Boundaries as Crossovers: The Shoreline as a Digressive Site in Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay's *Dhanapatir Sinhalyatra* (2010)

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Abstract
A prose retelling from the sixteenth century verse composition of Mukundaram Chakrabarti's *Kavikankan Chandi* of the merchant Dhanapati's voyage to Sri Lanka, Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay's award-winning Bengali narrative *Dhanapatir Sinhalyatra* (2010)[Dhanapati's Journey to Sri Lanka] is richly digressive. These digressions feature two types of stories: first, tales from the inhabitants along the shoreline as they await the arrival of Dhanapati's fleet and second, myths drawn from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* relating the spatial sanctity of the places the fleet passes by. This paper examines these digressions through the spatial category of the shoreline which functions as a zone of seamless crossover between the voyage and the stories. It is here that boundaries between the two become fluid and human stories set across different times and places segue into one another. If, as Ross Chambers argues, digressions demonstrate a 'permeability of contexts', shorelines in *Dhanapatir Sinhalyatra* trigger associations which drift away from the voyage to render it more tangible through an assemblage of the ports the fleet traverses and the stories that unfold in them. Shorelines are also sites for reversal of gazes as the focalizer keeps shifting from the voyagers to the waterside inhabitants who witness the fleet pass by. Here the narrative veers away from a sequential, ordered and cohesively narrowed telling to a sense of place based on non-linear, decentered, and dilatory meditations of simultaneity.

Keywords: digressions, crossovers, shorelines, assemblage, sense of place

Digressions have always been marked by ambivalence within both rhetorical and narrative traditions. This has to do as much with questions about the role they play in a text as how they are linked to it in the first place. Conceived primarily as movements of rupture and deviation, they are also seen as integral to the progression of a plot. In the Greco-Roman sophistic practices, digression, or *parekbasis*, involved breaking away from the conceptual core of an argument to light-hearted and casual illustrations which helped to establish a 'mutual cognitive environment' between the audience and the speaker. (Perry, 2009, p. 13) While dissociable from the gravitas of an argument, digressions also helped drive a point home in their own seemingly non-committal manner. In a more recent context, Ross Chambers (1999) has identified this easy-going tendency intrinsic to digressions as a narrative equivalent of loitering and as playing out in terms of shifts and deflections off the text. (p. 9) This evasiveness is not least owing to the tenuous link digressions share with the plot. Even in unsettling the narrative sequence, they also spatially enhance it and allow for a fleeting simulation of the multiplicity of the world. (Santovetti, 2011, p. 170)

To that extent, digressive moments set up connections among plots, events and characters across multiple textual realms. In drifting away, digressions amplify the narrative span to accommodate an assemblage of otherwise unrelated storylines. In examining the instances of such assemblages in the digressions of Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay's *Dhanapatir Sinhalyatra* (2010), I use the term crossover as defined by Jess Nevins, "a story where characters or concepts from two or more discrete texts or series of texts meet." (as cited in Trauvitch, 2014, p. 205) I identify in this article three such instances of crossovers where the shoreline becomes an occasion for delving into assemblages on the sidelines of the voyage described in *Dhanapatir Sinhalyatra*. These are placed at distinct stages of the journey featuring departure from his hometown Ujani, the voyage past Nabadwip and finally, the sinking of most of his fleet on the Bhagirathi near Magra. Each of these accounts of the shorelines draw richly from various *puranic* mythologies and *mahakavyas* to relate stories of their origins, bring out their sanctity as a place, or simply in detailing the landscape.

This is by no means exhaustive of the digressions present throughout the text and feature only those where the coming together of stories are evocative of crossovers and where the narrative encompasses multiple fictional worlds grounded on the shorelines. I leave out, for instance, the lengthy interludes between the voyage devoted to descriptions of Chandi's wrath at Dhanapati's indiscretions, or the story of Vinata and Kadru related by Budhan, Dhanapati's chief oarsman. My focus here is on how digressions contextualize the stories of these shorelines both within the ambit of mythology as well as Dhanapati's own voyage. I seek to demonstrate the manner in which a momentary retreat reconfigures the narrative into a more complete medium of arriving at a sense of place. Since a translation of Mukhopadhyay's text is not available, the excerpts taken up for the study have been translated by me. For some of the passages particularly rich in striking imagery, I have quoted the Bangla original along with the translation.

