

## KING HARSHA AND SHABARA FOREST DWELLERS

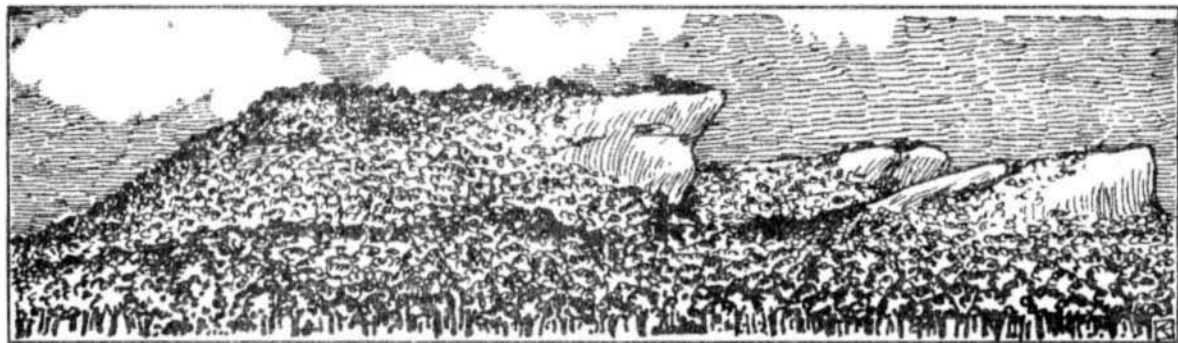


Fig. 1 Vindhyan hills and forests

### Agricultural Villages and Forest Settlements

You have learnt about the villages of north and south India in the last two chapters. Such villages were mostly settled on river plains or on plateaus. Most of the farmers of these villages used bullocks and ploughs for agricultural operations. They also experimented with new ways of irrigation. That is why these villages were well off. The population was very dense here and so houses were built close to each other. These villages also gave substantial revenues to the *bhogapatis* and kings. Brahmins came and settled in them and many big and small temples came up here. Many kinds of artisans and workers also lived in these villages.

However, there were some other villages that were quite different from these. These were settlements in the midst of forests. There was much more forest in those days than now. Many communities used to live in these forests and hills. They were dependent on forest produce for their livelihood.

- What did you learn about the people living on hills and in forests in chapter two?
- Did they grow crops?

### Harshacharita of Banabhatta

We get an account of the Shabara forest dwellers, inhabiting the Vindhyan hills in *Harshacharita*. *Harshacharita* is the biography of king Harshavardhana whom you had read about in chapter 5. A writer called Banabhatta wrote this biography of Harsha.

Banabhatta writes that when Harsha's sister Rajyashree lost her husband in a battle, she was beside herself with grief and fled to the forests. Harsha started looking for her and in this process reached the Vindhyan hills. Yes, the very same hills that fall on our way between Bhopal and Hoshangabad! Harsha wandered in the forests there in search of his sister. We often pass through these forests. But, 1400 years ago, what were these forests like and what did Harsha find here?

### Hunting and Gathering in the Vindhyas

*Harsha saw no road in the forest. There were only footpaths or trails. Even these trails were not very distinct - possibly because not too many people passed through the forests. As he walked along these trails, he saw many things. He found traps laid for tigers. At many places he came across people making charcoal by burning wood.*



Fig. 2 Hunting and trapping

On his way he came across some hunters who were carrying all kinds of traps and nets to catch animals and birds. These were made of animal sinew. He met some bird trappers, too. They were carrying partridges and hawks in cages. He also saw some small children trying to get tiny birds with lassoes made of creepers.

### Off to the Market

Harsha met many forest dwellers carrying bundles of forest produce on their heads. They were going to sell off these things. They were carrying a number of items such as the bark of the sidhu tree, red flowers, fruits, cotton, hemp, honey, peacock feathers, wax, timber from the khadir tree, khas, tree barks, roots, incense, silk cotton, etc.



Fig. 3 Carrying forest produce to the market

- Are any of these things found in the forests around you? Do people still collect these things?

### Cultivation in the Forest

Near the settlements, usually around a banyan tree, there were some enclosures made of dried wood. This was where people kept their cattle. Some fields were also visible but they lay far from one another.

There was not much open space in these forests and so the fields were few and far in between. Some fields had been prepared recently by clearing the land. Stumps of the felled trees could be seen. Fresh new leaves were growing out of these stumps. In some other fields whose fertility had been exhausted there could be seen heaps of leaves and other rubbish.

The people here did not use bullocks and ploughs to till the fields. Here the soil was hard and black as iron. So they dug it with hoes.

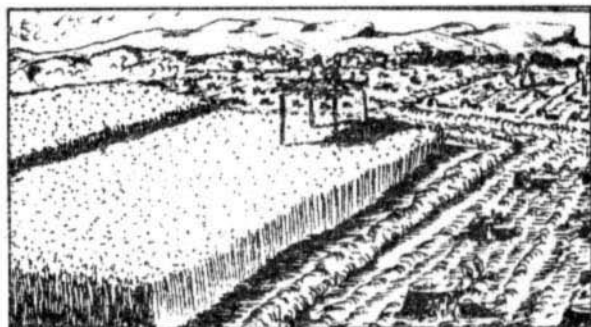


Fig. 4 The fields of the Shabaras

Amidst the fields were visible the high platforms or machans which indicated that the crops were attacked by wild animals.

- Underline five important words about the agricultural practices of the forest dwellers.

### Settlements, Enclosures and Houses

The evening was drawing near as Harsha reached a forest hamlet. He saw that the cottages were made a little far from each other. Every cottage was surrounded by an enclosure of thorny plants and bushes. There were a few bamboo clusters as well. Perhaps this was where they got the bamboo to make their bows.

