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NAVIGATING THE WILD: INTERROGATING THE SPATIAL DYNAMICS OF THE FOREST IN THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

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Abstract

In the Mahābhārata, forest is not a passive backdrop but a dynamic and integral setting that shapes the epic's narrative, characters, moralities, and social values. By subverting the Western binary opposition of nature and culture, the Mahābhārata portrays forests and urban centres as deeply interconnected, rejecting simplistic dichotomies of the forest as a utopian idyll or the city as a hub of moral corruption. Instead, the forest emerges as a worldly realm with its own complexities—replete with dangers, sophistication, and politics. The Pāṇḍavas engage with the forest in multifaceted roles: as orphaned natives, exiled refugees, and eventual conquerors. The forest becomes a crucible for their growth, forcing them to confront monsters, demons, and their own humanity. In their quest for dominance, the Pāṇḍavas vanquish Indra and burn the Khāṇḍava forest to establish Indraprastha. This act not only earns them a curse but also underscores the environmental cost of their ambition. Later, their journey comes full circle as they return to the forest as humbled exiles, shedding pride and gaining humility. In this transformation, the forest assumes the role of a guru, reshaping their worldview and moral compass. This cyclical journey—from conquerors to ascetics—highlights the Vedic theme of mātsyanyāya, contrasting the lawlessness of the jungle with the cooperative order of settled life. This article contributes to a nuanced understanding of the Mahābhārata's portrayal of the forest (araṇya) as a dynamic space that shapes characters, morality, and societal values. By juxtaposing Indian and Western conceptualisations of the wilderness, the article sheds light on the cultural and philosophical intricacies embedded in the spatial dynamics of the Mahābhārata's narrative.

Keywords: *Mahābhārata*, forest, spatial dynamics, ecology, politics.

Introduction

Within the narratological framework of the *Mahābhārata*, a distinctive equilibrium exists between the portrayal of civilised settlements, encompassing both rural and urban centres, and the sprawling expanses of the forest. This equilibrium is evident through a nuanced examination of the narrative, revealing a remarkable parity between episodes set in settled societies and those unfolding within the expansive *araṇya*. A compelling illustration of this thematic balance is observed in the opening section of the *Mahābhārata*, known as the Anukramanika Parva, which transpires in the Naimiśa*araṇya*. Here, KulpatiŚaunaka presides over a twelve-year sacrifice, and it is within this sacred enclave that Ugraśrava Sauti narrates the epic to the gathered *ṛṣis* as it had once been recited by Vaiśampāyana to King Janamejaya at his *sarpasattra* (snake sacrifice).

Noteworthy amongst the forest landscapes that play a pivotal role in the *Mahābhārata* are the Dwaita*araṇya* and Kamyaka*araṇya*, each serving as the backdrop for pivotal events in the epic narrative. The prominence of these woodlands raises profound inquiries regarding the conceptualisation of the forest within this epic saga. As we delve into the diverse forests that shape the *Mahābhārata*, we are compelled to interrogate the nuanced spatial dynamics that underpin the narrative, seeking to unravel the intricate balance woven between the civilised and the wild. This exploration seeks a deeper understanding of the *Mahābhārata's* conceptualisation of the forest, its spatial dynamics and its significance in the broader thematic landscape of the epic.

Conceptualisation of the Spatial Dynamics of Forest

Mahābhārata constructs the spatial dynamics of the forest (*araṇya*) in a way that is distinct from the modern notion of the "fragility" of Nature that necessitates its protection by humans. Forest has occupied a pivotal place in the ancient Indian philosophy. It has featured as early as in the *Ṛgvedic*hymn to the *Araṇyānī*, or the goddess of forest. Likewise, the *Āraṇyakas* and the *Upaniṣads* are known to have been composed by the *ṛṣis* dwelling in their forest hermitages. In Sanskrit *āyurvedic* texts, the forest is conceptualised as unsettled land that has not been cultivated. The forest, based on its ecological and physical characteristics, is divided into two distinct categories, namely *jāṅgala* and *ānūpa*.

