



## Mountains and Forests of the Ancient Punjab as Reflected in the Literary Sources

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the physical features of the ancient Punjab's geography with respect to the mountains and forests which appears as incidental references in various literary sources. Its location, extent, size, and characteristics have been discussed in this paper. The mountains and forests acted as natural borders/contours between different regions in the past. These features also helped in containing, protecting, and nurturing the distinct regional identity of the Punjab.

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### Introduction

Ancient Punjab can be defined on two grounds- First is on its distinct geographical identity supported by the formation of 'Doabs' in Indus drainage basin by the perennial rivers originating from Himalayas and draining into the Arabian Sea. Second, on its distinct socio-cultural identity supported by its heterogeneous traits and the development of Oligarchic order (Gana-Samghas) as a distinct political formation in this region which was a strikingly unique feature in the political sphere of rest of Indian Subcontinent. The name 'Punjab' in modern times have been assigned to political-cum-administrative unit/s. India and Pakistan both have Punjab provinces with well-defined territorial boundaries. It was in the medieval period when, for the first time, term 'Punjab' was linked to this region. Abul Fazl's '*Ain-e-Akbari*' (Vol. 2) describes the territory of the Punjab (collectively known as '*Panjnad*'), divided in two provinces i.e. *Subah of Lahore* and *Subah of Multan*, located between various interfluves or doabs for tax and revenue administration.<sup>1</sup> The etymology of the word 'Punjab' during the medieval period is more or less linked to the five rivers or the five doabs. J.S. Grewal refers to David Ross's opinion that, the



word 'Punjab' was used as a metaphor for a well-defined territorial unit.<sup>ii</sup> It is not clear whether it was used for the rivers or the doabs. However, J. S. Grewal put his stake in favour of five doabs, which ultimately links this appellation with six rivers.<sup>iii</sup> Historical records assigned various terms as names of ancient Punjab such as 'Sapta-Sindhu' (in Rig Veda), 'Hapta-Hendu' (in Zend-Avesta), 'Pentapotamia' (in Greek sources) and 'Panchnada' (in the Mahabharata, Puranas and Patanjali's writings) which commonly indicates us towards its distinguished geographical characteristic i.e. the riverine system. Whereas, 'Vahika' and 'Aratta' (mentioned both in 'the Mahabharata and Panini's writings) are the names which attributed to its distinguished socio-cultural characteristics. All these terms/names showcased the geographical extent of ancient Punjab in varying degrees. The study of etymology of these terms introduces us to the geographical horizon in their preview and their respective geographical contours. Roughly, we can conclude that all these terms referred to the area which lies between Hindukush range of Himalayas in the west to Yamuna River in the east; and from Pir Panjal range of Himalayas to the deserts of Sindh, Bahawalpur and Multan along with the lost tract of Ghaggar-Hakra River (ancient Saraswati River) in the south. It can be noted that, in ancient times, due to the absence of modern technologically advanced cartographic techniques, the geographical boundaries of a region were demarcated by the physical features on the topographic relief of the land i.e. the mountains, forests, rivers, rivulets, streams, soil classification, etc. Examining the nomenclature of the ancient Punjab, we find that the rivers or the doabs (interfluvial plains) of Indus river system totally dominated it. Basically, the hydrology of Punjab gave it a distinct geographical identity. As the Indus drainage system is the core of Punjab's hydrology, we come upto the mountains or the highlands which formed watershed divide of this drainage basin. It can be said that these mountains acted as contours to the Punjab plains. The mountains have been recorded with different appellations in various historical records which are enlisted below-

