CHAPTER THREE

MALWA: FACE OF THE LAND

History is made without knowing of its making.
Jean Paul Sartre (1963:29)

At every two or three kos clear and limpid streams are met on whose banks the willow grows wild, and hyacinth and fragrant flowers of many hues, amid the abundant shade of trees. Lakes and green meads are frequent and stately palaces and fair country homes breathe tales of fairy land. The climate is so temperate that in winter there is little need of warm clothing, nor in summer of the cooling properties of saltpetre. The elevation of this province is somewhat above that of other areas of the country and every part of it is cultivable. Both harvests are excellent, and especially wheat, poppy, sugarcane, mangoes, melons and grapes.


The Malwa region lying in the middle of India, forms a distinct geographical unit. Geographers differ about the delimitation of this region (Singh, R.L.(ed.)1971, Spate 1954). R.Y. Singh (1978) who has done a detailed geographical analysis of this area locates it at (20° 10' N - 25° 10' N and 73° 45' E - 79° 14' E). This definition would include not only the Indore and the Bhopal divisions but Banda, Betul, Alirajpur and Barawani areas of M.P., Banswara and Jhalawara districts and the Pratapgarh tehsil of the Chittorgarh district of Rajasthan and parts of Dhulia and Jalgaon districts of Maharashtra. According to him the Malwa region is girded on the west by the Vindhya's ranges and its off-shoots running from Jhabua to Pratapgarh. The Mukundwara range, dissected by many channels, forms its northern boundary. The eastern limits of this region are defined by the Sagar plateau. To the south it is surrounded by the Satpuras. Although the author has discussed factors like structure, climate, positional factors and historical formation in the definition of the region, we are not clear about his justification for including such diverse areas within the Malwa region. Historians and archaeologists seem to have further
compounded the problem. Lahiri's work (1992) on ancient trade routes includes all kinds of divisions of Madhya Pradesh in the Malwa region. Prof. Irfan Habib's celebrated Atlas of the Mughal Empire follows the categories used by the Mughal rulers (Habib 1982:25). This means that the Malwa Pargana would include areas as far flung as Chattisgarh. All these studies seem to presume that political configurations, modern or pre-modern, determine the shape of a region. The problem of defining the boundaries of the Malwa region has been complicated by the fact that it has rarely been an independent political unit.¹

For us, geography will be above all a way of re-reading, re-estimating and re-interpreting the past of the Malwa region. The distinctiveness of a region is not simply a function of its physiognomy or polity. It is related to the ethnicity of its population, its way of living, its role in history, and its role in the process of modification of the region over a given period of time. Our studies will show how in the case of Malwa frontiers have marched to the dictat of history. The presence of the Malwa region indicates that a folk region can survive in spite of the absence of co-terminous political boundaries. Malwa exists in the minds of the people who believe that they belong to that area. It indicates an intimacy and cognition between the habitat and its inhabitants. It also survives as an area with a distinct language and a rich folklore. Talking about the Malwa region, the

¹ For example statements like 'In Malwa copper ores are to be found basically in the Jabalpur region....The number of professional gold washers in different parts of Malwa in 1872 is...52 in Jabalpur and 19 in Sagar (Lahiri 1992:167), assume that Jabalpur and Sagar are parts of the Malwa region.

² As has been said by Schwartzberg (1967) 'a region...is a perceived segment of the time - space continuum differentiated from others on the basis of one or more defining characteristics.' While geographers have talked about their method, historians dealing with Malwa have not bothered to think about either the time or the space component in defining the region. When a new edition of Jain's book Malwa through the ages came out in the 1990s, it was called Madhya Pradesh through the ages. It shows how perceptions about regions change with political configurations.
anthropologist Mayer says:

This broadly speaking, is a plateau between 1500 and 2000 feet above the sea level, stretching some 200 miles from north to south and 150 miles from east to west. The Vindhyan mountains and the river Narmada form its southern boundary, while to the west lie the Aravalli hills and the deserts of Rajasthan. Going north the traveller descends abruptly to the plains of Bundelkhand and the Ganges valley. Only to the east is the transition less marked. Here it is hard to know when the increasingly hilly country is Malwa no more. Indeed the saying goes that one gate of the city of Bhopal is in Malwa while the opposite entrance is in Gondawana... (Ujjaini) is remembered by villagers as the capital of Chandragupta... Villagers look back to the time of Vikramaditya and Bhoja. They are conscious of being inhabitants of a particular province, which they consider to be superior to all others... It is a common saying that Malwa has such good climate and vegetation that people never leave it but outsiders from all quarters try to settle there. The foreign origins of many sub-castes are kept alive in the books of the genealogists and in the sub-caste names like Gujarati, Mewari, Purviya. (Mayer 1960: 11-13)

