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The Imagery Of Forest In Ancient Indian Texts

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Abstract- This paper attempts to understand sociological and political processes through the lenses of ecology in Early India. Forest has been the earliest residing place but with the emergence of settled life, the idea of *Grāma* emerged. Now forest looked like a place of danger and wilderness. However, this perception was not static but shifted with the socio-economic and political scenario. This paper is a text-based study. The Main theme in this paper is the representation of forest, its residents, and different habitation zones given in different Early Indian texts.

Key Words- Dharma, Madhyadesha, Agrahara, Ecology, Grama, Jati, Vana, Kshetra.

Introduction

The ecological and environmental approach is very important to look at the sociological as well as political processes. Forest has been the earliest residing place for mankind but from the Neolithic period onwards with the emergence of settled life and agriculture, the idea of *Grāma* also emerged. When *Grāma* became a separate unit, the perception for forest started changing and now it looked like a place of danger and wilderness. However, this perception was not static but changed with the socio-economic and political scenario. *Grāma* and *Vana* are two spatial regions that represent two different social and cultural units sometimes they are complementary to each other and at the same time contradictory. M. Sontheimer was the first who traced the dichotomy between these two zones in *Saṃgam* literature beyond the ecological conception. Other historians like Charles Malamound, Romila Thapar, Aloka Prashar Sen, etc. worked on the idea of *Grāma* and *vana* on the basis of primary texts. This paper is mainly a text-based study where I am going to discuss the representation of the forest and its inhabitants in Early Indian history, and historiography, with special reference to *Harśa-Carita* of *Banabhatta*.

The text under consideration is *Harśa-carita*¹ of *Bāṇabhatta* Originally written during the 7th century in Sanskrit prose form. It covers the geographical area of *Madhydeśa* and records the history of king *Harśa* of the *Puśyabhūti* dynasty. *Bāṇa* discusses four types of habitation zone. Each shows a clear dichotomy with other habitation zones and their residents. The first one is the capital city *Sathāneśwar*, which is the residence of king *Harśa*. The royal court's image is hateful, full of evils, dander, favoritism, and morally corrupt. But still, king *Harśa* is shown as the upholder of *Dharma-varṇa* norms. It seems that the term *Dharma* itself is a very

ambiguous, manipulative, and flexible term. The second one is an *agrahara* village with morally superior residents engaged in sacrificial rituals and teaching-learning activities. These people reside outside the city near a forest. The third is *Śrīkaṇṭha*, which is depicted as an agriculture-based zone. Its residents are hard-working, strong-built, and beautiful. Last is the forest zone, historically considered a polluted and dangerous place that is not abided by Dharma laws. The physical features of the people of the first three zones are depicted as beautiful and auspicious, while forest people are compared with wilderness, barbaric, inauspicious, and dangerous. The first three zones are considered free of passion and abided by dharma rule, while a *sūdra* and *Maleccha* are depicted as unstable and heedless creatures. Why there was a striking difference in the image of these different zones; and their inhabitants; was this feature limited to Harschrita and a particular time period or it was a practice of an earlier period? Through historiography, we will try to understand the definition and evolution of the idea of *vana* and *kshetra* and changing attitudes towards them.

Forest and Grama:

