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Sacred Groves, the Brahmanical Hermit, and Some Remarks on *ahimsā* and Vegetarianism

ABSTRACT: The term ‘sacred grove’ is used to denote an area of vegetation that is afforded special protection on religious grounds. In India, where sacred groves are known by a wide repertoire of local names, such places may be found right from the Himalayas up to the far South. Sacred groves host veneration of natural phenomena or elements of landscape, but also ancestral, local, folk or tribal gods and Sanskritised deities; the use of their resources is strictly regulated. Research studies on sacred groves in India often consider them to be a legacy of archaic economic forms, possibly harking back to the stage of hunters-gatherers, and an expression of a religiosity dating back to a remote, non-Aryan, pre-Vedic antiquity. However, main sources for our knowledge of Indian antiquity, namely the literary sources, provide no direct record of voices of such archaic societies. Nonetheless, the same sources allow us to highlight some important aspects of the sacredness anciently ascribed to vegetation, forest, and specific places therein. The present paper proposes to focus on the Brahmanical hermit’s distinct relationship with the forest and examine some aspects related to food.

KEYWORDS: sacred groves, forest, Ilā, Urvaśī and Purūravas, hermit, Dharmasūtras, *Mānavadharmasāstra*, *ahimsā*, vegetarianism

Sacred groves

The generic term 'sacred grove' is now used in various countries and continents to refer to an area of vegetation that is given special protection. A general and often quoted definition states the following:

Sacred groves are segments of the landscape, containing trees and other forms of life and geographical features, that are delimited and protected by human societies because it is believed that to keep them in a relatively undisturbed state is an expression of important relationship to the divine or to nature. (Hughes and Chandran 1998: 69)

Such places are extremely numerous in India, where they may be found from the Himalayas up to the far South, and are referred to by a wide repertoire of local names. States such as Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Odisha, and Kerala have probably the highest density of places of this kind, the characteristics of which are exceedingly varied. These sacred groves may consist of large tracts of forest or minimal wooded areas; they may have been left untouched or be subjected to regulations regarding resource gathering and water use; their management may depend on official administrative bodies, or they may be owned by families or communities. In these groves, natural processes or elements, ancestral, local, folk or tribal gods, or Sanskritised deities are worshipped in various ways.

In recent decades sacred groves have been the subject of a large number of studies, either general or devoted to individual cases or areas, with widespread field surveys. The studies focus on sacredness, the cults and forms of religiosity involved, the characteristics of the communities of reference (caste, tribal, etc.), the protection of the environment, and, in this sense, on the very important ecological role these areas play in the preservation of biodiversity, as well as on the threat that sometimes hangs over them due to the allocation of land for other economic purposes or for infrastructure. Extensive information, statistics, and bibliographies on the subject have been collected in Malhotra et al. 2001, including an annotated bibliog-

raphy comprising 146 entries, and in Malhotra et al. 2007, probably the most comprehensive and detailed survey on the subject to date. However, there has been a massive increase in publications devoted to these places in more recent years.

Much emphasis is placed on the primary connection of these areas with local, marginal, or tribal cults, so much so that their Sanskritisation—for instance, the introduction of a small temple dedicated to a pan-Indian deity—is sometimes judged to be a kind of intrusion, or at least a sign of transformation. In fact, in reference studies, Indian sacred groves are often considered to be the legacy of archaic economic forms, possibly from the stage of hunters-gatherers, and the expression of a religiosity dating back to remote non-Aryan and pre-Vedic antiquity. One of the studies that is generically referred to in order to substantiate this assumption is the still inspiring work by D. D. Kosambi where the scholar, to use his own words, proposes “to trace the primitive roots of some Indian myths and rituals that survived the beginning of civilization and indeed survive to this day” (Kosambi 1962: 2).¹ Recent authors have reiterated this view and stated: “Sacred grove culture in India has pre-Vedic roots” (Ray et al. 2014: 21); “Indian sacred groves have pre-Vedic origin. They are associated with indigenous/tribal communities who believe in divinity of nature and natural resources” (Agarwal 2016: 129); “India has an ancient tradition of conserving nature that goes right back to the pre-Vedic age” (Amirthalingam 2016: 64).

