

Envisioning a No-Man's Land: Hermitage as a Site of Exemption in Ancient and Early Medieval Indian Literature

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Right from the emergence of sedentary settled society in early Indian history, there has been a perceived dichotomy between settled society (*grāma*) and the forest (*aranya*). Though each operated more or less independently, the state gradually became aware of the forest's resource potential and sought to establish its authority over the forest realm. Forest hermitages, the residences of ascetics who had renounced the organisation of the settled society, occupied a space between these two contrasting worlds. Hermits often acted as the agents of the settled society, a channel through which its hegemonic religious and cultural mores could enter the forest-scape. In return, the hermitages were granted certain exemptions. As ancient Indian literature shows, royal authority ended at the thresholds of the hermitages, where the king had to leave behind his royal symbols and paraphernalia. The Early Medieval period (sixth to thirteenth centuries) saw royal claims over the forest increase in India, especially as the kings started to donate forest land to various religious beneficiaries who were also granted tax exemptions. However, the idea of the hermitage as a ›no man's land‹, exempted not only from tax but from all forms of royal authority, remained present in Early Medieval texts.

Keywords: Hermitage; āśrama; vānaprastha; forest; settled society; exemption

For a long period of time, dynastic political history used to be the chief consideration in ancient Indian historiography. While with the predominance of Marxist historians from the 1960s onwards, social and economic aspects began to receive attention, and socio-cultural processes have been extensively explored, any discussion of political structures has necessarily revolved around the figure of the king. No doubt, kingship was the most important political institution in early India, and political power was often understood in relation to the king. But, were there any zones exempted from royal authority? What were the dynamics involved in such exemptions? This article tries to engage with such questions by studying a particular case, that of the forest hermitage or *āśrama*. I shall focus on the changing representation of the hermitage over time in literary sources – including both normative and creative literature – to understand the early Indian perception of the *āśrama* as an exempted zone, initially in reality, and later in fantasy. I shall also investigate the factors leading to the changes we can trace over time, by looking at texts composed in different periods and different socio-cultural milieux.

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The āśrama in the Brahmanical tradition

The word *āśrama* has a double connotation in the vocabulary of classical Brahmanism. On one hand, it stands for the hermitage – a place away from settlements, usually in a forest clearing, where the hermit lives with or without his family and students, mainly for the purpose of performing different rites and austerities. On the other hand, it signifies a system of four alternative/successive modes of life, namely: the *brahmacārin* (celibate student), *gṛhastha* (householder), *vānaprastha* (hermit) and *saṃnyāsīn* (renouncer). As Patrick Olivelle has shown, these four were probably initially devised as choices that a *dvija* (twice-born; or those born in the three upper *varṇas* of the Brahmanical caste-hierarchy) could legitimately adopt as his way of performing *dharma* (religio-social obligations), once his initial education was over. Later, this system was revised into a form in which the four modes were suggested as the successive stages in a twice-born man's life (or, alternatively, in the life of a *brāhmaṇa* male, belonging to the highest *varṇa*).¹ The system became so integral to the formulation of classical Brahmanism, alongside the *varṇa*-based caste hierarchy, that *varṇāśrama* soon became a term standing for the totality of *dharma*.

The two meanings of the term *āśrama* were therefore not entirely divorced from each other, though the homonymy between them could be a mere coincidence. After all, in the organisation of the *āśrama* system, the third stage was located in the hermitage. However, in the usual conceptualisation of the system, the *vānaprastha* seems to be the least important of the four stages. The *āśrama* system was perhaps devised to reconcile two different and opposing modes of a pious lifestyle – that of the householder and that of the renouncer – after the traditional ideal of Brahmanical *dharma*, centred round the householder, received a stiff challenge from religions such as Buddhism and Jainism, both of which championed ascetic renunciation. As Romila Thapar has shown, renunciation almost became a kind of ›counter-culture‹ to the orthodox culture of the Brahmanical householder.² While student-ship was a necessary precondition for both of the two dominant modes, the necessity of the hermit's life was unclear. As a result, the third stage was becoming obsolete in the scheme of the *āśrama* system in its classical form, after the early centuries of the Common Era, its memory preserved only in fantastic descriptions in legends, poetry and drama.³ Therefore, Thapar thinks that *vānaprastha* was just a preparation for *saṃnyāsa*.⁴ Charles Malamoud has argued that *vānaprastha* was utopian. It was unrealistic and hence deemed unfit for the ›age of iron‹. It was located in the distant past of the Vedic *ṛṣis* who had received the fountainhead of all knowledge, the Vedic revelation.⁵

Indeed, many depictions of the hermitage in early Indian literature are utopian, associated with the hoary antiquity of the Vedic seers. Yet there is evidence to suggest that the hermitage was not just a figment of classical poets' imaginations. The *assama/āśrama* was known in texts of the early Buddhist canon, much of which had taken shape in the mid-first millennium BCE.⁶ The Buddhists, possibly the biggest challengers to the Brahmanical

1 Olivelle, *Āśrama System*.

2 Thapar, *Renunciation*.

3 Olivelle, *Āśrama System*, 143, 174.

4 Thapar, *Householder and Renouncer*, 916.

5 Malamoud, *Cooking the World*, 86.

6 The dates of the Buddhist canonical texts are contested. However, at least parts of the early Buddhist *canons* – especially the *Nikāyas* and the *Vinaya Piṭaka* – were well-known by the early third century BCE when Aśoka prescribed their reading in an inscription.

religion, knew of the *jaṭila brāhmaṇas* (*brāhmaṇas* with matted hair) living in uninhabited wildernesses outside villages or towns.⁷ The early Buddhist text *Majjhima Nikāya* reports of the *assama* of a certain Rammaka, not very far from the town of Sāvasthi (Śrāvastī), in the Buddha's time (sixth/fifth century BCE).⁸ In fact, these *brāhmaṇas* were given a place of greater reverence by their opponents, compared to their village-dwelling counterparts.⁹ If they wanted to enter the Buddhist order, they were exempted from the probationary period of four months.¹⁰ Such conversions, for example the Buddha's conversion of a hermit named Kassapa who deserted the ›fire‹ (symbol of Brahmanical sacrifices), was a matter of pride to the Buddhists.¹¹ In other words, when early Buddhism was competing with Brahmanism in the mid-first millennium BCE, the hermitages were a known reality. In the fourth century BCE, the Greeks visiting India in the entourage of Alexander also encountered such hermits. Megasthenes, a Seleucid envoy to the Maurya court at the very end of the fourth century BCE, possibly referred to this group as *hylobioi*.¹²

So the hermitage was not a mere utopia, at least not before the Common Era; but it did have a certain significance which contributed to its association with the Vedic seers, the growth of utopian fantasies around it, and its inclusion in the scheme of the *āśrama* system. This article investigates these aspects, and also points out why the special status of the hermitage also ensured that it was an exempted space, contributing a great deal to its utopian depiction in literature. However, to understand the context of the hermitage's location in the *āśrama* system, it is necessary first to understand the duality of the householder and the renouncer in Brahmanical tradition, which was enclosed within the duality of the settled society and the forest.