Jāṅgala refers to dry, uncultivated land with sparse and scattered vegetation. The *jāṅgala* landscape is usually associated with the western region of the Indian sub-continent. Also, due to the dry ecological feature of *jāṅgala*, the consumption of meat of the animals indigenous to the *jāṅgala* landscape provokes an excess of *āyurvedic* humour wind (*vāta*) and bile (*pitta*). On the other hand, *ānūpa* refers to the marshy landscape and is usually ascribed to the eastern part of the

Indian sub-continent. The *āyurvedic* treatises state that the consumption of meat of the animals that are native to the ānūpa landscape leads to a dominance of phlegm (*kapha*) in the human physiology. It is worth noting that the 18th century British colonialists interpreted the Sanskrit term, *jāṅgala* in a diametrically opposite manner. The English word jungle, with its colonial connotation, reeks of exoticism and essentialism. Jungle, as opposed to the dry *jāṅgala* landscape, refers to dense and luxuriant woodland with ferocious animals and a mystic aura about it that, in turn, attests to the colonial image of India as a primitive land.

In Anuśāsana Parva, planting trees is considered as a virtuous act no less sacred than the Vedic sacrifices. "The planter of a tree is saved in the next world by the trees he plants like children saving their own father" (*Mbh* 13.58.30). The forests are an important aspect in the lives of not only *ṛṣis* who ventured on the path of renunciation but also of regular householders (*gṛhastha*). As every human being is enjoined by the *Chaturāśrama* system to observe the Vānaprastha stage at the appropriate time in their life. Vānaprastha could be literally translated to mean 'way of the forest' or 'forest road', and have been given due importance in the *Mahābhārata*. Members from every generation of the Kuru dynasty, beginning from Satyavati and her daughters-in-law Ambika and Ambalika, and Kunti, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari in the next generation, to the Pandavas and Draupadi, had renounced their palace and ventured forth to forest in the last stage of their lives. However, the relationship of the civilised settlement with the wilderness of forest was not always harmonious, but was rather conflictual at times.

Forest was the abode of several non-Aryan tribes, such as the *rākṣasas*, *nāgas*, *kirāta*, *śabara*, and *pulinda* among others, that feature in significant episodes throughout the epic. These tribes were not subordinate to the varna system but were rather excluded from the Vedic varna order. Hence the forest tribes were distinctive in their exclusion from the Varna order, but exclusion doesn't necessarily imply antagonism. There are instances of marital alliances between the KṣatriyaPāndavas and women from the forest tribe. The most notable being Bhima's marriage with the *rākṣasa* woman Hidimbā, and Arjuna's union with the *nāga* princess Ulūpī. Moreover, both these unions resulted in the birth of valorous sons who played a crucial role in the Pāndava army during the Kurukṣetra war. However, the relationship between the Vedic varna order and forest tribes was at times rather conflictual, especially when one tried to encroach into the other's territory. Bhima was challenged by the *rākṣasa* chieftain Hidimb because he perceived Bhima and the others to be encroaching into the territory reserved exclusively for his clan. Likewise, during the twelve years exile of the Pāndavas, Bhima kills another *rākṣasa* chieftain, Kirmira, whom the Pandavas encounter in the Dvaita *vana*. Alternatively, Bakāsura, an

outsider to the varna order, attempted to assert his dominion over the village of Ekchakra, and therefore had to die at the hands of Bhima for his attempt to infringe into the civilised settlement. Moreover, the epic narrative is replete with the imagery of *rākṣasas* creating ruckus in the forest hermitages of the *ṛṣis* and obstructing their sacrifices, as the *ṛṣis* are perceived to be infringing the exclusive domain of the forest tribes.

Since forest was conceptualised primarily as the site of exile, hermitage and hunting, it was but inevitable that the civilised settlement would have a dichotomous relationship with the wilderness of forest. If the varna order of the civilised space is perceived as the Self then the forest with its charms and dangers becomes the unknown Other, therefore the relation between both is marked by a distinctive undercurrent of tension. It is also interesting to note that those who renounced the way of *gṛhastha* in their search for *Brahma jñāna* or *mokṣa* always headed towards the isolation and wilderness of the forest. Forest was the designated site to seek the Absolute or *Brāhmaṇ*, as the wilderness allowed the seeker to transcend the bounds of *saṃsāra*and its *māya* and immerse oneself in the search of the Ultimate Reality through experiencing the unknown.