But, as is well known, our essential sources for the knowledge of Indian antiquity, that is, literary sources, have not recorded direct voices of such archaic, popular or tribal social strata and, ultimately, however plausible and appealing it may be, the projection of the origin of the sacred groves in India into a distant past does not, in general, appear to be substantiated by clear evidence.² On the basis of the

¹ In this perspective, Kosambi analyses the myths of Urvaśī and Purūravas and Ila/ Ilā, and the location of the birth of the future Buddha in Lumbinī, emphasising the ancient sacredness of groves. On these subjects, see below.

² Note that Eliza F. Kent, while stressing the difficulty of tracing some form of origin of the sacred groves of India in a distant past, places the sacred groves of her

extant sources, however, it is possible to highlight some important aspects of the sacredness anciently ascribed to the forest, and specific places therein.

Some ancient traces

Looking back to the earliest sources, it is impossible not to recall the deification of wild nature expressed in the famous hymn X.146 of the *R̥gveda*. This hymn is dedicated to Aranyāni, the personification of the forest, the “mother of wild beasts,” *mṛgāṅām mātāram* (R̥g X.146.6). In the enchanting phrasing of this composition, a contrast appears to be emphasised between the reassuring reality of the village and the poet’s own disquietude, a disquietude that Aranyāni herself, according to the poet, cannot avoid feeling in face of her own disturbing essence. A notable stanza seems to establish a kind of pact between forest and man:

In truth, the Lady of the Wilderness does no slaughter, if someone
else does not attack.
 Having eaten sweet fruit, one settles down at pleasure. (R̥g X.146.5)³

Many centuries later, myth and literature testify to the existence of wild places that, being imbued with the divine presence, transform those who mistakenly enter them. Most famous is the birth myth of Purūravas, the progenitor of the lunar lineage, begotten by Ilā, who, as the *Mahābhārata* says, is both his “mother and father” (*mātā pitā ca-*, MBh I.70.16). The *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Harivaṃśa*, and a large number of Purāṇas narrate the story with many variations, involving Ilā’s several sex changes. The central feature of the myth is the fact that Ila (or Sudyumna) changes from a man into a woman

research area, Tamil Nadu, in relation to the political-administrative context of the 18th century, when the region was ruled by local chieftains, the *pāḷaiyakkārars* (Kent 2013).

³ *nā vā aranyānīr hanyā anyās cēn nābhigāchati / svādōh phālasya jagdhvāya yathākā maṇi nī padyate //*. Transl. Jamison and Brereton 2014.

(Ilā) on entering a forest that is an exclusive abode of Śiva and his bride, Pārvaṭī. The place is often referred to as a Forest of Reeds (*śaravaṇa*); the *Rāmāyaṇa*, for example, explicitly defines it as the place where Kumāra-Kārttikeya was born (Rām VII.78.10), which, as is well known, is precisely a grove of reeds.⁴ Most probably Kālidāsa has this very myth in mind when he composes Act Four of the *Vikramorvaśīya*, where the nymph Urvaśī, in a fit of jealousy caused by Purūravas, and forgetting that the place is forbidden to women, enters the grove of the god Kumāra and is immediately transformed into a creeper. Here, as is his habit, Kālidāsa reformulates and reorients the myth with a certain amount of bonhomie. In any case, Ilā's story and Kālidāsa's poetic reworking evoke the existence of groves invested with taboos, the violation of which carries serious consequences.

An important point of convergence between vegetation and sacredness is evident in the pre-Buddhist and pre-Hindu figures of the *yakṣīs*, female spirits often connected with trees and fertility. The earliest Indian Buddhist art portrayed these popular deities in the posture of the so-called *śālabhañjikās*, female figures holding on to the branch of a tree with one arm.⁵ Queen Māyā giving birth to the future Buddha is regularly depicted in the *śālabhañjikā* posture. As already done earlier by Kosambi (cf. fn 1), André Bareau has explained the placement of the future Buddha's birth in the Lumbinī grove in connection with the local worship of one of such *yakṣīs* (Bareau 1987). One could further recall the sacredness of certain trees throughout Indian cultural history, primarily the *bodhi* tree, under which the Buddha attained his enlightenment; sacralization of individual trees is still a common occurrence in India.

⁴ For sources and variants of the Ilā/Ilā myth and its interpretations see especially Hertel 1911; Brown 1927: 13–14; Doniger O'Flaherty 1980: 303–309; Doniger 1999: 270–278 and *passim*.

⁵ For the sake of brevity, we merely mention DeCaroli 2004 on archaic folk deities, and in general on the sacredness of trees (see below) Nugteren 2005. An ample bibliography on the *śālabhañjikā* can be found in Pieruccini 2023.

