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Agriculturists and the People of the Jungle: Reading Early Indian Texts

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Abstract: *Historians of early India have understood the transition from hunting-gathering to agriculture as a dramatic transformation that brought in its wake urbanism and state. Jungles are believed to have been destroyed by chiefs and kings in epic encounters. Does anthropology support such an understanding of the processes involved in the transition from hunting –gathering to agriculture? Is it possible that historians have misread early Indian texts because they have mistaken poetic conventions for a statement of reality? A resistant reading of the early Indian texts together with information from anthropology shows that communities of agriculturists, pastoral nomads and forest people were in active contact. Agriculturists located on the cultural or spatial margins of state societies colonised new areas for cultivation. Transition to agriculture was facilitated by the brahman-shramana tradition.*

Keywords: *The Neolithic Revolution, Slash and burn cultivation, Burning of the Khandava forest, The Arthashastra, The Mahabharata, Jatakas, Kadambari.*

The history of India in the last five thousand years is a history of the expansion of agriculture. Anyone who has mapped archaeological sites over the last five thousand years will testify that though there are cases where the wild has made a comeback, the general trend has been that of conquest of the jungle by agriculturists. I wish to study the processes involved in the transition to agriculture in early India, though such studies are handicapped by lack of information in contemporary texts.

Current Assumptions about the Neolithic Revolution in India

The assumption that all foraging communities adopted agriculture when the Neolithic Revolution took place is an incorrect one. While it is true that the transition to agriculture represented a dramatic change compared to the slow process of change in the Palaeolithic Age, the Neolithic transformation itself occurred over a period of about ten thousand years. In other words, the transition to agriculture was an extremely slow process. Most people continued to live by foraging even after the coming of agriculture in the Fertile Crescent. In fact, according to a rough estimate, two-fifth of the Indian sub-continent was covered by forests even in 1650 CE (Habib 2010:95). The presence of forests signifies the presence of not only trees and animals but of humans too. One can also assume that forests covered a larger part of the sub-continent before 1650 CE.[1]We need to recover histories of the clearance of forests in different parts of the Indian sub-continent. There is another assumption among historians that the clearance of forests was led by kings and chiefs.[i] In this context, I wish to explore some of the processes involved in the transition to agriculture by studying anthropological data and reading early Indian texts.

I shall try to reconstruct these processes by carrying out a critical reading of some passages from well-known texts. In doing so, we also need to keep in mind the literary conventions that prevailed at the time of the creation of texts. In north India during the centuries before and after the Common Era, the production of texts was laced with Brahmanical notions of power. My readings will be supplemented by information from anthropological literature.

Burning of the Khandava forest in the Mahabharata

The story of the burning of the Khandava forest is mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. The *Taittiriya Aranyaka* places it on the boundary of Kurukshetra (Macdonell and Keith: I: 215). The *Adiparva* of the *Mahabharata* narrates the story that while Krishna and Arjuna were picnicking on the banks of the river Yamuna near Indraprastha, the Fire God disguised as a brahmana met them. He begged them to burn down the Khandava forest with all its denizens to serve as his food (*Mahabharata* I.215) which Krishna and Arjuna accordingly did.

> Standing on their chariots at opposite sides of the forest the two tiger like men began a great slaughter of the creatures dwelling in the Khandava. At whatever point any of the creatures residing in the Khandava could be seen attempting to escape, they chased them down. Indeed those two excellent chariots seemed to be but one. And while the forest was burning, hundreds and thousands of living creatures, uttering frightful yells, began to run about in all directions. Some had particular limbs burnt, some were scorched with excessive heat, and some came out, and some ran about from fear. And some clasping their children and some their parents and brothers, died calmly without, from excess of affection, being unable to abandon those that were dear to them. Still others, faces distorted, rose upwards and soon fell whirling into the blazing element below. And some were seen to roll on the ground with wings, eyes, and feet scorched and burnt. These creatures were all seen to perish there almost soon enough. The tanks and ponds within that forest, heated by the fire around, began to boil; the fishes and the tortoises in them were all seen to perish. During that great slaughter of living creatures in that forest, the burning bodies of various animals looked as if fire itself had assumed many forms. The birds that took wing to escape from that conflagration were pierced by Arjuna's shafts, and cut into pieces, they fell down into the burning element below. When they jumped out Partha cut them to pieces with his arrows and laughing, threw them back into the burning forest. The denizens of the forest, struck with those shafts, began to roar and yell. The clamour they

raised was like unto the frightful uproar heard during the churning of the ocean (in days of yore).

