International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Society and Nature in Early India: Forests in Pāli Literature as Sources for Environmental History

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Abstract

This paper examines the role and significance of forests in early Indian society through the evidence of Buddhist literature dating from approximately the sixth century BCE to the third century CE. Rather than treating forests as marginal spaces outside the sphere of settled life, the study approaches them as integral components of the social, economic, and religious landscape of early historic India. Early Buddhist texts provide detailed references to forests as spaces of habitation, economic activity, religious practice, and cultural imagination, making them a particularly valuable source for reconstructing the environmental history of the period. The paper explores four interrelated dimensions of forest–society interaction. First, it examines the relationship between mobility and settlement, analysing how forests formed the transitional zone between wandering ascetics and expanding agrarian communities. Second, the paper investigates forests as spaces of spiritual expression, where monks and ascetics pursued meditation and renunciation, and where monastic establishments often developed in proximity to woodland environments. Third, the study considers the economic uses of forests, including the gathering of forest produce, hunting, wood collection, and other forms of resource utilization that supported both rural households and monastic communities. Finally, the paper analyses forests in cultural imagination as depicted in Buddhist narratives, where forests appear simultaneously as places of danger, refuge, moral testing, and transformation. By integrating these perspectives, the paper argues that forests occupied a central position in the environmental and social world described in early Buddhist literature. The study demonstrates that Buddhist sources provide a unique window into the environmental history of early India and reveal the complex and varied relationships between forests and human society in the early historic period.

Keyword: Forest, Vanna, Society, Environment, Religion, Buddhism, Early India,

Introduction

Forests occupied a significant yet complex position in the social and economic landscape of early historic India. Between the sixth century BCE and the third century CE, a period marked by the expansion of agrarian settlements and the growth of towns and trade networks, forested regions formed an essential part of the environment within which early societies developed. Far from being isolated wilderness areas, forests existed in close proximity to villages, market centres, and routes of communication, and were closely integrated into everyday economic and religious life. Early Buddhist literature, including the *Nikāyas*, *Vinaya* texts, and *Jātaka* narratives, contains numerous references to forests and woodland environments, providing valuable insight into the ways in which these landscapes were inhabited, utilized,

and imagined. These sources reveal forests not only as zones of resource extraction and agricultural expansion but also as important settings for ascetic practice and narrative traditions. By examining forests through Buddhist textual evidence, this study seeks to reconstruct the multiple relationships between forest landscapes and human society in early historic India.

Environmental history is the study of the dynamic interaction between humans and the natural world. It explores how societies have shaped their environments and how, in turn, natural conditions have influenced human history. This bilateral approach examines both the cultural and ecological dimensions of human life. Donald Worster (1988) identified three interrelated levels of environmental history: the intellectual**,** concerning ideas, ethics, and perceptions of nature; the socio-economic, where those ideas are expressed through politics, economy, and land use; and the natural, where human actions physically alter ecological systems. Each level interacts with the others, creating a continuous feedback loop between human culture and environmental change. In crux, environmental history seeks to understand how people have perceived, used, and transformed nature across time. It encompasses themes such as the history of forests, agriculture, climate, and resource exploitation. [i]

