

LAKṢMAṆ REKHĀ, OR A (THIN) BOUNDARY NOT TO BE CROSSED

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Boundaries, in the sense of ‘symbolic boundaries’, play different roles in the human world but one of their most basic and at the same time most important function is to delineate the known, familiar, safe and permissible from the unknown, unfamiliar, dangerous, impermissible (see e.g. Cynthia Fuchs Epstein: 1992). They have inherent moral weight and help individuals as well as whole societies to structure and regulate the universe they live in (on the micro- and macro-scale); they may also be constricting.

In present day India, these (and also other) aspects of boundaries can be very promisingly studied using an example of the concept of *lakṣmaṇ rekhā*. This idea, originating in the later *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, functions as a metaphorical expression denoting a strict (moral) boundary that should not be crossed, as its transgression inevitably exposes one to danger. *Lakṣmaṇ rekhā* forms an important element of the discourse on female chastity but is also very much present in different socio-political contexts, in works of art, films, etc.

In my presentation, I will first discuss textual evidence that can be found in the authoritative Hindi *Rāmāyaṇas* such as the *Rāmcaritmānas*, the *Rāmcaṇḍrikā* and *Rādheśyām Rāmāyaṇ* with the aim to contextualize various levels of explicit and implicit meanings of the concept of *lakṣmaṇ rekhā* that emerge from traditional sources in Hindi. In the second part of my talk, I will first discuss entries from standard Hindi dictionaries and then focus on modern non-literary usages of *lakṣmaṇ rekhā*. I hope that this analysis that gives emphasis to structuring and regulating (but not only) aspect of boundaries can contribute to our understanding of how safety is negotiated in contemporary Indian society by way of drawing (ethical) boundaries and what happens if they are compromised.