Charles Malamound² defines the two zones through differences in their material and cultural features. According to Malamound, *Grāma* is a place with definite boundaries where the concentration of people and institutions takes place. The stability of *Grāma* depends on the constitutive relationship between its members and is maintained by Dharma rules. But the idea of Dharma itself very wide and flexible, and it is most probably linked with the Sacrificial rituals of *Grāma* which provides social and political authority to *Grahashta*. While *Vana* or *Arṇya* are more wide and extensive terms which include forest, desert, semi-arid zone, and pastoral region. The features associated with *vana* region are strange, remote, wild, different, unpredictable, and lack the concentration of people, institutions, and Dharma norms. *Grāma* was associated with the *Grahashta* while forest with *Samyāsīn* renunciation tradition. According to Malamound sacrificial fire represent the trait of civilization and thus *Yajña* is a trait of *Grāma*. Shatpath Brahmana mentioned a story where the sacrificial fire came out of the mouth of Videgha Madhav and rolled towards eastern India and purified the land. It shows the practice of sacrifice is closely connected with grama. Apart from social and cultural aspects, the animals were also categorized according to their inhabitation. Stephene Jaminson gives a list of wild and domesticated animals from *Rig Veda* and found that there is a division between animals. Mankind is the only *Paśu* who has access to both zones, while others were categorized according to spatial regions. It listed the animals which can be used in sacrifice and says that as *yajna* was a village affair so sacrificial animals should also belong to *Grāma* only because forest animals are not subject to violence. In the later Vedic and post-Vedic literature, the division between village and wilderness has increased.

Romila Thapar³ looks at the forest in historical aspects that are not limited to material aspects. She says the idea of the forest is not static but a part of the historical processes. With these historical changes, the forest was also seen in multiple ways like- hunting, exile, and hermitage. It was the imagined alternative of Grama that increased the inequalities of civilized living. Various primary sources like *Śatpatha Brāhmaṇas*, *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, etc suggests that settled zone came out of the forest, but once they came out, they perceived them as an impure, dangerous zone inhabited by *Bhīla*, *Rākṣhasa*, *Niṣadas*, etc. who don't follow the Dharma norms. Epic literature⁴ describes it as a place of asceticism, exile, and hunting, whose residents

are *Gandharvas, yakshas, Rākṣhasa, and Nāga*. Even non-Brahmanical religions like Buddhism and Jainism also advocate avoiding direct contact with forest people, as they are half barbarians. Jataka texts⁵ like *Chhadanta Jātaka* give a physical description of forest people as having broad feet, thick beards, knees, and ribs like calf swollen, yellow teeth, disfigured with scars, hulking fellow, etc. These Buddhist sources talk about *hīnajātis*, which include *Caṇḍālakula, Veṇakula, Nisādakula, Rathkārakula, Pukkusakula*. However, in the matter of salvation, it says irrespective of caste anyone can attain *Niravāṇa*. But also acknowledge among humans, *Caṇḍāla* is the lowest. However, these texts make a difference between outcasts and wild people but associates some bad omen with both of them.

Origin and alienation of Forest people:

Brahmanical texts explain the origin of these tribes in their mythical setup. Aitereya Brahmana suggests the forest people as the progeny of sage Vishvamitra. But, when they refused to acknowledge his son Shunahshepa, Vishvamitra cursed them to be outcasted. Perhaps this myth shows the conflict, justification for subordination, and assimilation of tribal people to Brahmanical setup.⁶ Aloka Prasher Sen⁷ tries to understand how the association of forest people with the term 'Maleccha' which means Foreigners and is loosely translated as 'barbarians'. Initially, this term was used for the people who came from outside the frontiers of the Indian Subcontinent. The idea was first restricted to the people who speak the impure (non-Aryan) language but soon it acquired cultural connotations. When it acquired cultural connotations, it broadened its base from linguistic and geographical one to all outsiders who didn't follow the values, ideas, and norms of the dominating group. So, varna-ashrama-dharma is an important factor to determine whether a person is Maleccha or not. These ideas of inclusion and exclusion were created by Brahmanas to safeguard their hegemony. Kautilya's Arthshastra also represents this broadened meaning term 'Maleccha' and included the forest people and tribes. These are represented as robbers, thieves, and a challenge to the state. They are not abided by sacrificial as well as state laws and run a parallel state. Kautilya advised the king needs to exploit them for state purposes. King should use Maleccha/Forest tribes for his own needs like spies, the assassination of other rulers, useful in the army, etc. However, no matter how much use they are but still, Kautilya calls them unrighteous, suspected, and a continuous threat to the state. Other texts like Mahabharata, Harivamsa, and Amarkosha also include the forest tribes in Maleccha category. These texts consider Maleccha lands impure because they don't perform Brahmanical rituals. This exclusion can also be traced from the list of occupations mentioned in Arthshastra, it nowhere mentioned food gathering and hunting that was primarily related to forest people as means of earning a livelihood. While focusing on the various Brahmanical imaginations regarding the idea of Aryavarta which comprise the area from the south of the Himalayas to the Vindhya region; which automatically excluded the forest and hilly regions. Various smṛiti texts call it the land where black antelope roam. It roams only around the subcontinent and is closely associated with sacrifice rituals. Jain writings also suggest to avoid the forest and border people. As they are unlearned and barbaric, half-civilized, unconverted people, ate and rose at an improper time. Given pieces of advice are very much similar to Brahmanical *Dharmśāstra* texts. Prashar says that in *Arthśāstra* one hand state is trying to