The grāma and the aranya

»Goddess of wild and forest who seemest to vanish from the sight.
How is it that thou seekest not the village? Art thou not afraid?
What time the grasshopper replies and swells the shrill cicada's voice,
Seeming to sound with tinkling bells, the Lady of the Wood exults.
And, yonder, cattle seem to graze, what seems a dwelling-place appears:
Or else at the eve the Lady of the Forest seems to free the wains.
Here one is calling to his cow, another there hath felled a tree:
At the eve the dweller in the wood fancies that somebody hath screamed.
The Goddess never slays, unless some murderous enemy approach.
Man eats of savoury fruit and then takes, even as he wills, his rest.
Now have I praised the Forest Queen, sweet-scented, redolent of balm,
The Mother of all sylvan things, who tills not but hath stores of food.«¹³
– Hymn to the Forest, *Rg Veda*

7 *Dialogues of the Buddha*, trans. Rhys Davids, II.339.

8 *Majjhima Nikāya*, trans. Chalmers, I.160.

9 *Dialogues of the Buddha*, trans. Rhys Davids, I.104, III.94.

10 *Vinaya Piṭaka*, trans. Rhys Davids, I.71.

11 *Vinaya Piṭaka*, trans. Rhys Davids, I.36.

12 McCrindle, *Ancient India*, 98-105.

13 *Hymns of the Rg Veda*, trans. Griffith, X.146.

The primary concern of early Indian literature rests in the settled society (*grāma/kṣetra*). Still, the forest (*vana/araṇya*) has occupied a pivotal place in its domain. It featured as early as in the Ṛgvedic hymn to the *araṇyānī*, quoted above.¹⁴ Like the ›wine-dark sea‹ in Homer's *Odyssey*, it often constitutes the ›unknown other‹ in the imagination of poets. However, it would be wrong to assume that there is no realistic portraiture of actual life in the forest or its relationship with the settled society. In fact, this relationship is often expressed through a language of massive violence.

Thapar's key essay ›Perceiving the Forest: Early India‹, discussed the oppositional as well as the complementary relationships between the forest and the settled society, and the three-fold role of the forest as the site of hunting, hermitage and exile in Indian literature, especially in the early epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, both of which evolved over several centuries.¹⁵ In these texts, hunting, with almost the entire army in action, often took the form of a ›surrogate raid on nature‹. The violent and massive hunting of Duṣṭanta or the great carnage involved in the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest, both presented in the *Mahābhārata*, seem to be more the necessary precondition for power than simply a symbolic performance. The burning of the Khāṇḍava forest in the text, causing great slaughter and leading to the establishment of the city of Indraprastha, appears to establish a claim on the land as territory. The hunt could also be a mechanism of asserting control over grazing grounds. Thus, the Kuru kings of the *Mahābhārata* seem to have extended their control over the Dvaita Forest where they established a pastoral settlement. Their inspection of cattle became an excuse for hunting and the display of power. However, the resistance of the forest-dwellers to this infringement of the forest came in the form of the Gandharvas of Dvaita Forest who attacked the Kuru entourage. The Gandharvas are mentioned as one of the groups resisting the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest as well. The most frequent image of the forest people, in the epics, however, is of the Rākṣasas. They appear as unfamiliar forest-dwellers who obstruct hunting expeditions and harass those establishing settlements in the forest – including the hermits establishing their *āśramas* – in order to resist infringements of the forest space.

The antagonistic relationship between the forest-dwelling Rākṣasas and the settled society is reflected in the two exiles of the Pāṇḍavas, the chief protagonists of the *Mahābhārata*. Whenever the Pāṇḍavas enter the forest as exiles, this infringement is resisted by Rākṣasa chiefs like Hiḍimba and Kirmīra.¹⁶ On the other hand, when the Rākṣasa chief Baka tries to impose his authority on the settled society of Ekacakrā, by demanding the sacrifice of one human from one family of the village every day, he is slain by Bhīma, and his body becomes a public spectacle.¹⁷

14 The *Ṛg Veda* was composed in the second half of the second millennium BCE. However, the hymn quoted above comes from the Tenth Book of the *Ṛg Veda*, usually considered the latest book of the text, which can be dated to c. 1000 BCE.

15 The *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* are both popularly categorised as epics, and I am calling them ›epics‹ for the sake of convenience. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is traditionally known as *kāvya*, or creative literature; it grew over a long period of time, possibly originating in the seventh century BCE and going through major changes – including the addition of its last book and parts of the first book – till the fourth century CE. The *Mahābhārata* is usually categorised as an *itihāsa*, a major form of early Indian historical tradition. It possibly originated in a bardic tradition around the Later Vedic Kuru kingdom, originating around the ninth century BCE. It underwent several revisions, additions, alterations and interpolations to reach its present encyclopedic form by the fifth century CE. For a detailed discussion of the location of the forest in the *Mahābhārata*, especially the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest, see Sinha, *Mahabharata's Spatial Politics*.

16 Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, trans. van Buitenen, vol. 1, I.139-143; vol. 2, III.12.

17 Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, trans. van Buitenen, vol.1, I.145-152.

The equation changed a little with the appearance of an organised state apparatus. In the Mauryan period (fourth-second centuries BCE) or immediately after it,¹⁸ the political theorist Kauṭilya viewed the forest as a source of resources and also discussed the diplomatic possibilities of alliances with the forest people. That the forest-dwellers still had a confrontational relationship with the state is indicated in the warning in Aśoka's (BCE 273-232) Rock Edict XIII, where the otherwise pacifist emperor cautioned the forest-dwellers that his tolerance had its limits. In the Gupta period, the enthusiastic conqueror Samudra Gupta (mid-fourth century CE) is known to have brought the *āṭavika* (forest) chiefs into servitude. Closer contacts between the two worlds were however facilitated by the grant of *agrahāra* lands in the forested regions in subsequent periods.¹⁹ As a consequence, the distinction between settled land and forest remained, but the antagonism became less marked. In Kālidāsa's *Abhijnānaśākuntala* (c. fourth-fifth century CE), Duṣṣanta's hunt loses its *Mahābhārata* ferocity. In Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita*, written in the seventh century CE, the picture of the forest is quite close to that of a village. The description of the nephew of the Śabara chief matches the stereotypes of the Rākṣasa, but he is no longer feared or exoticised. Rather, Bāṇa acknowledges him as someone who knows every leaf of the forest.²⁰

From the state's perspective, it was not however enough to acknowledge the forest as a place of both antagonism and complement to a complex society. Though the forest space was othered, it also had to be subordinated to the complex society over which the king ruled. B.D. Chattopadhyaya notes that the mystique of the forest, possessing mystical as well as evil characteristics, can be traced as early as the Ṛgvedic hymn to the *araṇyāni* and the *Āraṇyaka* texts. Society could nevertheless not treat the forest as completely separate, since the forest was an important source of resources and often pivotal to security strategies. It therefore had to be brought within society's moral and cultural authority, though as a marginal area. Forest dwellers were to provide services to society, but as marginal untouchables or outcasts. The attempt to culturally hegemonise the forest space, and the resistance of the forest dwellers, created a certain tension between the two. This led to the repeated references to the forest-dwelling Rākṣasas spoiling sacrifices. We have already seen that even emperor Aśoka, who had adopted an otherwise lenient and non-violent policy after his only military campaign at Kalinga, spoke apprehensively of the forest-dwellers, and issued veiled threats to make them adhere to the moral order.