A broadly similar picture emerges if we to map the linguistic profile of the area. Since language is the vehicle of culture and the symbols created by human groups, the linguistic unit provides a better definition of the area. Grierson's monumental Linguistic Survey of India includes Indore, Bhopal, Bhopawar and Western Malwa Agencies of Central India in the Malwi language area. While Bhilsa is part of this language zone Sagar and Gwalior are outside it (Grierson 1968: 52). Parmar, defining the Malwi speaking areas says that its core area is formed by the Ujjain, Indore, Dewas, Mandasaur and Rajgarh districts. It has spread upto Nimar, Bhopal, Narsinghgarh, Bhilsa, south Jhalawar, Neemuch, Ratlam, and eastern Jhabua districts.³ Although the state language is Hindi,

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³ Another study on the Malwi language (Upadhyaya 1960) gives the following list of areas here Malwi is spoken :- East - Rajgarh, Shajapur and Bhopal, Central- Ujjain, Dewas, Indore, West - Ratlam, Jhabua, South west - Dhar and parts of Nimar, South - Nimar, North - Mandasaur, North -east - Kota and Jhalawar. There are variations in the list provided by Grierson, Parmar and Upadhyaya. There is unanimity about the Ujjain - Indore area being the core area of the Malwi language. Grierson has pointed out that many of the neighbouring districts use corrupt versions of the language. Many of these areas are not considered part of the Malwi language zone by him. Areas like Jhalawar, Jhabua and Nimar are some such districts. Districts which are common to all the lists can be confidently treated as Malwa.
people use Malwi in the villages. In the cities too people speak Malwi at home (Parmar 1955:10-11, 113).

Ours is an exercise in retrospective geography. We are interested in the problem of the emergence of urban society in the Malwa region in ancient times. Many parts of this area were known as Avanti in early Indian history (Law 1976:52). It was around the seventh-eight century that the identity of Malwa supplanted the identity of Avanti (Law 1976:322). Malwa consisted of Avanti and Akara regions (Bhattacharyya 1977:116). For our purpose the geographical locale of the Avanti Mahajanapada and the present day folk perception of the Malwa region are the most crucial components in delimiting our area of study. While not precisely coincident with the physical divisions, they are by no means divorced from them. It is in this context that we need to cut out various portions of the 'Malwa' area from Singh's definition. Our delimitation of the Malwa region cuts out areas east of Bhopal. However, the area to the north-east of Bhopal, i.e., the Vidisha area will be included. This area, too, is associated with Avanti in ancient inscriptions. It is referred to as eastern Malwa in ancient times (Law 1976:305,322). The people of these areas identify themselves as people of Malwa. These were the ancient Avanti and Akara Mahajanapadas in the sixth century B.C. According to the Mahagovinda Suttanta of the Dighanikaya, Mahissati was the capital of Avanti (Law 1976:52). Identified with modern Maheshwar on the bank of the Narmada, this city is frequently mentioned with Avanti in ancient texts and inscriptions (Law 1976:305). That is why we shall also include areas around the Narmada trough in our delimitation of the Malwa region.

Many of the areas included in the Malwa region by Singh (1978) would not be acceptable to the inhabitants of Malwa. The districts of Jhabua, Khandwa, Hoshangabad, Betul, Banswara and Pratapgarh among others have not therefore been included in our
definition of Malwa (see map 1). It was probably this Malwa which was referred to in the passage we quoted from Ain-i-Akbari. The 'fairyland' of green fields, beautiful houses and luscious fruits was a creation of about three thousand years of human activity. It was not conjured up by a king nor created by the wiles of nature.

If we look at the physignomy of modern Madhya Pradesh, it is clear that the areas around Ujjain provide the only really extensive agricultural base. Malwa is characterised by a wide expanse of undulating black soil. The relief of this area shows a ribbon pattern extension of the black soil to the Vidisha area. This area is characterised by a uniformity of relief also. The area east of Bhopal is hilly, with a few scattered agricultural pockets. They present a different landscape.

The region consists of gentle level slopes with black soil, the Narmada trough and the area dissected by the Vindhyanas towards the south and west. Within this region are certain variations in the environment which could lead to significantly diverse forms of human adaptation. There are differences in physical relief, rainfall and vegetation.

The elevation of the Vindhya ranges, in the present case mainly the Dhar upland and the areas towards Jhabua varies from 450 m. to 600 m. This hilly area with its steep slopes is mostly forested, making it a haven for tribemen who maintain their primitive ways of life. The elevation of the Narmada trough varies between 150m. and 300m. The fertile land around it has attracted agricultural settlements from very early times. The black soil region is also an area of attraction for agriculturists. But variations in rainfall and soil cover introduced significant differences in the patterns of living in this area.