Within this multifaceted topic, however, what we intend to investigate here is more specifically whether a historical connection can be fruitfully sought between sacred groves and the Brahmanical practice of forest hermitage. A hint to this effect is given, for example, by Romila Thapar, when she writes: “The suggestion for a hermitage could have come from the existing sacred groves, located either on the peripheries, or in the dense areas of the forest” (Thapar 2001: 7). As we shall see, the connection remains but a hypothesis even on the basis of a detailed textual investigation; however, we believe that such an investigation may offer several significant insights.

The Brahmanical hermit: Housing, clothing, and food

The history of Brahmanical hermitic practice can be very briefly recapitulated as follows. As is well known, in the canonical doctrine of the *āśramas*, the *vānaprastha* or hermit is the man in the third of the so-called ‘stages of life’ that structure the life of a male belonging primarily to the brahmanical class; this stage comes after that of the celibate student, *brahmacārin*, and that of the householder, *gṛhastha*, and is in turn followed by the stage of the renunciate, the so-called *saṃnyāsin*, or wandering ascetic.⁶ However, as has been clearly demonstrated by Patrick Olivelle’s detailed research (Olivelle 1993—we extensively rely on his studies in these pages), the stages were initially seen as possible alternative life choices, and not temporary ones to be pursued one after the other. These stages appear to reflect the existing patterns of life which, in practice, were widely experienced as independent options even after the formulation of the *āśrama* doctrine. Furthermore, with their subsumption into the last two stages, the normative texts on *dharma* reveal a great variety of attitudes that can be defined as ascetic:

⁶ Given the variety of terminology in the texts, we will regularly use the terms ‘hermit’ and ‘wandering ascetic.’ Of course, by ‘Vedic student’ we mean the *brahmacārin*.

These two *āśramas* bring under two classificatory rubrics a variety of concrete life styles on the basis of some common features. [...] The classificatory nature of the *āśramas*, especially of the last two, is indicated, moreover, by the numerous subclassifications they were subjected to in later literature. (Olivelle 1993: 25–26)

These subclassifications, which appear in the normative texts as we approach the middle of the first millennium CE, cannot be considered entirely unrelated to reality but, as is typical of the whole classificatory approach of the Brahmanical texts, they present a high level of artificiality.

As for hermitic practice, it is possible to infer in the late Vedic period the existence of Brahman householders who chose a life out of the ordinary, devoting themselves to sacrifices and *tapas*, ‘austerities.’ They isolated themselves from society, at times in the company of their wives and children; and, indeed, such situations are amply documented in the epics. On the other hand, the forest hermit soon becomes a legacy of the past, in favour of the now ideally prevalent religious figure of the wandering ascetic. Olivelle writes: “It appears that by the first few centuries of the common era the institution of forest hermits had become obsolete, its memory preserved only in legend, poetry, and drama” (Olivelle 1993: 174). In fact, the wandering ascetic is the religious man who seeks liberation, *mokṣa*; whereas the hermit, as the texts describe him, is linked to Vedic sacrifice, in short, to a more ancient phase of religiosity. In our opinion, this seems to be the decisive reason for the evolution of the practices.

In the ancient Dharmasūtras, the earliest texts presenting the rules for hermits according to the Brahmanical *dharma*, the canonical doctrine of the *āśramas* is still in fieri; in contrast, in the *Mānava-dharmaśāstra* (hereafter, Manu), the doctrine of the progressive *āśramas* is well established. All these texts, in any case, appear to have been composed, irrespective of later reworkings and additions (particularly relevant in Bauddhāyana, see below), at a time when the practice of retreating to a hermitage was still present or not too remote; i.e., roughly from the 3rd century BCE to the 2nd–3rd century CE

as far as Manu is concerned.⁷ Now, the passages that regulate the life of the hermit in these texts, the texture of which is at times very complex, have been widely studied. Nonetheless, here we propose a brief re-reading of some of their significant notations, useful in highlighting how they conceive of the hermit's relationship with the forest, also considering, with Baudhāyana, a perhaps slightly later voice. Obviously, for an individual who isolates himself from society, these relationships are primarily defined in terms of the basic needs of housing, clothing and food.