As a site of hunting the forests are intricately associated with the ambitious excursion of royal hunt. The royal hunt was not only a leisurely activity indulged in by the king but also a symbolic assertion of his dominion on the uncharted wilderness of the forest. However, the forest did not present itself as a passive turf to be easily conquered by the aggressor, rather it seemed to fight back with equal ferocity. In *Mahābhārata*, hunting excursions usually had deleterious impact on the lives of the kings. For instance, Pāndu who killed the deer that was sage Kimdama in disguise accrued the curse of prohibition of sexual intercourse, which virtually rendered him incapable of biologically fathering children. Similarly, Karṇa who mistakenly kills a brahmin's cow during a hunting expedition is cursed by the aggrieved brahman to be killed in a state of helplessness.

The *sarpasattra* of King Janamejaya is an attempt to avenge the death of King Parīkṣit, which occurred due to a curse that Parīkṣit incurred in one of his hunting expeditions. Tired and thirsty Parīkṣit, after his futile chase of a deer, entered the hermitage of *ṛṣi*Śāmika and enquired about the whereabouts of the deer. However, ṛṣiŚāmika was observing a vow of silence and consequently couldn't answer the king. The king was angered by what he perceived as the arrogance of the ṛṣi and placed a carcass of snake on his shoulders. Though ṛṣiŚāmika forgave the king, the *ṛṣi's* son Śringi was overcome by anger and cursed that Parīkṣit will be bitten by snake and die within seven days. The forest thus transformed the hunter, who enters its domain

as an aggressor, into a hunted by afflicting him with arrows of curses and misfortune. Though hunting is a symbolically significant activity, it is nevertheless classified as one of the four cardinal vices to be avoided by the king, the other three vices being drinking, gambling and womanising.

Pāndavas and their Sojourn in the Forest

Having been born and spent the formative years of their lives in the forest hermitages, the Pāndavas shared an intimate relationship with the forests. Throughout their lives, they spent several extended periods of time in forest owing to various circumstances. After escaping the assassination plot hatched by Duryodhana in the form of an inflammable *lākṣāgṛha* (house of lac) in Varnāvrata, the Pāndavas spent several years incognito wandering around various forests and villages before securing the alliance of the powerful king Draupada, through their marriage with his daughter Draupadi. Thereafter, they spent twelve years of exile in forests after Yudhiṣṭhira lost his kingdom in the rigged game of dice with Duryodhana. The forest becomes a crucible where they confront demons, vicious animals, and their own humanity. As a site of exile, the forest becomes an important setting where several significant episodes unfold, which are actively shaped by the politics of forest.

Though Pāndavas encountered the forest mostly as destitute refugees, there are instances where they resorted to violence to claim ownership over the forest, the most famous example being the carnage unleashed by Arjuna and Krishna at the Khāṇḍava*vana*. An epic that reiterates the message of '*ahimsa parmo dharma*', it is interesting to note that there has been no attempt to justify the brutal extermination of Khāṇḍava forest and its dwellers throughout the narrative. Iravati Karve, however opines that the Pāndavas did not escape the *Kārmic* consequences of their violent action at Khāṇḍava forest. The famous palace that was built in their capital city of Indraprastha by the *asura*Māya, who was one of the six survivors of the carnage, did not accord peace and happiness to the Pāndavas. The palace was the setting of the infamous game of dice and Draupadi's mocking of Duryodhana, which later instigated him to plot his revenge against the Pāndavas by inviting them to a rigged game of dice in Hastināpur.

