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## Portrayal of the Forest People: the "Other" in the Epigraphic records of Early India

Suchandra Ghosh, Soumya Porel

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Self-Representation  
and Presentation of Others  
in Indic Epigraphical Writing

Edited by  
Dániel Balogh and Annette Schmiedchen

Asien- und Afrika-Studien 63  
der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

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# Portrayal of the Forest People: the “Other” in the Epigraphic Records of Early India

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## 1. Introduction

The forest and its people have been portrayed in many ways in early Indian written sources. This portrayal at times showed — but often lacked — awareness of this space and its inhabitants. In spite of a great deal of ambivalence in their representations among the various categories of sources, there is a common agreement that both the space and its occupants were regarded as the “other.” In the 1990’s, three influential works shaped our understanding of the dichotomy and the complementarity between the forest space and the settlement (Sontheimer 1994; Malamoud 1998, 75–88; Thapar 2001).<sup>1</sup> Textual and epigraphic sources offer an array of terminologies to denote a forest, considering that the forest as a space was diverse. In the texts as well as inscriptions forests were known as *vana*, *jāṅgala*, *aṭavī*, *araṇya*, etc.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, terms meaning ‘forest’ were sometimes used in inscriptions as components in the names of kings, subordinate rulers, and officials of the state. Thus, one can see names like

- 
- 1 Romila Thapar delivered the first Sontheimer Memorial Lecture in Pune in December 1998 on this theme, an expanded version of which was published in 2001.
  - 2 This nomenclature has been further discussed by Chattopadhyaya (2017) and Aloka Parasher-Sen (2019).

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Aṭavidurjaya (*Cipurupalle plates of Viṣṇuvardhana I*), Vanasirīha (*Pandiapathar plates of Bhīmasena, Year 89*), and others.

When we turn our gaze from forests to forest people, we find that they were generally referred to as *āṭavika* in our sources. But singularly, they had different nomenclature and often defined territories. Śābara, Pulinda, Niṣāda, and Kirāta are largely the forest people who are alluded to in the textual and epigraphic sources. It appears that *āṭavī* was used together with *mleccha* in the *Arthaśāstra* (7.10.16) in the context of acquiring a land with permanent enemies (Olivelle 2013, 666).

These forest groups were equipped with extraordinary skills which ranged from physical prowess to medicinal knowledge. In the present essay, we wish to study the epigraphic portrayal of the Śābaras and the Pulindas, who were by and large the “other” of the Brahmanical society. The rationale behind the choice of these two groups lies in the fact that in the textual sources Śābaras and Pulindas are often mentioned in the same context, and their names became generic appellations for “barbarous” tribes and forest groups. Aloka Parasher-Sen (1991, 93–101) includes them within the category of *mleccha*. The marginality of the forest people remained an almost perennial theme in the long-term history of the subcontinent. However, there were occasions, particularly from the fourth century, when these forest people were represented as being in positions of power or status in a range of epigraphic records.

## 2. A few references in literary texts

The first Brahmanical text to mention the habitat of the Śābaras and Pulindas was the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (7.3.18), where it is said that these two groups along with a few others lived beyond the borders. They were regarded as the cursed sons of Viśvāmitra, as they had disobeyed their father and thus were banned to live beyond the borders. The *Arthaśāstra* (2.1.6) also mentions the Śābaras and Pulindas together as peoples who guard the regions between the frontiers and the interior of the kingdom. Thus, Brahmanical textual sources confirm that the location of these forest people is at or near the frontier. They lived at the edge of settled areas, which indirectly implied that there should ideally be a forest at the border of such areas (Chakravarti 2014, 181). The *Arthaśāstra* (8.4.42) paints a negative picture of the forest people, comparing them to robbers: “Highwaymen rob those who are heedless, are few in number and sluggish (*pratirodhakāḥ pramattasyāpaharanti, alpāḥ kunṭhāḥ*), and are easy to recognise and apprehend, whereas, living in their own region (*svadeśa-sthāḥ*) and being