Āpastamba states that the hermit must live without any shelter, sleeping on the bare ground and giving protection only to the sacred fire (ĀDh II.21.21; II.22.21–23). The text, however, provides also an alternative: he can also build himself a house outside the village and live there with his wife and children, or alone (ĀDh II.22.8–9). In the first case, Āpastamba refers to a young unmarried man who becomes a hermit right after completing his studies; the second case is of a man who leaves the village community after contracting marriage. The variation (cf. also Manu VI.3) appears to be related either to different current practices, or to theological debates taking place at the time about access to the hermit way of life (Olivelle 1993: 113–114).⁸ In turn, Vasiṣṭha holds that the hermit must live at the foot of a tree, and, after a period of six months, renounce a (fixed) abode and the fire itself (VaDh IX.11). Manu, too, envisages a kind of higher level that fades into the stage of the wandering ascetic: this involves the internalisation of the sacred fire and thus the concrete elimination of fire itself, the renunciation of a fixed abode, sleeping on bare

⁷ We refer to the dates proposed by Olivelle. In his opinion, and even taking into account that these texts were subject to several later additions, the dating of the Dharmasūtras of Āpastamba, Gautama and Baudhāyana, to be considered composed in this order, roughly extends from the 3rd century BCE to the 2nd century BCE, while Vasiṣṭha's would date from the 1st century BCE to the 1st century CE (Olivelle 2000: 4–10). As mentioned, the most serious textual problem concerns Baudhāyana; the clearly later parts of his Dharmasūtra will be referred to below. As for the dating of Manu, see Olivelle 2005: 20–25.

⁸ For a different interpretation of Āpastamba's text on these two types of hermits, see Bronkhorst 1993: Chapt. 1, and Olivelle's refutations (Olivelle 1995).

earth, living at the foot of a tree, and, as for food, which we will deal with specifically below, the possibility of begging for it from other hermits or even in a village, while continuing to live in the forest (Manu VI.25–28).

As regards clothing, the prescriptions of the Dharmasūtras and Manu are absolutely homogeneous. The hermit “must dress in what comes from the forest” (*tasyāranyam ācchādanam vihitam*, ĀDh II.22.1), i.e. in clothes of ‘bark’ (*cīra*) or skin (GauDh III.34; BauDh II.11.15; VaDh IX.1; Manu VI.6). Such attire is commonplace for hermits in Sanskrit literature; in place of *cīra*, the term *valkala* is frequently used, and ‘bark’ is the common translation. However, Emeneau has demonstrated that in all probability this was actually some kind of fabric made from plant fibres (Emeneau 1962). In any case, the hermit’s clothing appears to derive exclusively from the environment in which he lives.

Not unexpectedly, given the complexity of dietary norms that develop in late Brahmanism, and to which these texts themselves bear crucial witness, food constitutes the most intricate issue. We attempt to summarise the essential aspects as expressed by the group of texts analysed here. The general idea, shared by all, is that the hermit lives off what he manages to gather from the forest: roots, fruits, leaves, herbs, avoiding everything that is grown in the village (cf. ĀDh II.22.2, 23.2; GauDh III.26, 28; BauDh II.11.15; VaDh IX.4; Manu VI.13, 16, 21, 25). One detail is remarkable, because it shows that, at least at a certain early stage, the hermit is not exactly a vegetarian: in fact, according to Gautama and Baudhāyana, he can also eat the meat of animals that he finds dead in the forest because they have been killed by beasts of prey (GauDh III.31; BauDh II.11.15). With Manu, however, meat becomes a forbidden food for the hermit, along with honey, mushrooms, and a small group of vegetables (Manu VI.14; we will return to these rules later). However, alongside these, let us say, basic norms, these texts contain other important and recurrent prescriptions regarding the hermit’s diet. He is not allowed to accumulate food and store it for a long time: he must periodically get rid of any stocks (ĀDh II.22.24; GauDh III.35; BauDh II.11.15; Manu

VI.15, 18). Moreover, he should increasingly limit his food intake until he renounces it altogether, since, as Āpastamba says, “then he should progress to water, air, and space” (*tato 'po vāyum ākāsam ity abhiniśrayet*, ĀDh II.22.4, 23.2; cf. Manu VI.19–20, 31: here a voluntary death by starvation is explicitly evoked).

