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What is This?

Perceiving the Forest: Early India

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This essay explores a theme which Günther-Dietz Sontheimer had drawn attention to in his writings, namely the relationship of the forest to the settlement—the *vana* to the *kṣetra*. These could be opposing concepts contrasting the habitat of the ascetic and the renouncer on the one hand, and the established settlement reflecting attempts at a regularly ordered social system, on the other. Or, in some cases, they could be seen as a continuum. The *grāma* (which would fall under the category of 'settlement') was not static, and could include a mobile village or migrating cattle-keepers, the emphasis in both being on large numbers of people and domestic animals. The dichotomy as well as the complementarity between the forest and the settlement has often been commented upon. Sontheimer was interested in the application of this duality to historical processes, especially to the construction of religious articulations such as the parallels between tribal fertility cults and Tantricism or the Devi cults, as also in the relationship of this duality to pastoralism.[1] His study of pastoral activities led him to suggest a link between the forest and the settlement, and to attempt to understand the influences on the responses of the *ksetra* or *grāma* to the *vana* or *aranya*.

This dichotomy between the *vana* and the *grāma* evolved in early times when the village constituted the settlement. With the emergence of urban centres, and particularly in the early centuries A.D., there was also a growing dichotomy between the *grāma* and the *nagara*—the village and the town respectively. At the same time, *vana* and *aranya* had an ecology different from that of the settlement, and would have included the desert and the semi-arid pastoral regions as well. Another dichotomy, discussed in the context of ecology and medical knowledge, was that of

[1] 'The *vana* and the *kṣetra*: The tribal background to some famous cults', in G.C. Tripathi and H. Kulke, eds, *The Eschmann Memorial Lectures*, Bhubaneshwar, 1987, pp. 117–64; Sontheimer, *Pastoral Deities in Western India*, Delhi, 1989.

the *jāṅgala* and the *ānūpa*—the forest and the marshland.[2] This had a stronger ecological connotation than *vana* and *kṣetra*. There is also the well-known concept of *tiṇai* as set out in Śangam literature, listing five ecological zones. The definition of *vana* and *kṣetra* and the distinction between them gradually absorbed a variety of connotations which enriched the concepts and extended their meaning to well beyond ecology.

I would like to argue that although the duality has existed for many centuries, the perceptions accompanying it were neither static nor uniform. The forest was seen in multiple ways, and historical change altered the focus. Where it was roman-ticized it became an imagined alternative, a fictive paradise, which expunged the inequities of civilized living. Alternatively, it was seen as the fearful habitat of demons.[3] Both the romanticism and the demons are found in texts and in folk lit-erature. But the images change, as do their roles. In folk versions, the images are often the reverse of those in texts, and one has to ask why this is so. Where the literary tradition is the only source, the perspective is inevitably of the *grāma*. This is one of many reasons why the collecting of oral traditions is crucial to obtaining a view from the other side. When the demands of civilization begin to impinge on the forest, the perceptions of the forest and its people also change. The forest, therefore, is not a neutral item, that is 'out there'. The images it evokes are significant to the self-understanding of the settlement and these change with time and with intention.

Ideologies focusing on retreat into the wilderness seem to have germinated in the agro-pastoral society referred to in the Vedic corpus but came to fruition in the discussions which took place in urban centres, which ironically could only be established through clearing the forest. Here, in the *kutūhalaśālās*, parks and rec-reational places on the fringes of towns, people gathered to hear heterodox think-ers—the Buddha and others—who initiated various new ideologies. Such parks or groves became yet another liminal space between the forest retreats eulogized in the Vedic corpus and the variant philosophical concerns associated with a context of nascent urbanization. Even when the monastic system came to be established, despite the necessity of dependence on alms which linked the monasteries to the *grāma*, the ideal image remained that of monks in forest monasteries. In the Deccan, the early monasteries at nodal points in the Western Ghats were clustered around caves, some natural and some deliberately cut into the volcanic rock. This did not require extensive forest clearance as did the monasteries on the plateau.

Some years ago Charles Malamoud argued for a dividing line between the *grāma* and the *araṇya* and linked it to Vedic ideology.[4] He maintained that these were not merely spatial differences. Stability in the *grāma* grew out of the cohesion of the

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[2] F. Zimmerman, *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats*, Berkeley, 1987.

[3] *Rāmāyaṇa*, 2.22.6–8, 2.25. 4 ff., 3.65.3 ff.

[4] C. Malamoud, 'Village et forêt dans l'idéologie de l'Inde Brahmanique', *Archives de Sociologie europeenne*, Vol. 17, July 1976, pp. 3–20; *idem, Cooking the World*, Delhi, 1989/1996, pp. 74–91.

group rather than the limitation of space and was maintained by *dharma*, social rules within a world-order encapsulated in the ritual of sacrifice. The *araṇya*, by definition, lacked the cohesion of the *grāma*, for not only was it spatially more extensive, but was also the habitat of those who did not live by *dharma*, such as brigands and thieves. The *araṇya* is any wilderness, it is interstitial, empty and constitutes 'the other'. Yet, the forest is part of the *araṇya* even though it is not empty space. Whatever is not included in the settlement belongs to the forest. The forest is, thus, not only the space between settlements but is characterized by being strange, remote, wild and different. It teems with creatures but their appearance and behaviour is unpredictable. Malamoud also remarks that all beings belong to either one or the other, but only man has access to both.

