiritual significance.

The future of Bastar depends on whether the lessons of its epic heritage can be learned. Sita's warning that "any violation of the jungle leads to destruction" speaks to contemporary concerns about environmental degradation, displacement, and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. The Ramayana's vision of Dandakaranya as a space where human communities can coexist with nature, where ascetics can pursue spiritual goals, and where ethical conduct is paramount, offers an alternative to the violence and exploitation that have come to define the region.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has traced the multiple connections between Bastar and the Ramayana, from the epic's depiction of Dandakaranya to the region's contemporary challenges. What emerges from this investigation is a picture of a region whose identity is fundamentally shaped by its mythological inheritance, even as that inheritance is interpreted and reinterpreted across time. The identification of Bastar with Dandakaranya is not merely a matter of ancient text or local tradition. It has been claimed by British colonial administrators, cited by princely rulers to legitimize their authority, preserved in tribal oral epics, and invoked by contemporary observers seeking to understand the region's tragic conflicts. The persistence of this identification across centuries and across different social groups testifies to the power of the Ramayana to shape how people understand themselves and their environment.

At the same time, the history of Bastar reveals that the meaning of Dandakaranya has never been fixed. For the Valmiki Ramayana, it was a space of moral complexity where asceticism and demonic threat coexisted. For the Kakatiya rulers and their successors, it was a kingdom to be governed and a sacred geography to be patronized. For the British, it was a region to be administered and exploited. For the contemporary state, it is a site of development and



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counterinsurgency. For Bastar's tribal communities, it remains a homeland whose significance is captured in oral narratives and ritual practices.

The challenge for Bastar today is to recover the ethical wisdom embedded in its epic heritage. Sita's warning against "cruelness without enmity" and her insistence that violence should not be used against those who have done no wrong speak directly to the situation in which the region finds itself. Whether this ancient wisdom can inform contemporary efforts to resolve conflict, protect the environment, and respect the rights of indigenous communities remains an open question. But the enduring presence of the Ramayana in Bastar suggests that the epic's ethical vision continues to offer resources for imagining a different future.

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