(Translation based on Ganguli 2003:441; Buitenen 1973:417-8)

Images of epic scale are created in the Shakuntala story of the *Mahabharata* too. The hunting expedition of Dushyanta describes a massive intrusion into the forest by the king and his followers. The description of Dushyanta's hunt parallels the burning of the Khandava forest (Romila Thapar 2011: 35). Kalidasa also used the Shakuntala story to create his famous play, the *Abhijnanasakuntalam*. Given below is a description of Duhshanta's (Dushyanta's) hunt. Duhshanta's Hunting Expedition in the *Mahabharata* (I. 063.11-19):

> The overlord of earth filled earth and the heavens with the thunder of his chariot that flew like the Fair-Winged Bird. And as he rode, the alert king chanced to see a wood like Indra's paradise, wooded with bilva and arka bushes and khadira trees, abounding with trees and plants such as kapitthas and dhavas, rolling with hills and plateaus, overspread with boulders, which was empty of water and people for a stretch of many leagues. And in this wood, which teemed with herds of deer and beasts of prey that stalk the forest, Duhshanta, tiger among men, with retainers, escort, and mounts wrought havoc, killing game of many kinds. Many families of tigers he laid low as they came within range of his arrows; he shot them with his shafts. Those that were in the distance the bull among men shot down with his arrows; others that came up close he cut down with his sword; and antelopes he brought down with his spear, the powerful spearman, who also knew all the points of the circular club swing and whose courage was boundless. He stalked about killing wild game and fowl with javelin, sword, mace, bludgeon, halberd. And when the wondrously valiant king and his warlike warriors raided the great forest, the big game fled it.

(J.A.B. van Buitenen, (tr) Vol. 1, pp. 156-71)

Scholars have generally treated the epic burning of Khandavaprastha to describe the process of shift to plough agriculture from hunting–gathering. The burning of the Khandava heightens the drama of transition and tells us that it was leaders like Krishna and Arjuna who effected this change. Commenting on the destruction of forests described in the two episodes, Romila Thapar says, "Description of the burning of trees and of animals attempting to flee the flames provides a glimpse of the destruction of the forest prior to establishing a settlement" (Romila Thapar 2007:35). These readings mistake poetic conventions for a statement of reality and ignore the role of common agriculturists in the expansion of cultivation. In this understanding, the transition to agriculture is seen as a single activity – you burn the forest down and plough the field and you have transited to agriculture. R.S. Sharma's theorisation of agriculture and urbanisation in the sixth century BCE describes the use of iron axes for clearing forests and of the iron ploughshare for agricultural operations as the crucial determinants of change. Sharma argues that the use of iron axes and iron ploughshare transformed agriculture. This new agriculture led to the production of surplus which in turn led to urbanisation, state formation and emergence of heterodox sects (Sharma 1983:92). Observations by Anthropologists about transition from foraging to agriculture belie such assumptions. While the use of iron would have impacted the production process, historians of early India seem to have collapsed the stages of transition from foraging to agriculture.

Historians have not been sufficiently sensitive to poetic conventions. In the passages quoted above, the images that have been created are of epic scale –whether it is the hunting expedition of Dushyanta or the burning of the Khandava – the projection is of a massive

intrusion into forest by kings and chiefs. Historians have taken it for literal truth. Both the burning of the Khandava forest and Dushyanta's killing of animals are unabashed celebrations of violence against the forest. One could ask how the denizens of the forest felt. The flight of frightened animals possibly symbolised the flight of frightened human populations too. This observation is supported by the fact that in the Shakuntala story, Duhshanta had been in conflict with the people of the forest. The story can be understood as symbolic of an opposition between the society of the epic hero and the denizens of the forest. The hunt is a show of domination over forest dwellers (Romila Thapar 2011:36). The Brahmanical texts of the later Vedic period, believed to have been composed in the Western U.P. – Haryana area, are informed by the continuous presence of the forest as contrasted with the agricultural village. Heesterman has shown that many Brahmanical rituals of the later Vedic period were followed by war expeditions and raids. These raids were not so much attacks on enemy kingdoms as raids on neighbouring territory. Possibly, this alien outside the territory was the *aranya* or forest (Heesterman 1985:108-128).

Dushyanta's hunt in Kalidasa's *Abhijnanashakuntalam* is part of a romantic court drama. It is a genre of literature written in beautifully crafted language meant to be performed before a literate: formally educated, and elite audience. These plays highlight the sport of kings—hunting (both literally and symbolically) and romantic love, set in a courtly background. The hunt can also be read as a metaphor of courtly love: pursuit, contesting emotions and ultimately, submission (Romila Thapar 2011:47).

Reading descriptions of the real world into epic poems or plays can be misleading. For example, the descriptions of the burning of the Khandava forest and Dushyanta's expedition show the heroes riding their chariots. Kalidasa was following a poetic convention when he

described the king chasing a deer which seemed to be running in a straight line. On the stage such scenes were enacted without a chariot and without the deer. In real life, a chariot ride might be a good idea in open scrub land. However, the forests of the Ganga plains are dense, bumpy, treacherous and unpredictable. A chariot rider could not have moved, let alone hunt, in these forests. Similarly, the idea that one can set fire to a forest is not supported by ethnography. The normal practice of slash and burn cultivation requires that trees be cut down and allowed to dry up for some time before they can be burnt.[ii] The following description of the forest given in the Valmiki *Ramayana* gives a more realistic picture of the forest:

Whose gloomy forest meets mine eye
Like some vast cloud that fills the sky?
Pathless and dark it seems to be,
Where birds in thousands wander free;
Where shrill cicadas' cries resound,
And fowl of dismal note abound,
Lion, rhinoceros, and bear,
Boar, tiger, elephant, are there
There shrubs and thorns run wild.
(*Ramayana* 1.24.14-15 (tr) Ralph. T. H. Griffith.)

This passage seems to be a more accurate picture of the forest in the Ganga valley. The forest is pathless and dark. One cannot sport in a chariot in these forests. However, in trying to heighten the impact of the idea of wilderness, Valmiki mentions lions and tigers roaming the same forest. Modern studies show that lions and tigers do not share the same habitat.