Some scholars have made a further distinction between the two categories. *Grāma* and *araṇya*, as more widely inclusive terms, are seen as dichotomous; whereas *vana* and *kṣetra*, being more specific, are viewed as interactive or even as a continuum. The dichotomy is also suggested by the statement in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* that the sacrificial animal at the *yajña* should be from the *grāma*, for while a domesticated animal eliminates the undesirable, the sacrificing of a wild animal from the forest has a negative effect.[5] The performance of a *yajña* is linked inherently to the *grāma*. Village animals can, however, graze in the forest, and pasture lands are frequently seen as a category between the two.[6] The two complementary ways of obtaining meat for eating were hunting and the sacrifice.[7] The meat from hunting was obtained in a non-ritual context, and since it came from the *vana*, no controls were required. The meat from the ritual of sacrifice was generally that of a prized animal and was, therefore, infrequently available. Hence Yajñavalkya's pleasure at eating a tender cut of beef.[8]

The notion of dichotomy is also extended to the major opposition in societal terms, that of the *gṛhastha* (householder) and the *saṁnyāsin* (ascetic or renouncer). The householder has to observe the social obligations of the *grāma* and of *dharma*, and has a schedule of daily rites, but the renouncer living in the forest is free of these.[9] The logic of the duality was that he who had renounced the practice of social and sacred obligations would have the forest as his habitat, since the forest did not require these. The eventual crystallization of these ideas was the theory of the four stages of life—the four *āśramas*—where, interestingly, a major part of one's life was to be spent, one way or another, in the forest. Perhaps this was a compromise with the demands of monastic life encouraged by Buddhism and Jainism, and urged on the renouncer even from a young age.

[5] *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 13.2.4.1.

[6] *Mahābhārata*, 12.57.44 ff; *Arthaśāstra*, 2.34.6.

[7] Zimmerman, *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats*, p. 60.

[8] *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 3.1.2.21.

[9] R. Thapar, 'Renunciation: The making of a counter-culture?', in *idem*, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, Delhi, 1978; *idem*, 'The Householder and renouncer in the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), Vol. 15: 1–2, 1981, pp. 273–98.

Epic literature is among the early compositions which plays on the dichotomy and the complementarity of the *vana* and *kṣetra*, but it also tends to change the orientation somewhat from that of the Vedic corpus. Many forests are mentioned, each by name, suggesting that the forest was not an undifferentiated expanse but had its own categories of identity.[10] In early India, the forest was the context for at least three activities: the hunt, the hermitage, and the place of exile. The descriptions of the hunts of the *rājās* in the *Mahābhārata* have a ferocity which can only be described as their being a surrogate raid on nature. The narrative of Śakuntalā for example, opens with Duḥsanta hunting in the forest.[11] He has a large entourage of heavily armed soldiers and hundreds of horses and elephants, as if going into battle. The *vana* was the unknown territory, peopled by *rākṣasas*. Here the hero slaughtered undiscriminately. Families of tigers and deer were killed, and severely wounded elephants trampled the forest. So fierce was the slaughter of animals that predators and prey took refuge together. One is reminded of another vivid description of the destruction of a forest—the Khāṇḍava *vana* burnt by Agni.[12] The fire raged for days and ate everything that came in its way. The heroes were presented with stunningly splendid weapons and the massacre began. Not only did animals and birds lose their lives, but the *gandharvas*, *yakṣas*, *rākṣasas* and *nāgas*, all were sought to be killed. Were these the reflections of a vivid mythology, or was this a veiled allusion to the people of the forest? So great was the carnage that even the gods asked whether the moment of *mahāpralaya*—the ultimate destruction of the universe—had arrived. The land was devastated, but cleared of forest, and the settlement of Indraprastha and the chiefdom of the Pāṇḍavas established. Both the ferocity of the hunt and the burning of the forest were necessary preconditions for power, and not just in a symbolic sense.

It is ironic that the burning of forests by Agni is described in the earliest literary source, yet Agni itself is born through the friction of wood.[13] It has been argued that the burning of forests was an attempt to destroy the resource base of hunter-gatherers even if forested land was easily available.[14] Or was it an attempt to clear more land in the vicinity of over-populated areas? The burning of the Khāṇḍava *vana* as necessary for establishing Indraprastha suggests the idea of staking a claim on the land as territory. This burning has been viewed as a massive *yajña* for Agni. It is different in intention from Videgha Māthava carrying Agni in his mouth across the Sadānīra/Gandak, possibly to legitimize his settlement.[15] The mood of the two narratives is dissimilar.

In a society of chiefships, where the state had not yet come into being and relationships within and between clans were dominant, claims to territory were made

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[10] *Rāmāyaṇa*, 1.23.12 ff., 3.2.1 ff., 3.20.7, 7.24.42; *Mahābhārata*, 1.89.35–45.

[11] *Mahābhārata*, 1.62–69.

[12] *Ibid.*, 1.214 ff.

[13] *Ṛgveda*, 2.4.6, 3.6.7, 7.7.2, 2.1.1, 3.1.13.

[14] M. Gadgil and R. Guha, *This Fissured Land*, Delhi, 1992, pp. 78 ff.

