

## **A Journey into the Self:**

### **A Liminal Reading of *Days and Nights in the Forest***

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When society became increasingly differentiated, ...the new urban man felt increasingly alienated from nature; social discipline called for by new productive techniques created a sense of anxiety among the more individualistic non-conformists. At such periods of inner crisis and difficulty, man retreated into the forest to test his own strength and recover the sense of identity with his surroundings. (Richard Lannoy in Darius Cooper, 157)

The aim of this paper is to explore Sunil Gangopadhyaya's novel *Days and Nights in the Forest* (2010) as a liminal space which accommodates the journey into the self. The study uses the journey metaphor of a ritual pilgrimage in the quest for the self. Applying the concept of 'the rites of passage', this study builds on and extends Victor Turner's concept of Liminality. Attempt is also made to analyse this forest space as place of Bakhtinian Carnavalesque which subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humour and chaos.

Sunil Gangopadhyay, apart from writing novels has also written in many other genres including travelogues, children's fiction, short stories, features, and essays. *Days and Nights*, his second novel, is set in the turbulent 1960s India. It is autobiographical in nature to an extent because the novelist too went on such journeys with his friends. It was made into a celebrated film by Satyajit Ray very soon after its publication. In 2010, *Days and Nights* was for the first time translated into English from the original Bengali by Rani Ray.

The novel begins with a whimsical and impromptu journey of four middle-class Calcutta youths venturing into the unknown in order to escape the city with all its monotony and familiarity. What Ashim, Sanjoy, Robi and Shekar undertake signifies a ritual pilgrimage although the spiritual ramifications if any are to be explored. In addition, this pilgrimage is not in the strict sense a journey to a sacred place or shrine. The youth hardly seem to be on a spiritual quest. However it is a quest nevertheless just as the forest is synonymous with the shrine. Whether this ritual journey concludes in any marked transformation in the lives of these sojourners necessitates study.

The notion of liminality was first introduced by Belgian folklorist and ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in his exposition of the "Les Rites de Passage," (1909) or rite of passage. For van Gennep, a rite of passage consists of three stages: separation, margin and aggregation. In the first stage, the neophyte is separated from the structured society. The second stage is the liminal period during which the neophyte is transferred from the original site to the new site; from the oft trodden path to the territory of the unknown. This is "a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo" (*From Ritual to Theatre*, 24). In the third stage the neophyte has crossed the

threshold into a new fixed, stabilized state; he returns to structured society having being transformed into an adult.

In the late 1960s, Victor Turner, the anthropologist, developed the theory of Liminality borrowing from the work of van Gennep. He concentrates his exploration of liminality primarily on the rites of passage that especially deal with initiations. He also analyzes the rites of passage within tribal, sociocultural systems. According to Turner the transformation from one state to another happens in an in-between place where there is a reversal of hierarchical values and social statuses.

Normally a structured society has within its system, hierarchy and status. Gangopadhyay juxtaposes the structured society which is urban Calcutta with the Palamau forest which represents the liminal space occupied by the four men. By social structure Turner means the matrix of roles, statuses, and positions governed by social phenomena such as law, custom, institution, and cultural tradition. At certain times when a society enters what Turner calls a “liminal” time – “a betwixt and between” or threshold period, power and privilege, status and role, law and institution do not determine social relatedness (Rubenstein, 250).

Turner perceived that in the liminal stage, the initiates are removed and secluded from the rest of the society – in effect they become invisible and are in a state of “betwixt and between”. Turner believed that the neophyte at the liminal stage has nothing – no status, property rank, or kinship position (*Forest of Symbols*, 46). The subject, while neither being located in the departed stage nor in the arrived-at is still reliant on the presence of both stages.

According to Victor Turner, Liminality should be looked upon not only as a transition between states but as a state in itself. This state is temporary and can be alienating as well as freeing to the subject undergoing this. The space that the forest offers in *Days and Night* is symbolic as Turner believes that ‘Liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon’ (*The Ritual Process*, 95).

The youths who enter the forest, follow the archetypal structure of severance, threshold and incorporation. In the first stage there is a sense of alienation from all former things. To separate from the past and all representative structures of the past, the four men even ceremoniously throw away the newspaper and engage in a little spitting game. They strip themselves of all things that symbolise civilization. Shekar, one of the four men, wouldn’t even allow Sanjoy to bring his camera. When Robi suggests playing cards, Ashim disapproves vehemently: “Card-playing in the forest- is that what we’ve come here for?” (21).

When the four of them board the train, they have no idea where they want to go. The middle-aged man in a deep blue suit, who overhears their conversation, helps them decide on Dhalbargar. Once they decide on the place, the young men are keen on entering the forest (10). They collectively enter the threshold of the unknown.