numerous and brave, forest tribes fight in the open, plunder and destroy regions, and behave like kings (*deśānām rājasadharmāna iti*.)” In other words, they were more dangerous than robbers as they were in control of their own territory. In the *Amarakośa* (2.10.21), the Pulindas along with the Kirātas and the Śābaras are mentioned as outcastes (*kirāta-śābara-pulindā mleccha-jātayaḥ*) (Parasher-Sen 2019, 140). They were regarded as the “other” in contrast to the “civilised,” even though they were often used for the benefit of the state. The *aṭavī-bala* (army composed of forest people) formed one of the six kinds of armies of the king.

With regard to the area of habitation of these forest groups, most of the textual sources prefer to place them around the Vindhyan region or parts of Odisha, but they are also spoken of as dwelling in the Dakṣiṇāpatha. In this context I would privilege Bāṇabhaṭṭa as an author for his graphic description of the Vindhyan forests and the intense portrayal of Śābara men both in the *Kādambarī* and the *Harṣacarita*. In addition to these two works, another text of about the tenth century demands our attention, the *Kathāsaritsāgara* of Somadeva.

In the *Kādambarī* we get a vivid description of the Śābara army. A sense of horror prevails in that description as it is portrayed as “all the nights of the dark fortnight rolled into one... like a crowd of evil deeds come together; like a caravan of curses of the many hermits dwelling in the Daṇḍaka forest...” (Ridding 1896, 27). Following the description of the army is a lengthy depiction of the young Śābara leader whose name was Mātaṅga (*ibid.*, 28–33). He is compared to Ekalavya,<sup>3</sup> and Bāṇa describes him as a handsome strong youth who was capable of conquering the Vindhya Mountain. While Mātaṅga’s physical beauty is underscored with analogies from the forest and its inhabitants, Bāṇa does not hesitate to highlight his cruel nature by stating that he was “partial avatar of death.” Another description demonstrates the brutality of a hungry old Śābara man who mercilessly killed tiny parrots (*ibid.*, 33) to satisfy his hunger. The Śābara man, the cruel “other,” is contrasted with Hārīta, a youthful hermit, whose mind was purified with all knowledge and who is the son of the great ascetic Jābālī (*ibid.*, 35).

Bāṇa’s other creation, the *Harṣacarita*, portrays the Śābaras as living in a settled society within the forest. The Śābaras lived both by hunting and by farming. The context of Bāṇa’s description of the Śābaras was the time when Harṣa entered the Vindhya forest in search of his sister Rājyaśrī (Cowell and Thomas

3 The story of Ekalavya is narrated in the *Mahābhārata*. He was a Niṣāda (another forest group), who was an excellent archer. He wanted to be the disciple of Droṇa, the teacher of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. However, Droṇa refused to take him as a student as he was lowly born.

1897, 232). In the last chapter of the *Harṣacarita*, Bāṇabhaṭṭa gives a heroic description of a Śabara boy, named Nirghāta, who was the nephew of the Śabara chief:

the young mountaineer had his hair tied into a crest above his forehead with a band of the *śyāmalatā* creeper dark like lampblack, and his dark forehead was like a night that always accompanied him in his wild exploits, with an involuntary frown which branched in three lines. His ear had an ear-ring of glass-like crystal fastened in it, and it assumed a green hue from a parrot's wing which ornamented it, while his somewhat bleared eye, with its scanty lashes, seemed to distil hyena's blood which had been applied as a medicine. His nose was flat, his lower lip thick, his chin low, his jaws full, his forehead and cheek-bones projecting, his neck a little bent down while one half of his shoulders stood up, he seemed to mock the broad rocks of the Vindhya's side with his brawny chest, which was broadened by exercise and hardened by incessantly bending his bow, while his arms, which were more solid than a boa-constrictor, made light of the tallest *śāla*-trees of the Himalaya. [...] His right hand seemed busily engaged with a[n] [...] arrow, having its point dipped in a potent poison, and looking like a black snake which had been stupefied by certain roots. He was like a moving dark *tamāla* tree on the side of a mountain or a pillar of solid stone artificially wrought, or a moving mass of black collyrium or a melting block of iron from the Vindhya, a very fever to the elephants, the noose of death to the deer, a comet of ill omen to the lions, the last day of the *Durgā-pūjā* to the buffaloes, the personified essence of destruction, the embodied fruit of sin, the cause of the *Kali* age, the lover of doom's-night.<sup>4</sup>