Before delving into an analysis of the digressions, a brief look at how Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay's *Dhanapatir Sinhalyatra* relates to Mukundaram Chakrabarti's *Kavikankan Chandi* might be of help in situating the discussion. This is especially important given Mukhopadhyay's recasting of a text originally composed in the verse form into a prose novel. The novel borrows its name from the title of a twenty-eight-couplet long section of Kavikankan Mukundaram Chakrabarti's composition dating back to the sixteenth century. As a story tradition, the *Chandimangal* is more of a generic term and other compositions of it such as Manikdutta's predate Chakrabarti's by at least a century. In the earlier tellings of the *Chandimangal* including Chakrabarti's, there is also a story of forest dwellers Kalketu and Fullara besides the story of Dhanapati which appears in the latter half. Neither of these stories have a parallel in the *Markandeya Purana* or any of the other Sanskrit texts where other stories of Chandi appear. This has led to suggestions of both of these stories having folkloric roots in Bengal (Swami Jagadishwarananda, 1980, p. 19).

The Dhanapati segment, known as *Dhanapati Sadagarer Upakhyan* in *Kavikankan Chandi* spans two generations of the merchant's family beginning with his marriage to Khullana. Here, the journey of the merchant to Lanka takes up only a small portion, and related also is his imprisonment there and eventual rescue by his son Srimanta twelve years later. Mukhopadhyay culls out twenty-four sections from Chakrabarti's composition covering Dhanapati's voyage and expands them into his novel. The machinations of Chandi, the presiding deity of the *mangalkavya*, to get Dhanapati to worship her, features only as a subplot in his story. Similarly, the episodes of tension between Dhanapati's two wives Lahana and Khullana, so prominent in the *Kavikankan Chandi*, serve as a mere prelude to the merchant's voyage in Mukhopadhyay's novel. While

staying faithful to the *Kavikankan Chandi* in terms of the route followed by Dhanapati, he incorporates a great deal of detail in describing the places. Evidently owing to his focus on the journey, he does not merely catalogue the shorelines Dhanapati's fleet passes through, but delves into their mythological pasts on a number of occasions. Most of these are erstwhile river ports in places such as Khardaha, Nabadwip, Saptagram, and finally, Magra where Dhanapati loses six of his fleet's seven ships in a flood conjured up by a vengeful Chandi. Puri, referred in the text as Neelachal, is the sole major coastal stopover for Dhanapati's fleet. This is reflective of the asymmetry in the narrative which accords more space to the voyage through Bhramara, Ajay, and Bhagirathi rivers. My analysis too, focuses only on the shorelines along these rivers.

A Dispersal into Togetherness

Mukundaram Chakrabarti's *Kavikankan Chandi* records Dhanapati's fleet's passing by the outskirts of Ujani in merely two couplets:

> *Bhaosingher ghatkhan dahine rakhiya*
>
> *Metabir ghat jaye bametey agiya*
>
> *Ghono keroyal pore jole pore shat*
>
> *Erailo Chandigachha Bolanpurer ghat.* (Chakrabarti, 1921, p. 200)
>
> [With Bhaosingh's pier to the right and Metabi to the left,
>
> the oars splashed the fleet past Chandigachha and Bolanpur]