In the Pāli sources, a rich environmental vocabulary reflects the complex and evolving relationship between society and the forested landscape. The term *vana* broadly denotes "forest" or "woodland," while *araññ*a conveys a deeper sense of wilderness or uninhabited terrain, often representing both a physical and spiritual frontier. These terms appear frequently across the Buddhist sources, marking the forest as a central space in the early Buddhist imagination at once remote, resourceful, and sacred. The Pāli term *Aṭavī* (from Sanskrit *aṭavī*, likely of Dravidian origin) adds another dimension to this conceptual vocabulary. It primarily denotes "forest" or "woodland" but also carries the secondary meaning of "forest inhabitant" or "tribal people," suggesting that the term encompassed both a physical landscape and the human communities residing within it (*Jātaka* I.306; II.117; III.220; *Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā* I.13). This dual usage reflects an intertwined perception of the forest as both a natural and social environment home to resources, dangers, and distinct populations beyond the agrarian frontier. The term *araññavāsi* ("resident of the forest") is particularly significant in both monastic and social contexts. It designates monks or ascetics who lived outside settlements, embodying a form of renunciation closely tied to the ecological and spatial realities of the forest. Yet, the presence of these *araññavāsins* also highlights the permeability of boundaries between village and wilderness: forests were not isolated spaces but part of broader networks of exchange, subsistence, and spiritual practice. The *vanapatha* ("forest path") often perilous yet vital connected rural economies, trade routes, and pilgrimage circuits, underscoring the forest's function as a conduit between the cultivated and the wild. Together, these terms illustrate that in early India, the forest was far from a monolithic wilderness. It was a multifunctional space an economic resource, a spiritual refuge, and a cultural frontier. The Pāli canon thus preserves a nuanced ecological consciousness, revealing how communities in the sixth century BCE conceptualized, utilized, and coexisted with the forested world around them.

Wanderers and Settlers: Expansion into Forest Landscapes

A historical association between nature and humans is documented in various sources predating the sixth century BCE. Ancient hunting scenes in art provide evidence that pre-settlement humans inhabited ecosystems similar to those of other animals, relying on hunting for survival. The transition of early humans involved a progression from wild existence to the development of survival tools, mastery of fire, and eventually the construction of shelters, which contributed to the formation of human society. The shift toward constructing explicit drainage systems and organised settlements, such as those at Harappa,

demonstrates an evolving relationship with nature, as evidenced by the depiction of trees and animals on seals. This progression marks the human transit from wanderer to the settler.

Early *Vedic* literature reflects a stage in which society was still closely connected with woodland landscapes. *Vedic* culture exemplifies a semi-agricultural society during which the *Vedas* were composed. The Battle of Ten Kings (Daśarājña) in *Rigveda* Mandala 7 illustrates the expansion of *Vedic* tribes into riverine regions, a process that entailed both political conflict and the gradual conversion of forests into settled areas. This episode reflects an early stage in which tribal groups competed for control over river valleys still dominated by woodlands. The expansion of territory and natural resources became integral to power struggles, as documented in historical sources. *Vedic* and subsequent texts, including the *Āraṇyakas*, *Atharvaveda*[ii] *Brāhmaṇas*, and *Upaniṣads,* further illustrate this interaction by classifying plants and promoting forest sanctity through ritual and belief. Scholars such as Kumar argue that traditions of sacred groves and ecological reverence may predate Vedic culture, indicating the assimilation of indigenous ecological knowledge. [iii]

By the later *Vedic* period, forests appear less as distant wildernesses and more as landscapes increasingly proximate to expanding agricultural settlements. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* describes the eastward movement of Māthava Videgha from the Sarasvati region toward Videha, guided by sacred fire[iv]. The burning of forests in this account symbolically represents the transformation of wilderness into agrarian and ritual space and reflects the historical expansion of settlement into the eastern Gangetic plains. Similarly, the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest in the *Mahābhārata* represents the ideological conquest of forest landscapes and their conversion into settled territory, linking kingship with the control and transformation of forest land By the sixth century BCE the middle Gangetic plains witnessed a significant expansion of agriculture and permanent settlement. This development brought cultivated land into increasing contact with forested regions and intensified the incorporation of woodland areas into agrarian production. *Forest (vana)* emerges as a defining landscape situated beyond settled villages and fields. The *Suttavibhaṅga*[v] describe it as the space outside human habitation, an area both feared and revered. Romila Thapar highlights the dynamic relationship between *vana* (forest) and *kṣetra* (cultivated land), which profoundly shaped early culture, religion, and economy. Over time, forests evolved from sacred, untamed spaces into vital economic resources supplying food, fodder, fuel, and valuable materials like timber and elephants.[vi] The role of iron technology in facilitating forest clearance has been widely debated, but it is generally accepted that the availability of iron tools contributed to the extension of cultivation into heavily wooded areas.