If we analyse the vibrant portrayals of the Śabara men in both the texts, a common pattern can be located. The bodily strength and the muscle power of the Śabarās were highlighted in both the cases. This may be a stereotypical description of forest people. Their body language, ritual, lifestyle — everything — was different from “civilised” society. The forest people were feared, but their help was also taken when required.

Within various contexts, the Śabarās figure as a powerful presence in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*. In one story, the hero Śrīdatta is looking for his beloved Mṛgāṅkavatī in the Vindhya and meets a Śabara chief called Śrīcaṇḍa. The chief dupes him and brings him to the hamlet (*pallī*) of the Śabarās, where he is planning to offer Śrīdatta as a sacrifice to the goddess Caṇḍikā. In the meantime, Sundarī, the daughter of the Śabara chief, falls in love with Śrīdatta, who agrees

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4 Cowell and Thomas (1897, 230–32).

to marry her in the *gāndharva* form of marriage, as this would free him from his fetters. While the chief is away, they meet regularly, but Śrīdatta can eventually return to his home at the behest of the wife of the Śabara chief. The Śabara chief is portrayed as a cruel man (Tawney 1880, 64).

On another occasion, we find that Śrīdatta was confronted by a group of robbers who were Śabarās. He was ultimately able to save himself by the grace of his Śabara wife Sundarī. Thus, Śrīdatta, though not a Śabara himself, took over the Śabara village from his wife and became its chief (Tawney 1880, 65).

These glimpses of textual references of various genres are clear indicators that these forest people were the “other” of the society, the robber, the destroyer of peace. In the description of the Śabara men, their muscle power is clearly underscored.

### 3. Epigraphic mentions: changing positions of the forest people

Epigraphy offers a slightly different picture, which is much more complex. The references to forest people in epigraphic records were apparently guided by a multiplicity of contexts relating to the politics and historical traditions of the respective regions. This should be kept in mind while studying the allusions to Śabarās and Pulindas in epigraphy.

It is commonly known that the first epigraphic reference to the forest dwellers (*aṭavi*) comes from the *Major rock edict XIII of Aśoka*, where it is quite evident that the emperor is not pleased with them and thus goes to the extent of stating that he could be compelled to take stern measure against them. *Āṭavikas* were actually told that the emperor would pardon only up to the limit that was pardonable; he would regret (*anutāpe*) having to hurt them, which is nothing more than an assertion of his power (*pabhābe*) (Tieken 2023, 96). The practices of the forest dwellers were obviously not in congruence to what Aśoka envisioned for his Dhamma. The forest people must have continued to be an irritant to the state in the post-Mauryan period as well, as their perception is much sterner in Book 8 of the *Arthaśāstra*. It is widely accepted that the *Arthaśāstra* consists of different layers, and Books 8 and 9 may have been composed by the end of the first or the beginning of the second century (Olivelle 2013, 25–30).

The *Allahabad inscription of Samudragupta* carefully details the differences between frontier kingdoms, forest kingdoms, non-monarchical powers, etc. The record states that Samudragupta reduced all the *āṭavika-rājas* to the status of servants (*paricārakī-kṛta*). What is significant to note is that Aśoka referred only to the *aṭavi*, meaning the forest people, whereas the *Allahabad inscription*

mentions forest kings/chiefs (*āṭavika-rāja*). These *āṭavika-rājas* occupied forest territories between the Āryāvarta and Dakṣiṇāpatha. By the time the Guptas came to power, the forest people had become organised and transformed the forest space into chiefdoms of the people living there.