18 Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* had initially been unanimously dated to the Mauryan period by early colonial and Nationalist historians, on the basis of a supposed identification between Kauṭilya and Cāṇakya, Candragupta Maurya's mentor and prime minister in legends. The identification, mostly based on the later play *Mudrārākṣasa*, which was not composed before fifth century CE, has been rightly challenged. Therefore, the date of the *Arthaśāstra* is a contentious issue. Some of the prescriptions in the text curiously match the account of Megasthenes, the Hellenistic envoy to the court of Candragupta Maurya, strengthening the claim of the text as a Maurya document. However, some references, such as those to Chinese silk, definitely point towards a post-Maurya date. Therefore, many scholars, such as Thomas R. Trautmann, assume that the text contains more than one layer of authorship. This idea has been challenged by others, such as Surendra Nath Mital. In his recent translation of the *Arthaśāstra*, Patrick Olivelle has dated the entire text to the post-Mauryan period. Leading historians of early India – including Romila Thapar and Upinder Singh – tend to assume that some parts of the text were composed in the Maurya period, allowing for later interpolations or a later revision in the early centuries CE. See Trautmann, *Kauṭilya and the Arthaśāstra*; Mital, *Kauṭilya Arthaśāstra Revisited*; Olivelle, *King, Governance and Law*; Thapar, *Aśoka*; Singh, *History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*, 322-324.

19 *Agrahāra* meant tax-exempted plots of land granted usually to religious functionaries (such as the *brāhmaṇas*) or institutions (such as monasteries and temples).

20 Thapar, *Perceiving the Forest*, 173-191.

These attempts to impose hegemony became widespread from the Gupta Age period onwards. Samudra Gupta vanquished many forest-chiefs, and the practice of granting lands in forest areas gradually led to the transformation of many forest areas into settled villages or towns. The forest chiefs, through this incorporation, often also acquired both symbols and substance of political authority in the contemporary complex society. Sanskritisation became a major tool for that, as Chattopadhyaya shows from the Sanskrit inscriptions of Samkṣobha, a *parivrājaka mahārāja* subordinate to the Gupta kings, and of the Hoysalas. He also notes elements of Sanskritisation on the forest hunter Kālaketu of the *Caṇḍīmaṅgala*, a sixteenth-century Bengali text by Mukundarāma Cakravartī. Conversely, those chiefs who did not take part in the transformation remained forest chiefs, instead of becoming rulers matching the requirements of a complex state society, even up to the twentieth century, as Chattopadhyaya shows from the example of the forest *rājā* in the *Āraṇyaka*, a Bengali novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyaya.²¹

With this background in mind, Malamoud shows how *araṇya* constituted the ›other‹ to the ›self‹ of the settled village, and could include all kinds of landscapes other than the cultivated village, ranging from forest to desert. The village was the settled society governed by social norms (*dharma*) observed by the householder (*grhastha*), while the forest was the ›other‹ world of wilderness. As a consequence, forest animals were not to be used for sacrifice, to prevent the householder from becoming a part of the other landscape. Yet, as the sacrifice implied human authority over both realms, the forest had nevertheless to be absorbed into the village. In the horse sacrifice, forest animals were tied to the posts where village animals were tied. But they were then set free, while the latter were sacrificed.

In early Indian society, the forest was therefore both within and outside the village: within, as the realm inferior to that ruled by *dharma* and subject to those worshipping Agni, the god of the sacrificial fire; outside, as the realm of unknown wilderness that might account for the Absolute Reality. It was the forest where, in contrast to the *grhastha*, the renouncer (*saṁnyāsin*) sought the Absolute, transcending the normative reach of *dharma*. Ascetics would sometimes use only the hollow of their hand as a dish for eating, while some others would directly eat with their mouths, like animals. Man could be a part of both worlds. He was the village animal *par excellence*, the ideal object of sacrifice, and the only animal who could also be a sacrificer. But in many cases he was also considered among the forest animals, including the list of sacrifices in the horse-sacrifice. The secret lay in the contrast of the *grhastha* and the *saṁnyāsin*, though each could be a stage in the same man's life.²²

From the Vedic period onwards, the Brahmanical religion was centred around the householder residing in the settled society. Sacrificial rites were the most important aspect of Vedic religion. It was a *grhastha*, a householder, who established a sacrificial fire. Thus, the householder was the pivot of *dharma*. In fact, the sacred fire's association with the village household was so enshrined in Brahmanical thought that a sick man was advised to pretend to leave the village, carrying his fire, presuming that the fire would cure the man in fear of being away from the village.²³ Therefore, continuation of the householder's life was the

21 Chattopadhyaya, State's Perception of the Forest, 23-37.

22 Malamoud, *Cooking the World*, 91-94.

23 Thapar, Householder and Renouncer, 923.

biggest concern of the normative Brahmanical treatises, which emphasised certain duties described as payment of debts and performance of sacrifices, including marriage and the begetting of offspring, Vedic study and the performance of rites, as well as the entertainment of guests.