If one looks at the rainfall pattern, the entire region has a semi arid climate. However, several micro-regions exist in this zone. Areas like Mandasaur and Susner
receive less than 80 cms. of rainfall. The vegetation of this area is of the dry tropical kind with thorny bushes. Ujjain, Indore, Dhar and most other areas receive slightly higher rainfall (between 85 cms. and 110 cms.). This area is characterised by dry deciduous forests. One finds a change in terrain and cultural setting if one moves north-westward. Moving from Nagda to Ratlam one sees the fertile black soil change to a rugged and dissected territory. The undulating plateau merges with the off-shoots of the western Vindhyas running northwards. The soil is less retentive of water and is of a reddish hue. Scattered boulders and basalt are strewn in the area. Similarly, the areas falling in the upper Chambal-Parvati basin are covered with fertile black soil. For agriculturists areas like Dhar, Ujjain, Indore, Dewas and Mandasaur were easy to colonise. The topography of this area is flat with a few scattered hills and ridges. But as one moves northward to places like Bhanpur, Pachpahar and Jhalrapatan, etc., there is a marked decrease in the total cultivable land available. Traditionally associated with pastoral communities this area forms part of the Chambal badlands. Overgrazing and other natural factors have led to massive gulli erosion by the river Chambal. Large areas have turned into infertile waste.

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4 Reports of the National Commission on Agriculture, Government of India, New Delhi 1976, Vols. IX and XIII discuss the rainfall and cropping pattern of this area. They provide us with interesting insights through their division of various sub-zones having differing rainfall and cropping pattern.

5 National Commission on Agriculture, Vol.IX provides the following statistics for the net sown area and wasteland in the districts of Jhalawar and Ujjain. It shows the contrast between the two areas very clearly -

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tehsil of Jhalawar</th>
<th>Net sown area</th>
<th>Wasteland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pachpahar</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhanpur</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jhalrapatan</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aklera</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The southern Malwa region has a variety of relief features. It comprises parts of the Vindhyas ranges which dip southwards and merge with the Narmada trough. This area is characterised by dissected scraps, thick forests and sparse population. The Narmada trough, primarily consisting of the parts of the Nimar plain and upland, is a fertile region at the lower reaches. This area is attractive to agriculturists.

The Ecological Setting

The history of a people is inseparable from the country it inhabits... One should start from the idea that a country is a storehouse of dormant energies whose seeds have been planted by nature, but whose use depends on man (Braudel1989:263).

We intend now to examine the environmental variables in a cultural ecological perspective. We define ecosystem as a population comprising a set of species whose reactions to the habitat and co-actions between each other constitute an integrated system having some degree of unit character. The members behaving with reference to their

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tehsils of Ujjain</th>
<th>Net sown area</th>
<th>Wasteland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pirawa</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gangadhar</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indore</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sawar</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depalpur</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ujjain</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>16%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Badnagar</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khacharod</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahidpur</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarana</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
dissimilarities engage in inter-specific relationships called symbiosis. This will help us understand the patterns of adaptation to nature and long term interaction among the communities within the ecosystem. This might shed light on the problem of change from pre-urban to urban society. We shall also try to examine their relationship with communities beyond the ecosystem to understand the adaptation of various groups in the light of their historical experience.

In the Malwa region, three groups with distinct patterns of adaptation can be seen. In the plains are the agriculturists; while in the hilly regions and the rocky outcrops which dot the entire area, primitive tribal groups have resided from times immemorial. People like the Bhils seem to have been hunter gatherers in pre-modern times, while pastoral nomadic communities have occupied the drier parts going up to the Mathura region in the northeast and merging with Rajasthan in the north-west. It seems that the three groups of people i.e. the Nisādas and Bhils, the Ābhīras, and the Mālavas who have been traditionally associated with this region, indicate the three types of adaptation outlined above. The Bhils were primarily hunters, the Ābhīras engaged in pastoral nomadism and the Mālavas (another group was the Yadus in the earlier period) were settled agriculturists.

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Ecological Setting: The Hunter-Gatherers