Insights from Anthropology

The study of anthropology can provide many insights into the process of transition from foraging to food production. There is a misconception about food producers being active managers of the land and foragers being passive gatherers. Studies have shown that foraging people in New Guinea and Australia actively remove weeds around plants that they deem useful. They burn the surrounding trees to encourage the growth of tubers. Such attempts might be the first attempt in modifying the ecology of a forested landscape. Some foraging communities follow practices that presage the practices of agriculturists (Diamond 2005:106 -7).

It also seems likely that forest produce remained an important part of the food kitty of agriculturists. Agriculturists could not and did not domesticate different plants and animals at the same time. For example, if a community of hunter-gatherers started growing wheat, they would still need to hunt for protein and fat supplements. A wholesome shift to agriculture would be possible only after a variety of seeds had been domesticated. Therefore, the transition from hunting –gathering to agriculture involved a variety of mixes of foraging and agriculture. At some point many communities would be called agriculturist because they depended more on the food that they grew. Many foraging communities are aware of agricultural practices and yet avoid the agricultural mode of life. There are other foraging communities who practice agriculture which, however, is marginal to their lives. They prefer slash and burn cultivation that requires less labour input compared to plough agriculture. Since agricultural produce is a minor part of their food kitty, they are called hunter-gatherers.[iii] Ester Boserup, basing her generalization on a large number of anthropological studies, has shown that there are five types of land use in order of increasing intensity: a) forest fallow cultivation having around 20 years' regeneration cycle, b) bush fallow

cultivation having about 6 years' regeneration cycle c) Short fallow cultivation having two or one year regeneration cycle, d) Annual cropping; and e) Multi-cropping (Ester Boserup 2005:15-16).

The kind of agricultural tools needed in a given context depend upon the system of land use. In the forest fallow cultivation system, trees are felled with axes or burned on the root after having been killed by ringing. Logs and other unburnt remnants of the natural vegetation are left in the field together with the ashes and roots of the trees. Sowing and planting are done directly in the ashes without any land preparation. Land is highly productive at this stage. The plough cannot be used on this kind of surface, since it is littered with unburnt objects which will hinder its movement. The only tool that can be used is a digging stick to scratch the ashes. The plough requires a clean, permanently cleared surface. In Boserup's scheme, the plough can be applied only when grassy land appears as a result of annual cropping. Grass can neither be removed by hoeing, nor burnt. Since the burning of forests can be assumed to have been the preliminary to the earliest forms of cultivation, one would expect the presence of agricultural communities practising agriculture before the coming of plough-based cultivation. Boserup suggests that communities and individuals do not adopt advanced plough cultivation immediately after clearing forests. Her model indicates that while axes are primarily associated with slash-and-burn cultivation, ploughs are used only by advanced agriculturists. Ploughs and axes are used in different kinds of agricultural practices and the plough would, therefore, have been introduced much later in the early historic period. It is quite possible that the people who cut down the forests were not the same as the ones who practiced plough cultivation on that piece of land.

Interesting examples of forest clearance are found in ethnological literature. One description is provided by Captain J. Forsyth (1919). His description of the forests in and around Pachmarhi in Madhya Pradesh dates to the 1860s. Pachmarhi is located in the Satpura mountain range and receives high rainfall. Forsyth writes:

> The jungle that sprang upon the old clearings was so thick and a miasma so deadly as to baffle all attempts at renewed occupation by the Hindu cultivators densely crowded in the adjoining open country. Here and there the Korkus whose constitution seems impervious to malaria, have settled down on some neighbouring rising ground, and built villages and have cleared and tilled the opener part of the valley. But it is a terrible struggle between the aborigine and the jungle with its immense unremitting strength of vegetation and tribes of wild beasts. Every now and then the heart of the Korku fails him and he abandons the contest, flitting off to some hill side where he may easily contend with axe and fire against the less exuberant vegetation of the thin mountain soil (p.118).

> Everywhere the aboriginal is the pioneer of the more settled races in their advance against wilderness. His capacity for toil that would break the heart of a Hindu, his endurance of malaria and his fearlessness of the jungle eminently qualify him for this function, and his thriftlessness and hatred of being long settled in a locality as certainly ensure the fruits of his labour reverting as a permanency to the settled races of the plains. The process is everywhere much the same. The frontier villages in the possession of the Hindu landholder, or of the Gond Thakurs, or chiefs, usually comprehend large areas of culturable but uncleared land and there are always numbers of the aborigines floating about such frontiers, earning precarious livelihood by wood cutting and occasional jobs, or working as farm servants who can be induced to break it up (ibid.161).

Forsyth also points out that aborigines have no instruments except an axe. They practice slash-and-burn cultivation and the productivity is very high (ibid. 83). When forests are burnt

green shoots appear for the grazing of the vast herds of cattle, which form the greater part of the wealth of the people in the neighbourhood of the jungle tracts.