break ties but on the other hand trying to redefine these groups. Aloka Prasher Sen⁸ giving the example of the Mauryan empire explains how the state subordinated and assimilated the forest people. *Rākṣhasa* is seen as cruel, restricting hunting, and uprooting settlements of brahmins. She says that this Image of Forest people is represented as demons so their extermination can be legitimized.

State and Wilderness:

Kautilya in *Arthśāstra* talks about the categories of forests like *Dravyavana*, *Hastivana*, etc. he suggests the diplomatic use of forest and forest people⁹. *Kautilya* advises the king to initiate the establishment of the new agrarian settlement, which would include the forest clearance and destruction of forest inhabitants. *Kautilya* visualizes the wilderness as a space where the state aggressively extends its administrative and fiscal activity. Celebration of the royal hunt is evidentry of state prowess and mastery over the forest and its inhabitants. Thomas. R. Trautmann¹⁰ says that when the full fledged empire came into existence the state's dependence on the forest has been increased and they couldn't ignore the potential of the forest. Trautman shows the importance of the peripheral region for a state to get animals for warfare. Due to the high importance of forest animals only royal persons were allowed to keep horses and elephants. Either association of these animals with royalty or their scarcity or their use for war purposes limited their access to these animals to common people. Upinder Singh¹¹ studied Ashokan inscriptions and here she shows that Aśoka in his rock edicts shows more sensitivity and compassion towards the animals. In his 13th rock edict, there is evidence of conciliation, persuasion, and the threat of force. After the Kalinga war, he renounced warfare but this didn't apply to the frontier people. It suggests that forest people pose a great challenge to the authority of the king and the Mauryan empire¹². *Samundragulta's Praśasti*¹³ mentions the *Attavī* people in a more controlled and respectable manner, which shows the states' assimilative tactics to control forest resources. However, this assimilation and expansion was not a one-way process but it could be possible another way as well. Ranbir Chakrabarti¹⁴ explains the reverse expansion that means from forest to core areas and points out that 'Moriya' and 'Piprhawa' titles suggested the emergence of the Maurya dynasty itself from a non-monarchical clan associated with a forest tract. It shows that situation was not always one way but there is a possibility of other way expansion as well. How hostility of tribes was controlled. Thieves and robbers operate on the frontier and forests.

Kshetraization of Forest:

Various historians favor the idea that from the Gupta period onwards the practice of land grants in the unsettled area has increased. This suggests the physical transformation of the forest into the *Kshetra* region. Forest is not an empty place but has its own identity, and names like *Khāṇḍava Vana*, *Dvaita Vana*, *Kurjungla*, *Kamyaka*, etc. These are seen as a zone of possibilities, where chiefs and kings claim their authority through hunting, by establishing the *Āśaramas*, which were like an intrusion in the forest. Rulers put their Claim to these territories through hunting but the people who lived on hunting are seen as untouchable. These *Āśhrama* people support the king and propagate the idea of kingship, and later it evolved into the practice of *Agrahāras*. Romila Thapar sees the brahmana settlements in the forests as the form of *Agrahāras*. The emergence of more and more *Agarhāra* means the spreading of more Brahmanical norms and their civilizing mission.