The word Bhil is a generic term for hunters. It is derived from the Tamil word Bilvar meaning bow man (Doshi 1971:16). The ancient Sanskrit sources use the word "Bhilla" for Bhil. They refer to a group of wild mountain people (Bohtlingk and Roth, Worterbuch). They are also believed to be the sons of a Sabara and an Andhri (Monier Williams:1950). The female ascetic Sabari in the Valmiki Ramayana was a Bhil. Similarly, the Mahabharata describes a fight between Sankara disguised variously as a Bhil or Kirata, and Arjuna (Singh 1972). All this shows that the Bhils were believed to live in forests. They mostly occupy hilly areas. Although distributed all over the Malwa plateau, they are concentrated in Dhar and Nimar. They use dialects derived from Mewari, Harauti, Gujarati, Malavi etc. languages depending on their proximity to a particular agricultural community. This indicates tremendous inter-action between the agriculturists and the hunting gathering groups. The interaction between the communities of the hills and the communities of the plains falls into some regular patterns. The Bhils work as agricultural labourers in the plains in periods of scarcity which coincides with the sowing season. They supply firewood and wild products like honey, venison, and Mohua flowers to neighbouring peasant communities. There are thus, two kinds of exchanges between the agriculturists and the hill people i.e. the exchange of labour and the exchange of food items. This kind of cultural interaction has a very long history. This led to a continuous intermingling of peasants and hunting-gathering groups. At present most of the Bhils have taken to agriculture except in some remote pockets. But the poor soil on the hills and primitive methods of agriculture do not provide sustenance throughout the year. They are dependent on the communities of the plains for at least some part of the year. 1/6 of the Bhil population work as agricultural labourers in the plains' villages. They cultivate fields as share croppers or landless labourers. The
Vikramaditya, after whom the Malava era is named, may have been related to Bhil groups. He belonged to the Gardabhilla tribe. The "Bhilla" ending suggests some relationship with the Bhils. This indicates that some Bhil groups might have shifted from the hunting gathering way of life to agriculture in the early historical period. This is a pattern which might be observed even earlier. The Sanskrit sources refer to another word, Bhir', which is a substitute for 'Abhir̥a' (Bohtlingk and Roth - Worterbuch). Considering the fact that in the Indian languages 'R' and 'L' sounds are interchangeable (Burrow 1965:44), it might indicate that the same term was used sometimes for the hunter-gatherer "Bhilla", and the pastoral nomadic "Abhir̥a". This shows the close interaction between the pastoral nomads and the hunting gathering groups. It might indicate a shift of population from one mode of adaptation to another. Alternatively it might show that they were not necessarily

labourers often go to Gujarat, Malwa and Nimar during the harvesting period. Nearly 20% of their work force is engaged in rearing livestock for milk and animal power. (R.Y. Singh 1972). In fact areas like Khandwa in the Nimar district were famous for the excellent breed of cattle even in the Mughal period (Habib 1982:plate 9B). Bhils also work as labourers in road construction, forest labour and railway construction. According to a case study in the Jhabua district, most of the labour force migrates to Nagda, Ujjain and Gujarat in the month of April and stays away till September (Naik 1969:213-214). Sometimes they permanently settle on the plains and become part of the village (Singh 1972).

*We shall discuss this problem in greater detail in the next chapter.*
distinguished from one another in the perception of the dominant agriculturists. For villages in the past, the forest was a reservoir of free resources which long familiarity had taught them to use. Wild food could be gathered there, flocks found part of their food there. Domestic animals like sheep and cows spent months at liberty running almost wild in the forest.

The Ecological Setting: The Pastoral Nomads

The pastoral nomads living on the margins of the Malwa plateau present another interesting case of adaptation to the local conditions. Pastoralism as a mode of life is primarily dependent upon the herding of animals. It involves regular movement in search of new pastures to areas which are marginal for agriculturists. At present pastoralists are confined to some hilly regions of the Vindhyas in places like Chindwara and Betul (Bose 1972). There are, however, indications that in ancient times this region had a sizeable population of pastoral nomads. The Ābhiras who have traditionally been associated with pastoral nomadic activities have been associated with the Malwa region in historical times. A late Jain work, the Kalpasūtra refers to Malwa and some other regions as Ābhīradesa (Suryavanshi 1962). Mathura and its adjoining areas are considered their homeland by Ābhiras all over India. In fact one of the reasons for the creation of the Chambal badlands is the excessive grazing of cattle. These areas are still frequented by pastoral nomads. The legends of Kṛṣṇa who was a Yadu prince always associate him with the Gopas, a pastoral group. The close interaction between these two communities (Yadus and Gopas) in ancient India is indicative of the symbiotic relationship of the two communities. The Ābhīras are believed to have come from Rajasthan and Sindh and settled in various regions including the Malwa region. Even in modern times, the Guna
district and some other areas show a high proportion of pastoral castes (Suryavanshi 1962). This indicates sedentarization of erstwhile pastoral communities. Besides, place names like Gopagiri, Asirgarh (Assa-Ahir-garh), Gohad etc. indicate some kind of relationship with cattle-herding. The rural bovine ratio is the highest in middle India (100 and more per 100 people). This might indicate the existence of large pastoral groups in the past which might have been absorbed by the dominant agricultural groups. One is not associating this phenomenon with particular tribes like the Ābhīras or Yādavas; rather, a kind of dynamic ecological adaptation by different communities is suggested. Population pressure on available land, lengthy droughts, and so on, create conditions favourable to pastoral nomadism. In such a situation, marginal agriculturists might shift to full time pastoral nomadism. On the other hand, such conditions are reversed by the opening up of new agricultural pockets. The nature of a nomadic settlement and the associated importance of agriculture can best be visualised as a mobile point along a continuum with "fully sedentary" marking one end and "wholly impermanent" the other (Leshnik 1972).