The descriptions of Forsyth, supported by numerous other ethnographic notes, indicate that the clearance of the forest is done in many stages. The iron axe and the iron plough are probably used in different modes of agriculture. Agriculturists and forest dwellers are aware of each other's lives and practices. There are exchanges of various goods between settled agriculturists and forest dwellers creating conditions for change in the modes of life of one group or the other. A careful and resistant reading of early Indian texts yields useful information. It appears that the transition to agriculture happened in the context of the structures of the everyday life of agricultural communities. For example, the Sangam literature composed in the Tamil region in the early centuries of the Common Era describes day to day lives of a variety of human groups. Modern historians have read them as a distinct classification of the landscapes peopled by hunters or agriculturists or fishermen. Hills are believed to be the homes of hunters. However, the following poem suggests that even hill men cultivated millets.

Hill men

Brew into a liquor…

Soon get drunk on it…

Served by their women in leaf skirt

And forget to guard

The millet fields

On the slopes

Which elephants attack and ravage.

(*Akananuru,* A.K. Ramanujan 2006:19)

Evidence from the Early Indian Texts

Although the Vedic texts see a contrast between the village and the forest, they were by no means isolated from each other. *Aranya* or forest was inhabited by communities of *yaksas, rakshasas, vanaras* and countless other groups that were feared and looked down upon. The *Aitareya Brahmana* mentions groups of *Shabaras, Pulindas, Mutibas, Andhras, and Pundras* being present on the border *(*Aloka Parasher1983:4). Since this text is believed to have been composed in the Brahmavarta area, the border would mean areas of Kurukshetra and Panipat in Haryana and Punjab. The *Manusmriti* a text belonging to the early centuries of the Common Era describes *Brahmavarta* (the purest land) as the place where the behaviour of the four *varnas* and that of the mixed *varnas* is called the conduct of the good people (*Manusmriti* II.17). The term for mixed castes (*amtaralanam)* is used by Manu (Chapter X.6-7) in his discussion on mixed castes. It is well known that Manu's list of mixed castes included many forest communities like the *nishadas* and *svapachas*. Texts of later period indicate that foraging groups were present in every *janapada* and *mahajanapada*. The *rakshasas* depicted in texts like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are not bound to any territory, they roamed around at their own will, and are present in virtually every area mentioned in these texts (Romila Thapar 1984:134). The forest also acted as a link between settled areas and as a refuge for rebels and recluses. If the stories about the *rakshasas* in the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* were taken as statements on the geography of non-state foraging communities, it would appear that they inhabited every part of the sub-continent. *Grama* and *aranya* were not simply opposite poles of habitation; they complemented each other too. The assimilation of non-Vedic deities was part of the process of assimilation of

non-Vedic communities into the Brahmanical order. Rituals performed during the *pariplava cycle* required the participation of representatives of non–Vedic communities of fishermen, experts in serpent lore, robbers and usurers (Kumkum Roy 1994:136-138). “In the *grama*, one undertakes the consecration, in the *aranya* one sacrifices.” (Heesterman 1985:118). The sacrifices conducted in the *aranya* probably disseminated the ideology of the dominant agro-pastoral groups in the *aranya*. The priests were allowed to instruct the *nishadas*, snake-charmers and fishermen. The subjects for teaching included the *Atharva Veda* and *Sarpavidya* (Sharma 1989:75). These communities must have occupied spaces around the *gramas* of the agro-pastoral later-Vedic communities.

The *Jatakas* refer to villages of carpenters, potters, reed makers, salt makers, foresters, fowlers, fishermen and hunters. This indicates that the *Jataka* literature does not see a sharp distinction between the habitations of hunters and agriculturists. Stories of settlements of *yakkhas* who ate up humans and bulls and left merchandise intact (*Jataka* No.1), may refer to communities hostile to trading groups. References to fear of robbers causing desertion of villages are familiar in Buddhist literature (Wagle 1995:14). One is not very clear about who these robbers were, but the literature seems to refer to a diverse set. References to individual robbers are rare. Rather, there are communities of robbers who had their own settlements. (*Jataka* no. 503). I suggest that many of the groups called robbers in the *Jataka* literature were foraging communities. For example, the *Sattigumba Jataka* refers to a village of 500 robbers. In one passage, a robber says ‘My mother is naked; why condemn the calling we live by?’(*Jataka* no. 503). The translator explains that ‘mother’ refers to the robber chief’s wife and she probably wore a garment of branches. The description of their habitat deep in the forest also indicates that it was a group of foragers. There are several such descriptions.

In the *Vedabbha Jataka* (No. 48), there are references to groups of five hundred robbers who lived in a forest. The references from the *Jatakas* indicate that even in the centuries preceding the Common Era the middle Ganga valley was studded with a large number of settlements of foraging communities. The *Jataka* stories of Buddhist monks settling in forest or merchant caravans traversing different regions attest to both the accommodation of and hostility to foragers on the part of the urban and agricultural communities.

The later Vedic period witnessed expansion of agriculture. This was further intensified in the age of the Buddha. I have suggested that it would be more accurate to see agricultural communities as pushing the frontiers of cultivation than imagining kings and heroes as the harbingers of an agricultural revolution. We need to ask why agriculturists intruded into the jungle. Probably the weight of numbers in combination with statist ideologies of power pushed the agriculturists to break the barriers of forests. We get glimpses of these processes in texts like the *Indica* and the *Arthashastra*.