Authoritative behavior is still there, but now monarch is a state whose power depends on revenue from all resources, whether it's forest or grama. To support the increasing population and to increase revenue there was a need for agrarian expansion. This was done by tax-free Agraharas to learned persons and brahmins. The state was developing resources and ideologies according to its needs and requirements. The inclusion of new *Jatis*, Land grants into deeper forests, new genealogy, new genealogical myths, the emergence of the new state, etc. suggests the matrimonial relations between the state and forest people. During the early medieval period, some states trace their lineage through the tribal origin. Prabhavati Gupta's mother was a Naga lady, while his father was a Kshatriya. Tribal practices become part of puranic Hinduism.¹⁵

Sheldon Pollock¹⁶ points out that rakshasa and asuras are the mythical memories of real personalities. Most of the time they are identified with bioregional tribes. They have been viewed as cannibals, primitive cave dwellers, and masked dancers in totemic rites which are still found among some tribes. Demons are conceived in animals and human forms whose main motive was to destroy sacrifice. Comparing the outrage of heroines of the two epics is different. Dishonor of Draupadi and Sita are differentiated. The first one took place in public and was seen as the political struggle for the throne between humans while the abduction of Sita where the outrage was private took place in a forest. Because the idealized representation of *Ayodhyā* did not allow the existence of such a rival. In the latter one abductor was not even of the same biological order and easily assimilated into demonic power and showing the reincarnation of cosmic evil.

Representation of wilderness in Folk Imagery:

However, this image was not static, the image of demons is very different in folk and text literature. In folk, the image is reversed of what is in the texts. Oral tradition is providing the other version of the story. The representation of forest people is continuously changing which shows the changing attitude towards the forest and its residents. *Kathasaritsagar* gives an imaginative and different description of *arnaya* with big palaces and elephant tusks. *Śabara* seems to be a common term for all tribal people. They are shown with archers and bows. Texts admire their knowledge of the forest, positive image in *Sāmajātka* was represented with respect, genii under a magical spell. The representation of shiva as *Kīrāta* armed with bow, head with a feather, hair tied into a bun in *Mahābhārta*. There are very few representations of forest people in Brahmanical art. Some terracotta plaques like Pahārpur represent the Sabra image, Lepakshi Śiva image represents forest people. Buddhist art represents them with wild attributes, peacock feathers, a garland of flowers, and hair hanging loosely¹⁷.

In *Harshcharita* romanticized description of *vana* like epic time has faded. Bāṇa gives a descriptive analysis of the Vindhya Forest and villages adjacent to the forest known as *vanagrama*. It seems like it has been established by clearing the forest because it describes the activities like hunting, gathering, and small-scale agricultural activities which are predominantly related to the forest. Its geographical condition that the whole *kshetra* was surrounded by the *vana*, trapping of wild animals, fence around houses to protect cattle and themselves from wild beasts, etc. also indicate this. Here people do agriculture without ox and plow, Jhoom agriculture, etc. are the features of this village. Houses were made of slips of bamboo, leaves, stalks, reeds, etc. However, the physical description of *Nishada*, *Prithu*, and *Shabra*, resembles the description of *Rakshasa*,

but now they are not feared and were subservient to the king. *Harṣa's* visit to the forest and submission of forest people to him shows the process of assimilation of peripheral regions into a larger state. The representations of forest people were the same as those of the earlier times economically different views if compare with the epic tradition¹⁸.

Conclusion:

So, we can say that idea of otherness towards forest and forest people emerged with the arrival of permanent settlement. But the towards forest was not static but change with the change in socio-economic conditions. It was very integral to political formations. It was the fantasized alien, which was desired as well as feared at the same time. There is flexibility in the term it shows marginalization and accommodation and assimilation.

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