The period beginning around the sixth century BCE represents an important phase in early Indian history marked by the emergence of territorial states, the expansion of agriculture, and the growth of trade and urban centres. These developments were closely connected with the increasing importance of land as a productive resource and as a basis of political authority. Buddhist narrative traditions preserve significant indications of this transformation. The *Mahāvastu*[vii] describes a mythic account of the appearance of fragrant rice growing naturally on the earth, followed by the gradual emergence of private appropriation when individuals began to take more than their share. This development led to social conflict and ultimately to the election of a ruler known as Mahāsammata, “the Great Elect,” who was entrusted with maintaining order. The ruler was entitled to receive a share of the produce, and the term *rājā* is explained as one who is “worthy of a portion of the rice” (*rañjati* or *rañj*, interpreted in later tradition as deriving from entitlement to produce). Although presented in legendary form, this narrative reflects the growing importance of agricultural production as the foundation of political authority. Archaeological and textual

evidence suggests that wet-rice cultivation and transplantation techniques became increasingly widespread in the Gangetic plains during this period, contributing to higher agricultural productivity and the generation of surplus. The expansion of cultivation brought new areas of land into use and increased the importance of territorial control. Buddhist sources indicate that land could be held as private property, particularly by wealthy householders (*gahapati*), who appear as important rural elites controlling agricultural resources. At the same time, there is evidence for royal authority over uncultivated and forested land. *Suttavibhaṅga*[viii] and *Digha Nikaya*[ix] refers to *brahmadeya* grants, in which land assigned by the king was enjoyed by Brahmins together with rights over grass, wood, and water. Such references suggest that forested areas were included within the sphere of royal control and could be transferred as gifts. R. K. Chaudhuri and Uma Chakravarti[x] has argued, the development of such grants contributed to the transformation of ritual specialists into land-based elites whose authority rested not only on priestly status but also on control over agricultural production. These developments indicate the close relationship between state formation and the expansion of cultivation into forested regions.

The fiscal importance of agrarian production is also reflected in Buddhist references to the *gahapati* as a taxpayer. A passage in the *Dīgha Nikāya* records a householder describing himself as "a cultivator, a householder, and a taxpayer who swells the royal treasury",[xi] indicating that the *gahapati* formed an essential element in the revenue structure of early states. As agricultural producers and taxpayers, such householders sustained the financial basis of political authority and contributed to the consolidation of territorial states.

Royal patronage of Brahmins further illustrates the connection between land control and state formation. The assignment of *brahmadeya* lands created Brahmana landholders who participated in the agrarian economy and contributed to the expansion of cultivation. Rather than representing purely ritual beneficiaries, these Brahmana landholders formed part of a broader group of agrarian elites whose economic importance lay in their control of productive land. The development of a stable tax-paying population was closely linked to the extension of cultivation into new areas, including regions previously covered by forests.

The formation of a revenue base therefore proceeded alongside the gradual encroachment into forested landscapes. The extension of agriculture not only increased the taxable surplus available to the state but also integrated forest resources into the wider economy. Forest land thus became increasingly significant both as a potential field for agricultural expansion and as a source of materials necessary for settled society. In this sense, the growth of state power was closely connected with the transformation of forest environments into productive agrarian landscapes.

The evidence discussed above suggests a long historical transition from mobile forms of life to settled agrarian society in early India. Forest environments formed an essential part of this transformation, first as spaces within which early human communities lived and moved, and later as landscapes gradually incorporated into agricultural production and state control. By the sixth century BCE forests no longer represented distant wilderness alone but increasingly marked the outer limits of cultivation and settlement. The movement from wandering to settled life was therefore closely connected with the transformation of forested landscapes into agrarian zones. In this sense, the history of forests in early India reflects the broader transition from mobile human communities to organised agrarian society.