[15] *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 1.4.1.14–17.

or reiterated more frequently through a raid or through the hunt—the surrogate raid. Even the notion of conquest tended often to be associated with rituals performed on special occasions, such as the *dig-vijaya* required prior to a *yajña*, and even then there is some uncertainty about the exact nature of 'conquest'. In each of the epics, the war that was pivotal to the events was not essentially motivated by the wish to control further territory but by the insistence on the recognition of rights. The hunt was also a mechanism of asserting control over grazing grounds. When the keeping of large herds became the main resource for a clan, then access to grazing grounds became a basic necessity that the chief of the clan had to provide and defend. Domesticated animals grazed outside the village and in the periphery of the forest and had to be protected.[16] A fine example of these links occurs in the *ghoṣa-yātra*, the cattle foray described in the *Mahābhārata*. The Kuru clan, in fact, had to brand its herds. The younger members of the clan, together with their friends, women and retainers, their horses, soldiers and huntsmen, took the cattle to the Dvaitavana forest for grazing, where the animals were counted and the calves branded. The forest was an established grazing ground with huts for the cowherds, and the inspecting of cattle became the excuse for a hunt. That it was tied to claiming territory and the legitimacy of the Kurus to rule, is evident from the initial intention to use it as an occasion to attack the Pāṇḍavas. The entourage, apart from the townspeople, is said to have consisted of 8,000 chariots, 9,000 horses, 30,000 elephants and several thousand foot soldiers, as well as carts, traders, prostitutes and thousands of hunters. This, clearly, is an exaggeration, meant undoubtedly to emphasize the power of those taking the offensive. The forest was seemingly close by, so that people could return daily to the settlement. The distribution of gifts on this occasion was lavish, and is another indicator of the status of the Kuru clan. This is followed almost immediately by an altercation with the *gandharvas* over rights to the interior of the forest, which leads to a battle in which the Kurus were eventually defeated.[17] Cattle raids and claims over forest lands were essential to chiefdoms. The *gandharvas* in this narrative have an ambiguous identity, for they are likely to have been forest dwellers rather than celestial beings.

Hunting as the activity of chiefs and later of kings was looked upon as an enviable expertise, and the hero's success was measured by his prowess in the hunt. Yet those forest peoples who lived by hunting—the Vyādha, Niṣāda, and such like—are regarded with contempt, treated as uncouth and sinful, and subordinated to a low-caste status. Ostensibly the explanation for this was that they lived by violence and were devoid of the values of the *grāma*. But more likely, the downgrading was intended to uphold the legitimacy of the royal hunt. The conflict with such groups was constant, as is mentioned in the narrative of Śakuntalā in the *Mahābhārata*. We tend to forget that for hunter-gatherer societies, claims to forests as hunting grounds and the association of particular groups with these claims, continued even

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[16] *Mahābhārata*, 12.57.44 ff.
[17] *Ibid.*, 3.227–29.

after such societies ceased to be dependent on hunting. From the perspective of the *grāma*, if the forest was seen as the chaotic unknown, the king had to conquer it and refashion the chaos into order.[18]

The hunt introduces us to the forest dwellers. These tended to be either creatures of the imagination such as the *rākṣasas* who are abundant, or else humans with supernatural faculties. *Rākṣasas* have generally been described as demons and as unreal. But given the perceptions of the forest in the epics, they are as likely to be the unfamiliar forest dwellers who obstructed hunting expeditions and harassed those establishing settlements in the forest, for example, *ṛṣis* establishing *āśramas*. Or are they societies contrasted with monarchy, such as the more sophisticated *rākṣasas* of the *Rāmāyaṇa*? Moreover, is the hunt also an aspect of the subordination of nature to culture? If the forest is seen as a place which is without order or discipline, then it is required of the *rājā* to control it and the hunt becomes the beginning of such control, even if it is initially chaotic. This subordination was also achieved, perhaps less traumatically, through the setting up of *āśramas* in the forest. In the narrative of Śakuntalā, the ferocity of the hunt is contrasted with the gentle calm of the hermitage, each presenting a different view of nature. The hermitage is set so deep in the forest that it is almost another world, enveloped in a translucent green of sun and trees. This is liminal space, the threshold between the two contrasting ecologies of the *vana* and the *kṣetra*. But at the same time it may be seen as a precursor of what later evolved into *agrahāras*—grants of land to *brāhmaṇas*, either in forests or wastelands, or grants of cultivated land. The *āśrama* is at one level an intrusion into the forest by the people of the *grāma*, an intrusion sought to be stemmed by those living in the forest. Not unexpectedly, the literature is replete with references to *āśramas* being attacked by *rākṣasas* and heroes being requested to repel these attacks. The predators are more often demons rather than wild animals. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa begin their apprenticeship as heroes by defending *ṛṣis* against *rākṣasas*.

The hermitage may have been the vanguard of the encroachment into the forest. But at the same time the choice of the forest, and the symbolic act of going to the forest for purposes of asceticism and renunciation has multiple meanings: there is a distancing from civilization; a seeking of knowledge through isolation and meditation; and a search for the meaning of life through experiencing the unknown. This emphasis on the solitary individual was entirely different from the social interlocking which the clan required for the performance of sacrificial rituals. There is meant to be an underlying sense of release in going to the forest and a heightening of the feeling of anomie. The early *Upaniṣads* use the dichotomy to differentiate the path of the soul where rebirth is associated with the *grāma* but self-realization in the forest ensures a release from rebirth.[19] The movement away from sacrificial ritual invests the retreat in the forest with a different kind of power. The origin of hermit-

[18] N. Falk, 'Wilderness and kingship in ancient South Asia', *History of Religions*, Vol. 13: 1, 1973. pp. 1–15.