However, the Pāndavas' journey does not conclude with mastery over the forest; instead, they return to it as exiles, learning essential lessons of humility and shedding royal arrogance. The forest, in this context, becomes a metaphorical teacher, reshaping the Pāndavas' worldview. It is during their twelve years of exile in forests, the Pāndavas attain not only spiritual maturation but also an insight into their own Self. In Vana Parva, it is Yudhiṣṭhira who saves his brothers twice from near death experiences, once during the YakṣaPraṣna episode that occurs in the

twenty-first sub-section of Arṇya Parva, and in another instance, Yudhiṣṭhira counterintuitively saves the mighty Bhim from the deadly grasp of the snake, Nahuṣa which takes place in the tenth sub-section of Ajagara Parva. Thereby, highlighting the fact that physical might is not always a guarantee of triumphing over enemies, especially in forests where the codes of civilisation does not operate. Likewise, Arjuna also has to perform tapas, thereby mentally preparing himself before acquiring the divine weapons that is eventually bestowed on him by Lord Shiva.

Politics of Compassion and Preservation of Ecology

Compassion is an emotion that is construed as noble and even essential pre-requisite for attaining *mokśa*, but what is generally overlooked is the fact that it is a virtue which is deeply entrenched in politics. *Mahābhārata* consistently extols the greatness of having compassion towards all beings, but remains silent on the question of what entails the supposedly all-encompassing directive of 'being compassionate towards all.' The politics of compassion unfolds intricately in the forest, where the general laws of civilised order doesn't apply, and therefore becomes the ideal setting for examining the emotion of compassion as conceptualised by the *Mahābhārata*. In Adi Parva's section of Astika Parva, occurs an episode in which Parīkṣit places a snake's carcass on *ṛṣi*Śāmika's shoulders, Śringi, Śāmika's son get righteously outraged and curses Parīkṣit for his disgraceful deed.

However, Śāmika disapproves of his son's anger and impulsiveness. Śāmika argues that "We live in the domain of that king (Parīkṣit) and we are righteously protected by him. We should not take note of his evil acts. Ruling kings must always be pardoned by men like us" (*Mbh* 1.37.75). In fact, he chides his son, who himself is an accomplished ascetic in quite harsh words, as well as sympathises with the king who was clearly in the wrong. Śāmika says, "Like his great-grandfather, Parīkṣit protects us, the way a king should protect his subjects. Today, he came here tired, hungry and thirsty and he did not know that I was under a vow of silence and he himself practices austerities. Therefore, you have committed an evil act through childishness. O son! In no way does that king deserve a curse from us" (*Mbh* 1.37.89). He further extols the virtue of compassion and the pitfalls of anger, especially for ascetics like them. He advises his son, "Give up your anger. Otherwise, you will not be able to follow the path of *dharma*. Anger destroys merits that ascetics obtain after a great deal of pain. There is no hope for those who are deprived of merits. Tranquillity alone gives success to ascetics who are forgiving. Good accrues to the forgiving, in this world and the next. Therefore, you must always control your senses and lead a life that is forgiving. By being forgiving, you will attain worlds that cannot even be reached by Brahma" (*Mbh* 1.38.29).

This episode is indeed a lesson in compassion and forgiveness but the question that arises is why the narrative is not consistent in its treatment of compassion. A striking parallel, especially in regards to the politics of compassion can be drawn with another episode in Ādi Parva, which occurs in the sub-section of Sambhava Parva. This episode also unfolds in a forest, features a king on a hunting expedition and an enraged ascetic who curses the king, which ultimately becomes the cause of the king's demise. This is the fateful episode of King Pāndu when he shot dead a deer that was engaged in the act of intercourse with a doe. In an unexpected turn of events, it is revealed that the deer, which had been killed by Pāndu, was an accomplished sage named Kimdama who had assumed the disguise in order to engage in coitus. The sage is enraged because he had been interrupted during coitus, which consequently foiled his attempt to obtain an offspring. In sacred texts including *Mahābhārata*, it is reiterated that producing progeny is the most essential pre-requisite for attaining heavens.