### **Mountains of the ancient Punjab:**

**Himavat:** It is generally identified as Himalayas, also called as Hermangiri, Himacala etc. The Mahabharata (VI.6.3) records the Himavat as the range stretching from the western to the eastern ocean. The eastern ocean in the Mahabharata may referred to the Bay of Bengal as Arakan Yoma, an eastern extension of the Himalayas runs upto it. The Sulaiman and Kirthar Ranges are the western extension of the Himalayas runs towards the Arabian sea, thus possibly referred as the western ocean. Markandeya Purana identifies the Himavat with a shape of bow.<sup>iv</sup> If we observe the Himalayas from the top, starting from Kirthar-Sulaiman Ranges to the Pamirs, and from Pamirs to the Purvanchal Himalaya, and



extending up to Arakan Yoma Range, the shape of bow appears before us. The Himalayas has been called as Emodus and Imaus by the Greeks. The former denotes the part of Himalayan range running along Nepal and Bhutan, also extending further to the eastern ocean (upto Bay of Bengal).<sup>v</sup> The latter refers to the Kashmir and Kumaon Himalayas, and also the Hindukush mountains.<sup>vi</sup> The Himalayan ranges acts as natural frontiers of ancient Punjab. The Pir Panjal range differentiates it from the Kashmir. The Hindukush mountains set up its northern frontier by separating it from the Swat region. Similarly, the Safed Koh mountains set up the north-western or the most contested frontier of ancient Punjab with Afghanistan. Further, Sulaiman mountains acts as western frontier to middle and lower portion of ancient Punjab.

**Nisadhparvata:** In the Saptadvipa Vasumati concept, Nisadhparvata has been described as a *varsa-parvata* between Mt. Meru or *Ilavrta varsha* and Hari varsha. It runs to the south of Mt. Meru. The Bhagwat Purana counts it as the *marayada-parvata* or the boundary range, along with Paripatra both on the west of Mt. Meru. Whereas, in the Saptadvipa concept, Malyavat-parvata is placed to the west of Mt. Meru. B. C. Law's hypothesis clears the air which identify both Nishada-parvata and Malyavat-parvata as different segments of the Hindukush mountains.<sup>vii</sup> Hindukush forms the north to north-western frontier of the ancient Punjab. The Greek writers called the central part of the Hindukush as *Paropamisos*. They called *Imaus* as the boundary of Nishada-parvata in the north and Caucasian mountain (Caucasus) as its eastern boundary.<sup>viii</sup> The Greeks identifies the hills lying in Kashmir as *Imaus*. The Pamirs to the north can be considered as the northern most extent of the Hindukush mountains. Arakhosia (eastern Afghanistan) lies to the south of Nisadha-parvata. Arakhosia can be compared with Mt. Rksoda of the Panini's writings. Arakhosia is detached from ancient Punjab by the Safed- Koh mountains and lies to the west of Peshawar. It was once a satrapy of Achaemenid empire which once extended up to Indus River. Alberuni refers Mt. Nishada to in the close proximity to the Visnupada lake,<sup>ix</sup> the source of Arghandab river of Afghanistan or the Persian Harauvati/Harkavati, often compared with the Sarasvati River. The source of Arghandab river lies in Jaghori district in Ghazni province of Afghanistan in the Hindukush mountains. We find another name for Hindukush from Panini as Lohitagiri or Rohitagiri, which gave the name 'Roha' to Afghanistan in medieval records.<sup>x</sup>

**Anjana-giri:** Anjana-giri is one amongst the Trikakat triplet ranges. It is identified as Sulaiman Mountain range from the description given in Panini's records (V.4.147).<sup>xi</sup> One amongst the other two members of this triplet consists the Toba Kakar or Toba Kakari range, extended southwards into



Balochistan. Bolan Pass is an important pass of this range. The third member of the Trikakut ranges is the Shingar Hill which also lies in Balochistan. Trikakut is a Vedic term recorded in Atharva-Veda (IV.9.8). The Vayu Purana refers this mountain to the west of Sitoda lake,<sup>xii</sup> one of the four lakes lie around Mt Meru (lie on the west of Meru). Mt. Meru is supposed to be located between Oxus valley and Tarim valley. The Jains called this mountain as Avasyaka Curni.<sup>xiii</sup> We also find this mountain in the Puranic concept of *Kurmavibhaga* which supports the view, that the shape of Bharatavarsha is like a tortoise. The Markandeya Purana (Ch. 58) locates the different kingdoms of the Bharatavarsha in nine land divisions identically located in nine limbs of the *Kurma* (tortoise). Varahamihira's Brihatsamhita, a commentary on astronomy informs us about another Anjana Mountain lie in the face (head) of the tortoise facing towards east.<sup>xiv</sup>