The specific location of such forest kingdoms was revealed for the first time — with reference to eighteen *āṭavika-rājyas* in the *Betul plates* (c. 519) and the *Khoh plate* (c. 529) of Saṅkṣobha of the Parivrājaka family — as the region of Bundelkhand and the adjoining areas (presently around Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh). The ruler was governing the core area of Ḍabhālā/Ḍahālā *rājya*, which included the peripheral areas of eighteen forest kingdoms (*sāṣṭādaśāṭavirājyābhyantara*), and which he had received through inheritance (*anvayāgata*). The use of the term ‘inheritance’ here indicates that prior to him this forest space was already a kingdom. It is clear from the two inscriptions that his father Hastin was the ruler of this kingdom. Romila Thapar (2001, 13) points out that “this was part of the conversion of the Vindhyan region from forest to kingdom, from *vana* to *kṣetra*.” Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya (2017, 66) observes that none of the elements of forest life can be seen in the record, except for the goddess Piṣṭapurī, who was of *āṭavi* origin, but was transformed into a Brahmanical deity housed in a temple (*devakula*). Prior to this inscription, the *Navagrāma grant* of Saṅkṣobha’s father Hastin (c. 517) records the grant of the village Navagrāma, which was located in the *pulinda-rāja-rāṣṭra* (the territory of the Pulinda king) within his kingdom. This not only implies the presence of a locality under control of the Pulinda chief within the kingdom of Hastin, but also the transformation of a forest space inhabited by the Pulindas to a more settled locality.

The Pulindas experienced internal change over a period of time, and gradually came to have a chief and chiefdom for themselves. From Khoh itself we come across the mention of a person called Pulindabhaṭa in the *Khoh copper plate of Śarvanātha* from Uccalpa, issued in the year 214 of the Gupta era, c. 533. The king had earlier granted two villages, Kācarapallika and Vyāghrapallika, as a mark of favour (*prasādi-kṛta*) to Pulindabhaṭa in perpetuity (*ācandrārka-samakālikau*). He in turn (*tenāpi*) presented (*pratipāditau*) them to Kumārasvāmin as [property] to be enjoyed by the lineage of [Kumārasvāmin’s] sons and grandsons, for the sake of the worship (*pūjā*) of the goddess Piṣṭapurī and for the restoration of ruined [structures] and damaged [movables] at the temple (*devakula*) commissioned [by Pulindabhaṭa] in Mānapura.<sup>5</sup> The name ending *bhaṭa* added to Pulinda is noteworthy. We have the expression *cāṭa* and *bhaṭa* in inscriptions. These were lower-level employees of the kingdom who acted as a kind of

5 We are grateful to Dániel Balogh for discussions on the purport of the inscription.



constable. It may so happen that some of the Pulindas, who were local inhabitants, were employed in this position for their martial character and gradually became important. We can imagine that the appointment of a few of the local people into a position in the king's service could have created a kind of social hierarchy among the indigenous population. It appears from the inscription that Pulindabhaṭa dispossessed himself of the two villages given to him by the king, passing them on to the Brāhmaṇa Kumārasvāmin for the worship at and upkeep of the temple. For the transfer of rights, he perhaps sought the permission of the ruler, as King Śarvanātha claims in the inscription to have endorsed the grant of the two villages (*tāmra-śāsanenānumoditau*). Pulindabhaṭa himself had commissioned the construction of the temple and installed the goddess Piṣṭapurikā, who was an autochthonous deity. Once Piṣṭapurikā was installed as a Brahmanical deity, Pulindabhaṭa lost all rights to be directly associated with the temple due to his autochthonous origin. By giving the two villages he made arrangements for the upkeep of the temple. This act perhaps gave him the satisfaction of indirectly being associated with the goddess. Significantly, the inscriptions from Khoh speak only of the Pulindas as a forest group, while the Śābaras are not mentioned. Perhaps this area around Bundelkhand was largely the habitat of the Pulindas.