An interesting phenomenon affecting the balance of relation between the agriculturists and the nomadic groups is the fact that pastoral groups from the neighbouring provinces of Rajasthan and Gujarat come up to Indore and Bhopal in the dry season (Whyte 1964). The Malwa plateau is a thoroughfare and an area of attraction for nomadic peoples. Their numbers increase considerably in years of drought. Besides, itinerant merchants like the Lambadas and Banjaras also keep traversing these areas. They sell salt and animal products like ghee, milk etc. to the agriculturists. In fact, studies in neighbouring Gujarat have shown that pastoral nomads pen their cattle in fields for manuring them. Some groups of iron smiths (Gadia Lohars) also come to this area from
Rajasthan. They make agricultural implements and household articles like knives and containers (Raghavaiah 1968:175-76).

Peasants and pastoral nomads are dependent on each other. The pastoral nomads exploit areas which are marginal to agriculturists. They supply milk, curd, ghee and animal hides to village dwellers. They manure their fields and sometimes engage in other kinds of trading activities like selling salt etc. The pastoralists in return get food grains from the peasants without which they cannot survive, because, more often than not, they are in short supply of food. In fact, pastoral nomadism as a way of life presupposes the existence of peasant groups which supply their food requirements. A year of drought might lead to an onrush of large pastoral groups from Rajasthan to Malwa. In periods of prolonged drought these communities might stay back in Malwa itself. Here one sees an example of what can be called mal-adaptation, when pastoralists might persist with their way of life in an agriculturally exploitable niche. Pastoral castes seem to have emerged in areas where an intense peasant pastoralist symbiosis developed. Certain features of pastoral life also

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9In an interesting study of the process of sedentarisation of pastoral groups in the adjoining Gujarat region, Hellbusch has shown how the pastoralists react to the demands of the agriculturists. The Bharavad pastoralists stay in peasant villages for longer periods because the peasants' demand for milk, ghee etc. has increased. Due to an increase in population and extension of cultivation, pastures and cattle have decreased in numbers. Thus, peasants are more and more dependent on shepherds for the supply of animal products. The Bharavad pastoralists might stay as long as three years in a single village. Sometimes they settle there permanently. This indicates the dynamic inter-relation between the peasants and pastoralists. It has been well said 'A true nomad is a poor nomad'. Wealth is a burden to him. Excessive wealth hinders his movement. If the size of the herd he owns exceeds a particular limit he is forced to make faster movements in search of pastures. This in turn is hampered by the large size of the herd. If the number of cattle (which usually have a high mortality rate among pastoralists) decreases below a limit, the nomad can not survive on them alone. Thus at both ends of the continuum i.e. if the nomad becomes rich beyond a certain threshold or if he becomes poor below a level he is likely to join more sedentary groups. In case their herd is too large they will convert their wealth into land or other forms of more permanent wealth. In case their herd falls
show the inherent instability of the total system. A pastoral group finding itself divested of its cattle might use hit and run methods against agriculturists. They might rob them of their food supplies or sometimes even subjugate them.\textsuperscript{10}

**The Ecological Setting: The Agriculturists**

A agriculturists cover the largest portion of the Malwa region. They have been the dominant group since early historical times and perhaps even earlier.\textsuperscript{11} As they occupy the whole of the black soil region, they evince the most important form of adaptation to the local environment. The early historical period saw the rise of cities in this very core region.

As pointed out earlier, Malwa is a low rainfall zone. The black soil which covers this region is very fertile and has an extraordinary capacity to retain moisture. It is known to have supported agriculture for centuries without manuring or being left fallow (Wadia 1953). A British agricultural expert, commenting on the farming practices in the later half of the 19th century, has made some interesting observations. He says that the farmers rarely ploughed the field. They did not even use a harrow. Rather, they employed a Dutch hoe which was the only agricultural implement known to them. The soil swells in the rainy season after absorbing water. In summer it loses a large amount of moisture and shrinks in consequence. Wide cracks develop in the soil, sometimes as much as a metre deep. These cracks were filled by the fine soil of the surface with the help of some minor

\textsuperscript{10}The dynamics of the pastoral nomadic way of life have been very well discussed in (Sahlins 1968), (Barth 1965) and (Browman 1974).