**Pancaladhara:** Pancaladhara and Pancaladeva both the terms are associated with the Pir Panjal mountains. M.A. Stein quotes a 11<sup>th</sup> century poet Ksemendra which used the former term for a pass of Pir Panjal whereas, the latter term was used by a 15<sup>th</sup> century poet Srivara to refer the Pir Panjal range.<sup>xv</sup> The Pir Panjal range separates the Punjab from Kashmir.

**Mainakagiri:** Shivalik range is the outermost Himalayan range. B.C. Law considers 'Mainakapurvata' of the ancient records as Shivalik range. However, the Mainakapurvata only refers to the segment of Shivaliks extends from Beas to Ganga rivers. Although this range runs from the Beas to the Brahmaputra rivers and covers over 2400 kms from east to west. The Yoni Tantra text originated from Assam, refers to this hill in close proximity of Brahmaputra River. This mountain has been assigned with different names in its different segments i.e., Churia and Dundwa range. Shivalik range separates the Punjab plains from the hilly terrains. Shivalik and Pir Panjal ranges were the natural frontiers which lie in diagonal position in north-east of ancient Punjab. Shivaliks were the once the home of Soan culture.<sup>xvi</sup> From the archaeological remains, they are differentiated by the variety of choppers, scrappers and flake tools they used.

**Saindhavaranya:** It is identified with the modern Salt range. This range was famous for the extraction of a special type of rock salt, popularly known as 'Saindha Namak (Salt).' The Jhelum River runs almost parallel to its south, and Potohar plateau lies on its north. Saindhavas tribe were known for their exemplary warlike skills. Their capital has been termed as Simhapura by Hiuen Tsiang.<sup>xvii</sup> Strabo addresses that the King Sophytes or Saubhuti, was ruling over the vast area of Salt range during the advent of the Alexander's invasion.<sup>xviii</sup>



**Sveta-parvata:** It is identified as Safed-Koh Mountains of the Afghanistan.<sup>xix</sup> This range always acted as a natural border between eastern Afghanistan and ancient Punjab. The Kabul River cuts across this range while flowing in the easterly direction to join the Indus River. The Khyber Pass of this range connected the eastern Afghanistan with mainland India through Punjab plains. According to the present geo-political setup, it separates the Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province from Afghanistan. It is also known with the name of Dhabala-giri, referred in the Mahabharata's Sabhaparva. It was reached out by Arjuna along with other mountains i.e. Himacala and Niskuta-parvata while approaching towards Kimpurusa-varsa and Hari-varsa.<sup>xx</sup>

### **Forests of the ancient Punjab:**

We get information about the forests of ancient India from Vedic literature, the Epics and the Puranas. We get incidental references to the local forest from the journeys and exiles of Princes/Kings. The epic of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata introduces us to various forests of the time, and the characteristics and location of these forests. Likewise, the records containing military expeditions of the Greeks, Bactrians and Kushans gives us references to the forests they had crossed. The travellers and merchants' accounts also have record of these forests. Some of the forests of ancient Punjab which appears prominently in the records are as under-