The last sections of Baudhāyana, those following II.16, are certainly to be considered much later, presumably dating from the 3rd–4th century CE (Olivelle 2000: 7, fn. 10; 191). Here, the text resumes the subject of hermits (BauDh III.3.1–22), dividing them into two categories: those who cook their food, and those who do not; within the two categories, different types of hermits are listed—five main ones in each category—to each of whom a specific diet is attributed. Among the hermits who cook, the possibility of eating meat of animals killed by predators is still cited alongside the usual vegetarian practice of gathering forest produce (BauDh III.3.6). Among those who do not cook, mention is made of hermits who live only on water or air respectively; that is, the latter do not eat at all (BauDh III.3.9, 13–14). The general rules expressed here also contain the injunction not to harm even the smallest insects (BauDh III.3.19). In addition, and very notably, hermits themselves are equated with forest animals: their way of life, it is said, “is similar to that of animals and birds” (*vṛttim [...] sāmānyāṃ mṛgapakṣibhiḥ*, BauDh III.3.21):

To move around with animals, to dwell with them alone, and to sustain oneself just like them—that is the visible token of heaven. (BauDh III.3.22)⁹

Olivelle has made a meticulous study of the limitations that the hermit undergoes with regard to the accumulation of food (which,

⁹ *mṛgaiḥ saha parispandah saṃvāsas tebhīr eva ca / tair eva sadṛṣṭī vṛttiḥ pratyakṣaṃ svargalakṣaṇam // pratyakṣaṃ svargalakṣaṇam iti //*. Cf. BauDh III.2.19. The cited translations are from Olivelle 2000. Olivelle comments on these lines from Baudhāyana within the framework of the ascetic’s total rejection of everything that has to do with civilisation (Olivelle 2008; cf. also Olivelle 1990).

obviously, is totally forbidden for a wandering ascetic, who, as is known, lives by begging and has no fire), and of the progressive elimination of nourishment, which appears to connote higher stages of asceticism. His conclusions are that such a behaviour must be interpreted in the frame of a gradual recovery of an ideal stage of human condition. Production, property, and accumulation characterise a period of decadence in the history of humanity, associated with the rise of greed and other moral vices (Olivelle 1991).

Another point regarding the hermit's diet, and certainly not a secondary one, is the possible participation of this individual in a vegetarianism dictated by a need to 'do no harm,' i.e. *ahiṃsā*, and respect for all creatures, moral values that as we know developed transversally over these centuries in Brahmanism and in the so-called heresies, Buddhism and Jainism. It is certainly not possible here to outline even briefly the events that delineate the rise and spread of *ahiṃsā* and vegetarianism, their various initial manifestations and documented fluctuations, and to recall the theories that have been formulated on their origins or matrices.¹⁰ We do, however, propose a few observations limited to our context, which by necessity cannot be confined to the figure of the hermit alone.

Now, in their historical development, it is often not easy to draw a clear demarcation between 'do no harm' and vegetarianism,

¹⁰ Among the most important works on these topics let us mention Alsdorf 2010 (this is the 1962 study republished in English by Willem Bollée with the addition of writings by Jan C. Heesterman, Hanns-Peter Schmidt, Hiralal R. Kapadia); Heesterman 1984, and Houben and van Kooij (eds) 1999. However, we believe it is worth emphasising that any kind of 'monogenetic' theory on *ahiṃsā*/vegetarianism is, in our opinion, outdated. In short, it seems to us that these values derive from movements of shared thoughts that are reflected in a multiplicity of intertwined threads, or vice versa, and perhaps better, that a multiplicity of threads with common nuances have intertwined to create these concepts through exchanges of ideas and intersections. The following remarks on their appearance in Brahmanical normative texts may shed some light on such threads. More generally, we would like to underline the almost obvious observation that for major phenomena to be correctly interpreted it is always necessary to recognise that they reflect a plurality of meanings: this also applies to our attempt to connect the hermit with the sacredness of the forest, combining this interpretation of his figure with other interpretative facets.

due to the fact that the latter appears to be the most obvious and immediate manifestation of *ahiṃsā*. In the texts we are examining, meat consumption is considered as ultimately being normal in both daily and ritual contexts, albeit within a highly articulated framework that indicates which animals can or cannot be consumed (Olivelle 2002). It is finally only Manu that directly and explicitly correlates *ahiṃsā* and vegetarianism, in the following famous and often quoted stanzas:

One can never obtain meat without causing injury to living beings [...]. (Manu V.48)¹¹

The man who authorizes, the man who butchers, the man who slaughters, the man who buys or sells, the man who cooks, the man who serves, and the man who eats—these are all killers. (Manu V.51)¹²