\textsuperscript{11}The earliest known agricultural community in this area is known as the 'Kayatha culture' dating back to cir. 2400 B.C. It was succeeded by the 'Banas' and 'Malwa' culture. The Malwa area saw a discontinuous yet progressive expansion of agriculture for almost two thousand years before its entry into the historical period. See our discussion in the next chapter.
implement. This ensured a regular circulation of the soil. The cracks serve the function of ploughing by admitting free air into the body of the soil.\textsuperscript{12} Even in modern times in some parts of central India ploughs made of the hard wood of Khair etc. are used, not iron shares (Dhavalikar and Possehl 1974). These agricultural practices can reasonably be expected to have prevailed in the same form or still more primitive forms in early Malwa. This knocks the ground out of such hypotheses as assume that a sufficient surplus could not be generated without iron technology, especially iron ploughs.\textsuperscript{13}

Due to low rainfall, farmers practise dry farming in Malwa. The soil is fertile enough to bear both the Kharif and Rabi crops without irrigation. Apparently the soil is so retentive of moisture that even the small amount of rainfall for the spring season crop is sufficient for plant growth.\textsuperscript{14} Most of the rivers in this region flow through high banks cutting past hard basaltic traps. The hard rocks afford very shallow channels for the streams. In summer they cease flowing altogether, leaving a few puddles of water here and there (Singh 1978:67-68). Thus, even though rivers like Chambal, Kali-sindh, Sipra, Parbati etc. carry a considerable volume of water in various seasons, they are of little use for agriculture. The steepness of their banks makes irrigation from their waters very difficult. It is difficult to dig wells also because of the proximity of rock to the surface.\textsuperscript{15} Even in 1971, the total irrigated area in Malwa did not exceed 8\% of the total cultivated area. 82\% of the total irrigated area has well-irrigation and the rest of it is by ponds and

\textsuperscript{12}Quoted in (Dhavalikar 1974).

\textsuperscript{13} (Dhavalikar and Possehl 1974) have effectively demonstrated the improbability of Agrawal's hypothesis that due to technological limitations the chalcolithic communities could not exploit the black soil for agriculture. See (Agrawal 1971:228-230).

\textsuperscript{14} The Imperial Gazetteer of India 1984, Vol. IX, p.358.

\textsuperscript{15} See the Gwalior State Gazetteer, Vol. XII.
Distribution Pattern of the Rural Settlements

Mapping the distribution pattern of the rural settlements in relation to the relief and soil types, one can discern the prime influence of environment. Cultivation or its absence as determined by various natural factors has a lot to do with the kind of settlements that exist in this region. The fertile plateau proper extending from the Mahi divide to the Betwa Sind basin presents uniform distribution of habitation. The area is criss-crossed by channels like Chambal, Parbati and Sind. Here the physical and cultural settings have combined to present homogeneity in the spatial pattern of habitation. Intervillage distance varies from 2 to 6 kms. This area, and the Nimar plain on the Narmada are characterised by compact rural settlements. Village sizes range from clusters of thirty to hundreds of dwellings. Unlike these, the dissected relief of the Vindhya generates dispersed and scattered habitation (Singh 1978:69-107). The population distribution

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16 This kind of agricultural practice rules out the possibility of the state formation model provided by Karl Wittfogel. His notion of semi-arid regions requiring a network of canals for successful agriculture, leading to the formation of state organisation, does not seem to hold true in the present case. The despot who is the repository of all power and wealth derives his power from the control over irrigation canals. See (Karl Wittfogel 1957:43-54).
pattern also clearly shows the fertile Malwa plateau to be the area of attraction (ibid. 31-32). The areas traversed by the Vindhyas are characterised by sparse habitation. Districts like Indore and Ujjain located in the heart of the black soil zone have population densities of 262 and 142 per sq. km. respectively, whereas districts like Sehore and Pratapgarh etc. have population densities below 90 persons per sq. km. (ibid. 69). Also in the Ujjain district we find place names like Carulda, Yachakada, Nagda, Niboda and Suryada. Hrida and Da endings, according to the ancient grammarian Panini signify places with abundant water supply (Arya 1992). Water was undoubtedly very valuable to the early agriculturists. The plentiful availability of water in the Ujjain district might have helped in the emergence therein of a flourishing urban centre. All the ancient cities which emerged in this region were located in the agriculturally fertile areas. This emphasises the dependence of the early cities on the surrounding agricultural hinterland.

Internal competition and conflict among the agriculturists gave rise to strongholds on hill spurs. From these fortresses the chiefs could control the agricultural population and sometimes save them from depredations by other groups. Fortresses like those of Bijagarh, and Ramgarh (Khargone), indicate a pattern of adaptation to defence requirements (Singh 1978: 67).