The novel, on the other hand, transforms these two couplets into a full-fledged chapter that shows how right from the start, Dhanapati's voyage remains fraught with digressions. As his *saptadinga* [a seven-ship fleet] leaves the piers of Ujani, there is a shift in perspective to those on the shores on the outskirts of the town in a chapter titled '*Dinga darshane pratiksha*' ['Wait for the Fleet']. Villagers along the river Bhramara preparing to call it a day retreat into the comfort of their homes, shelters and nests lost in the world of mythological stories the inhabitants tell each other and dream of while falling asleep. Only that this night, they are alerted back into wakefulness in anticipation of the approaching fleet as the world of the shoreline continues to unfold in rich detail throughout the chapter while Dhanapati's voyage is held in abeyance. In the process, the point of view does not merely shift away from the river, but is also dispersed within the shoreline across an entire cast of characters drawn from both the human and animal worlds: a bird couple, a troop of monkeys, a farmer called Haladhar, and a milkman and his cattle. In digressing then, the narrative not only alters the perspective, but multiplies it manifold with the result that the shoreline sees a diffusion into multitudes of stories involving both humans, animals and eventually, the characters from the tales they narrate. The farmer, for instance, had lost himself in recounting how King Janaka was overcome with grief as his daughter Sita left home for Ayodhya after her marriage: "tears stain his cloth and the earth alike, as he hands his daughter over in marriage to Ramachandra, the virtuous son of Dasharatha" (p. 72).

Meanwhile, in the adjacent trees, the monkeys were busy recollecting Ramachandra's *setuvandhan* [bridge-building] episode while in the barn, a cow was fondly dreaming of Radha's trip to Mathura from Vrindavan when she unexpectedly runs into Krishna who would row her across Yamuna. For her, the two worlds of the banks of Yamuna and Bhramara segue into each other at this moment: "the divine play of Kala the oarsman of Yamuna, was reflected in the deep

dark stillness of the eyes of the fair white animal" (p. 71). The narrative captures each of these myriad characters in turns, preserving more or less the exact same sequence in which the perspectives of the birds, the monkeys, the farmer, the milkman and that of his cattle were introduced. Stories are nested within each other in a repetition of the digressive maneuver which affected the break from the voyage. Each story unfolds its own world and moves further away from the voyage, while also remaining in anticipation of the approaching fleet which has now receded to the background.

The digression then, does not just veer into multiple locations away from the voyage, but sets them up as a parallel sequence of events. This is a world where stories of Dhanapati's fleet, the farmer Haladhar, King Janaka and Radha and Krishna seamlessly overlap and even fade into each other. The mythical realm of the *mangalkavya,* within which the novel progresses, thus sets up the shoreline as a zone of crossover into the realm of the epics and the *puranas*. If, as György Lukács contends, "the epic gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within [and] the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life" (as cited in Tally 2013, p. 63), the digressive space offered by this chapter weds together these two visions of totality within its span.

Spatially speaking, this crossover, not just across the *puranas* and myths, but also between the novel and the epic forms, expands the perspectives that come into play in the shoreline and bring them together. As the whole settlement flocks to the river bank in eager anticipation of the fleet's approach, they re-enact this spirit of togetherness:

> And then a string of lights appear on the horizon, sparkling up the waves of the Bhramara as they herald the fleet's voyage to Lanka from one village to the next. Lamps turned down are lit up yet again, cows plod out of the barns, a tiger on the prowl stops dead on its tracks, the fox listens intent as the oars splash the waters...their faces all aglow in the light from the fleet. (p. 70)

Encapsulated in this digressive movement then, is a journey of the narrative across two assemblages: first, that of crossovers bringing together the worlds of the inhabitants along the shoreline and their stories and second, of convergence on the banks of the Bhramara of these multiple subjective spaces as they eagerly assemble in anticipation of the fleet. It is in recognition of these disparate spaces being collectively charmed that the shorelines break into untimely festivities:

> Shorelines along the Bhramara break into rapturous joy. Autumn winds shake the *kash* grasses, spread the fragrance of *shiulis,* as thatches whistle and cows swish their tails...it is a communion of happiness and celebration of life on the banks of the Bhramara. (p. 74).