To all of this, the *samnyāsin* represented a complete antithesis. Not only did he leave the village for the forest, he also ceased performing all the rites, including the fire sacrifices. Renunciation, extremely popular among the heterodox sects, was such a great threat to the Brahmanical concept of *dharma* that the *Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra*, perhaps composed in the middle of the first millennium BCE and therefore one of the earliest treatises on *dharma*, described renunciation as the creation of a demon who wished to deprive the deities of the sustenance they received from sacrificial offerings.²⁴ The *samnyāsin* was legally and socially considered to be dead. The *Arthaśāstra* even excludes him from all legal transactions.²⁵ However, the appeal of renunciation, with its promise of spiritual liberation from the repeated cycle of birth and death, not only popularised the heterodox religions but also appealed to many adherents of the Brahmanical religion. The *Upaniṣads* (philosophical texts within the Vedic corpus, the earliest of which can be dated to c. 800-600 BCE), arising out of the same intellectual milieu that gave rise to the heterodox religions, championed renunciation. Olivelle has suggested that renunciation, both Brahmanical and heterodox, was the product of an urban culture patronised by kings, quite different from the rural *brāhmaṇa*-dominated belief system.²⁶ This counter-culture advocated the transcendence of rites, arguing that performance of rites – even if it could deliver its promise of heaven – brought only a temporary reward, while renunciation could indeed lead to spiritual liberation. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, one of the earliest *Upaniṣads*, says that those who live in the wilderness do not return, while those who win worlds by sacrifices return.²⁷ The same theme is elaborated by the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* which states that those in the wilderness know and worship with the thought 'faith in our austerity', and so they reach Brahman (the Supreme Being); while those who live in villages and sacrifice return to the world when their merits are exhausted.²⁸ The idea became entrenched in the subsequent *Upaniṣads*, too. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, possibly composed in the middle or the latter half of the first millennium BCE, says:

Deeming sacrifices and gifts as the best,
the imbeciles know nothing better.
When they have enjoyed their good work,
Atop the firmament,
They return again to this abject world.

But those in the wilderness, calm and wise,
who live a life of penance and faith,
as they beg their food;
Through the sun's door they go, spotless,
to where the Immortal Person is,
that immutable self.²⁹

24 *Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra*, trans. Bühler, II.6.11.28.

25 Kautilya, *Arthaśāstra*, ed./trans. Kangle, III.1.12.

26 Olivelle, *Āśrama System*, 60-67.

27 *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, trans. Olivelle, 6.2.15-16.

28 *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, trans. Olivelle, 5.10.1-2.

29 *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, trans. Olivelle, I.2.10-11.

As Olivelle has noted, renunciation as a culture therefore advocated a mode of life completely the opposite of the householder's *dharma*. It prescribed »wilderness over village, celibacy over marriage, economic inactivity over economic productivity, ritual inactivity over ritual performance, instability over stable residence, inner virtue and experience over outward observance.«³⁰ Since the Brahmanical religion could not altogether ignore or dismiss the popular and powerful counter-culture of renunciation, it had to create a space for it. The *āśrama* system thus provided a model where both the householder's life and renunciation were presented as two of the four possible modes of performing *dharma*, though the desirability of the former was highlighted in all major treatises. The later reorganisation of the system, where the four modes were presented as successive rather than alternative stages, further secured the orthodox position by advocating renunciation only after one has performed the duties of a householder, particularly begetting male offspring who would continue the performance of sacred rites.

Of course, in that scenario, *vānaprastha* became a redundant stage. One could perform all of the necessary obligations as a householder and then – if one wished for liberation – become a renouncer. The hermit's life did not promise anything as special as renunciation did. What, then, was the significance of this intermediate *āśrama*? Why did poetic fancy associate such a redundant stage with the holiest of people, the Vedic seers? To answer these questions, we must first examine the kind of lifestyle prescribed for a hermit.

Life in a hermitage

The lifestyle of a hermit, as described in the oldest available Indian sources, was not much different from a Brahmanical householder, except that the hermit lived in the forest. The early Buddhist canon recorded these *brāhmaṇas* with matted hair as fire-sacrificers.³¹ The description of a marriage feast indicates that celibacy was not a necessary component of a hermitage.³² Similar ideas can be gleaned from the Brahmanical sources of the mid-first millennium BCE. For instance, the *Bṛhaddevatā* (c. 500 BCE) speaks of three generations of hermits: Atri, his son Arcanānas, and his grandson Śyāvāśva, indicating the belief that these Vedic seers were born and brought up in the hermitage and spent their entire lives – which included marriage and childbirth – there. They also had contacts with the settled society, which might amount to matrimonial relationships. Thus, Śyāvāśva married the daughter of the king Rāthavīti Dārbhya for whom he performed a sacrifice.³³ The same text describes how Atri's daughter, Apālā, was married.³⁴

Therefore, when the *āśrama* system was being conceived as a mechanism of four alternative lifestyles, the hermit's life was represented as one way of spending a man's entire adult life. *Āpastamba Dharma Sūtra*, composed in the latter half of the first millennium BCE, accordingly suggests that one could become a hermit either as a family man (who would bring his wife, children and fires to the forest) or as a celibate. While the married hermit would

30 Olivelle, *Āśrama System*, 67.

31 *Vinaya Piṭaka*, trans. Rhys Davids, I.71.

32 *Majjhima Nikāya*, trans. Chalmers, II.146.

33 Śaunaka, *Bṛhaddevatā*, trans. MacDonnell, V.50-81.

34 Śaunaka, *Bṛhaddevatā*, trans. Macdonnell, VI.99.

build a house, the celibate hermit was advised to wander about, subsisting initially on fruits and leaves, then on whatever would fall down from the trees, and finally on water, air and ether.³⁵

However, when the classical idea of the *āśrama* system was conceived, the life of a hermit became closely associated with old age. The earliest of the normative treatises or *Dharmaśāstras*, the *Manu Smṛti*, possibly composed in the early centuries of the Common Era, advised becoming a hermit after a man's skin had become wrinkled, his hair had turned grey, and he had become a grandfather.³⁶ Yet since that would mean that the man had already finished his obligations of studying the Vedas, fathering sons and offering sacrifices, the preconditions of renunciation according to the same text,³⁷ the necessity of the third *āśrama* became questionable. Indeed, life in a hermitage as a mere stage in a fourfold life-cycle was redundant. Manu had retained the option of remaining a hermit till the end of one's life, and dropping dead while walking and being without food at the end.³⁸ But, since in this new formulation, one would become a hermit or a renouncer only after performing a householder's duties, which was given maximum importance, the hermit's life started to become difficult to justify. If one looks at the epics, the only justification of this life stage was in relation to the king who could abdicate at a certain age while also nominating his successor, therefore nullifying any confusion over succession.³⁹ This custom of royal abdication was appreciated in early Buddhist literature as well.⁴⁰ Whether any king would have abdicated his throne while in his prime to become a hermit is a different question. But the ideal was there, and that it was not completely unheard of till at least the Gupta period (c. fourth-fifth centuries CE) is indicated by the Mehrauli Iron Pillar Inscription which shows that at least one Gupta Emperor retired after the end of a successful career.⁴¹

Nevertheless, texts from the Gupta period onwards show the gradual disappearance of the hermitage. The *Yājñavalkya Smṛti*, composed at least a century after the *Manu Smṛti*, kept the provision for becoming a forest hermit either with one's wife or after entrusting her to one's son. But, its declaration that after fulfilling the householder's obligations, one could renounce either as a hermit or directly as a householder, indicates that the hermit's life was no longer considered strictly necessary.⁴² The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, composed between the seventh and the ninth centuries CE, made the third stage completely optional.⁴³ Since the Early Medieval Period – between the sixth and thirteenth centuries CE – saw the establishment of several monastic sects within the Brahmanical religion, which valorised renunciation further, the appeal of renouncing at the earliest opportunity increased. These monasteries or *maṭhas* were also called *āśramas* at times. However, they were completely different from the forest hermitages in terms of location, organisation and ethos. In fact, rather than being separated from the settled agrarian society, these monasteries were often the bene-

35 *Āpastamba Dharma Sūtra*, ec. Garbe, II.21-23.