2. *Spiritual Expression: Forests as Religious Landscapes*

Forests occupied an important place in the religious imagination of early India and are frequently mentioned in Buddhist literature as preferred locations for spiritual practice. Far from being isolated

wilderness, forests often existed in close proximity to villages and routes of communication, forming environments where religious activity could flourish alongside settled society. Earlier traditions had already associated forests with sacred knowledge and ritual activity, as reflected in the *Āraṇyakas*, where forest settings provided the context for reflection on nature and ritual practice. Religious traditions thus contributed to shaping the perception of forests as spaces suited to contemplation and spiritual discipline. Scholars such as Romila Thapar have emphasized the significance of forests within the broader social framework of early India. The conception of the forest retreat as part of the later *āśrama* system reflects the recognition of forests as appropriate spaces for withdrawal from household life. Thapar has also described the emergence of forests as liminal spaces during the period of the Second Urbanisation, where the boundary between settlement and woodland became an important site for religious discourse[xii]. In this context forests served both as zones of separation from society and as environments closely connected with expanding settlements.

Buddhist sources provide particularly detailed descriptions of forests as settings for spiritual practice. The *Dīgha Nikāya* frequently portrays forests as places of retreat and religious instruction. The Buddha is described as dwelling "in the forest, in the depths of the jungle, free from noise and disturbance, well suited for seclusion," emphasizing the importance of quiet and isolation for meditation. At the same time, these forest environments remained accessible to nearby settlements[xiii]. The *Dīgha Nikāya* description of Uruvelā refers to a pleasant landscape consisting of a forest grove, a flowing river with suitable banks, and nearby villages where monks could obtain alms. Such descriptions indicate that forests functioned as spiritual retreats while remaining integrated into networks of settlement and subsistence.

The everyday practices of monks further illustrate the close association between forest environments and religious life. Buddhist texts describe monks living at the foot of trees and subsisting on simple resources such as forest fruits and roots while wearing garments made from bark, grass fibres, or animal skins[xiv]. These practices reflected ideals of simplicity and detachment and reinforced the association between forests and ascetic discipline. The *Majjhima Nikāya* and *Vinaya* texts frequently emphasize the suitability of forest environments for such forms of life.

At the same time, Buddhist literature indicates that religious activity also involved the modification of forest landscapes. The *Suttavibhaṅga* describes venerable Channa clearing of sites for monasteries, including the cutting of trees that were locally revered[xv], suggesting that the establishment of religious institutions sometimes involved the transformation of woodland environments. Similarly, the *Mahāvagga*[xvi] records that King Bimbisāra granted attendants and a village to support a monastic community, illustrating the integration of forest monasteries into wider networks of royal patronage and settlement. Religion thus functioned both as a means of preserving forest environments as places of retreat and as a rationale for their occupation through the construction of monasteries and hermitages.

Forests therefore appear in Buddhist literature as complex religious landscapes that combined seclusion with accessibility and spiritual retreat with organized settlement. While forests provided the solitude necessary for meditation and renunciation, they also became centres of religious activity supported by nearby communities and rulers. The spiritual significance of forests thus coexisted with their gradual incorporation into the social and economic structures of early historic India.

Exploitation of the Forest

The expansion of settled agrarian society from the sixth century BCE onward brought forests into increasing contact with human economic activity. Buddhist sources portray forests not as marginal wilderness but as productive environments that supported a wide range of livelihoods and supplied

essential resources to rural and urban society. Woodland areas provided timber, fuel, pasture, medicinal plants, and animal products, forming an important component of the early historic economy. The exploitation of forest resources involved diverse social groups and occupations and linked woodland environments to networks of trade and political authority.