The Malwa region was famous for its exports of precious and semi-precious stones. This activity is associated with the oldest agricultural settlements in the area i.e. the Kayatha culture. These semi precious stones are found in many areas of Malwa. Ujjain exported semi-precious stones in the early historical period to the West. Large parts of the Malwa area covered by the Deccan trap contain semi precious stones. The bed of the Narmada river is known to contain onyx and amethyst. Agate, opal and jasper are also
fairly common (Lahiri1992:169). Specialised working in stone quarries could have given rise to some sites.

**The Surrounding Areas**

The contrasts outlined above among the three different patterns of adaptation are reinforced by the adaptation patterns of the surrounding regions. Communities continued to migrate from the Indus region to this area even in recent times. Memories of these migrations are to be found in the names of various caste groups in the villages (Mayer1960:11-13). Though agriculturists like the Ahar culture people in pre-historic times did come from the north - west, one can reasonably hypothesise that the communities emigrating from this side would be primarily pastoral nomads. On the other hand, we may assume that the communities emigrating from the Agra-Mathura region would be both agriculturist and pastoral nomadic. To the east of Malwa region we have the dense forests of the Mandla region which foster the hunting gathering way of life. Thus, the contrasts inside the Malwa region are further articulated by the different types of areas which surround it. The requirements of the three groups functioning in the wider world of the whole of northern India stimulated exchange activities. In fact, some of the settlements are located loci of such exchange activities could take place. Big settlements like Bagaud in Khargone and Manpur in Indore are examples of contact point settlement (Singh 1978:69).

**The Ecological Setting : Some Premises**

Our survey shows that Malwa comprises a variety of settlements, negotiating with nature. The fragments of this mosaic are bound together by complementary differences,
trade and communications.

The socio-political structures which emerged in space and time were a result of the dynamic articulation of the interaction among the three groups i.e. the hunter gatherers, the pastoral nomads and the agriculturists. If diversity divides, by the same token it also unites; division itself being the creator of complementary needs. Between pastoralists and grain producers, contact is virtually essential. Different from and hostile to each other though they may be, human groups - of whatever size - never live entirely within their own shells. A kind of disequilibrium is built into their relationship. The hazards of pastoral nomadic and hunting-gathering ways of life, coupled with the presence of aggressive agricultural communities, might have led to the shift of labour to the agricultural communities. It would be interesting to look into the factors which caused imbalances in this pattern of interaction among these three groups in the ancient Indian context.

**Malwa : A Link between North and South**

The Malwa region functioned as a connecting link between North and South India. From pre-historic times communities from the Indo - Gangetic plains have migrated to this area. They have used Malwa as the land of passage for going South. This, too, is inherent in the geography of the Malwa region. To the north west of the Malwa is the Mewar region which is succeeded by the burning wastes of the Thar desert. On the north-eastern side is a mass of excessively broken and forested terrain. Merchants and armies wanting to go South, were attracted to the Malwa region. Thus, Maheswar emerged as a city in ancient India not simply because it was located in the heart of a fertile agricultural plain, but also because it was the point where the Narmada could be crossed with the greatest
ease. Even in the medieval period a place called Akbarpur adjacent to Maheswar was used as the point of crossing the Narmada. This was because the river at this point is only about one mile broad and no deeper than three feet. It is easily fordable by camel for most of the year (Habib 1982:25). This stretch of plain-land about 16 miles long on Barhwa -Maheswar is succeeded and preceded by deep valleys and gorges. Not only this, the usually steep scraps of the Vindhyas can be easily crossed here. So much so, even in modern times the road to Dhar and Indore passes through this area. No wonder ancient routes converged on the 16 mile stretch of Maheswar plains. Crowded villages by road and river crossings can be seen in Bistan, Pati, Silawad etc. in the Khargone district. The ordinary everyday rhythm of life depended on contacts and communications. Early agricultural settlements like Navdatoli show use of metals and stones not available locally. The depths of history are full of continuous, silent movements. These regular flows of goods and ideas are a recurrent feature of human settlement. However, they become visible to historians only when towns and cities emerge.

**Malwa: A Passage to the West**

The Malwa region also functioned as a connecting link between north India and the port cities of western India. Ancient Indian and Classical Greek literature refer to routes connecting Ujjain, Maheshwar and Bharukaccha. Bharukaccha was a port at the mouth of the Narmada, famous port for exporting goods to the Roman empire in the early centuries of the Christian era. It is difficult to work out the route which connected Ujjain to the sea coast. Scholars working on the prehistory of the area have pointed to the