36 Manu, *Ordinances of Manu*, trans. Burnell and Hopkins, VI.2.

37 Manu, *Ordinances of Manu*, trans. Burnell and Hopkins, VI.35-37.

38 Manu, *Ordinances of Manu*, trans. Burnell and Hopkins, VI.31-32.

39 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Pollock, II.20.21; Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, vol. 2, trans. van Buitenen, III.186.2-3.

40 *Dialogues of the Buddha*, trans. Rhys Davids, III.60-64.; *Majjhima Nikāya*, II.75-82.

41 *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, ed. Fleet, vol. III, 257-259.

42 Yājñavalkya, *Yājñavalkya Dharmaśāstra*, ed. Ganapati Sastri, III.45, 56-57.

43 *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, ec. Acharya, XI.17.55.

ficiaries of lavish land grants and owners of large amounts of property. More importantly, by enhancing the prestige of the institution of direct renunciation, they contributed to the growing unpopularity of the hermit's *āśrama*. By the twelfth century, texts like Śrīdhara's *Smṛtirahasya* and the *Mahānirvāṇatantra* rendered the hermit's *āśrama* forbidden in the Kali Age (the present era according to the Purāṇic concept of cyclic time).⁴⁴

In sum, the hermitage was a reality in early times, but its relevance was as a different lifestyle for an entire lifetime, not as a stage in a four-part life-cycle. Moreover, its appeal was becoming reduced – in either form – from the Gupta period onwards, and had become completely obsolete at some point in the Early Medieval Period. We shall come back to what necessity it might have fulfilled in those earlier times, and why it became irrelevant in the post-Gupta period. Before that, let us see what kind of lifestyle was prescribed for and associated with the hermitage.

Most normative texts classify the hermits into two broad categories: those who took their wives along with them, and those who became celibate hermits by leaving their wives with their sons. Both, but especially the latter, were expected to perform a variety of austerities. The *Vaikhānasa Dharma Sūtra*, a normative text possibly composed in the Gupta period, speaks of many such practices, including eating at specific times, going about with upraised staffs, using stones or arrow-heads for grinding food, using only the teeth as mortar, living by gleanings, living on what one happens to see, living like pigeons or like deer, eating food from one's hands, living on stony fruits, living on sun-dried fruits, living on wood-apples, living on flowers, living on pale leaves, skipping meal times (eating once a day or every other day), lying on thorns, sitting in the *vīra* posture, lying between five fires, lying on stone, inhaling smoke, plunging into water, living in jars filled with water, remaining silent, hanging with their heads down, gazing at the sun, keeping their hands raised, and standing on one foot.⁴⁵ Similar descriptions are found in the *Rāmāyaṇa* about the different groups of hermits assembled in the hermitage of Śarabhaṅga:

»There were *vaikhānasas* and *vālakhilyas*, *samprakṣālas* and *marīcipas*. There were many ascetics of the sort that pound their food with stone or subsist on leaves. Some were sages who use their teeth as mortars, or keep themselves submerged; who subsist on water, or eat nothing but air. There were those who make their abode in the open, who always sleep upon the ground, or dwell only in the heights. There were self-mastering men who clothe themselves in wet garments or ceaselessly intone their prayers; who are ever engaged in ascetic practices or subject themselves to the five ascetic fires. All of them were possessed of brahmanical majesty and intensely concentrated in yoga, all the ascetics who came to visit Rāma in the ashram of Śarabhaṅga.«⁴⁶

In Kālidāsa's long poem *Kumārasambhava*, one of the finest pieces of Gupta-period court poetry, the divine protagonist Pārvatī became a hermit to perform austerities to please Śiva, the great god whom she wanted to marry. Dressed in bark clothes and matted hair, she slept on the bare ground and performed various austerities, including sitting in the middle of a

44 Olivelle, *Āśrama System*, 236-237.

45 *Vaikhānasa Dharmasūtra*, ed./trans. Caland, I.8.

46 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Pollock, III.5.2-5.

ring of blazing fire in the summer and looking straight at the sun, drinking only the rain-water dripping down her body on its own, standing in water in winter, living only on the leaves that had fallen on their own, and then spurning even those.⁴⁷

From the earliest times, much of the classification of the hermits was on the basis of their observances, particularly in relation to food. The *Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra* speaks of two kinds of hermits: *pacamānaka* (those who cook their food) and *apacamānaka* (those who don't cook their food). The first group includes the *sarvāraṇyaka* (those who eat all kinds of wild produce, further subdivided into vegetarians and non-vegetarians), *vaituṣika* (those who eat husked grains), *kandamūlabhakṣa* (those who eat bulbs and roots), *phalabhakṣa* (those who eat fruits), and *śākabhakṣa* (those who eat potherbs). The latter group includes the *unmajjaka* (those who do not use iron or stone implements), *pravṛttāśin* (those who eat only with their hands), *mukhenādāyin* (those who eat only with their mouths), *toyāhāra* (those who subsist on water only), *vāyubhakṣa* (those who subsist on air).⁴⁸ Similarly, Manu speaks of the hermits who eat cooked food, those who eat ripe fruits, those who use a stone for grinding, those who use their teeth only, those who live from day to day, those who store food for a month, those who store food for six months, and those who store food for a year.⁴⁹ The *Mahābhārata* follows a similar classification based on the storage of food for a month, for a year, for 12 years or living from day to day.⁵⁰

However, if these austerities brought the hermit curiously close to the renouncer, the most necessary obligation of a hermit remained the same as that of the householder: the performance of the fire sacrifices. Like a householder, and unlike the renouncer, the hermit had to sacrifice (although with wild grains) and entertain his guests (although with fruit and roots). In fact, one way of classifying hermits was on the basis of what they offered to the fire, such as *vaikhānasa* (those who tended the sacred fire with plants and trees grown on uncultivated land outside the village), *auḍumbara* (those who tended the sacred fire with figs, jujubes, wild rice and millet, fetched from the direction faced in the morning), *vālakhilya* (those who followed a regular livelihood for eight months, and offered flowers and fruits during the remaining four), and *phenapa* (those who feigned insanity, wandered about, ate withered leaves and rotten fruits, but tended the sacred fire).⁵¹ When Rāma, the protagonist of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, was exiled to the forest, every hermitage visited by him had marks of fire sacrifices, and everywhere he received hospitality of fruit and roots.⁵² The following is the typical depiction of a hermitage in the *Rāmāyaṇa*:

47 Kālidāsa, *Kumārasambhava*, trans. Rajan, V.8-28.

48 *Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra*, trans. Bühler, III.3.1-15.

