FORESTS

The presence of vast forest covered areas in the land of Kurukṣetra is attested by the great Epic and the Purāṇas. It reflects a stage in the history of the region when urbanisation has not yet reached an advanced stage. Yet in the age of the Āraṇyakas and the Upniṣadas there was a tendency towards acquiring spiritual knowledge at the feet of the Rṣis who mostly resided in āśramas along the banks of the sacred rivers Sarasvatī and Drśadvatī. These hermitages gradually developed into conjused localities of students living as hermits and getting education in different branches of learning. The situation had reached to the stage by the time of the Mahābhārata where the āśramas looked like growing townships. We find in literature interesting descriptions of these hermitages has resounding with the chanting of Mantras and betraying there presence by the rising smoke from the sacrificial fires.

Kurukṣetra region is devided into seven vanas or forests. Their names are Kāmyaka, Aditi, Vyāsa, Phalkī,
Sītā, Sūrya, Madhu according to the Mahābhārata, and Vāmana Purāṇa¹ and Nāradiya Purāṇa². Cunningham describes two independent sources which together contain nine different names Prṣṭhu Vana, Solan Vana and Dvaita Vana are the additional names of forests which are also in Kurukṣetra³. These forests are very sacred, auspicious and sin destroying as described in the Vāmana Purāṇa⁴. All these vanas find mention in the Mahābhārata particularly the following seven.

KĀMYAKA FOREST

Kāmyaka forest means that forest which fulfils the desires. Those people who take bath there on Sunday, get the desired things⁵. As the name suggests that it has come from Kāma-Vana and is associated with God Puṣan who is a symbol of love and marriage.⁶ It is about eight Kms. from Thānesar towards Kaithal in Kaithal tehsil. Kamoda which is six miles to the south-east of Thānesar and contains Draupadī-kā-Bhandāra is said to be located in this forest. Here in this forest there is a shrine of Kāmeśwara Mahādeva with two brick ghats and two brick temples.⁷

The Mahābhārata further locates that this Vana was situated on the bank of the Sarasvatī⁸ and was visited by
the Pāṇḍavas and Vidura in the course of their exile. The sagas performed many religious ceremonies which made the forest Rddhimat.9

Even Dharmarāja Yudhiṣṭhira had seen that forest and it extended upto the desert.10 There is another Verse in the Epic which also throws some light on the location of the forest.11 The Kāmyaka forest was inhabited by deers, Siddhas and sages.12 There were many ascetics and their hermitages15 which performed here many sacred sacrifices.14

ADITI VANA

Aditi is said to be the wife of Viṣṇu according to Vājasaneyī Saṁhitā15 and the Tattiriya Saṁhitā.16 But in the epic-Paurānic literature she is called the mother of Viṣṇu,17 the daughter of Dakṣa18 and the wife of Kaśyapa19. Devakī the mother of Kṛṣṇa is represented as being a manifestation of Aditi.20

This Vana was situated around the present Amin village which is 5 miles to the south-south-east of Thānesar.21 Here Aditi is said to have seated herself in ascetic abstraction to obtain a son, and accordingly she obtained her wish and gave birth to Viṣṇu22 at this very place.

There is a significant story about Aditi. A pair of
ear-rings came up during the churning of the ocean. Indra gave these rings to Aditi. The demon named Naraka stole them and carried them off to the city of Prāgyotīṣa. Kṛṣṇa brought these back to Aditi. 23 There is another story relating to the holiness of Aditi forest in the Vāmana Purāṇa. The king of the demons, named Bāli, had won the kingdom of the gods. The gods with their father Kaśyapa and mother Aditi went to Śveta Dvīpa, Viṣṇu’s residing place, as they were inspired by Brahmā. They went there with the view that they will get rid of the demons. Viṣṇu is sometimes called the Śveta-Dvīpa-Pati-Mahādeva. 24 This dvīpa is on the bank of the Ḫṣīroda-Samudra i.e. Ḫṣīravan which V. S. Aggarwala regards as the old name of the caspian sea. 25 Śveta Dvīpa which is sacred to Mahā-Viṣṇu is located somewhere in Asia minor. 26 Viṣṇu gave them the boon that he would be born in the womb of Aditi and would make the gods free from fear of Bāli. Then they returned to hermitage of Kaśyapa in Kurukṣetra and she undertook a severe penance which moved Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu was reborn in the womb of Aditi as the incarnation of Vāmana. The performers of Vratas in the Aditi forest for three successive nights achieve their desired objects. 27