[19] *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 5.10.1–2; *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 6.2.15–16.

ages is not very clear. The preferred choice was a place distant from the settlement so that there would be few intrusions, which is ironic, since the hermitage itself was an intrusion. Its way of life was a denial of that associated with the settlement. Renouncers having renounced social obligations, had to live where such obligations and duties were not required. Rituals were performed, but only for the members of the *āśrama*. Food was gathered from what the forest provided and cultivation was marginal. The attempt was to live in unison with the rhythms of the forest world, even if not in amity with the forest people.

The suggestion for a hermitage could have come from the existing sacred groves, located either on the peripheries, or in the dense areas of the forest. The former would be tended by the settlement and the latter by the forest dwellers. A small forest was dedicated to a deity, was left uncut, and had a space for offerings and activities demanded by rituals focusing sometimes on a shrine located in the grove. This would have been consistent with the way in which forest dwellers looked upon forests—as a source of nurture and a territory for sustenance, an appreciation which continues into later times and forms. The Buddha is often said to have been born in a grove of Sāla trees. For Kālidāsa, the *āśrama* of Kaṇva is a *tapovana*, suggesting a sacred grove.[20] Sacred groves may even have been specially planted since the trees are sometimes specified, and believed to be sacred to particular deities. The protection of the grove was sought by barring entry excep on certain occasions. Those infringing the prohibition suffered dire consequences, sometimes as extreme as a change of sex as in the well-known story of Ila/Iḷā. The normal activity of hunting associated with the forest was often forbidden in the grove. Although the large numbers of groves are commented upon even as recently as the nineteenth century, those in the interior of forests had a better chance of survival than the ones on the periphery. The association with deities afforded only limited protection; when the encroachment came, accompanied by the gods and goddesses of Hinduism, the existing deities would have been subsumed.

The forest was never far away from habitation. For instance, excavations of the settlements at Atranjikhera and Hastinapur, which are not too far from Delhi, have yielded evidence of a large variety of forest trees.[21] The Buddhist Canon states that aside from the village and its outskirts, the rest of the land is jungle.[22] Even as late as the seventh century A.D., the Chinese Buddhist monk Hsuan Tsang writes of forests close to Kauśāmbi, as also of the extensively forested areas in the vicinity of Kapilavastu and Kuśinagara in the *terai* and north Bihar.[23] Travelling from one town to another meant going through a forest. Therefore, when in exile, the forest was not a physically distant place, although distant in concept. The exile of heroes in both epics is to the forest. But here the forest takes on a different connotation and is not merely the jungle beyond the settlement. The forest, as the location of the

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[20] *Abhijñāna-śākuntalam*, I. v. 27/29 ff.

[21] K.A. Chaudhuri, *Ancient Agriculture and Forestry in Northern India*, Bombay, 1977.

[22] *Vinaya Piṭaka*, 1.74.

[23] *Si-yu-ki*, Vol. I, p. 234; Vol. II, pp. 25, 43.

unknown, and the place of exile, became an exploration. It was also necessary to the continuation of the narrative of the epic. Exile was a device used commonly by bards and poets to stretch the story. The forest was where anything could happen and in each retelling of the story or even in each day of the recitation, fresh incidents could be added. The heroes in exile entered the unknown, unpredictable space, where events had strange consequences, for the hierarchies and regulations of the *grāma* were not observed. Exile, thus, became an experience in forging and testing human values.

Every epic has an imagined space which is crucial to the imagery created for the audience and which is then sought to be projected as a reality. This central space signalled the presence of people whose appearance and customs could be alien, and these were viewed either as worth emulating or were rejected through contempt or fear. The space, however, was an extension in the imagination of a geographical reality. In the Indian epics, it was the forest that constituted this imagined space. By way of contrast, the Greek hero Ulysses was tossed into a similar space after the battle of Troy, although for the essentially sea-faring Greeks, this was what Homer describes as the wine-dark seas. The journey from Troy to Ithaca which would at most have taken a few days across the Aegean Sea, took many years, with Ulysses' ships being driven ashore at various places along the Mediterranean. This provided Homer and the bards with opportunities for introducing exotic men and women, part fantasy, part mythology and in part the mirror which 'the other' presents to the self. Those conjured up in these spaces of the unknown are either contrary to or else ideal projections of the society of the poet.

Such imagined space can, up to a point, be given some geographical location and be used to encourage the cultural appropriation, if not the political subordination, of new areas coming within the ambit of a dominant culture. Associations are sought between the culture of the heroes and that of the people in this space. This often takes the form of myths or expressions of local culture which insist that the heroes had visited a particular region; hence the frequency of the Pandu *lenas* and the Sita *kunds* all over the subcontinent. When some epics are later converted to sacred literature, as the Indian epics were, then this space becomes a matter of sacred geography and there is an even greater insistence on the association of people, deities and location.