Megasthenes' Description of Shepherds and Hunters

> The third caste consists of the Neat herds and Shepherds and in general of all herdsmen who neither settle in towns nor in villages, but live in tents. By hunting and trapping they clear the country of noxious birds and wild beasts. As they apply themselves eagerly and assiduously to this pursuit, they free India from the pests with which it abounds,--all sorts of wild beasts, and birds which devour the seeds sown by the husbandmen.
>
> (*Indica*: 42)

> … In return for clearing the land of wild beasts and fowls which devour the seeds sown in the fields, they receive an allowance of grain from the king. They lead a wandering life and live under tents (*Indica*: 84).

The passage from the *Indica* brackets shepherds and hunters as one category. They are said to not only look after cattle, but also to destroy birds and beasts harmful to agriculture. Although Megasthenes is looking at space through the eye of the state, he suggests that pastoralists too were involved in clearing the forests. They would have needed fields for grazing their kine. Most wild vegetation is not useful to specific species. Cows might consume some kinds of leaves, although not all. So, even pastoralists modify the natural forest by encouraging the growth of some forms of vegetation that can be consumed by their domesticates. Interestingly, the *Arthashastra* too talks about cattle being looked after by cow herders and hunters (*Arthashastra* 2.29.2). Possibly, hunting-gathering had seamlessly merged into pastoralism in some areas of the Indian subcontinent. This impression is further strengthened by the discussion on the layout of settlements in the *Arthashastra*.

Layout of Settlements

We find in the *Arthashastra*, an attempt to classify and segregate the wilderness too. One gets an idea of the layout of the countryside and the surrounding space from Book Two. The section on the settlement of the countryside is followed by a section on the 'Disposal of non-agricultural land' (*Arthashastra* 2.2). In this section, one gets an idea of the layout of the countryside as one moves out of the agricultural centre. It suggests that agricultural villages were surrounded by pastures which in turn were surrounded by wilderness (*aranya*) inhabited by ascetics. The wilderness was surrounded by different kinds of forests (*vana*). These forests were also classified in terms of the kind of animals and human communities

living there. This would have ensured regular contact between the communities of agriculturists and *brahmana – shramana* groups that resided in the *aranya*. There were forests that had been tamed for the requirements of the king and there were untamed forests inhabited by elephants and wild animals. Forest-dwellers included *vagurikas, shabaras, pulindas and candalas* (*Arthashastra* 2.1.5-6). The presence of non-agricultural groups in and around agricultural villages is also evident from references to regions being laid waste by foresters (*Arthashastra* 2.1.36). The *Arthashastra* says that forest tribes are many in number, brave, fight openly and seize and ruin countries (*Arthashastra* 8.4. 42-43). The Superintendent of Pastures is supposed to clear the land of forest tribes (*Arthashastra* 2.34). One can see a clear direction of state policy in its treatment of foraging communities. It has been suggested that the *Arthashastra* distinguishes between forest dwellers who were beyond the control of the state and those that had been brought under its control. The picture seems to suggest that agriculturists, pastoralists and forest dwellers inhabited the same landscape. Agriculture nibbled at other kinds of settlements (*Arthashastra* 8.4.37-38). *Shreni* groups, chiefs and peasants tried to extend cultivation. While agriculturists were nibbling at the space belonging to pastures, shepherds were entering the less densely forested wilderness (*aranya*) surrounding the pastures. This impression is supported by the quote from the *Indica* given at the beginning of this section.

The *Arthashastra* evidence seems to be similar to the description provided by modern ethnographers. Forsyth points out that in the Satpuras forests are cleared by people of the Korku community. People of the surrounding areas own large herds of cattle that graze on fields cleared by the Korkus. This expansion moved hand in hand with an attempt to subjugate communities of the surrounding areas. Also the section on the '*shunya nivesha*' in

the *Arthashastra* indicates that the *shunya* was not an empty space, but was already occupied by communities of various kinds— presumably primitive agriculturists who had not been subjugated by state power (Kangle 1992:32). This evidence is supported by Patanjali's *Mahabhasya* too, where the *aranya* is shown as an inhabited space (Agnihotri 1963:272). Evidence from the early medieval settlements suggests that many non-peasant village settlements were forcibly brought under control by kings. The *aranya* was not an empty space. It contained many tribal villages called `*palli*' where people practiced primitive agriculture. Over a period of time many of the *pallis* were converted into *gramas.* The presence of a large number of place names with '*palli*' endings might suggest that in the historical period a large number of villages practising primitive agriculture were converted into peasant villages practising advanced agriculture (Chattopadhyaya 1990:3-4). Moreover, the following description from the *Harshacaritam* gives an idea of the process of expansion of agriculture:

> Entering he saw while still at some distance a forest settlement, distinguished by wooded districts, turned grey by the smoke from granaries of wild grain in which heaps of burning Śaśtika chaff sent up a blaze . . . The outskirts being for the most part forest, many parcels of rice land, threshing ground and tilth were being apportioned by small farmers, and with no little vigour of language, since it was mainly spade culture and they were anxious for the support of their families . . . owing to the difficulty of ploughing the sparsely scattered fields covered with Kāca grass. With their few clear spaces, their black soil stiff as black iron, the branches bursting from the tree trunks set up here and there, their growth of impenetrable Cyāmāka, their wealth of Alambusa and their Kokilākṣa bushes not yet cleared away. . . .In other places again blacksmiths were almost intensifying the heat by burning heaps of wood for charcoal. On every side the prospect was filled with the

> inhabitants of the district, who dwelt in the surrounding country, entering the woods to collect timber and enveloped in the provisions guarded for them by old men stationed in the hamlet houses of vicinity. . . on their shoulders were set strong axes . . . strong oxen marched before them in couples.
>
> (*Harshacaritam*, (tr) Cowell and Thomas 1961:225-7).