Pāli literature presents forests as important sites of livelihood where multiple social groups operated within shifting ecological and political boundaries. Figures such as the *gopālaka* (herdsman), *migava* (hunter), *sakuṇika* (bird-catcher), and *dārukammika* (woodworker) appear frequently in the Jātakas, illustrating the wide range of occupations dependent upon forest resources. These references indicate that forest products such as timber, honey, medicinal plants, and pasture were integral to rural livelihoods and exchange networks. The presence of such occupations suggests that forests were not isolated environments but areas of regular economic activity closely connected with settled communities.

Buddhist literature provides a vivid picture of the variety of materials obtained from forest environments. Timber, bamboo (*veṇu*, *veḷu*), firewood, resin, lac, honey, fruits, roots, medicinal herbs, and animal products were widely used in everyday life. These materials supported domestic needs as well as artisanal production and long-distance trade. The *Sutta Piṭaka* refers to the use of hardwoods for construction and other commodities derived from woodland environments[xvii], while the *Alīnacitta Jātaka* narrates the story of a carpenter who builds a house using timber procured from the forest, illustrating the integration of forest-based labour into the local economy. Similarly, the *Mahāvagga* describes the construction of the Dhuvasetu, a substantial wooden bridge capable of supporting elephants and caravans, demonstrating both the technical sophistication and infrastructural importance of forest-derived materials[xviii]. References such as that of the Brahmin Bhāradvāja, who earned his livelihood by cutting and selling timber[xix], further indicate that forest produce could provide an independent source of income.

Many forest products were directly accessible to ordinary people and supported daily subsistence. Firewood, fruits, roots, grasses, and creepers were gathered for cooking, housing, animal fodder, and minor crafts. These resources illustrate how forest environments sustained both elite and subsistence economies. Forest fauna also provided important materials: hides, meat, ivory, honey, and beeswax were traded and, in some cases, taxed. Elephants, highly valued for warfare, transport, and royal prestige, were captured and trained in designated forest zones. The *Mahāvagga* describes Lonsuviraka, a complex medicinal preparation made from a combination of forest ingredients such as myrobalan, jungle creepers, sprouts, honey, and molasses[xx], reflecting the role of forests as a rich pharmacological resource. Honey in particular was valued both as a medicinal substance and as a traded commodity. The *Mahāvaṃsa* refers to honey merchants (*madhura-vāṇija*) who derived their livelihood from its sale, indicating the integration of forest produce into commercial exchange networks linking rural producers with urban markets.

The exploitation of forests was also closely connected with the growth of political authority. As discussed in the previous section, the expansion of agriculture and the emergence of tax-paying householders (*gahapati*) contributed to the formation of a stable revenue base for early states. Forested areas formed the outer limits of settled agrarian territory and represented potential zones of expansion and resource extraction. Buddhist sources, particularly the Jātakas, depict forests as regions under royal supervision but inhabited by hunters, ascetics, and other independent groups. These areas functioned both as sources of revenue and as buffer zones at the margins of cultivated territory.

References to royal officials such as the *vanacārika* (forester), mentioned in texts such as the *Sandhibheda Jātaka*, suggest the presence of agents responsible for supervising forest activities, gathering resources, and reporting disturbances to the king. Such figures indicate that forests were gradually drawn into the

sphere of governance and regulated for their economic and strategic importance. Later treatises such as the *Arthaśāstra* systematized this process by classifying forests into categories such as *mṛgavana* (game reserves), *hastyvana* (elephant forests), and *dravyavana* (productive forests), each administered for specific purposes of the state[xxi]. Although Buddhist texts do not describe such administrative arrangements in systematic detail, references to royal hunts, forest taxes such as *veṇubali* (a levy on bamboo)[xxii], and the controlled extraction of valuable resources indicate a similar concern with forest management.