If the *āśrama* was a place of penance and purification for the ascetic, the forest provided the same context for aspiring heroes. The hunting and gathering life which they are forced to adopt is a reversal of the life they were born to, but is projected as idyllic and free from the complexities of their normal existence. The heroes bring with them the awareness of social obligations but, as long as they are in the forest, they are permitted to question or even discard these. If this period is as it has been described—'the liminal context for spiritual transformation'[24]—then it becomes a threshold condition which prepares them for the eventual denouement.

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[24] T. Parkhill, *The Forest Setting in Hindu Epics: Sages. Demons, Princes*, Lewiston. 1995.

The forest becomes a metaphor for change, subsequent experiences being coloured by the exile in the forest.

Among the most romantic images of the forest are those which occur in the plays of Kālidāsa, as in the *Abhijñāna-śākuntalam.* This takes us into a different perception of the forest. The duality of settlement and forest is apparent in the contrasting images of the *āśrama* of the *ṛṣi* Kaṇva and the court of Duḥṣanta at Hastināpur. Śakuntalā is essentially a woman of the forest and Duḥṣanta a man of the court, suggesting again the bifurcation of nature and culture. It has been argued that patriarchal ideologies project 'nature' as feminized and 'culture' as masculine, where nature is passive and culture authoritative.[25] But the counter argument maintains that notions of nature relate to specific conditions and that association of gender with culture varies in different situations.[26] The distancing between the *āśrama* and the court is made explicit in Kālidāsa's play through the comments of the two acolytes from the *āśrama* who accompanied Śakuntalā. Their discomfort is expressed in the feeling that the palace is as if on fire, and the town mired in filth. However, the *āśrama* was not unfamiliar with the ways of the world. Kaṇva knows the mores of upper-caste society and his advice to his foster daughter draws on the axioms appropriate to proper wifely behaviour in a patriarchal society. The play also touches subconsciously on the different kinds of authority invested in the *ṛṣi* and the *rājā*. The *ṛṣi* opts out of social obligations and establishes an alternative pattern of life where such obligations have no role. His power is drawn from his individually practised asceticism, in isolation in the forest, and this power can even threaten the gods. The *rājā* upholds social obligations and protects the *varṇāśramadharma*, believing that the equilibrium of society is thereby maintained. Unlike the *ṛṣi*, he draws his powers from interaction with others, and through governance and various coercive agencies. Yet, his power does not allow him to compete with the gods.

Kālidāsa's play registers a change in the three characteristics related to the forest that I have associated with the epics, and to that extent captures a historical moment which is in some ways transitional to later perceptions of the forest. The opening scene is a less gruesome hunt than in the epic. There is even an elegant verse on the fleeing deer chased by the king in his chariot. The hunt is neither a surrogate raid nor a claim to territory, for these are now achieved more effectively through campaigns and battles. The hunt is a royal pastime infused with the axioms of gallantry. On arriving at the *āśrama*, the king removes his royal regalia and enters as an ordinary man. *Āśramas* are now protected by kings, although at the same time they claim to be outside royal jurisdiction. Protection is largely against *rākṣasas*, *pretas*, and *daityas*, all creatures conjured up as poetic fancy. It is, however, equally likely that they are projections of forest people resisting encroachment,

[25] S. Ortner, 'Is female to male as nature is to culture?', in M. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere, eds, *Women, Culture and Society*, Stanford, 1974.

[26] M. Strathern, 'No nature no culture: The Hagen case', in C. MacCormack and M. Strathern, eds, *Nature, Culture and Gender*, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 174–222.

who are, therefore, fantasized as demons in order to legitimize their extermination. It is not easy to separate poetic imagery and political reality, but the former can provide a momentary glimpse of the latter. As already noted, the relationship of the *āśrama* with the state is a precursor of a greater interlocking in the instituting of the *agrahāras*—grants of land to *brāhmaṇas*—which become common from this time onwards. The activities in the *āśrama*, focusing on the study and recitation of the Vedas, would suggest that it was a support of a conservative nature for the king. The *āśrama* of Kaṇva in the play does not accommodate heterodox beliefs and practices. But being at the intersection of settlement and forest, it could and did sometimes link the knowledge systems of both, thus encouraging innovations.[27]

This change in attitudes to the forest, different in the play from perceptions in the *Mahābhārata*, hints at other changes in attitude towards the forest and its people. The forest was now less alien and at least on its margins was beginning to be looked upon almost as a variant of the *grāma*; it was slowly becoming the recipient of the discipline and norms associated with those regarded as civilized. Above all, it was being viewed as a resource to be exploited. The perception of the forest as viewed by those who were advisors and authorities of the state, such as Kauṭilya, is entirely unlike those discussed so far. This new perception did not replace what has been depicted so far, but offered a new and different perspective, reflecting the concerns of a different political entity, namely the state. At this juncture, the state took the form of a mature monarchy with a concentration of political power in a single person, drawing less on kinship loyalties for administrative functioning and more on an impersonal structure backed by coercive authority. Power and authority in the state system became dependent on revenue, among other things. Consequently the legitimate tapping of various sources of revenue was being suggested, and this included the forest.