These descriptions show that although the plough and iron were available to these communities, they were not using it. This supports Boserup's view that the availability of the iron ploughshare was no guarantee of its use. The description also gives an idea of the process of forest clearance. New areas are shown as being cleared by either the foresters themselves or by the people of the surrounding villages. This matches the descriptions provided by Forsyth. Many texts from early India mention a term '*pratyanta gama*'(border village). A study of its changing connotations gives us some clues about the processes and ideologies involved in the expansion of agriculture.

Pratyanta Gama

In the context of the layout of settlements, the term *pratyanta gama* is quite important. Translated as border village, the word *pratyanta gama* is frequently mentioned in the *Jatakas*. If it were simply referring to a village on the border one should have found references to *pratyanta nagara* too. I believe that the idea of border in this context is not so much of a place located at a great distance but of a cultural divide. It was the frontier – the zone between the known and the feared unknown. This is clear from references in the *Jatakas*. Border villages are shown as being located close to the city or inside the kingdom. Sometimes they represented spaces beyond the political control of kings. A *Jataka* mentions a border village that was attacked seven times by a king (*Jataka* no.41, p.110). Similarly, another *Jataka* story describes how the king of Benaras ran away after he failed to bring

some *pratyanta gamas* under control (*Mahassaroha Jataka* No.302). These references probably indicate the unstable nature of state control over *pratyanta gamas*. These were areas where the new structures of power were intruding into spaces occupied by pre-state structures. It is interesting that none of the *Jataka* stories indicate the presence of kings or rulers over the communities staying in the *pratyantas*.

In the *Succaja Jataka* (*Jataka* no. 320), the prince of Benares is said to have settled down in a *pratyanta gama*. He built a hut made of leaves in a wood and survived on wild roots and fruits. There are other *Jataka* stories of hermits coming to *pratyanta gamas* for procuring salt and vinegar (*Jataka* no. 310, 406). In yet another *Jataka*, there is a reference to a group of five hundred ascetics who dwelt near a *pratyanta gama* (*Jataka* no. 336). Some of the reference locate *pratyanta gamas* in the vicinity of a forest (*Jātaka* no. 549). There is a story of a brahmana settling down in a *pratyanta gama* and taking up hunting and surviving by selling the flesh of animals (*Jataka* no. 222). Many references to *pratyanta gamas* clearly indicate that the inhabitants were either primitive agriculturists or foragers (Basant 2012:266-8).

A story speaks of the ignorance of the people of a *paccanta janapada*. A conch blower comments, "How silly are these people born in the outlying *janapada*" (Wagle 1995:34). Many of these settlements also seem to have been places where the Brahmanical *varna* system did not prevail. They represented communities of fisher folk, foresters and trappers who had not been brought within the *varna* scheme. They were not internally stratified nor part of a hierarchical social space. These references indicate that *pratyanta gamas* represented a cultural divide between the dominant statist cultures represented by

Brahmanism and Buddhism on the one hand and local traditions of many other communities on the other.

Sometimes the *Arthashastra* uses the word *pratyanta* and *atavika* as a compound (*Arthashastra* 8.4.41). The term *atavika* is derived from the root '*at*' which means 'to travel around' (Monier-Williams 1959:11). Similarly, many contemporary texts use words like '*mleccha'* for despised groups who included hunting gathering groups (Aloka Parasher 1983:1-30). Perhaps the *Arthashastra* was referring to communities of foragers who did not live in fixed territories. By the time of the *Arthashastra*, the words *pratyanta* and forest tribes had acquired inter-changeable meanings. The *Arthashastra* quotes the views of older authorities who say that forest tribes operating in the frontier far away harm only a part of the country. However, the meaning of the word frontier should not be confused with our notions of national boundaries. Ashoka's inscriptions show that the word '*amta*' is used to denote border in the context of Greek kings of Egypt (Rock Edict XIII). However, he appointed many '*amtamahamatras'* to look after the welfare of people in border areas. These officials are mentioned in his pillar inscriptions located in many parts of his empire (Sircar1965:54). Similarly, the community of *'atavikas'* (forest people) are mentioned in Rock Edict XIII which had been inscribed on stone in many parts of his kingdom. He was troubled by the disturbance caused by the '*atavikas*' (Sircar 1965:34).

The varied images of *pratyanta gamas* indicate that they represented communities of foragers or agriculturists who were not controlled by state systems. They also indicate that in many cases state authorities tried to bring these villages under their control. These villages showed a mix of agriculture and hunting gathering. Possibly, pastoralists and hunter-gatherers grazed their animals in forests. Their need for pastureland led them to remove the

vegetation that was not directly useful to them. Many forest communities practiced limited agriculture too. Their primitive agriculture would create spaces for more advanced forms of cultivation. Once agricultural villages came into existence the state authorities stepped in to collect revenue. The complicity of ideologies of power – caste, state, ethnicity and class – in the expansion of agriculture becomes visible through the *Jataka* references to the *pratyanta gamas.* These ideologies increasingly othered hunting-gathering communities. The censoring of the foraging mode of life was so strong that the hunting expeditions of kings were celebrated in Brahmanical texts. The story of the burning of the Khandava forest showed that one of the survivors was the *rakshasa* Mayasura. The fact that Mayasura lived inside that forest could indicate that there were many other human communities in the forest. They did not qualify to be humans in the eyes of the Brahmana tradition. A few examples of the construction of ideological censor of the hunting –gathering mode of life will clarify our point.