Kimdama, therefore, is justifiably enraged by Pāndu's dishonourable conduct. However, Pāndu is not ready to concede defeat, and instead argues his case rather passionately. Pāndu is of the opinion that he had committed no sin in killing the deer (disguised Kimdama) and therefore has no reason to be repentant. He argues, "In dealing with deer, kings behave no differently from enemies; they kill them. Therefore, you should not blame me in your delusion. Deer can be killed openly and through trickery. That is the dharma of kings" (*Mbh* 1.109.57). Pāndu's reasoning imply that compassion is not meant for all beings, and most certainly not for beings that are construed as the Other, which in this case is deer, creature of the forest, the realm of unknown. Moreover, Kimdama's insistence on cursing Pāndu, who had no intention of causing any harm to the sage, further problematises compassion, an emotion that is politically-charged and deeply entrenched in ideology.

The episodes of Pāndu and Parīkṣit have a lot of similarity, however, their treatment of compassion is what markedly distinguishes them from one another. Parīkṣit acted out of anger and frustration towards Śāmika. He acted consciously and was aware of the pettiness and maliciousness of his act, but blinded by anger he couldn't act otherwise. Śāmika's astuteness enabled him to empathise with the fatigued Parīkṣit, and therefore he felt compassion towards the king and graciously forgave him. Śāmika reasoned with his son that ascetics like them who live in forest hermitages, away from the safety nets of civilisation, ought to be in good terms with the king. *Mahābhārata* is replete with tales of ordeal faced by the ascetics in their forest hermitages. They require the protection of king for their unhindered pursuit of *dharma*.

Therefore, compassion, especially towards the king as exemplified in Parīkṣit-Śāmika episode, becomes an essential tool of survival for ascetics dwelling in forest hermitages. In contrast, Kimdama, who was in his death throes, was not burdened with the concern of preserving the security of forest hermitages. He was very well aware that his final moments are near and therefore he could afford to forgo the generosity of being compassionate towards his king. Thus, it could be inferred from the similar yet contrasting episodes of Parīkṣit-Śāmika and Pāndu-Kimdama that compassion was indeed a desirable emotion because it enabled conflict resolution and reconciliation between unequal parties, kings and ascetics in this case. Moreover, compassion became an essential tool of self-preservation and survival when one lacked physical might such as the ascetics, which became especially apparent in the context of forest where*mātsyanyāya* reigned supreme.

Conclusion

In *Mahābhārata*, the forest is not merely a passive backdrop but an active participant in the narrative, influencing the trajectory of the epic's plot. It can conclusively be stated that in the epic narrative of *Mahābhārata*, the forest is conceptualised as a character with multi-layered meanings, at par with every other multi-dimensional character of the epic. Forest is not a site of utopic idealism, but a labyrinth with its own complex politics and enigma. By navigating the wilderness, the characters confront challenges that mirror the complexities of life, morality, and duty. While the ascetics are mostly reverential in their attitude towards forest, the kings and overlords perceive forest as uncharted site of resources that needs to be brought under their dominion, in other words, they seek to tame the untameable wilderness. The ascetics, on the other hand, are drawn towards forest to attain *Brahma jñāna* because they reckon the wilderness as a refuge from the fetters of *māya* and *saṃsāra*. Forest, as a multi-dimensional site, held multiple relevance for varied characters.

In stark contrast to the seekers of *Brahma jñāna*, who considered forest as a site divested of the bonds of *saṃsāra*, there were several star-crossed couples who found their eternal love amidst the wilderness. Forest became an integral aspect in the love stories of celebrated couples such as, Śakuntalā and Duṣyanta, and Tapatī and Saṁvaraṇa, among others. For instance, King Saṁvaraṇa during one of his hunting expeditions came across the radiant Tapatī, who was the daughter of the Sun God, and instantly fell in love with her. Even after getting married to her, the couple stayed on in the forest for twelve long years. Saṁvaraṇa, who is also the father of the famous Kuru, was not only in love with Tapatī but also mesmerised by the forest so much so that he ignored his kingdom for over a decade, and returned only after a drought struck his city. The

forest, therefore, serves as a metaphorical and transformative realm in which character development, moral dilemmas, and the unfolding of destiny take place. The intricacies of the spatial dynamics within the forest reveal profound insights into the human condition, societal norms, and the cosmic order as depicted in the epic. This exploration of spatial dynamics enriches our understanding of the epic, providing a deeper appreciation for the *Mahābhārata*'s timeless relevance and its ability to resonate with diverse audiences.

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