49 Manu, *Ordinances of Manu*, trans. Burnell and Hopkins, VI.17-18.

50 Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, vol. 15, ed. Belvalkar, XII.236.8-9.

51 *Vaikhānasa Dharmasūtra*, ed./trans. Caland, I.3.9.

52 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Pollock, III.1.14-21; III.10.49; III.10.68; III.11.5; III.10.78.

»Spurious fire-sanctuaries made it beautiful, so too the sacrificial implements, the ladles and all, hide garments and *kuśa* grass, bundles of kindling, pitchers of water, roots and fruit.

Tall forest trees encircled it, holy trees that bore sweet fruit. It was a place of worship of offerings and oblations; a holy place echoing with the sounds of *brahma*, the sacred *vedas*.

Wild flowers carpeted it, and there was a lotus pond filled with lotuses. Ancient sages were present there, temperate men who ate only roots and fruit, wore bark garments and black hides, and shone like fire or the sun.«⁵³

Pārvatī, in the *Kumārasambhava*, despite performing austerities, also offers oblations to the Holy Fire, reciting chants.⁵⁴ A large section of Kālidāsa's play *Abhijñānaśākuntala* is located in the hermitage of Kaṇva. It depicts the life in the hermit household – with the hermit, his students, his foster daughter, and the women of the hermitage – in vivid detail. There also, the sacrificial fire receives much attention, and the inmates are careful about entertaining guests with fruit and other offerings.⁵⁵ The households included not only the inmates, but animals and plants. Vasiṣṭha's hermitage, in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, has numerous deer and birds.⁵⁶ Pārvatī, in the *Kumārasambhava*, nurtures saplings and feeds wild grains to gazelles.⁵⁷ Inmates of Kaṇva's hermitage in the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* protect their deer, while the hermit's foster daughter – Śakuntalā – has an intimate relationship with the trees, creepers, deer, fawns and peacocks in the hermitage.⁵⁸

A hermitage was also a centre of learning. Most depictions of hermitages also speak of the students of the hermits. Thus, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are received by Agastya's student, while Bharadvāja sends his students to provide welcome offerings to Vasiṣṭha in the *Rāmāyaṇa*.⁵⁹ Vasiṣṭha's students study the Vedas in his hermitage, in Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*.⁶⁰ Such depictions continue even in later texts. In Bhavabhūti's seventh-century play *Uttararāmacarita*, Vālmiki's hermitage is full of students, including women. Even the hermitage of the Buddhist hermit Divākaramitra in the *Harṣacarita*, the biography of the seventh-century king Harṣa, composed by his court poet Bāṇa, shows students of different affiliations and sects – Buddhists, Jains, Bhāgavatas, Sāṅkhyas, Lokāyatas, Vaiśeṣikas, followers of Vedānta and Nyāya, students of the normative treatises and Purāṇas, Pañcarātras, etc. – following their own tenets, pondering, urging objections, raising doubts, resolving them, giving etymologies, disputing, studying and explaining.⁶¹

Bāṇa's other work, the novel *Kādambarī*, gives a picturesque description of a hermitage as imagined in the seventh century. In the hermitage of Jābālī, three sacrificial fires are maintained, and the hermits live in huts. *Śyāmaka* grains are spread out to dry in the sun. There are piles of gooseberries, cloves, *karkandu*, plantain, breadfruit, mango, jackfruit and palm.

53 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Pollock, III.1.4-6.

54 Kālidāsa, *Kumārasambhava*, trans. Rajan, V.16.

55 Kālidāsa, *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, trans. Rajan, 246-7, 252.

56 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Goldman, I.50.22-27.

57 Kālidāsa, *Kumārasambhava*, trans. Rajan, V.14-15.

58 Kālidāsa, *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, trans. Rajan, 246, 291-292.

59 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Pollock, II.84.4; III.11.1.

60 Kālidāsa, *Raghuvamśa*, ed./trans. Devadhar, I.95.

61 Bāṇa, *Harṣacarita*, ed. Kane, 235-237.

Students loudly recite their lessons. Forest cranes peck at the offerings while cygnets eat the wild grain offerings. Myna birds are trained to chant the Vedas. Deer lick the children of the sages. Sages are absorbed in reading, deep philosophical discussion and yogic meditation. Guests are looked after, and rice is cooked with ghee. Some inmates put up thatched huts, others cement the courtyard with cow-dung or sweep the insides of the cottages; some clean the skin of the black buck and wash their bark garments, while yet others collect firewood, dry lotus seeds and string the rosary. Hermits' daughters leave palm-prints of yellow scented powder. Deer drink from the moat-like basin around a tree. Hermit boys secure their *kuśa* garments with ropes made of *darbha*.⁶²

In such a description, as Malamoud observed, the hermitage was a pure and peaceful society, without any division of labour or power structures. It was an organised social life without any alteration of the natural environment.⁶³ In its social life structure and the performance of rites and customs, it emulated the life of a householder. However, in its location in the forest, the use of bark garments and wild food, and the performance of austerities, it also contained elements of the renouncer. Moreover, students were also part of the hermitage establishment; it had elements of studentship, too. Therefore, the hermitage, rather than being the least important of the four *āśramas*, as it may apparently seem, was the only one containing elements of all four. No wonder that the word for the hermitage – *āśrama* – also signified the whole system of a fourfold life-cycle. The hermitage played a particularly important function, and that function also made it a site of exemption: for the hermitage was a *dharmāranya*, a forest space where the norms of the settled society – *dharma* – were observed. The hermitage thereby brought the culture and the authority of the settled society into the forest.

The Hermitage and the king: exemption, utopia and authority

In the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, Mādhavya, the jester and friend of king Duṣṣanta, advises him to claim one-sixth of the produce of wild grains in Kaṇva's hermitage as tax. Duṣṣanta replies:

They pay a tribute far richer than a heap of priceless gems for the protection we provide them; and we cherish that far more. Think:
Perishable is the fruit of the yield
raised from the realm's Four Estates;
but imperishable is that sixth part
the hermits give us of their holiness.⁶⁴

Here, Kālidāsa justifies a tax exemption on the basis of the idea that the king receives a share of the merit acquired by the hermits through the performance of their austerities. Considering the relationship between the settled society and the forest discussed above, however, the hermits possibly played an important material role for the state as well. As Thapar observes, »The hermitages referred to in Indian sources, set in forest clearings, were often

62 Bana, *Kadambari*, trans. Rajappa, 40-43.

63 Malamoud, *Cooking the World*, 87-88.

64 Kālidāsa, *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, trans. Rajan, 284-5.

the vanguard of the colonization of the area by the settlers of agriculturists with or without state backing. Such hermitages were often under attack by those who claimed the forest as their territory or hunting ground.⁶⁵ As we have noticed above, the forest was the antithesis of the settled society in early Indian thought. The state nevertheless needed to keep the forest under its control, given that it was an essential source of resources. One of the modes of asserting such authority was coercion, as displayed in elaborate royal hunts. However, it was through the hermitages that the cultural component of the settled society entered the forest. With the sacrificial fire, the hermit brought the Brahmanical *dharma* to the forest, and established a centre of learning, and facilitated a process of culturally hegemonising the forest space. Thus, unlike the renouncer, the hermit was not socially or legally inconsequential to the state. Rather, he was the harbinger of the spread of Brahmanical culture, the successor of the Vedic seers. Thus, the hermitage was a no-man's land, within the forest yet also outside it. It furthered the royal interest, and hence deserved royal protection. But, it was not within the ambit of royal authority.