Topography of the Far and the Near

Assemblages arising out of the recurring crossovers in the narrative also occasion collective acts of remembering as much as festivities. Chief among these are the original stories of places and place names the fleet passes by. Here too, recollections unfold along multiple, if also parallel, narrative strands and bring together a range of stories and myriad ways of remembering them. Five chapters after leaving Bhramara, as the fleet sets sail on the River Bhagirathi along the shores of Nabadwip, Budhan, the chief oarsman in Dhanapati's fleet recounts its beginnings:

> Sixteen hundred cows roamed the Godrum pastures. And on the nights, the royal herder would have the trees sway to the notes of his flute as a sweet fragrance enveloped the islands. 'Kol' means a boar and the presiding deity for the island is Vishnu in his incarnation of the animal…Ganga had flooded the sacrificial fire altar of Jahnu and the enraged sage had drunk her up before being placated by the gods and Bhagirath to let her out through his ears. His daughter then named the island in remembrance of her father. (p. 103)

Here, in the tale of Nabadwip's beginnings, Ganga's origins, Vishnu's *varahavatara* and the pastoral image of Krishna as a flute-playing youth are weaved together despite their belonging to three different epochs. Such stories then serve as diverse repertoires from which elements are selectively drawn and situated and localised in the immediate surroundings of the islands. They are brought together to impart a context to the place. If the story of Ganga attaches a sense of antiquity to Nabadwip, the association with Krishna and Vishnu as presiding over the islands evokes their sanctity.

For Budhan and his audience, it is in the bringing together of these multiple worlds that the distinctive sense of place for Nabadweep is invoked is its entirety. This is also suggested in the title *'Noy Deep, Noy Dweep'* ['Nine Lamps, Nine Islands'], a play in homonymy alluding to the two stories surrounding the city's name. The first of these find place in the particularly attentive detailing of Budhan as he conjures this world:

> To the east are four islands – Godrum, Antardwip, Seemantadwip and Madhyadwip—and five to the west – Kol, Ritu, Jahnu, Modadrum and Rudra. And with these nine islands, the oarsman explained, the place came to be known as Nabadwip (the nine-islands). These were densely forested with a variety of trees: *atayi, adare, kalchit, kashimala, chaldal, dambur, tilak, dhulikadamba, nadan* and *bandhuli* (p. 102).

In relating this origin story with a distinct emphasis on the flora and layout of the islands, Budhan is also reproducing and delineating the islands in words, especially since their names carry echoes of their unique flora, fauna as well as the blessings of the deities associated with the islands. This presents topography weaved out in words and to that extent, is typical of medieval cartographic practices which seek to not merely represent, but also create spaces in the process. (Rouse, 2014, p. 17) In the process, the place is not merely charted out, but through the story of how the islands come to be, also framed and narrated into existence. Even within the form of the novel, it is in digression that the medieval roots of the story find resonance in terms of how places are described. Visual details such as the location of the islands are complemented by an extensive foray into their etymologies, the environs that lend them their names and an account of their past inhabitants. Besides bringing these stories together then, the digressive space emerges as a zone of crossover in terms of narrative forms.

If Budhan's descriptions help construe an objective topology of Nabadwip, the islands also come across as an intensely personal space in Dhanapati's own imagination. In a brief monologic interlude in the narrative of passing by Nabadwip, he dwells upon the other explanation about the origins of the city's name in the mysterious lighting of nine lamps in the islands that shone bright in their hue:

> Once upon a time on such nights would the nine lamps light up, one after another, out of sight, in the solitary island, arousing the gooseberry, *haritaki*, cumin and banyan trees. Illumined would be the asparagus shrubs and hyssops…till the nine lamps of the great one transformed these earthly islands into heavenly abodes.(p. 103)

Even as this becomes an occasion for him to contemplate on the enigmatic figure of the hermit who accomplished this wonder, Dhanapati's mind wavers away from the immediate present and marvels:

> Of what clay were the lamps molded, and in what tenderness shaped, and the wicks looped? *Sadhu* Dhanapati thought of the nameless *sadhu* whose nine lamps gave the islands their name Nabadeep.(p. 103)