Certain forest commodities possessed particular prestige and were often associated with elite consumption. Sandalwood (*candana*), frequently described in Buddhist literature in elevated or even celestial, was among the most valued forest products. As Romila Thapar statement for romanticisation of forests equivalates as paradisal environments enhanced the symbolic value of such materials, making their control an important marker of social status. The extraction, trade, and use of sandalwood were often confined to state authority and elites such as noble clan or brahman clan or royal clan[xxiii] who used it in rituals, perfumes, medicine, architecture, and as luxury goods and appears in Buddhist contexts in railings, seats, and incense associated with the Buddha. The concentration of valuable forest commodities in the hands of rulers and elites illustrates the close relationship between ecological resources and social hierarchy. Through such mechanisms of regulated extraction and selective access, forests became both economic assets and instruments of political authority.

The evidence of Buddhist literature thus suggests that forests were not marginal environments but economically productive landscapes closely integrated into the life of early historic society. Forest resources supported diverse occupations, supplied essential materials for domestic and artisanal use, and contributed to systems of trade and taxation. Through everyday subsistence as well as organized extraction, woodland environments became an indispensable component of the agrarian and political economy. The exploitation of forests therefore formed an important dimension of the changing relationship between society and the natural environment in early India.

Cultural Imagination: Forests as Symbolic Landscapes

As Romila Thapar has observed, forests in early India were never truly separate from settled society; rather, they shaped the economic life, political organization, and cultural imagination of the communities that bordered them. Buddhist literature reflects this close relationship by presenting forests not only as physical environments but also as symbolic landscapes that expressed social values, moral ideas, and perceptions of the natural world. Narrative traditions such as the Jātakas portray forests as settings where human beings encountered both danger and transformation, and where moral lessons were frequently enacted. Through such representations, forests became spaces in which early Indian society articulated its understanding of the relationship between civilization and wilderness.

Buddhist sources reveal that forests were approached in multiple ways and gave rise to a rich cultural imagination shaped by familiarity as well as uncertainty. Forest landscapes appear as spaces of difference and transition, simultaneously integrated into social life and set apart from the ordered world of villages and towns. Religious traditions played an important role in shaping these perceptions by embedding forests within narrative and symbolic frameworks. Forests were widely known as places of retreat for recluses and ascetics, but they also appear in narrative traditions as spaces of exile or danger. The *Apaṇṇaka Jātaka* describes five kinds of wilderness such as the wilderness of robbers, wild beasts, drought, demons, and famine illustrating the range of dangers associated with woodland environments. As Thapar has suggested, forests were often imagined in contrasting ways: romanticized as places of abundance and beauty while also feared as regions inhabited by dangerous beings and unpredictable forces.

Forests also appear in Buddhist literature as sacred landscapes marked by the presence of supernatural beings. Tree worship and sacred groves formed an important part of local religious practice, and particular trees were revered as the dwelling places of spirits and protective deities. The Bodhi tree, most famously associated with the enlightenment of the Buddha, represents the highest expression of the sacred significance attributed to trees. At a more local level, Buddhist narratives frequently refer to tree spirits and woodland deities. The *Devadhamma Jātaka* and *Kaṇḍina Jātaka* refer to Bodhisattas dwelling as tree spirits in forest groves, while the *Kuṇḍakapūva Jātaka* describes villagers bringing offerings to a tree spirit during a festival. Similarly, the *Āyācitabhatta Jātaka* mentions a village that had promised a sacrifice to the spirit of a banyan tree standing at its entrance. Such references indicate that woodland environments were regarded as spiritually inhabited spaces requiring respect and ritual observance.

The reverence accorded to trees is also reflected in Buddhist disciplinary literature. The *Dhammapada Commentary*[xxiv] records the story of a monk who angered a tree spirit by attempting to cut down a tree in which the spirit resided, illustrating the belief that forest trees were inhabited by supernatural beings. At the same time, Buddhist texts refer to a variety of spirits associated with forest environments, including *yakkhas*, *yakkhinīs*, water ogres, and demons. These figures represent the fearful dimension of the forest imagination and suggest the perceived dangers that lay beyond the boundaries of settled life. Such beliefs contributed to the construction of symbolic boundaries between cultivated society and the wilderness.

