KURUKŚETRA AS A REGION

As already observed the geographical definition of Kurukśetra is first given in the Taňtírīya Ārañyaka¹ which makes it almost co-terminous with the present state of Haryana. In the Mahābhārata², the region has been mentioned along with the Kurus, and the Uttrakurus. The name Kuru was probably applied in this description to the eastern part of the ancient state which included the land lying between the Yamunā and Gaṅgā.³ The Uttra Kurus in the Great Epic probably denoted the hilly region lying to the north of Kurukśetra, covering the area above Srughana and reaching over the Śivālikas into the Himālayas.⁴

As far as the shape of the land is concerned the region was not suffered any noticable changes since the age of the Mahābhārata. There was a desert on the west of the land as the mention of vinaśana where the sacred Sarasvatī is said to have vanished in the sands shows. Beyond Vinaśana lived the people called Śūdras and Ābhīras because the Sarasvatī is said to have disappeared out of hatred for these people. At one place the river is said to have disappeared so that the Niśādas might not see her.⁵
This would suggest that the Śūdras and Ābhīras were also called Niśādas. On the north-west lived the Vātadhanas who had their capital near Bhatinda which appears to be a corrupt form of Vātadhana.6

In the conquest of the western region by Nakula the region of Rohitaka, the present town of Rohtak, has been mentioned as Bāhudhānyaka which suggests that it was known for the production of Paddy and food grains in general. It was also the stronghold of the brave Yaudheyas who were fierce fighters and fought Nakula under the banner of a dancing peacock. Nakula went further in this direction and conquered Mahettha, identified with the present town of Mahem and further on Śairiśaka or the present town of Sirsa.7

The Mahābhārata describes the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest by Agni under the protection of Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna. This story suggests that the forest had been cleared to fulfill the increasing need for Urbanization in the region. Still vast areas of land were covered by forests as the name Kurujāṅgala indicates. The mention of more than seven forests (described in a separate chapters) also points in the same direction. The emergence of towns in the areas claimed from wild growth is demonstrated by the mention of Khāṇḍava-prastha, also named as
Indraprastha in the region of Khāндava. In the north
the most important town mentioned in the Yaugandhar or
the present town of Jagadhari which was at one time applied
as the name of the surrounding region. In the heart of
the region the Great Epic describes a large number of
tīrthas which have been dealt with in a separate chapter.

It can be mentioned here that the towns of Thanesar-
Kurukṣetra. Prthūdaka- (Pehowa) and Jayantī (Jind) formed
the nucleus of the three main clusters of tīrthas. The
large number of tīrthas suggests that the land was dotted
with small habitations in the form of āśramas or villages,
along the rivers banks. As a matter of fact Urbanization
naturally spread first near the rivers in view of avail­
bility of water for agricultural and daily uses.

The Śivalikas was the mountain range lying
immediately to the north of Kurukṣetra. It was known as
Srṅgavāna or possessing a large number of peaks. In
Buddhist literature a hill called Yaugandhara giri in
mentioned which was obviously named after the tribe and
town of Yaugandhara. In the north-east was the hill
known as Yamunā-giri or Trīṃṭa from where the Yamunā
took its rise. Krauṇḍh Parvata was also probably the
same of a peak of the Śivalikas which was pierced by the
God Skanda Karttikeya according to a story given in the
Mahābhārata. Skanda is very closely connected with
the region of Kurukṣetra as he was annointed to the commandershiep of the army of gods at the tirtha named Taɪ̯jasa in the Prthūdaka complex. The Great Epic mentions a hill called Muñja-Pṛṣṭha which was probably somewhere in the Himalayas. One peak of which is also called Muñjavana. In the Vāmana Purāṇa, however, a tirtha called Muñja-Giri is also mentioned in the neighbourhood of the Tirtha Muñjavata which was near Jind. The name Muñja-giri should apply to some hill but there are no mountains in the part of Kurukṣetra where it has been placed, leaving aside these mountains which were to the north of Kurukṣetra and in the region called Uttrakuru the rest of the land was plain by and large.

Although the Mahābhārata and the Vāmana purāṇa both name seven Sarasvatīs six of which were probably the names of the tributaries of the main river. It is not possible to identify them all. All the rivers of Kurukṣetra have been described in an independent chapter. It is, however, necessary to mention those of them here which were main stay of the economy of the land. The first place in this respect naturally goes to the Sarasvati. The name originally applied to the Ghaggar but by the time of the Mahābhārata it had travelled eastward and come to the small stream which was flowing sometime back.
by the side of Thanesar. The Mahābhārata also names a river Arunā which is described as another form of Sarasvatī. Arunā is now known as Run Nadi and joins the river Mārkaṇḍā not far from Naryangarh. The description of the Sarasvatī in Vedic literature shows that it was an impressive river at one time and brought down a large amount of water as well as alluvial soil which contributed to the fertility of the land. All along the course of this river existed the hermitages which resounded with the singing of hymns and which could be spotted easily by the rising smoke of sacrifices. The prosperity which this river brought to Kurukṣetra is reflected even in the Rgveda very discriptively. At another place the sacred river is said to have produced ghṛṭa and honey for the progeny of Nahuśa. The other sister river Drṣadvatī formed a connection with the Sarasvatī. The Āpayā which was probably a small river flowed in this 'doab'. It contributed to the prosperity of the land in considerable measure. It must have been due to the richness of its soil that the region hosted the earliest inhabitants of the land and came to be called the seat of creation as well as Brahmāvarta and the Uttravedi of God Brahmā.