As we move eastward from central India to Odisha, we find that the *Parikud plates of Madhyamarājadeva* of the Śailodbhava dynasty (694) mention one Pulindasena, a reputed person from Kaliṅga (*khyātaḥ kaliṅga-janatāsu*). It is said that he prayed to Svayambhū to create a capable ruler who could take care of the region, and thus the dynasty's founder emerged from a rock (*śilā-śakalodbhedī*). This Pulindasena is associated with the forest tribe Pulinda, and the territory of the Śailodbhavas was the area known as Koṅgadamaṇḍala around present-day Ganjam, Khurda, and Puri of Odisha. What is evident from this inscription is the position of respect that Pulindasena was accorded for being associated in the founding of the dynasty. After the Śailodbhavas, these areas were under the control of the Bhauma-Kara dynasty, which ruled from the eighth century to the tenth.

That the Pulindas continued to be present here can be foregrounded with the help of the *Hindol plate of Śubhākaradeva* belonging to the Bhauma-Kara dynasty, datable to the mid-ninth century.<sup>6</sup> Śubhākaradeva granted a village at the request of Pulindarāja (*pulindarāja-vijñāptyā*), half of the village being meant, *inter alia*, for the worship of the god Vaidyanātha-bhaṭṭāraka installed in the Pulindeśvara temple founded by him (i.e. Pulindarāja).

6 We are thankful to Debankita Das for drawing our attention to this inscription.

Like the Pulindas, the Śābaras too found a place in the epigraphic records of the period from the sixth to the tenth century. Here we do not intend to provide an inventory of all the mentions of Śābaras, but shall draw attention to those records where the Śābara presence is seen. The *Chicacole plates of Devendra-varman*, an Eastern Gaṅga ruler, are significant because here a Śābara held the position of a *mahattara*. It is said that the epigraph was written in the presence of this *mahattara*, the Śābara Nandiśarman. The position of a *mahattara* is important in the village administration and is much above an ordinary *kuṭumbin*. The name Nandiśarman is also indicative of Sanskritisation and Brahmanisation, but the addition of Śābara before his name suggests that the ethnic identity of this *mahattara* was not to be forgotten. One cannot miss the fact that he was present when a charter was written which records a royal grant in favour of six Brāhmaṇas, whose names also all end in *-śarman*. The village donated was called Poppaṅgika, located in Saraūmaṭamba of Kroṣṭukavartani. The names may indicate that it was a locality largely inhabited by non-Sanskritic population.

Another inscription of significant importance is the *Mallar plates of Jayarāja*, year 9, which can be dated to the middle of the sixth century. The plates were issued from Śarabhapura near Sirpur, in the present-day Chhattisgarh area. They are about the donation of a village to two Brāhmaṇas, Maheśvarasvāmin and Rudrasvāmin. Rudrasvāmin is further identified as *śabara-bhogika*. Gouriswar Bhattacharya and M. Sivayya (1961–62, 29) opined that the term *śabara-bhogika* may mean either that he hailed from an administrative division (*bhoga*) called Śābara, or that he was in charge of a locality called Śābara. On the other hand, Ajay Mitra Shastri (1995a, 26 n. 33) opines that the expression should be taken to mean that Rudrasvāmin acted as a priest of the Śābaras. Whatever may be the case, the inscription at least indicates the presence of the Śābaras in the area. The area around present Chhattisgarh was known for its forests, and it was the natural habitat of the forest people.

The *Udayendiram plates of Nandivarman Pallavamalla* (ninth century) are an example of the Śābaras attaining a position of power and then being defeated by a ruler, in this case Nandivarman. The grant proudly affirms that Nandivarman's general defeated Udayana, king of the Śābaras, and captured his mirrored banner made of peacock feathers (*mayūra-kalāpa-viracitaṁ darppaṇa-dhvajaṁ gr̥hītavān*). The Śābara king must have been growing in power and this position of power of the Śābaras, the "other," caused much anxiety to the settled kingdoms.