**Khandava forest:** Khandava forest was the southern boundary of the country of Kuru tribe called Kurukshetra (corresponds with modern Sirhind and Ambala-Karnal region), while Turghna and Parinah were its northern and western boundaries respectively.<sup>xxi</sup> A Puranic legend records that River Asvaratha (identified as Yamuna) transversed through it.<sup>xxii</sup> On this basis, N.L. Dey proposes that it was extended from Bulandshahr (U.P.) to Saharnpur (U.P.).<sup>xxiii</sup> In such a way, this forest could have covered the northern-most plains of Ganga-Yamuna divide, consisting of modern districts of Muzaffarnagar, Saharnpur, Meerut and Bulandshahr. The Saraswati River probably flowed to the north of this forest. Thus, this forest acted as southern frontier of the ancient Punjab. The Saraswati River separated the north India into two parts i.e. Udicya on its northwest and Pracya on its southeast.<sup>xxiv</sup> Udicya and Pracya are two of the five land divisions enlisted in the Aiteraya Brahmana (VIII.14). The area covered by ancient Punjab corresponds with Udicya division. Thus, the Khandava forest lied on the ancient trade route called Uttarpatha connecting Central Asia with Gangetic plains.

**Kurujangala:** It compromised the eastern part of the Kuru kingdom, a kingdom which held a large land tract between the northern Panchalas and the Ganga River.<sup>xxv</sup> This forest was joined with Kamyaka



forest on its left flank and Khandava forest on its right flank. The Khandava forest compromised the Ganga-Yamuna divide whereas, in all possibilities the Kurujangala may be spranged from the right bank of Yamuna to the left bank of Saraswati River. Thus, this forest lied on the southern frontier of ancient Punjab. The Kurujangala compromised with modern districts of Rohtak, Hisar and Hansi of Haryana. It is recorded as one among the three territorial divisions of the Kurukshetra, while the other two were the Kurukshetra plains (the cultivated land) and the Kuru's country (Kuru-rashtra).<sup>xxvi</sup> As it was a part of Kurukshetra, it is also known with the name of 'Brahmavedi'.<sup>xxvii</sup>

**Kamyakavana:** Kamyakavana is referred in Vanaparva of the Mahabharata during the narrative when the Pandavas left Hastinapur. They proceeded towards the eastern bank of Ganga, forded it and went into western direction to cross Yamuna and the Kurukshetra plains to reach Kamyakavana lie along the Saraswati River.<sup>xxviii</sup> This forest had a Kamyaka lake within it. It lay on the western boundary of Kuru kingdom. It was joined with Kurujangala which was further merged in Khandava forest.<sup>xxix</sup> These three forests formed a shape of an arc which over-looked the Kuru plains on its south-west. The Mahabharata text tells us that the Pandava spent most of their exile in the forests of Kamyakavana and Dvaitavana. The flora and fauna and the persistent supply of fresh water (Saraswati River stream) in this forest catered their needs of food and water. However, the vegetation becomes sparse due to arid conditions in the south where the Kamyaka vana merges with the Thar desert.<sup>xxx</sup>

**Dwaitavana:** Dwaitavana is a forest associated with the Dvaita Lake in Mahabharata. The Pandavas visited and stayed three times during their exile in forest. It was supposed as more secluded place which the Pandavas used to stay away from the royal spies. It was the free land, without the control of any monarch which lied close to a desert on the Saraswati bank. Tangana was on its north-east and Kurekshetra and Hastinapur on its south-east.<sup>xxxi</sup> This description makes us to believe that this forest was located on the lower basin of Saraswati River, on the edge of Thar Desert.

**Tamasvana:** Alexander Cunningham refers to the Tamasavana while tracing the route of Hiuen Tsang, a 7<sup>th</sup> century CE Chinese traveller to India. He identifies it with the wild region lie near modern Sultanpur (Distt. Kapurthala) in the Punjab. Sultanpur is situated at the confluence of two rivers of Sutlej and Beas. Hiuen Tsang travelled 25 miles eastwards from Patti town (Distt. Taran Taran) to reach Tamasvana monastery.<sup>xxxii</sup> Thence, he proceeded to the north-east direction and reached Jalandhar after travelling 24 miles.<sup>xxxiii</sup>