From the standpoint of the forest dwellers, the hermit and his fire sacrifices were an infringement on the forest space, symbolising the settled society's colonisation of the 'other'. This often provoked violent resistance, as seen in the activities of the demonic Rākṣasas in the epics. The forest, being outside the settled society, was the place of exile in the epics. However, even the exiled prince carried with him the responsibility of protecting the hermitages from the marauding Rākṣasas. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, when the Rākṣasas disrupt the sacrifices in Viśvāmitra's hermitage, the hermit wants the young princes Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to protect them. The king Daśaratha, despite his reluctance to send his sons out on such a dangerous mission, has to offer himself as an alternative and finally accedes to the demand.⁶⁶ Later, when Rāma goes to the forest as an exiled prince, the hermits seek his protection.⁶⁷ They specifically mention the danger from the Rākṣasas who are slaying the sages in every imaginable way, and warn Rāma that a king's right to taxation is contingent upon his performance of the duty to protect his subjects, including the hermits.⁶⁸ Therefore, the hermits, though exempted from paying taxes, enjoy the right to royal protection in exchange for the taxes paid by others. Similarly, Kālidāsa describes how the hermitage of Kaṇva is under Duṣṣanta's special protection, with an official in charge of protecting the hermitages. The hermits could request the king to protect the hermitage in person, in case of a threat.⁶⁹ Moreover, despite the peaceful portraiture of the hermitage, the hermit could himself in some cases adopt violent means against the forest dwellers. Agastya killed the demons Vātāpi and Ilvala, and gave to Rāma not just blessings but also weapons.⁷⁰

Similarly, even though austerity was the general condition in a hermitage, the hermit could also go to the settled society in search of wealth – which the king was expected to give. The *Mahābhārata* describes how Lopāmudrā, the wife of the hermit Agastya, wanted

65 Thapar, *Householder and Renouncer*, 922.

66 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Goldman, I.18-19

67 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Pollock, III.1.17-20.

68 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Pollock, III.5.7-18; III.9.11-15.

69 Kālidāsa, *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, trans. Rajan, 252, 266.

70 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Pollock, III.10.53-64 and III.11.29-34.

fine bedclothes and ornaments for cohabiting with him, and how he went to various kings to acquire these.⁷¹ Ṛṣyaśṛṅga, the son of the hermit Vibhāṇḍaka, born and brought up in a hermitage without any female company or luxury, could be seduced by a courtesan who brought costly viands, garlands, colourful and flamboyant clothes and fine liquors, and was brought to the kingdom of Aṅga for the performance of a ritual.⁷²

Yet, despite providing such protection and wealth, the king in principle had no moral authority over the hermitage. This was the special kind of exemption the hermits claimed for the crucial role they played in colonising the forest. Accordingly, a king was expected to get rid of his royal paraphernalia before entering a hermitage. Thus, in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Bharata lays aside his weapons and equipment, dresses in linen garments, and proceeds on foot with the family priest Vasiṣṭha walking before him, when he enters the hermitage of Bharadvāja.⁷³ He summons in his army only after Bharadvāja so commands it.⁷⁴ Rāma similarly unstrings his bow before entering a hermitage.⁷⁵ In Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*, the king and queen could enter Vasiṣṭha's hermitage only after descending from the chariot.⁷⁶

The hermitage, therefore, was a no-man's land neither governed by nor outside the purview of the state. These were places crucial for the settled society's interests but not within its ambit, and therefore exempted lands in various senses. In the utopian imagery that grew around the hermitage in early Indian literature, therefore, the same perception predominated; that is, that it was a zone of exemption from all kinds of power struggles and discords, not just political but also natural. In the utopian hermitage, all creatures – even naturally antagonistic ones – were imagined to have lived in complete harmony because of the hermit's special power. The *Rāmāyaṇa* describes Agastya's hermitage as having such a supernatural ambience:

Here gods and *gandharvas*, perfected beings and supreme seers, constantly attend upon Agastya, a seer given to rigorous fasting.
 Here no untruthful man may live, no one cruel or guileful, malevolent or licentious; that is the sort of sage he is.
 Here dwells gods and *yakṣas*, great serpents and birds, they too given to rigorous fasting and eager to uphold the ways of righteousness.
 Here great perfected beings cast off their bodies and new bodies ascended to heaven as supreme seers, in aerial chariots gleaming like the sun.
 Here gods will make one a *yakṣa* or offer immortality or various offices to good creatures who propitiate them.⁷⁷

71 Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, vol.2, trans. van Buitenen, III.94-96.

72 Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, vol. 2., trans. van Buitenen, III.110-113.

73 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Pollock, II.84.2.

74 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Pollock, II.84.9.

75 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Pollock, III.1.9.

76 Kālidāsa, *Raghuvamśa*, ed./trans. Devadhar, I.54-5.

77 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Pollock, III.10.87-91.

As the elderly and enfeebled hermits of Mataṅga's hermitage could not go to the holy pilgrimage sites themselves, their power of thought is supposed to have brought the seven seas to the hermitage!⁷⁸ Beasts mutually hostile in nature have forgotten their enmities in Pārvaṭī's hermitage in the *Kumārasambhava*.⁷⁹ In the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, trees provide silk-garments, rose-red juice, and jewel ornaments with which to adorn Śakuntalā.⁸⁰ As the hermitage became less familiar in reality, the utopia around it became even more fanciful and fabulous in the imagination. Thus, the hermitages of Bāṇa's imagination in the seventh century CE are still more extraordinary. In Jābālī's hermitage, monkeys help the blind elderly sages to walk, elephants water the trees, and peacocks fan the sacrificial fires by waving their feathers. There are no bad deeds, anger, sharpness in temperament, lust, partiality, confusion, adulation for worldly wealth, or downward motion in any sense. The snake seeks respite from the heat by crawling under the dense feathers of the peacock. Young deer fawns drink milk from the lioness alongside their friends, the lion cubs. The lion sits in enjoyment as the elephant calves pull at his mane. Monkeys give up their restlessness and bring fruits for the children of the hermits.⁸¹ Similarly, in the hermitage of Divākaramitra, monkeys perform sacred rituals, devout parrots explain Buddhist scriptures, myna birds give lectures on the law, enlightened owls mutter the various births of the Buddha, and tigers give up meat-eating under the influence of Buddhist teaching.⁸²

