On October 19, 2018, to mark the Indian festival of Dussehra, the prime minister of India ceremonially shot an arrow into a giant effigy of Ravana—the enemy of Rama, the eponymous hero of the ancient Indian epic the *Ramayana*. Ravana's effigy was installed in Delhi, where thousands had gathered to watch this mythic spectacle of the destruction of evil. By some pyrotechnical sleight of hand, the prime minister's arrow, although missing its target, officially set off a blaze of firecrackers concealed inside Ravana's body that could not have had a salutary effect on the capital's already lethal air-quality index. Never mind if some of the nation's environmentally concerned citizens have been fighting a vain battle to get the burning of festive firecrackers banned by the country's highest court.

Like the endlessly retold battle between good and evil, the coming together and falling apart of history and myth, past and present, fact and fiction, politics and faith simultaneously define how an epic like the *Ramayana* is inextricable from the bewilderingly varied fabric of everyday life in contemporary India. I could not help recalling the ritual encounter between Ravana and the prime minister when sitting down a few weeks after Dussehra to think about Vasantha Yogananthan's *A Myth of Two Souls*, his ongoing, seven-part, photographic retelling of the *Ramayana*, a project that began in 2013. The fourth chapter, *Dandaka*, is set in the Dandaka Forest—a place of punishment and exile for Rama; his newly married wife, Sita; and his devoted brother Lakshmana. At once a mythological topos and an actual topography, the modern-day Dandaka Forest region is spread across several Indian states, each with its own dynamic of environmental depredation and activism that is inseparable from political conflict, social change, economic development, and cultural diversity.

Yogananthan—who lives in Paris, whose mother is French, and whose father is from Sri Lanka—travels repeatedly throughout India to make this body of work. There is no guarantee that he will find any easily indexical correspondence between the places he photographs and those he reads about in the innumerable versions of the *Ramayana*, even if their names happen to be the same. He allows, therefore, the timelessness, the historicity, as well as the contemporaneity of the epic to be refracted through the actual and the immediate in a series of encounters with what Louis Malle calls "the real" in his seven-part documentary *L'Inde fantôme: Reflexions sur un voyage* (1969). Yogananthan colors these refractions, literally and metaphorically, by employing a number of narrative and pictorial traditions, both archaic and modern, and collaborating with a variety of local storytellers, artists, and actors.

The dreamy forestland in these hand-painted photographs—in which objects, gestures, expressions, and interactions turn mysteriously, even sinisterly, allusive—happens to be situated in the actual jungles of Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Karnataka. These are states where daily encounters with migration, displacement, industrialization, and environmental damage are lived out within, and between, communities that are defined by shifting configurations of class and caste, as well as tribal, linguistic, religious, and political identities, allegiances, and interests. This is a postcolonial history that stretches back from the present toward the strategically credulous invention of a mythical past, which may be invoked to validate the oppressive violence of a nation-state when it chooses to play its games of power, corruption, exploitation, and greed in the guise of a modern and secular democracy.

The most memorable poetic expression of such an experience of history—at once living, lived, and imagined—might be found in the essay "Three Hundred *Ramayanas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," written and revised between 1985 and 1991, by the late A. K. Ramanujan, the multilingual poet, translator, and scholar. In this essay, Ramanujan includes his translation of the description of a river that begins a retelling of the epic *Irāmāvatāram* by Kampan, the medieval poet: "Turning forest into slope, / field into wilderness, / seashore into fertile land, / changing boundaries, / exchanging landscapes, / the reckless waters / roared on like the pasts / that hurry close on the heels / of lives. / Born of Himalayan stone / and mingling with the seas, / it spreads, ceaselessly various, / one and many at once." For Yogananthan, Ramanujan's essay informed his understanding of how the *Ramayana* continues to generate its proliferating afterlives in the modern world. But Ramanujan's essay ran into trouble in India—with those who bigotedly prefer to enshrine the One as opposed to celebrating the Many.

Vasantha Yogananthan

Aveek Sen

All photographs from *A Myth of Two Souls*, chapter 4, *Dandaka*, 2018
Courtesy the artist

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