The shift in tenor here to the minute particulars of the lamp's makeup is significant. The word *sneha*, an equivalent of affection, coupled with the sensuous image of the *tul-abartan* or the lamp wick being lovingly twined, suggests more than nostalgia for the island's past. In the tone of tactile intimacy, and almost loving embrace of the lamp wicks as they are crafted, there is also a hint these lines carry of his yearning for the comforts of his own home. This recasting of Dhanapati's loneliness in the image of the hermit's solitude is particularly evident in how the text plays on the word *sadhu*. While the word denotes a sage, hermit or a monk in contemporary Bangla, the text reserves it as a title for Dhanapati and merchants in general, save for this one instance. As the two *sadhus* become indistinguishable in the digressive space of the text, irruptions into the fantasy world interfere with the perceived reality of Nabadwip as it appears before Dhanapati. Transformed into a vivid image of his homeland as a site charged with the dual images of homesickness and belonging, it becomes, in Gaston Bachelard's (1969) terms, a 'complex of memory and imagination', a perfect refuge for reverie (26). At that moment, his own familiar Ujani crosses over to the islands, and available only to his imagination, becomes every bit as mysterious and enchanting. As a result, there is a sense of attachment he develops to this mysterious island, and the exotic fable of the lamps becomes a strangely familiar source of association with home for him.

Sentient Shorelines

As Dhanapati's fleet sail from one port to the next, a parallel scene of action unfolds in the story. Enraged at his obstinate refusal to worship her, Chandi, the presiding deity of the *mangalkavya*, plots revenge typically sinister of the gods in this world. Along with her daughter Padmavati, herself a presiding goddess of the *Manasamangalkavya* tradition, she enlists the support of the river deities to deal a catastrophic blow to Dhanapati by drowning most of his fleet near Magra. It falls upon Ganga, the foremost among the river deities to execute her plan in a chapter titled '*Nod Nodir Magra Gaman*' ['The Journey of Rivers to Magra']. Poised critically just before the start of the flood, the narrative veers away for this entire chapter to chart the shorelines the rivers traverse and the scenes that unfold along them as they change course and meander away to drown Dhanapati's fleet. Just how much the rivers take on after their shores is evident in the lines describing their response to Ganga:

> Upon hearing Ganga's call, the river Amodar journeys past the pristine forests of Jaipur along a red, rocky trail. The *linga* at Ekteshwar temple is crooked, even the rather dapper Bankura Ray hunched, and so the river runs its serpentine course through Kotulpur, Karmakarpukur before merging into Tarajuli. (p. 126)

As the chapter progresses, the narrative accrues pace, as sentences become short with images of youthful, masculine verve and place names appear in quick succession:

> Flows Darukeshwar, Dhalkishore as the villagers affectionately call him, with his hue of jasmine white and the strapping, sprightly stride of an adolescent boy, roaring away on his distant journey. Rok gives him company as they join forces near Hura with the spruce white

> Dudhbharia from the Kanra Kala Pabra hillocks. And then they skirt one village after another: Dumra, Balia, Natungaon, Dumda, Chamkara.(p. 126)

These multiple, parallel scenes of frenzied divine activity channeling all rivers into a single flow offer a striking contrast to the voyage of the fleet captive to its this-worldly, human finitude navigating the waters of Bhagirathi. While the scene of action around Dhanapati's fleet is held in abeyance, there is a flurry of activity unfolding at a dizzying pace elsewhere along multiple locations simultaneously, one that the narrative itself struggles to keep up with.