In the Vedic literature, Aditi is frequently prayed for blessings on children and cattle, for protection and forgiveness. 28
PHALKI VANA

Phalkivana is supposed to mean "the forest of Phalaka", a famous sage who obtained great spiritual power. Phalgu fair is held here now these days in the memory of this Rṣi. The Phalkivana is identified with the region of the modern village of Pharal, 17 miles to the south west of Thānesar on Aughvati river and four miles from the town of Pundrī, in the Kaithal sub-division of the Karnal district.

Phalkivana was very sacred vana according to the Epic. Here the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas performed the funeral rites of the warriors who had fallen dead in the war. This vana is also very pious for performing the Yajñas by the Devas and sages. After going to tīrtha Phalgu one attains the fruit equivalent to the Aśvamedha and also great 'Siddhi'. A big fair is held here on the days whenever a Somavatī amāvas (falling on Monday) occurs during the Śrāddhas. The site of the fair is a tank of irregular shape more than a furlong in length and about 100 yards in breadth, near the Pharal village. One different edges of the tank slanting brick platforms or ghats have been built which are variously named as Gau Ghāṭā, Viṣṇu Ghāṭā, Kuśā Ghāṭā etc. There are small temples on most of these ghāṭas dedicated to Hanumāṇa, Rādheyshyama, Durgeśwari, Śiva and Phalagu ṛṣi. The rituals of PindaDāna are performed at these ghāṭas.
From one confusing verse it appears that Phalgu was situated on river Kauśikī whose water is pure and pious. Viśvāmitra came here and obtained Brāhmaṇahood after great penance.

According to Paūrānic literature this forest is very holy. Vāmana Purāṇa relates that those who perform Śrāddha here on Monday during the dark fortnight of a month, earn great merit. It is as holy as Gayā from the Śrāddha point of view. These who performed here a Śrāddha their dead fathers definitely obtain satisfaction. Matsya Purāṇa describes that during the reign of King Adhisomakṛṣṇa, a Yajña was performed in the Phalkīvana on the bank of the Drśadvatī for about two years.

Thus Phalkīvana is a sacred place for gods, Gandharvas, Siddhas and sages for undertaking sacrificial sessions. A man who bathes in the Drśadvatī and offers oblations to gods, gets the merit of the Agniṣṭoma and Atirātra sacrifices. By taking bath in that forest one gets the merit the gift of a thousand cows.

**VYĀSA VANA**

It is said that the author of the Mahābhārata Veda Vyāsa lived in this Vana. The Vyāsa Vāna is identified with Vyāsasthalī or Bastali which is about 26 Kms. west of Karnal on the present Karnal-Kaithal road.
The Mahābhārata has reference to this Vana like this that one who goes to this forest by keeping fast and takes bath in the Manojava gets the fruit of donation of one thousand cows. Here is a place named Vyāsasthali, where Vyāsa who was in deep sorrow because of the death of his son, had decided to end his life. Here according to Brahma Purāṇa, the Rṣi Vyāsa was visited by the nine sages—Kaśyapa, Jamadagni, Bharadwāja, Gaṅgā, Vaśiṣṭha, Jaśminī, Dharma, Mārkaṇḍeya and Vālmiki. Manojava, Madhuvati, Kiñdatta-Kūpa tīrtha and the confluence of Sarasvatī and Drīḍadvatī are the holy place in this forest.

The Sītā Vana is identified with Seo-Vana or Siwan or Sivana apparently signifying Sītā-Ka-Vana. It is now a village called Siwan situated on the bank of the Sarasvatī river in Guhla Tehsil, 10 Kms. to the north of Kaithal. The area of this Vana was 16.41 sq. miles.

The epic emphasises the sanctity of this forest by saying that one who goes there by keeping fast he may feel that there is no tīrtha important than this lord amongst tīrthas.