Suddenly they all began to feel different, as if they were in an alien land. A medley of sounds, soft and unobtrusive, punctured the silence that seemed to pervade the entire place. A chorus of multiple tones- the swish of the breeze, the twittering of birds, the chirping of crickets, the

knocking of squirrels, and the crackle of dry leaves- adorned the stillness of the woods. The young men felt as if they were truly on the threshold of a wondrous experience.(11)

On entering the forest, they reach the second stage of liminality. They become “transitional-beings,” or “liminal persons,” who according to Turner are characterized by a series of contradictions. They are neither one thing nor another, or may be both; or neither here nor there, or may be nowhere. The subject, during the liminal stage, is “betwixt and between” all the recognized fixed points in space-time of structural classification.

It is in the middle stage, that is, while they are in the forest that the youths develop a sense of egalitarian or ‘communitas’ bonding, which then perpetuates itself, revitalizing them even after their return to structured society. Turner references invisibility or a sense of oneness, as a key classification of the liminal being insofar as it cannot be recognized as any singular, corporeal, or embodied entity. In order to establish singularity the neophytes drink with the low class people liquor made from the Mahua plant, something that could never happen in urban Calcutta. It is their intention as well to merge into the dominant group mainly to avoid any confrontation, but also to not look and feel conspicuous. Shekar tells the others that, “It would be better to sit with them and behave as if we are one of them. It’s more fun that way. There’s no sense in playing the Babu game or remaining distant” (26).

Leaving behind the ways of the urban society and merging into the forest takes a while for the foursome as seen in the first interaction with the chowkidar. Ashim says, ‘Thank God for corruption’ as he bribes the caretaker of the bungalow for staying there without having prior permission as was the case.

As[h]im’s remark acquires an extra layer of meaning, with echoes that are magnified by the setting in which it is spoken – the compound of a forest rest- house, of the kind once used by supposedly incorruptible British officials on their tours of duty. (Robinson, 195)

When the men journey into the wilderness of Palamau, seeking the unknown, they imagine that their escapade would distance them from ‘civilization’ and would bring them closer to pristine nature. They hope to experience a clear mind and receive distilled wisdom. In reality, the peace and solitude that the forest offers, transforms their journey into one of self-discovery. Each in his quest to reject the primary space – the city and all its troubles enters the alternate space offered by the forest.

Nakedness, which is an important concept, in the initiation rites is also significant in the novel. It is the binary opposite of ‘uniform clothing/distinctions of clothing’ (*The Ritual Process*, 106). Liminal entities such as the neophytes according to Turner, may be represented as possessing nothing:

They may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system -in short, nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands (*The Ritual Process*, 95).

A further structurally negative characteristic of transitional beings is that they *have* nothing. ...Their condition is indeed the very prototype of sacred poverty. In the words of King Lear they represent “naked unaccommodated man” (*Myth, Ritual*, 49).

He [Shekar] lay flat against the bed of wet earth and fallen leaves and stared at the sky... He felt euphoric, lying totally naked inside the forest. Baring the body had achieved baring of the soul.(80-81)

The young men had realised the futility of parading gentility in the middle of the wilderness. Shekar, Ashim and Robi disrobe themselves in the night because they understood one did not have to be modest in the jungle, in the dark. Turner appropriates this nakedness which is at once the mark of a newborn infant and a corpse prepared for burial (*Myth, Ritual*, 49).

Another important attribute of liminality is that it offers complete equality to the neophytes. For Turner, the liminal group was not hierarchically structured. (*Myth, Ritual*, 50). The four men are conscious about achieving a sense of homogeneity by ensuring equality among themselves. Each of them was of a different disposition but had now come together as a group. Shekar is resisted by the others from taking on the leadership position. When the others want to have a shot at the birds Shekar objects saying that it is cruel to kill innocent birds.

The four men are again placed in stark contrast to the tribal inhabitants, the Santhals who seem to have a mind of their own. Although the urban-rural divide is not explicitly narrated, overtones of this are implicit in their dealings with the forest people: the high-handed manner in which they treat the Chowkidar, inspite of knowing about his wife's illness and the way Robi beats up Lakka, the young boy who was initially their Porter and later their errand boy. Later when Lakka along with a group of tribals avenges the wrong done to him, and also for physically using a Tribal woman, Robi and his friends cannot come to terms with it.

Self-denial is important for community living. The self cannot be asserted in this space and loses its previously known autonomy. The Palamau group, though not strangers to each other, had never lived together previously. So, if they want their holiday to be peaceful without any disruption, forming a community becomes imperative for all of them. During the period of interstructural liminality, the ritual subjects in a collective rite form an undifferentiated lot, partake of comradeship, and constitute a close-knit community.