For purposes of extending agriculture, both in order to bring in a larger revenue and perhaps to support a growing population, Kauṭilya's advice was to settle *śūdra* peasants on wasteland or land which had been deserted.[28] This meant some cutting of forests in order to clear the land. If the desertion of land was due to shifting cultivation this also required constant tree felling. Shifting cultivation permitted a secondary growth but settled cultivation assumed the permanent clearing away of the forest. The granting of tax-free, cultivable land to special categories of persons— learned *brāhmaṇas* and professionals working for the state—was also mentioned. This would either have been cultivated land in villages, or else larger acreages of uncultivated land to be brought under cultivation by the grantee. The latter would again mean some deforestation. The incidence of this creating what came to be called *agrahāras* can be traced to the early centuries of the Christian era, when inscriptions attest to kings making such grants. The frequency increases in later times. Forests were also assessed as a source of revenue, both from their natural

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[27] Similar interactions are discussed in Zimmermann, *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats.*
[28] *Arthaśāstra,* 2.1.1.

products such as timber, elephants, veins of semi-precious stones and mines, and through their transformation into cultivable land.[29] The clearing of forests had to be kept under firm control—not because Kauṭilya was an environmentalist, but because the state had to be watchful of both the production and the receipt of revenue. The state was also advised to take the initiative in developing forests, especially those featuring particular kinds of forest produce, and to settle people in forests who would be trained to garner this produce and to convert it into items for commerce.[30] Elephant forests were especially prized, for not only was the ivory valuable but it was also thought that victory in battle depended principally on the elephant wing of the army. Furthermore, such forests made excellent natural frontiers. That these activities of the state may have met with some opposition from forest dwellers is suggested by Kauṭilya's remark that the king should not tax those areas which had been laid waste by the *āṭavika*/forest dwellers.[31] What form this opposition took is not specified, but the exemption from tax for those cultivators affected by the activities of the forest people would suggest that perhaps the crops of the cultivators were burnt. He also cautions against forest chieftains who were numerous, visible, brave and could ruin a country. They could be allies or could be used politically to create trouble for neighbouring kingdoms.[32] Forest peoples— *aranyacaracāṭavika*—are a distinct category, known and visible, in the text.[33]

Many references to forest chiefs occur in the later sections of the book, dating to the early centuries A.D. In these later portions, too, forest chief͘ are seen as potential allies or enemies or as instruments to be used politically to create trouble in neighbouring kingdoms. They are, therefore, depicted as part of the diplomacy of inter-state relations.[34] Some are even said to have pillaged cities.[35] Attacks on caravans were commonly feared by traders, which led to some guilds maintaining their own militia for defence against such attacks.[36] The frequency of references to forest chiefs and forest peoples in the context of campaigns and of diplomacy would point to their being of greater importance than has been assumed by modern historiography. A hint in another source unexpectedly suggests much the same. The Mauryan emperor, Aśoka, ruling in the third century B.C., makes a curious statement in his Major Rock Edict XIII, the same edict in which he expresses remorse for the suffering caused by his campaign in Kalinga.[37] We are told that Devānaṃpiya conciliates the forest people, but warns them that he has power even in his remorse and asks them to repent lest they be killed. The reason for demanding

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[29] *Ibid.*, 2.17.1 ff.

[30] *Ibid.*, 2.2.5–11.

[31] *Ibid.*, 2.1.36.

[32] *Ibid.*, 7.2.19, 8.1.54, 1.16.29.

[33] *Ibid.*, 8.4.41–48.

[34] *Ibid.*, 7.2.19, 8.1.54, 1.16.29, 1.12.33, 1.16.29, 5.6.12, 7.2.19, 13.3.17.

[35] *Ibid.*, 3.12.2.

[36] *Ibid.*, 4.5.15.

[37] Major Rock Edict XIII: J. Bloch, *Les Inscriptions d'Asoka*, Paris, 1950, p. 129.

their repentance, or for the threat to their lives, remains a mystery. Elsewhere he forbids the wanton burning of forests.[38] Was the threat to forest dwellers a way of preventing the illegal clearing of forests and of curbing shifting cultivation? Was Aśoka, being a conscientious Buddhist, trying to wean away the *āṭavikas* from a life of hunting and killing animals, or was the state ensuring that its appropriation of forest produce would not be obstructed by forest dwellers? Or was the state protecting forest dwellers? There was at that time enough forested land for there to be no fear of the disappearance of forests. Shifting cultivation, therefore, may not have been viewed as a disaster, for it also permitted the growth of a secondary forest. Aśoka, it seems, took pride in having trees planted along the roads to provide shade for travellers. This was not a policy of forecasting treeless areas, though Pillar Edict V is much quoted by modern environmentalists arguing for his having been conscious of ecological damage. Aśoka lists those animals that were inviolate, and some were inviolate on particular days. The list is curious, including as it does creatures unlikely to be killed for food, which could suggest their use in medicine, and the mention of particular days links the edict to ritual practices rather than environmental concerns.

The stern policy of Aśoka Maurya towards the forest people takes a further turn under the Guptas. In the fourth century A.D. Samudragupta is said to have reduced the *āṭavika-rājās* or forest chiefs to servitude.[39] It is likely that the customary use of the forest by the *āṭavika-rājās* was based on privilege rather than on rights. Not only was the use of the forest by forest communities curtailed, but servitude would also have broken their clan or community identity. Further, the expansion of trade and the opening up of new areas to commercial exchange took routes cutting through forests. Forest dwellers had to be brought under control to safeguard these routes and the valuable resources of the forest. Brigands attacking travellers and merchants are a given in Indian history. It was not that the forest people were necessarily brigands but the forest provided shelter for brigandage. Where these areas were conquered, the *āṭavikas* would have been put to work to obtain resources. Centres for the collection of timber and the produce of mines meant further inroads into the forest.