**Panchanada forest:** Panchanada forest or the Punjab Forest was one of the eight forests classified for elephants.<sup>xxxiv</sup> These forests inhabited different elephants' species, and catered the needs of these beasts. Elephants were the war machines used to carry heavy loads, and used in other tactical-cum-strategic tasks i.e. clearing the marching path, lifting of logs, crossing the rivers, piercing the walls of enemies' forts etc. These beasts were always looked upon as most desirable item in the war booty and the item used in exchange of gifts between different kingdoms. These forests were in eight different cardinal points which had eight different Dig-gajas (elephant species) and Dik-palas (lord of the quarter). Panchanada forest had Marut (Vaaya) as its Dik-pala and inhabited Kumuda Dig-gaja/species.<sup>xxxv</sup> Arthashastra has divided the eight countries into three quality-rankings for elephants in which Panchanada forest elephant species has been given the lowest rank.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The rankings were based on the speed, strength and spirit of these beasts. The geographical extent of Panchanada forest is referred in three different historical records mentioned below. *Vishnudharmottra Purana* recorded its northern, southern, western, eastern frontiers as Himalaya, Kalika, Sindhu (Indus River) and Kurujangala respectively.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Kalika is identified as Kali Sindh, a tributary of River Chambal.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The Kurujangala was the forest tract sprawled in the eastern part of Kuru Kingdom, between northern Panchalas and the Ganga River.<sup>xxxix</sup> Possibly, River Saraswati separated the Panchanada and the Kurujangala forests. The *Manosollasa*, an encyclopaedia written by King Someswara III (1126-1138 CE) also refers to the Panchanada forest having the Himalayas on its north, Indus River delta in its south, Kalanjara (or Kalinjara, on the border of Kashmir) in its west and Kurukshetra in its east.<sup>xl</sup> Post 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, we find Gandhara become the dependency of the Kashmir kingdom,<sup>xli</sup> thence the Kashmir's western frontiers extended upto Peshawar. In such a way, the *Manosollasa's* description of Panchanada almost covered the whole of Indus River basin. This forest is also recorded in prose of Dandin, who served in the court of Narasimhavarman II (680-722 CE), called *Avantisundarikatha*. It is a love story of a beautiful lady of Avanti (a kingdom comprised of Malwa region) and a royal Prince. It recorded the Panchanada forest extended from the middle of Kashmir to the Sirmur Hills.<sup>xlii</sup> This hilly tract supplies water to several rivers and streams flowing through present Punjab and Haryana. Dandin has referred to a segment of Panchanada called Kalkavana on Himalayan foothills supplying water to streams of Kurukshetra region.<sup>xliii</sup> It is possibly the Kalka, in present Ambala district of Haryana. In the above references, the *Vishnudharmottra Purana's* description have recorded Panchanada forests' North-South-West-East frontiers. Whereas in the *Manosollasa* and the *Avantisundarikatha*, its territorial extent has been described in a diagonal manner.



**Haritavana:** Haritavana is another forest which we find in the vicinity of ancient Punjab. It was popular for the high-quality horses presented by its rulers, the Yavanas (Greeks) to the rulers of Magadha. It was located in the west of ancient Punjab, near Heart (Afghanistan) alongside of Hari-Rud River.<sup>xliv</sup>

## Conclusion

The mountains and forests hold immense importance as these topographic features gave distinct identity to the ancient Punjab. These acted as natural defence line separated the regions. These were also used to demarcate frontiers by setting natural boundaries of various kingdoms. Understanding the location and characteristics of these features along with the political developments helps us to understand how the historical narrative and the events occurred due to these features. The Sulaiman and Hindukush mountains in the west and north-west respectively, and the Pir Panjal, Dhauladhar and Shiwalik ranges in the north were the natural frontiers of ancient Punjab. Similarly, the forests also acted as a natural defense against the intruders and acted as natural boundaries of regions or kingdoms. The forests of ancient Punjab covered the sub-montane and the plains extending from the Yamuna river in the east to the eastern most Afghanistan. Various scriptures imbibe us with the knowledge of use and management of forests. It also showcases the life of the forest dwellers. The Shastras or the scriptures of Charaka and Susruta throws light upon the aesthetic, medicinal qualities, and uses of various plant species. Knowing the historical importance of these features, multiple disciplines can get the insights for fresh research

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