Yet forests were not imagined solely as dangerous or sacred spaces; they were also valued for their rare and prestigious resources. Certain forest products, particularly sandalwood and elephants, acquired symbolic as well as economic importance. Sandalwood (*candana*) is frequently described in Buddhist literature in elevated or even celestial terms. The *Milindapañha*[xxv] associates' sandalwood with purity and divine qualities, while the *Divyāvadāna*[xxvi] refers to a forest of *gosīrṣa* sandalwood protected by the yakṣa Maheśvara and reserved for the use of a universal monarch. Such accounts demonstrate how valuable forest resources could be incorporated into religious and political imagination. The association of rare forest commodities with divine protection and royal authority reflects the prestige attached to the control of forest wealth.

Buddhist representations of forests therefore reveal a complex cultural understanding of woodland environments. Forests were imagined simultaneously as places of danger and protection, wilderness and sacred space, isolation and abundance. These symbolic meanings existed alongside the economic exploitation and religious use of forests discussed in earlier sections. Buddhist literature reveals that forests were not only material environments but also landscapes shaped by imagination, belief, and narrative traditions. The cultural imagination of forests thus formed an essential dimension of the environmental history of early India, reflecting the ways in which human communities interpreted and gave meaning to the natural landscapes in which they lived.

Conclusion

The evidence of early Buddhist literature demonstrates that forests occupied a central place in the environmental and social landscape of early historic India between the sixth century BCE and the third century CE. Rather than existing as isolated wilderness beyond the margins of society, forests formed dynamic environments that were closely integrated into patterns of settlement, religious practice, economic activity, and cultural thought. The relationship between human communities and forest landscapes evolved through multiple forms of interaction that together shaped the environmental history of the period.

The transition from mobile forms of life to settled agrarian society brought forests into increasing contact with human activity and gradually transformed woodland environments into zones of cultivation and political control. As agricultural expansion progressed, forests came to mark the shifting frontier between cultivated land and uncultivated space. The emergence of agrarian households, systems of taxation, and royal authority contributed to the incorporation of forested regions into the economic and administrative structure of early states.

At the same time, forests retained profound religious significance. Buddhist sources consistently portray forests as environments suited to meditation and renunciation, where monks and ascetics withdrew from the routines of settled life. Woodland landscapes thus functioned as important centres of spiritual discipline and religious knowledge. The religious valuation of forests helped preserve their importance even as agrarian expansion brought them within the sphere of settled society.

Forests also formed an essential component of the economic life of early historic India. Woodland environments supported a wide range of occupations and supplied materials such as timber, bamboo, medicinal plants, honey, and animal products. These resources sustained rural households, artisanal production, and networks of trade while also contributing to systems of taxation and royal control. Through everyday subsistence and organized extraction, forests became indispensable to the agrarian and political economy.

Beyond their material importance, forests occupied a prominent place in the cultural imagination of early Indian society. Buddhist narratives portray forests as spaces of danger and refuge, sacred presence and supernatural power, moral testing and transformation. Woodland environments were imagined simultaneously as realms of uncertainty and abundance, inhabited by animals, spirits, and ascetics. These symbolic meanings reveal how forests shaped not only economic and religious life but also broader cultural perceptions of the natural world.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that forests were neither peripheral nor static environments but active participants in the historical development of early Indian society. The environmental history of early India can therefore be better understood by recognizing forests as landscapes that were inhabited, revered, exploited, and imagined in multiple ways. Buddhist sources provide a particularly valuable window into this complex relationship, revealing the diverse ways in which human communities engaged with forest environments. The study of forests thus illuminates the broader processes through which early historic society transformed and interpreted the natural world.

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