In contrast, the *Khajuraho stone inscription of Dhaṅga* of the year 1059 has an interesting portrayal of a Śābara. The inscription was composed by the poet Rāma, son of Balabhadra and grandson of the poet Nandana, who is said to have

been born of Śabara extraction (*sāvāra-vamśa-janmā śrī-naṁdanaḥ*). The implication of this statement is that the composer of this inscription hailed from a family of poets belonging to the Śabara lineage. In spite of the Śabara background, members of the family learnt Sanskrit and became famous as poets. There was no attempt to iron out his lineage, rather it was recorded. This inscription is a eulogy which states that the fame of Dhaṅga spread far and wide.

That the Śabarās continued to be in positions of power in eastern Odisha is clear from the *Korni second copperplate grant of Anantavarman Coḍagaṅga* (c. 1113). This inscription clearly states that Kāmārṇava I, the originator of the Eastern Gaṅgas, took charge of the Mahendra mountains and killed the local tribal chief Śabarāditya. The Gaṅga charters claim that the god Gokarṇeśvara bestowed on them the right to rule Kaliṅga. According to B. P. Sahu (1985, 155), Gokarṇeśvara was the patron deity of the Śabara tribe in the Mahendra mountains, and this deity was given the name Śiva Gokarṇeśvara and made the patron deity of the Eastern Gaṅga family. Here is another case of appropriation of the deity of the forest people, the Śabarās. This was a convenient way of eliciting support from the common people.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be said that there is not an iota of doubt about the multiple perceptions of the forest people. Notions and contexts alter over time. Forests could have been a liminal space, located often between two villages or a city and the village. Land grants to Brāhmanas, bordering forests, led to encroachment on forest lands and thereby on the lives of the forest people. This opened up spaces for re-grouping and consolidating. It appears that while in the literary texts the forest people are clearly the “other,” in the epigraphic context they are represented in multiple ways, beyond the binary distinction between “civilised” and “uncivilised.” A few cases discussed from the epigraphic records reveal that there were various ways of seeing and recognising the forest people. The notions differed according to the specific circumstances. Expressions like *śabara-mahattara*, *śabara-bhogika*, *pulinda-rāja-rāṣṭra*, or names like Pulindabhaṭa in the epigraphs undoubtedly indicate enhanced social status along with participation in the affairs of the state. In this context, along with the other examples cited above, one can also add a story narrated in the *Kuvalayamālā* of Uddyotana (779).<sup>7</sup> The story (Kumar 2015, 183) is about the kingdom of Viniṭā (in Madhya-

7 About the *Kuvalayamālā*, see also Chojnacki’s paper (pp. 261ff.) in this volume (eds).

deśa), which was ruled by King Dṛḍhavarman, whose queen was called Priyaṅguśyāmā. The story records that Suṣeṇa, a Śabara prince (*sabara-senāvai-putto*) was sent to war against the Mālava king. He returned victorious and visited King Dṛḍhavarman, who was seated in the inner assembly along with the queen and a few selected ministers. Suṣeṇa narrated to the king in an exuberant manner how the army of the enemy was routed along with capture of the child prince and the war-spoils. Here the Śabara prince, being a valiant warrior, was used by the monarch.<sup>8</sup>

The forest chiefs were closely working within the ambit of a monarchical system. The forest deities were appropriated, and the monarchs were engaging with the forest dwellers in a bid to effectively control the forest space, which was a veritable source of economic resources. Ranabir Chakravarti (2022, 129) has recently suggested that “appropriation of the autochthonous cults into the Brahmanical pantheon was neither a peaceful, nor an innocuous nor an innocent process” and, in this case, it was the forest people who, living in a liminal space, were subject to an ambivalent situation. Most inscriptions are from the forest tracts of Central India, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha. The myth of the Śailodbhavas arising from a splinter of rock with divine blessings in answer to the prayers of a Pulinda speaks of the tribal origin of the dynasty on the one hand, and of a step towards the Brahmanisation of the dynasty on the other. One can notice that the Śabararas continued to be present in the epigraphic records for a longer time than the Pulindas.

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