In the age of the Brāhmaṇas, when the cult of sacrifice was in its prime, sacrificers undertook long
sacrificial sessions two of which were named after the holy rivers Sarasvati and Drśadvatī. These sessions were started from Vinasana and performed upstream along the rivers.

Brahmāvarta or the central part of Kurukṣetra was full of lakes. Many of which were covered with lotus flowers. Pururavā is said to have found his lost beloved nymph Urvasī indulging in water sports with her companion in one of the lotus lakes of Kurukṣetra. Many of these lakes are supposed to have been formed by the river Sarasvati as it flowed from the hills in its downward course. Most of them acquired a holy status and became tīrthas.

Not far towards the north of Sarasvati flowed the river Sutlej known to the Epic as Śārī. On the East of the Drśadvatī flowed the Yamunā which passed very close to Yaugandhara or Jagadhari before turning eastward. These two major rivers also contributed to the prosperity of Kurukṣetra in a large measure. All in all therefore it was a fertile land. The Mahābhārata gives an interesting description of the flowers and fruits produced here. But it is interesting to take note first of the fact that according to the Aiteraya Brāhmaṇa Kurukṣetra was the birth place of the tree of Nygrodha or Vaṭa. It is said
that when the gods departed after completing a sacrifice
here there Some cups were tilted (Nyubuja) and from the
Soma that was thus spilt the Nyagrodha tree was born in
Kurukṣetra and called Nyubja. From these trees sprang
up others elsewhere and came to be known as Nyagrodhas.
The prosperity of this land can be gleaned even from a
reference in the Atharvaveda\textsuperscript{24} where a citizen of the Kurus
asks his wife as to what she should like to have curds,
gruel of milk or Barley-Brew and praises the rule of king
Parikṣit for the prosperity of the land. In the Rgveda the
valley of the Yamunā is noted for the wealth of cows and
horses.\textsuperscript{25} The Mahābhārata gives the credit for making the
country prosperous to the Kurus who are said to have
enriched it even at the cost of other nations so that it
could complete with the heaven.\textsuperscript{26} According to the great
Epic the soil of Kurukṣetra produced juicy grains,
rains were timely and trees were full of flowers and
fruits. The land abounded in wells, orchards, meeting
places, large reservoirs of water and brāhmaṇa villages
where prosperous festivals were frequently held.\textsuperscript{27} When
the Pāṇḍavas got half of the kingdom they made the country
rich with animal wealth and grains.\textsuperscript{28} There were trees
of many kind like Parijāta and Mango laiden with flowers
and bending under the weight of their fruit. There were
plenty of wild animals, cows, camels, donkeys and
horses.\textsuperscript{29} As already scene the region of Rohitaka has been
described as abounding in grain, riches and cattle-wealth. The valley of the Sarasvatī was full of holy tirthas and its banks were covered with Paddy and wild rice. The area about the Sarasvati tirtha was rich with orchards of Bananas and other fruits and looked pleasing to the eyes.

Buddhist literature also describes the land of the Kurus as prosperous in nourishing and delicious food stuffs and their capital Hastinapura as a rich prosperous and populous city. However, the description of the Mahābhārata has a parallel in the account of Sthāṇviśvara in the Harsacarita of Bāna who describes the ploughs scarring the acres, marches packed with corn-heaps, wheat crops, variegated with Raj-Mash patches ripe to brusting and yellow with the split been pods, herdsmen mounted on buffaloes, gay with tinkles of bells bound to their necks, roaming herds of cows making its forests white, exists made attractive by vine arbours and Pomegranate orchards, arbours ablaze with Pilu sprays, travellers blissfully sleeping after drinking the juice of fresh fruit, orchards where the fruit ripen to brusting; lovely groves where woodrangers taste the coconut juice, travelling folk plunder the date trees, monkeys lick sweet scented date juice, and partridges tear the Aruka to pieces with their
peaks, freely wandering troops of camels; flocks of sheep and droves of mares besmeared with the sap of crushed saffron beds, ponds like Viṣṇu's navel with Brahma or fire birds seated upon lotuses with tall stalks and wide ranches washing the lands with torrents of churned milk like the turmoil of the Churning of the Milky ocean.  

Likewise Yuanchwang in his travels speaks of the rich and fertile soil and abundant crops in the Sthāṇviśvara country. Still later in the tenth century A.D. Somadeva vies with Bāna and describes this land of the Yaudheyas as the abode of all riches with a soil highly fertile and yielding crops which the farmers were unable to thrash and stack properly.

Much of this prosperity of Kurukṣetra was of course due to the river Sarasvati which was its life time. The Mahābhārta refers to the fertile bed of this river while saying that wisemen could recognize even the lost Sarasvatī by the thickness of vegetation and dampness of the soil.
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