To an extent, this also reflects limitations obtaining on the narrative form itself as an essentially this-worldly medium. It cannot help but relate this vast expanse of simultaneous activity only in terms of succession of words and sentences appearing over time. This mimetic function of the narrative is mediated through the chapter-long digression's portrayal of multiplicity of worlds that emerge in the prelude to the flooding. It radiates out from the Bhagirathi in the main plot to encompass a vast network of river basins spread across the subcontinent. In the process, it invokes a field of action devoid of any particular structuring and yet complete in its portrayal of the rivers and their courses. Is a digression set across such an expansive space then, a recompense for the fundamentally temporal nature of narrative? Erich Auerbach would appear to agree. In analyzing the role of the famous scar-scene digressions in the *Odyssey*, he suggests that digressions there create a world perpetually in the foreground where everything is laid out in entirety, in an "externalized, uniformly illuminated phenomena" (2003, p. 11). Thus, within the digressive space, "separate elements of a phenomenon are most clearly placed in relation to one another" (2003, p.6) in an attempt to bring out clearly the fictional world as unravelling simultaneously on the foreground, as all the rivers course towards the Bhagirathi.

Foregrounded also in this unidirectional flow of rivers are the range of crossovers into the narrative of *puranic* incidents they bring in their wake. While describing the journey of Godavari to Bhagirathi, for instance, the episode of Sita's abduction by Ravana and Jatayu's mourning is evoked:

> Out of the womb of the Trambyak mountain came Godavari past Bhadrachalam and Rajmahendry in a torrential flow. Once it was on her banks that Ravana, the king of Lanka had abducted Janaki. To this day, in her tides echo the lament of Jatayu's wails. (p. 127)

While this reverberates also in the banks of the Sarayu, the Yamuna relishes in memory of Radha and Krishna's escapades.

In the backdrop of riverine topographies rich with tributaries, these range of places and the stories associated with them are brought together, as Auerbach says, "in perfect fullness; so that a continuous rhythmic procession of phenomena passes by" (p. 6). This function of assembling a range of stories echoes what Trauvitch identifies as essential to the crossover worlds where "networks are accomplished by the frequent reappropriation of fictional entities by means of parallel novels, adaptations and crossover fictions." (Trauvitch cited in Tally, 2014, p. 208) As is evident in *Dhanapatir Sinhalyatra* too, even as the *puranic* myths sprawled across a vast terrain are brought together, richly detailed spatial descriptions of the environs of the rivers are also linked up through them in a co-presence along the routes of their flow even before they converge. At the level of the narrative, this assemblage in detail of shorelines distant from each other, convey to the reader what Jeff Malpas describes fundamental to developing a sense of place through "different but simultaneous perceptions that, inasmuch as they are perceptions of the same object, have a common cause" (2018, p. 148). While Dhanapati's voyage in itself takes the

narrative forward, it is through digressions such as these, that the places he passes through are animated and brought to life, if also portending his peril.

Digressions, Crossovers and Sense of Place

Breaking away from the principal narrative strand is just one aspect of digressions leading to crossovers. Of greater importance is what happens in the ensuing moments. If it is to function effectively as a crossover, a digression cannot entirely eschew the narrative. Ross Chambers is explicit on this point: "The swerve, however, is necessarily defined by that from which it departs." (p. 86) Digressions then carry forward imprints from their sites of departure which furnish the starting points for the crossovers. In doing so, they are already at work in delineating their own boundaries. It is here that the stage is set for the crossovers to occur and for diverse stories and events to assemble. Thus, one might begin to think of digressions as more of an ongoing dialogue with the plot, be it in the form of the shifting perspectives along the Bhramara's banks or the co-presence of multiple shorelines in the lead up to the flood in the Bhagirathi. As is evident in Dhanapati's reflections on the story of the nine lamps in Nabadwip, they bring multiple places and events within the textual world into conversation with each other and inspire an act of self-reflexivity for the text.

Of course, that is where the multiplicity of crossover worlds play a crucial role: Dhanapati's voyage becomes merely another event among the many across a ceaselessly expanding world. In constantly veering away to crossovers, the narrative sets them up as vantage points where events and characters across this world are assembled and mirrored against each other. This engenders an experience of place as a "subjective presentation that is similar to, but distinct from [one's] own." (Malpas, p. 151). Place is seen to be populated by others like oneself but with alternate, if also intersecting, perspectives. What this foregrounds is the inter-subjective nature of all spatial relations including that of the narrative and the digressions interspersed amidst its flow.

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