The change in the agrarian economy brought about by grants of land from the Gupta period onwards has been analysed as an innovation in political economy. The impact of this change on the forest and those dwelling within needs further investigation. These are the people who would either have been forced to migrate deeper into the forest, or else, if they remained juxtaposed to the encroaching state system and the cultivation it brought, they would have been inducted into the *jāti* or caste structure. Those who were required to work the forest resources for a conquering state would have undergone a similar experience. Such new *jātis* would be

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[38] Pillar Edict V: *Ibid.*, 166.

[39] Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta: J.F. Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* (henceforth *CII*), Vol. III, Varanasi, 1970 (reprint), p. 7.

identified by their having retained, to some degree, their kinship patterns and customs. This process has been described as the transition from tribe to caste, from *jana* to *jāti*, a conclusion which obscures the more fundamental transformation, namely, the emergence of a peasant society in erstwhile forest regions. This process would have integrated the deities of Hindu sects into the ritual and belief systems of the new *jātis*, as well as incorporated the cults of the forest into what we recognize as Hindu religions. The process of the transformation of *jana* to *jāti* goes back to earlier times, but given the availability of a larger body of diverse sources at this later time the process is more apparent. These were the less visible ways in which the *vana* entered the nodal points of the *grāma*. In such relationships, the definition of *vana* and *kṣetra* may also have implied the centrality of *jāti* stratification in the *kṣetra*.

Grants of land increased in number with the parallel increase in small states that were dependent on agriculture for revenue, on resources from the forest, and on commerce. Origin myths of local dynasties carry hints of connections with forest clans and some even provide an ancestry. This would suggest that grantees and adventurers may have married into the families of forest chieftains. As in all such interactions, what resulted was complex. However, this was not always a process of osmosis by which the *āṭavikas* were gently converted to a caste. Where deriving revenue from the forest was at issue, this could become a disjuncture in their lives. A group of inscriptions from Khoh in central India illustrates the process.[40] In A.D. 475, a *mahārājā*, Hastin, ruling in Bundelkhand, is recorded as granting a village to a group of *brāhmaṇas*. The king's ancestry is described as being of a *nṛpati parivrājaka kula*, that is, of a kingly ascetic. This may point to an earlier connection with a grant of land for an ancestor—the *brāhmaṇa* Suśarman. If the grant was large enough to form a foundation for a dynasty, it must surely have included substantial areas of forest land, particularly in Bundelkhand. Twenty years later, another copper-plate inscription from Khoh, issued by the successor to Hastin, records a grant of land to a *brāhmaṇa*. The king claims that his ancestor was of the Bhāradvāja *gotra*, thus suggesting a *brahma-kṣatra* status, without actually saying so. He also claims as part of his inheritance eighteen *aṭavī rājyas* or forest kingdoms conquered by the family. This was part of the conversion of the Vindhyan region from forest to kingdom, from *vana* to *kṣetra*. This process needs to be investigated in assessing the transmutation of each, and in ascertaining where the change was an accommodation and where it was a contestation.

Some *brāhmaṇas* who received land grants were known to marry into the families of 'tribal' chiefs, as has been discussed by many scholars.[41] Such marriages were not only a mutual backing of status, albeit of two different systems, but were

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[40] Khoh CP Inscription of Hastin; Majhgawam CP Inscription; Bhumara Stone Pillar Inscription; Khoh CP Inscription of Saṃkṣobha: *CII*, Vol. III, pp. 93 ff.; 100 ff.; 106 ff.; 110 ff.; 112 ff.

[41] As, for example, F. Apffel-Marglin, *Wives of the God King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*, Delhi, 1985.

also used to lay claim to the territories traditionally associated with the clan of the chief.[42] This becomes something of a sub-continental pattern where land grants are common. The Pallavas, for example, claimed descent from a *brāhmaṇa* and a *nāga* woman.[43] This, however, did not result in a change of status of the *āṭavikas*. The initial contestation, frequently violent, gradually took the form of cultural and social incorporation and opened up possibilities through ritual and custom for the *āṭavika* practices to become part of Puranic Hinduism. Even more crucial are the ensuing political relations between aspirants to kingdoms and forest dwellers when the kingdom is established but the participation of the latter remains essential. State formation was not a simple, linear process exploiting the forest dweller. Although the exploitation cannot be denied, adjustments in other forms also had to be conceded by those who were exploiters. The multiplicity of goddesses and myths, and the emergence of new *jātis* is an indication of these changes.

This is not to suggest that the earlier attitude to the forest and its people was replaced by the new relationships. Many of the earlier attitudes persisted. Some were even romanticized since fresh encroachments into new forests continued to be those of the hermitage and the land grant. The coming of the state was subsequent. There is, therefore, even a certain superimposition of the images, with some more dominant than others. *Rākṣasas* and *apsarās* are less in the forefront in courtly literature than in folk narratives. Frequently, the latter relate a variant narrative which may not be a direct reversal of the classical version, but which, nevertheless, presents the story from a different perspective.