In the enclosures around these houses, various plants such as castor (for its oilseeds), brinjals, tulsi, sigru (an onion like vegetable), cane, kodo, kutki (coarse grains), gourds, etc. were grown throughout the year. Bottle gourd creepers climbed the poles in the enclosures. Some trees were used for tying up calves. Cocks could also be heard

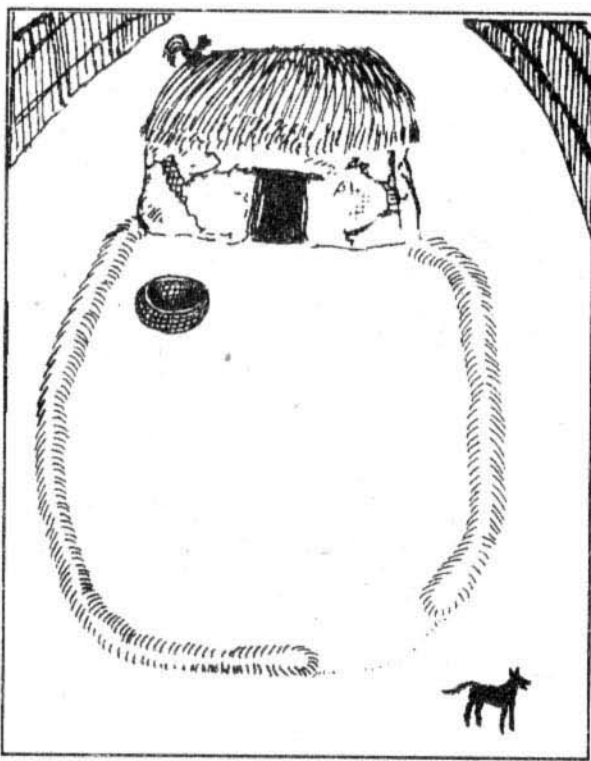


Fig. 5 A house and its enclosure

crowing from the rooftops. Under the trees were spread grain for birds and also water in a basin for them to drink.

Harsha noticed that these forest dwellers made their huts with split bamboo, leaves and reeds. Their huts contained many things lying here and there. Many of these things had been collected by the women folk from the forests. Some of these things he saw in their houses were charcoal, silk cotton, wild paddy, wild chestnut, bamboo mats, medicinal herbs, seeds of khirni, mahua, etc.

- Here is a picture of an empty enclosure of a Shabara house (Fig.5). Draw pictures of the above listed things in it, or at least write their names in it.

### Shabara Youth

That night Harsha stayed near this village. Next morning, he set off again in search of his sister. On his way he met a young man from the Shabara tribe. He was in fact the son of the chief of that tribe. He was dark in complexion. He had a flat nose and thick lips.

He had parrot-feathers stuck behind his ears, which were also bedecked with rings of glass beads. On his wrist, he carried an antidote to snake poison, wrapped up in boar hair. On his hands he wore bejeweled tin armlets. The hilt of his sword was made of animal horn and the sword was kept inside a leather sheath.

The Shabara youth carried his arrows on his back in a quiver made of bear and leopard skin. The arrows he carried in it were tipped with poison. A bow hung from his left shoulder and a partridge and a rabbit were dangling from his bow.

- List all the animals from which had come the many things which the Shabara youth wore on himself.

The Shabara youth bowed to Harsha and gifted him a partridge and rabbit which he had just killed. "Have you seen my sister anywhere in these forests?" Harsha enquired of him. The Shabara youth replied, "Oh king, we know every inch of this forest. But we have not seen your sister. However, there is a river nearby. Some sages live on its banks. Perhaps you may get some information about her in their ashrama."

When Harsha reached the ashrama, the sages welcomed him. They told him. "At a little distance from here a noble lady is preparing to commit herself to fire. Could she be your sister?" Harsha broke into a run and reached that the place where a pyre had been prepared. There he saw that it was indeed his sister Rajyashree who was about to enter the flames. The sages and Harsha together then consoled Rajyashree and persuaded her to give up her decision to die. Rajyashree agreed. After that Harsha returned with his sister to Thaneshwar.

While reading this story in Harshacharita, we get a feel of the life of forest dwellers thirteen to fourteen hundred years from now. Is it not amazing how Banabhatta noticed the minutest details of their lives and described them so carefully in his book?

## THEN AND NOW

Even today if you go to the forests of the Vindhya or Satpura hills you would encounter many of the scenes described above.

*In class 6 you read an account of Pahvadi village. That was a village on the Satpura hills. Did you notice any similarities between today's Pahvadi village and the life of Shabara forest dwellers in the time of Harsha? What were the similarities?*

- 1. In their agriculture*
- 2. In the hamlet and the houses*
- 3. In the enclosures*
- 4. In the forest produce that people collected.*

But now the lives of the forest dwellers have begun to change. Their lives are not the same as they were in the time of king Harsha.

*You probably know the changes that have taken place in their lives. Discuss these in your class with the help of your teacher and then write 6-7 sentences on the changes.*

### EXERCISE

- The table below has two columns. One deals with the forest dwellers and the other is about other agricultural villages. You have to fill the two columns with appropriate items selected from the list given below.

*Hoe cultivation, hilly fields, closely built houses, plough cultivation, dispersed dwellings, water wheel (arghatta), brahmins, hunting for food, temples, collecting and selling forest produce, artisans, paying taxes to the king.*

The forest dwellers	Agricultural villages

- What did the forest dwellers of Harsha's time grow in their fields and around their homes?
  - What did they sell?