Ideological Censure of Hunting Gathering Mode of Life

Sometimes the word *pakkana* is used in the Sanskrit language for the settlement of foragers. A passage in the *Mahabharata* describes such a settlement:

> One day he came upon a hamlet, in the midst of a forest, inhabited by cruel hunters addicted to the slaughter of living creatures. The little hamlet abounded with broken jars and pots made of earth. Dog-skins were spread here and there. Bones and skulls, gathered in heaps, of boars and asses, lay in different places. Cloths stripped from the dead lay here and there, and the huts were adorned with garlands of used up flowers. Many of the habitations again were filled with sloughs cast off by snakes. The place resounded with the loud crowing of cocks and hens and the dissonant bray of asses. Here and there the inhabitants disputed with one another, uttering harsh words in shrill voices. Here and there were temples of gods bearing devices of owls and other birds. Resounding with the tinkle of iron bells, the hamlet

> abounded with canine packs standing or lying on every side… (Shantiparva, 139. 27-30, (tr) Ganguli 2004:315)

There is a similar description of a settlement of foragers in the *Kadambari* of Banabhatta –

> By observing the smoke carrying the smell of burnt flesh rising from dense clumps of bamboo, I guessed the presence of their huts….their aim of existence was limited to women and drinks….their behaviour was rude. Children, grown-ups and the aged behaved as if they were equals. There was no discrimination about women who should or should not be enjoyed. (*Kadambari*, (tr) Kane 1973:691-692).

The passages quoted above show the creation of a stereotype of foraging communities. Their practices of hunting, their rude language, the absence of hierarchy and the unacceptable mores of sexuality were contemptible to the statist, patriarchal ideology of Brahmanism. It became central to the Brahmanical classification of the we/ they idea. The process of othering communities of the forest had its beginning in the Vedic texts. The *Rigveda* used the word '*vanara-gu*' (savage) in association with the word *taskara* (thief) (X.4.6). Yaska explained it by saying that savages hunted in day time and robbed at night (*Nirukta* 3.14).

The brahmana tradition had an obsessive fixation with the idea of pure language. In the Vedas, one of the terms used for the people of the jungle is '*vanargavah'*; the term is contrasted with the term *'kavargavah'* (Macdonnel and Keith 1912: II.241). The term '*kavargavah'* is related to the word *'kavi'* which carries a range of meanings related to wisdom and creation of hymns. The connection of the word '*kavargavah*' to speech is obvious. '*Vanargu*' probably carries connotations of language too. The rejection of the language of other communities is a theme that is repeatedly mentioned in the brahmanical literature. The *Shatapatha Brahamana* uses the word *mleccha* to denote a despised language.

In the subsequent period the word *mleccha* referred to despised groups. They might or might not have been foraging groups. However, there is a constant refrain that the pious should avoid the language and territories of the *mleccha* people. If a *snataka* conversed with a *mleccha* he had to perform purificatory rites (Aloka Parasher 1983:4-8). By the early centuries of the Common Era upholders of 'the language of gods' expressly censored other languages. There were statements which indicates that truth could be discovered only in the Sanskrit language (Pollock 2006:56). With a self –conscious awareness that this was the language of the ritually pure and cultured, they set about condemning other languages. The *mleccha* languages were to be avoided by the Buddhists and Jains too (Aloka Parasher 1983:11). In the *Amarakosha mleccha* denotes forest tribes of the *Bhedas, Kiratas, Sabaras and Pulindas* (*Amarakosha* 2.10.21). The enumeration of the forest tribes is preceded by a statement about the *nishadas* and *svapachas. Amarkosha's* enumeration is located in the larger section describing the category of the shudras. It seems to suggest a seamless web where low caste people of agricultural villages merged into pastoral nomadic and foraging communities.

The Brahmana tradition constituted its idea of the other by mixing and meshing categories inherited from earlier traditions. So *vanargavas, mlecchas, vanacharas* and people of the *pratyantagamas* became part of the despised other. They were condemned for their rude speech and their non-hierarchical social behaviour.[iv] Theoreticians of Sanskrit drama allowed the use of some non-Sanskrit languages in Sanskrit plays. The *Natyashastra* mentions seven sublanguages (*vibhasha*) deriving from the *Shakara, Abhira, Candala, Sabara, Dramila, Andhra,* and the low language of forest-dwellers. While the *Natyashastra* allowed the use of

these languages in poetry and plays, the commentator Abhinava prohibits the use of *Barbara, Kirata, Andhra, Dramila* and related languages (Pollock 2006:93).