Conforming to this, Shekar, on the first night, refrains from consuming liquor made from the Mahua plant while the remaining three get horribly drunk. He is afraid of getting drunk and not being able to take the others back to the bungalow safely. Similarly the encounters with the chowkidar of the bungalow where they are staying are fraught with tension. There is a rich-poor, urban-rural master-servant divide, which is sorted out eventually although not completely. The realisation comes when they learn of the chowkidar's wife's illness and that his frequent disappearance was to take care of his dying wife. Playful comradeship is also seen in Ashim and Robi's pursuit of Aparna (Jaya's sister), who is savvy with men and ways of the world; a fine example for a city bred girl.

The 'time-out' for this group in the forest is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnavalesque. Bakhtin coined this term to refer to a literary mode that traces the origins to the concept of a carnival which embodies a popular, folk based culture which is defined by its irreverent antipathy to the official and hierarchical structures of everyday, non-carnival life. The term carnival was originally celebrated in the pre- Lenten period between Christmas and Ash Wednesday. Carnival helped the society to prepare itself for the Lenten period of fasting after the celebration of Christmas.

Thus celebrated at the crossroads between winter and spring, indulgence and abstinence, death and rebirth, work and leisure, so-called civilization and what is perceived as savage or "wild," carnival has always licensed the crossing of many kinds of boundaries - between classes or estates, genders, races, ethnicities, carefully guarded geographical territories or neighborhoods. (Riggio, 13)

They have physical but not social "reality", hence they have to be hidden...they are often disguised, in masks or grotesque costumes or striped with white, red, or black clay and the like. (Myth, Ritual, Symbolism and Taboo, 49).

During the liminal period of initiation rites, the neophytes are disguised in pigments or masks that are bizarre and monstrous and often this exaggeration amounts to caricature. An example of a full-fledged carnival is the American Halloween where there is role, status and sometimes even sex reversal in the masks donned. Masking prevents recognition of the individual which leads to a homogenous levelling of sorts.

The Jewish celebration of the Purim festival also marks such liminal phenomena. This also teaches the neophytes to distinguish clearly between the different factors of reality, as is conceived in their culture. It startles them into thinking about objects, persons, relationships and features of their environment they have hitherto taken for granted. For the four men, consumption of Mahua wine aids their celebration of the carnivalesque. It makes them bereft of all inhibitions, and liberates them although momentarily and they dance into the night.

People have a real need to doff the masks, cloaks and apparel and insignia of status from time to time even if only to don the liberating masks of a liminal masquerade (Turner, *Dramas Fields and Metaphors*, 243).

Liminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection. Since the neophytes are separated from society and withdrawn from their structural positions and divest of previous influences and experience liberation from social norms during the liminal period they are forced and encouraged to think about their society, cosmos and the powers that generate and sustain them. (Turner, *Myth, Ritual*, 53).

The spatial dislocation and being away from their familiar environment provides the four men a time of reflection. Sanjoy, a Labour welfare officer in a Calcutta jute mill resigns when he is unable to reverse the labourers' plight. Although in truth, he did not have the power to do good or evil, he feels guilty.

It was at this juncture that he had decided to come away to the forest, leaving all the woes of his urban existence behind him. Ashim is unable to rid himself of the guilt of having killed a girl due to his heedless driving. Robi, in an attempt to forget a girl who has rejected him, seeks pleasure with a tribal girl, Duli. Sekhar, tries to arouse feelings in his sterile heart for Jaya, his college mate, for whom he didn't have time earlier.

The liminal space offered by the forest sets Jaya at ease with Shekar and his friends although much time had passed from the time they had studied together in college. Jaya explains this sense of ease as:

Everything changes once we are out of our habitual surroundings...it would have taken us a long time to feel at ease with each other had we met in Calcutta. But in the forest and away from human habitation everything has become easy. I feel like I have known your friends for a long time! (148)

The novelist while exploring the moral predicament of Ashim, Sanjoy, Robi and Shekar, juxtaposes the trapped city life with the liberating country life and confronts urban sophistication with rural simplicity. While they realise that forest can never be a pastoral utopia, whether this escape into nature makes them morally and socially conscious remains ambiguous.

In their interactions within the boundaries of the forest, they realise that wilderness no longer contains its original restorative qualities instead the forest itself symbolises a contested space. The turbulence within the forest is indicated by the constant felling sounds of the tree. The politics of mainstream society is seen even within the forest although subtly.

Though all of them, Ashim, Sanjoy, Robi and Shekar undergo in Turner's sense a 'ritual consummation' whether this leads to any ontological transformation or self-knowledge is not clear at the end. They collectively display a sense of the 20th century existential angst. However nothing is resolved with any finality and their reconciliation remains unclear. They are expected to acquire a new vantage point for viewing society and feel better off than their contemporaries who have not experienced this life of exile. When the friends depart again for the city, the reader hopes that at least it is with a better appreciation of life and a new superior status, the status a post-ritual person would enjoy after re-joining a receptive society.

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