This Vana is known as the forest home of Sītā, wife of Rāma. It has a temple made of elaborately ornamented
bricks dedicated to Sītā at a spot where the earth is believed to have swallowed up Sītā in response to her appeal, as proof of her chastity. Besides, there is an ancient tank with wells on its four corners, which is supposed to be as old as the shrine itself.47

A Trivikrama image of Lord Viṣṇu in sculpture, attended by gods and goddesses and having seven ṛṣis as reliefs was recovered here and is now worshipped in the Kāśipurī temple at Kaithal. Another image obviously of Gupta Period, of a three faced Viṣṇu recovered from this place is also worshipped in the same temple.48

DVAITA VANA

Dvaitavana or the Dvaita forest is associated with the name of the great Matsya King, Dhvāsana Dvaitavana who performed here a horse sacrifice. The Dvaita lake is also so called after this King.49 It is identified with Deoband which is about 50 miles to the north of mirat in the Saharanpur district, U.P. and 2½ miles to the west of the eastern Kālindī.50 Bhargava, however, locates this forest in the south of Sarasvatī and east of the Kāmyaka forest51 which appears to be more appropriate.

The Vana Parva presents a graphic view of the Dvaita forest and enumerates every possible detail of the
surroundings there. This mighty forest was covered on the close of summer with Śālas, Pālms, Mangoes, Madhukas, Nipās, Kādambas, Sarjjas, Arjunas and Karnikars, many of them laiden with flowers. And flocks of peacocks and Datyuhas and Chākoras and Varhins and Kokilas, seated on the tops of the tallest trees of that forest were pouring forth their melliflous notes. And one also saw in that forest night herds of gigantic elephants huge as the hills, with temporal juice trickling down in the season of rut, accompanied by herds of she elephants. And approaching the beautiful Bhogavatī i.e. Sarasvatī, one could see many ascetics crowned with success in the habitations in this forest where virtuous men of sanctified souls clad in barks of trees and bearing matted locks on their heads practised austerities.

It was here that the Pāṇḍavas had offered oblations to their ancestors i.e., Yatis, Munis and Principal Brāhmaṇas. The place became prosperous and continued to remain an abode of the sages and the Brāhmaṇas till the stay of the Pāṇḍavas there. The lake within this forest ever resounding with vedic recitations, became sacred like a second region of Brahmā. It was from this forest that the Pāṇḍvas had left for the Kāmyaka forest. There is of course no doubt that the Dvaitavana was very near to the river Sarasvatī.
Vāmana Purāṇa also recognized this fact that Sarasvatī flowed through this forest. King Vena, being cursed by Yama, was born in this Vana which is also known as Saugandhika Vana and here he was humiliated by the dogs and the bitch Sūrma. Then he went to Sthāṇu-Tīrtha and became free from sin by the grace of Śiva. It seems that Sthāṇu tīrtha or Sthānēśvara was not far away from the Dvaita forest and the Kuśa tīrtha was also situated in the Dvaita forest. The Lodhia plate of Mahāśivagupta describes— Dvaita- Vana as having penance groves and the Pañcayajā tapovana was one of them.

MADHU VANA

Mahākavi Kālidāsa describes a story about the origin of the name Madhuvana. A demon named Madhu lived on the bank of the Yamunā and the region was called Madhuvana after him Śatrughna killed here his enemy havana, son of Madhu made this place a city and named it Mathurā of Madhura. But it is difficult to identify the Mathurā with the Madhuvana of Kurukṣetra. According to cunningham, there is a village Mohona which is Madhuvana in later times was 4 miles to the south of Pharal-Madhuvati tīrtha, Budhavala tīrtha, Kauśikī tīrtha and Datpavati tīrtha. Madhuvana is mentioned in the Mahābhārata but no details are found
descriptively. It was guarded by Vālin and afterwards by Sugriva, but was pillaged by Hanumāt, etc. It will thus appear that although the number of the forests of Kurukṣetra is actually given as seven we in reality come across a few more names also. It is quiet possible that the number of seven has been adopted in the texts only as a matter of routine. On account of the usual weakness for an auspicious digit. There is no doubt that some of the ṛṣis who had acquired a reputation for their wisdom were greatly respected by the rulers and occasionally lent their name to the part of the forest occupied by them. The names of Vyāsavana and PhalkIvana are such examples. It is also quiet probable that a particular deity became popular in a certain region which came to be named after it. Aditivana provides an example of this kind. The forest of Dvaitavana was named after the king of Matsyās who bore this name.
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