The power of the Brahman tradition can be understood from a variety of narratives found in early Indian texts. The story of Videgha Mathava following Agni from the banks of Sarasvati to the banks of the river Sadanira has been interpreted by historians in a variety of ways. What is certain, however, is that it shows the alliance of the brahman and kshatriya actors. Videgha Mathava was accompanied by his priest Gotama Rahoogana who chanted mantras (*Shatapatha Brahmana* II.3.4.8). The story of the burning of Khandavaprastha again brings out the element of the brahmana–kshatriya alliance. It was the god Agni disguised as a brahman who urged Krishna and Arjuna to burn down the forest.

The invention and continuous reworking of the we /they idea moved with a very clear intent to control the people of the forest. It needs to be noted that important *Dharmashastra* texts like the *Manusmriti* do not differentiate between agriculturists, pastoralists and hunter-gatherers in their enumeration of castes. They are simply located along a conceptual grid of purity and pollution. Terms like *anta*, *antya*, *antyaja*, *antyayoni*, *antyavasayin* and *bahya* have been taken as a proof of the effective physical segregation resulting from widely shared notions of purity and pollution among Brahmanised communities. They also indicate desire to control the people of the jungle. The point that needs to be emphasised is that the social world of the Ganga valley was landscaped by the presence of a variety of groups who could be herders, hunters, fishermen and marginal agriculturists.[v] These communities located on the margins of powerful peasant groups resisted centralized power. These were people who did not pay taxes, ate different food, worshipped strange goddesses and gods and spoke different languages. Understandably, the Buddhist and Brahmanical traditions demonized the

forest dwellers. Words like '*vanacara*' and '*jangali*' survive in many Indian languages no longer signifying a person living in the forest but a person who is uncouth and uncivilized.

Conclusion

D.D. Kosambi (2005:31) with his classic insight had pointed out that the entire course of Indian history shows tribal elements being overwhelmed by the statist brahmana traditions of power. The food gatherers learned to adjust to agriculture and the farmers not only came to rely on food gathering to supplement their diet but also brought wild foodstuffs under cultivation. Forests were domesticated along with foresters as part of the non-dramatic process of the *longue duree*. A resistant reading of the early Indian texts together with information from anthropology shows that communities of agriculturists, pastoral nomads and forest people were in active contact. This communication was facilitated by the brahmana-shramana tradition of retreating to forests or to the buffer zone between forests and villages. Although the *Arthashastra* talks about colonisation of new areas it was agriculturists located on the cultural or spatial margins of state societies who tamed the forests. Jungles were cleared as a result of combination of factors that brought together foresters, pastoral nomads and agriculturists. It was the agricultural communities with the pressures of dominant classes and castes, proddings of the state power and the ideological hegemony of the brahmana- shramana tradition that pushed the barriers of forest. It is possible that iron technology and the weight of numbers might have helped them in colonising new areas. Scholars working on historical geography tend to locate hunting gathering communities in the far off Vindhyas or Himalayas. In fact borders referred to areas that were not part of the brahmana ideological system. The familiar word '*digvijaya*' meant that kings conquered 'directions'. The early literature suggests that the conquest of directions

was basically an attempt to control primitive agriculturists and people of the jungle. Frontiers were defined as much by rivers and mountain as by forests and they shifted with the whims of history.

Endnotes:

[i] See for example Habib (2010:59) where the story of Videgha Mathava is believed to be a metaphor for the beginning of plough cultivation in Uttara Pradesh. Romila Thapar (2011:36) also mentions the burning of the Khandava forest near Delhi as an example of clearance of forests by chiefs for the construction of Indraprastha. These readings have collapsed the stages involved in the transition to plough cultivation.

[ii] "Although the food crops used vary with location, the sequence of events in slash and burn agriculture are very similar around the world. Farmers begin to prepare a field by cutting down many of the trees and woody plants in an area. Trees that provide fruits, nuts, building materials or other useful products may be spared. The downed vegetation or "slash" is allowed to dry until right before the rainiest part of the year, at which time the slash is burned converting biomass into nutrient-rich ash". (http://www.eoearth.org/view/article/156045/ accessed 24/06/2015, 8.44 am.)

[iii] The perceptive comments of Haimendorf (1982) on the practice of slash and burn cultivation are important – "This type of tillage, in which axe and not the plough is the primary instrument, is in Andhra Pradesh known as podu, in Madhya Pradesh as bewar or penda, and in Northeast India as jhum. But there are important differences among the various forms of shifting cultivation. While the Naga, Nishi or the hill Maria uses a hoe to turn over the soil on his hill fields, the Reddy of the Godavari region broadcasts all small millets without so much as scratching the surface… (pp.8)." Some of these communities are called agriculturists while others are called hunter-gatherers.

[iv] It is not surprising that even in Tulasidasa's story people of the forest tell Ram that they shall desist from stealing his clothes and utensils. "And our greatest service is that we do not steal and remove your utensils

and clothes. We are insensitive creatures taking others' life and are crooked by nature, wicked, evil minded and low born." Ayodhyakanda RamCharitaManas (the Ramayana of Goswami Tulasidas) PDF File (All Pages) updated 15/09/2014, Gorakhpur: Gita Press, p.632.

[v] Kosambi (1975: 26-7) had made this brilliant observation in 1956, "Yet it is not only in these deeply forested portions of India that the mark of tribal society is found. In every locality, even in the neighbourhood of well-developed modern cities, one finds little bands of tribal people holding-on to whatever they can of their ancient customs…"

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