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17 Sankalia and his colleagues have surveyed the Narmada basin to bring out the importance of the Maheswar area as a crossing point. See Sankalia et al.1971:1-5
presence of several routes connecting Malwa and Gujarat. Lahiri quotes Malcolm's
memoirs where he points to the presence of several well frequented routes within a 50 to
70 miles geo- breadth separating Malwa and Gujarat (Lahiri1995:246). The problem with
such analyses is that such roads become part of an eternity. They seem to have always
been there. Such evidence could be used profitably if we try to work out the evolution of
such routes in a historical context. It is normally believed that the Narmada is not
navigable for most of its course but some sections can be traversed for a few months of
the year. 18 While the use of the river for navigation is generally unlikely, it is navigable
in a large part of Gujarat. Modern gazetteers discuss the navigability of the river from the
point of view of modern vessels weighing 10 to 95 tons (Gujarat State Gazetteer, 1961
Broach district, Ahmedabad). The distance from Maheswar to the sea through the
Narmada is 371 kms. (Paranjpye 1990:114). The gazetteer points out that vessels of 10
tons go upstream to a distance of about 105 kms.). Between the months of November to
March, some traffic is carried out in small boats as far as Mokhadi falls, and still further
for about 15 miles, provided a shift is made to another boat on the other side of the
Mokhadi falls which is the chief obstacle to the traffic. This works out to a distance of
about 148 kms. upstream from its mouth. In the Malwa area the Narmada is navigable
from Maheswar for about 25 kms. This must have been an important factor in the rise of
Maheswar as an urban centre in ancient times. Land transport was excessively difficult in
the ancient world (Finley1975: 126). It is likely that people would have used water

18 A torrential stream upriver from Jabalpur, it becomes farther along its course a
dine river flowing through a wide alluvial valley. It must cross shoals, prohibiting long
distance travel, where locally during the rains dugouts were employed to a limited extent.
See The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. IX, p.325.
navigation as often as they could.

In modern times people have memories of routes skirting the bank of the Narmada. In the Kukshi - Barwani area one can still run into old bullock cart drivers who transported goods from Indore via Maheswar to Broach. Caravans would cover the distance from Indore to Broach in eight days (Rajpurohit 1992). It is also possible that the modern pilgrim route around the river Narmada preserves the memory of the ancient land route. It is likely that earlier the journey might have combined land and water routes since land transport would have been excessively difficult in pre modern times. Tavernier's description of the difficulties of land travel in the 17th century Deccan gives us some idea of difficulties of land transport (Schofl1912:196). The Periplus's account of goods 'brought down' from Ujjain probably referred to this river transport (Schofl1912:180). The Periplus also refers to special boats which carried goods from the mouth of the Narmada. These boats were probably similar to the fishing boats in the Bombay area in the early part of the century (Schofl1912:182).

Conclusion

This has been necessarily an exercise in retrospective geography. Every village

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19 At Sanchi the plaques dating back to the early centuries of the Christian era depict a barge for the Buddha crossing the river. This kind of boat would have been useful for navigation on the Narmada.
seems to have a distinctive of negotiating with nature. This diversity is offset by the fact that from the earliest beginnings of agriculture we see the emergence of networks linking different villages within Malwa. The frontiers of an area are defined by barriers of perception. We have shown how the people of Malwa believe that they are part of a distinct region. The frontiers of Malwa do not insulate it but surround it, binding its various sectors together.

Malwa is a multitude of realities and living beings, to which justice can scarcely be done by a chronological narrative. History books on Malwa mention monarchs from Magadha aplenty but no peasants, pastoralists or foresters. That is why we need longer time-scales going beyond kings. After all, the Malvi language was not invented by kings. Its echoes are hidden in the mists of prehistoric past. Similarly, the distinct styles of dress and dramatic performance that ancient Indian writers talk of (see the chapter on literary perceptions of Malwa) must look back to the long tradition of village settlements. Prehistory and history are part of the same process. Every geographical niche created a type of inhabitant and a way of life. We have to remember that every landscape also imposed its own history. Every history also creates a kind of inhabitant, a type of landscape (Braudel 1989: 49).

Was Malwa invented by its geography? The rather simplified picture presented above regarding the ecology of the region, has taken us very close to the cultural materialist position. As has been asserted by Braudel, man is the inheritor and continuer of the acts and deeds, techniques and traditions of all those who have preceded him in his own territory, shaping its landscape and locking him into a series of retrospective determinisms (Braudel 1989: 263). There is always a possibility that communities will continue with their
old forms of adaptation even though more rational forms of exploitation of nature become known to them.\textsuperscript{20} What we are aiming at is an understanding of the societal processes which functioned in a particular ecological setting. Environmental factors do not explain the origin of states and urban centres but they are intertwined with the process of social change. As such, the emergence of cities can be understood only in the context of the ecological setting.

\textsuperscript{20}(Bronte 1978) comes out with an interesting example of the Masai tribesmen in Africa who are exclusively pastoral nomadic in an environment where agriculture is possible, whereas the Turkana attempt cultivation in an uncompromising and arid zone. These cannot be explained as effects of environmental factors.