If the hermits had such abilities as to discipline forest creatures, they were certainly then perceived as great instruments in taming the forest space and its residents. Though the king was bound to provide military protection – and financial grants – to them, this by no means marked his authority over such spaces. The disdain of the hermits for royal power and the norms of the settled society is reflected in the way Kālidāsa portrays the feelings of Śārṅgarava and Śāradvata, two residents of Kaṇva's hermitage, for Duḥṣanta's court. Śārṅgarava feels that the court, thronged with people, is like a house encircled by blazing fire, while Śāradvata looks at the courtiers like »a man freshly bathed views one seated massaged with oil; as one pure the impure, as one wakeful the sleeper; as one who can move freely sees one in bondage.«⁸³ Therefore, in another set of utopian stories, the hermits dazzle the kings with a spectacle of the wealth they are capable of producing if they so wish. For instance, the *Rāmāyaṇa* describes how Vasiṣṭha's wish-fulfilling cow treats his royal guests with sugarcane and sweets, parched grain and wines, excellent liquors, costly beverages, all sorts of food, mountainous heaps of steaming rice, savory soups, rivers of curds, and thousands of silver platters filled with various delicious confections.⁸⁴ When Bharata and his army reach Bharadvāja's hermitage, the hermit invokes the divine architects Viśvakarman and Tvaṣṭṛ to provide hospitality to them with all sorts of luxuries including palaces, stables, couches, chairs, carriages, spotlessly polished utensils, thrones, fans, parasol, and performances by celestial musicians and dancers. Even the trees are transformed into singers, dancers, entertainers and female attendants. There are arrangements for rubbing the

78 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Pollock, III.70.21.

79 Kālidāsa, *Kumārasambhava*, trans. Rajan, V.17.

80 Kālidāsa, *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, trans. Rajan, 289.

81 Bana, *Kadambari*, trans. Rajappa, 41-46.

82 Bāṇa, *Harṣacarita*, ed. Kane, 235-237.

83 Kālidāsa, *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, trans. Rajan, 300.

84 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Goldman, I.52.2-4.

body with oil, white sandalwood ointment packed in vials, other fragrant powders and ointments, tooth brushes, sparkling clean mirrors, nice clothing, shoes and sandals, collyrium boxes, combs, brushes, bows, armour, couches and chairs. The platters, trays, jugs, jars and cauldrons made of gold contain date palm liquor, long-aged wine, rice pudding, white rice, goat meat, boar meat, condiments, flavourful fragrant soups of fruit stock, steaming venison, peacocks and chicken. There are mounds of sugar and ponds of buttermilk scented with wood-apple, as well as sugarcane and sweet barley for feeding the horses, elephants, asses, camels and oxen.⁸⁵

What these stories suggest is the perception that the hermitages' exemption from royal authority was justified, the king being less powerful than the hermit. There are numerous legends according to which the royal violation of such exemption is punished. When the king Viśvāmitra forcibly wants to take away the wish-fulfilling cow of Vasiṣṭha's hermitage, referring to the maxim that all gems (signifying wealth) belong to the king, the cow produces armies who defeat the royal force.⁸⁶ That the hermitage can liquidate the authority of the king is indicated by the statement that, following the lavish hospitality offered in Bharadvāja's hermitage, the soldiers no longer recognised any master – Bharata or Rāma.⁸⁷ Similarly, in the *Mahābhārata*, when King Śaryāti's daughter Sukanyā playfully and unintentionally hurts the hermit Cyavana performing austerities, the latter punishes the king's escort with constipation till the king pacifies him by offering Sukanyā in marriage to him.⁸⁸ When the proud king Kārtavīrya first ransacks the hermitage of Jamadagni and later kills the hermit, the entire kingly caste – the *kṣatriyas* – faces violent and repeated extermination at the hands of Jamadagni's son, Bhārgava Rāma.⁸⁹ Moreover, this exemption is perceived as being one-way. When a hermit enters the royal territory and demanded a princess in marriage, the king is expected to comply.⁹⁰ Even in the Early Medieval period when the hermitage as an institution was becoming obsolete, the perception of the hermitage as a no-man's land – outside, and often counter to, royal authority – remained. So, in Bhavabhūti's *Uttararāmacarita*, when the family elders are infuriated with Rāma's unfair banishment of his wife Sītā, they leave his domain and go to the hermitage of Vālmiki.⁹¹ In Daṇḍin's eighth-century fantastic novel, the *Daśakumāracarita*, a defeated king goes into exile in the forests of the Vindhya. There, under the protection of the hermit Vāmadeva, the king raises ten princes who prepare themselves to avenge the defeat and ultimately succeed in their design. Therefore, the hermitage was still perceived as a place from where royal authority could be challenged.

Why then was the hermitage becoming obsolete in the post-Gupta period? As we have seen, the most important role played by the hermitage as an institution was as a mediator between the settled society and the forest in a period when there was a clear dichotomy between the two. However, a major shift in Indian history began during the Gupta period, and became manifest in the Early Medieval period. At the centre of this shift was *agrahāra*, or the grant of tax-exempted land to the *brāhmaṇas* and religious institutions. The *agrahāras*

85 Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, vol. 2, trans. van Buitenen, II.85.

86 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Goldman, I.53-54.

87 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, ed./trans. Goldman, I.85.55-56.

88 Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, vol.2, trans. van Buitenen, III.122.

89 Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, vol. 2, trans. van Buitenen, III.116-125.

90 Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, vol. 2, trans. van Buitenen, III.115-116.

91 Bhavabhūti, *Uttararāmacarita*, ed./trans. Kale, 18-19.

enjoyed exemption not only from paying taxes, but also from civil and military interventions by the king. Such exemptions have been interpreted by Marxist historians as a marker of ›Indian Feudalism‹, an argument that began an intense debate that is beyond the scope of this article.⁹² But, interestingly, many grants were in forest regions, which meant that the grantees had to clear the forest and establish agricultural settlements. This politico-economic process had religious and cultural implications. As the *brāhmaṇa* landlords entered the forest space, and the forest dwellers came in closer proximity to them, there was a two-way exchange. As Chattopadhyaya's article cited above notes, the forest was now better understood, while the process of Sanskritisation was more direct. There was no longer the need for an institution like the hermitage to mediate between the two politico-cultural landscapes. Hermitage, a crucial cultural institution of the early period, was transformed into an imaginary utopia: however the utopia was still remembered as an exempted zone which was protected by but lay outside of the ambit of royal authority and was capable of acting counter to royal power.

92 For details, see Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*; Mukhia, *Feudalism Debate*.

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