A century later, Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita* describes a forest in the Vindhyas where the king, Harṣa, goes in search of his sister.[44] What were once the perceptions of the forest in the epic, focusing on the hunt, the hermitage and exile, were now beginning to fade. Bāṇabhaṭṭa's description would pertain to the middle of the first millennium A.D. Villages in the forest as described by Bāṇabhaṭṭa are large and well stocked. In addition to cowpens there are rice paddies and sugarcane fields worked by farming families. Blacksmiths collect wood for charcoal, and hunters, trappers and fowlers are active. Others come with the produce of the forest— bark, cotton from the Simul tree, flax and hemp, honey, waterlily roots, and wax— and women carry baskets of forest fruit to sell at the next village. This is, economically, a different scene from the forests of the epics, and *rākṣasas* and *apsarās* are far less frequent. Yet this is the same Vindhyan forest through which the epic heroes were said to have wandered in exile. The description in the *Harṣacarita* is not too dissimilar to that of Vimalasūri in the *Paumacariyam*—a Jaina version of the narrative of Rāma, where exile in the Vindhyas entails travelling

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[42] H. Kulke, 'The struggle between the rajas of Khurda and the Muslim Subedars of Cuttack for dominance of the Jagannath cult', in A. Eschman, G.C.Tripathi and H. Kulke, eds, *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition in Orissa*, Delhi, 1978, pp. 321–42.

[43] *Epigraphia Indica*, 1898, Vol. 5, pp. 49–53.

[44] E.B. Cowell and F.W. Thomas (trs and eds), *The* Harṣacarita *of Bana*, Delhi, 1968 (reprint), Sections 255 ff.

through many more *kingdoms*, unlike in the Vālmīki version where there are more *forests* to be traversed through. This description would pertain to the mid-first millennium A.D.[45]

And what of the forest people? The king Harṣa, travelling in the Vindhyan region, is introduced to the nephew of the Śabara chief.[46] He is described as dark with blood-shot eyes, a flat nose, a thick lower lip and projecting cheekbones, moving like a *tamāla* tree or a mass of black collyrium or a melting block of iron from the Vindhya. But it is said that he knew every leaf of the forest. The description carries echoes of the earlier descriptions of the Niṣāda, Bhilla, Pulinda and other forest peoples. In short, it appears to be a stereotype. Should it be taken as accurate? The stereotype, it seems, had entered mythology. Puranic myths about the first ruler emphasize the difference between the forest dweller and the cultivator.[47] The contempt of the *brāhmaṇas* for the first is contrasted with the eulogies of the second. Thus, when the *rājā*, Veṇa, began to oppose the *brāhmaṇas* and stopped performing sacrifices, they turned on him and killed him. Without a ruler there was chaos in the land, so in desperation they churned the left thigh of Veṇa. A short, ugly, dark man with a flat nose and blood-shot eyes emerged. He was thought to be unfit to rule, and was banished to the forest and given the name Niṣāda, meaning 'to sit' or 'to sink'. Niṣāda, Bhilla, Pulinda and Śabara were to be generic names for those who lived in the forest. Subsequently, when the right arm of Veṇa was churned, there emerged the tall, handsome Pṛthu who introduced cattle rearing and agriculture. The ensuing prosperity so pleased the earth that she took on his name and is hence called Pṛthivī. Implicit in this imagery is the opposition between the civilized and those belonging to the forest. The opposition was not new, for the description of Śabara resembles earlier descriptions of the *rākṣasa*, but the relationship has changed. The Śabara was neither feared nor allowed to forget that he had to be subservient. The myth encapsulates an opposition between the *vana* and the *kṣetra*.

And so the story continues for many centuries up to the present. There is a constant mingling of all these perceptions, but some either lie dormant or surface dramatically. The epics, for instance, continue to be recited, and their narratives have generated multiple and varying local versions in folk literature. Sometimes the imagery coincides with that of the hegemonic epic, but often, it is contrary to it and becomes a way of contesting the former. The Indian past provides us with multiple perceptions of the forest and those who live there. Perceptions and contexts alter over time. In many cases, we do not know who the original inhabitants of the forest may have been, for much of the present mythology speaks of migrations and the shuffling of peoples. It has now also begun to reflect the intertwining of the

- [45] K.R. Chandra, *A Critical Study of Paumacariyam*, Vaishali, 1970, pp. 507 ff.; R. Thapar, 'The *Rāmāyaṇa*: Theme and variation', in S.N. Mukherjee, ed., *India: History and Thought*, Calcutta, 1982, pp. 221–53.
- [46] Cowell and Thomas, *The* Harṣacarita *of Bana*, Sections 259 ff.
- [47] *Mahābhārata*, 12. 59; *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, 1.13; *Padma Purāṇa*, II. 27.42–43.

mythologies of forest and settlement. A juxtaposition of the images, those of the settlement and the self-images of the forest peoples, could encourage a dialogue on perceptions.

We cannot say that the Indian tradition insisted on the conservation of forests, or alternatively, that there was little comprehension of ecology and that forests were devastated. There were times when some forests were devastated, there were times when some were conserved, whatever the reason. But it would be illuminating to attempt to know the reason. What does, however, become apparent is that even on recognizing the dichotomy of the *vana* and the *kṣetra*, their complementarity immediately surfaces. The historical role, the historical interaction, and the imagery of the one is essential to the reconstruction of the other. In the absence of the one, the reality of the other is diminished.