If we consider the above mentioned prescriptions of Gautama and Baudhāyana which allow the hermit to eat meat as long as he finds animals that are already dead, it would seem safe to assume that, at least for the composers of these texts, a possible choice of ‘do no harm’ preceded vegetarianism. On the other hand, in the Dharmasūtras examined, apart from the remark contained in the later part of Baudhāyana, the hermit is not explicitly required to respect living beings. Related rules do however appear for the wandering ascetic: he is enjoined to treat all beings equally, whether they cause him harm (*hiṃsā*) or show him favour (GauDh III.24),¹³ to be devoid of hostility (*adrohī*) towards creatures in word, thought and deed (BauDh II.11.23), and to grant safety (*abhaya*) to all beings, so that he may receive the same in return (VaDh X.1–3; cf. X.29). In the later Baudhāyana, *ahiṃsā* is explicitly mentioned

¹¹ *nākṛtvā prāṇināṃ hiṃsāṃ māṃsam utpadyate kvacit /*. Transl. Olivelle 2005. The passage is recalled by Vasiṣṭha (VaDh IV.7).

¹² *anumantā viśasitā nihantā krayavikrayī / saṃskartā copahartā ca khāda-kaś ceti ghātakāḥ //*. Transl. Olivelle 2005.

¹³ Gautama also enjoins the wandering ascetic not to pick parts of plants or trees and not to destroy seeds (GauDh III.20, 23).

among the vows that the wandering ascetic must observe (BauDh II.18.2); as we shall also see in Manu, Vasiṣṭha mentions it as one of the universal and most important values to be pursued (VaDh IV.4, XXIX.3).

The Dharmasūtras sometimes forbid meat to the Vedic student (ĀDh I.2.23, 4.6; GauDh II.13)—who, let us recall, is obliged by the universally shared norm to beg for his food like a wandering ascetic—and to the wandering ascetic himself (VaDh X.24). But, for both of these individuals, the prohibition of eating meat is coupled with the prohibition of other foods that are, so to speak, tasty, and probably also considered valuable, typically honey.¹⁴ In addition, other restrictions for the Vedic student include a whole series of practices concerning care of the body and entertainment: in short, practices that may arouse pleasure—restrictions which are obviously taken for granted in the case of a wandering ascetic. But it is very important to mention that the Dharmasūtras under examination contain rules for the avoidance of meat, again alongside other dietary or behavioural prohibitions and directives, also in the context of what, in general, we may define as expiations of faults committed or situations of impurity, and for particular instances of ritual preparation (e.g. ĀDh II.18.1; GauDh XIV.39; BauDh II.4.7, III.7.7; VaDh V.7). Baudhāyana, particularly in the later parts of the text, also names *ahiṃsā* as a means of purification or atonement (BauDh I.8.2, III.1.26–27, 10.13).

We have already seen that Manu prohibits the hermit from eating meat, along with honey and a few vegetables; moreover, he also explicitly states that he must be “compassionate towards all beings” (*śarvabhūtānukampakaḥ*, Manu VI.8). Among the many prohibitions addressed to the Vedic student, those against meat, honey, ‘tasty food’ (*rasān*, Manu II.177), care of the body, and pleasure-giving activities such as music and dance are listed too; in addition to avoiding feelings that are considered negative, it is also

¹⁴ Āpastamba, for example, forbids Vedic students from partaking of tasty condiments, salt, honey, meat (*kṣāralavaṇamadhumāṃsāni*, ĀDh I.2.23).

clearly stated that he must shun “causing harm to living beings” (*prāṇinām caiva hiṃsanam*, Manu II.177; see Manu II.177–179). The wandering ascetic, in the context of a very strict control of mental attitudes, is required to show “equanimity towards all” (*samatā caiva sarvasmīn*, Manu VI.44). It may come as a surprise that Manu does not explicitly prohibit him from eating meat, but with these stanzas he makes him a champion of *ahiṃsā*, bringing his behaviour closer to the special customs of certain Jaina monks:

To protect living creatures, he should walk always—whether at night or during the day—only after inspecting the ground even at the cost of bodily discomfort.

To purify himself of killing living creatures unintentionally during the day or at night, an ascetic should bathe and control his breath six times. (Manu VI.68–69)¹⁵

Manu mentions *ahiṃsā* among the practices of conduct that make a man an excellent individual (Manu VI.75, X.63, XII.83),¹⁶ and among the norms to be adopted in the case of atonement (Manu XI.223). For Manu, the purifying diet consists only of foods of vegetal origin and cow and dairy products (e.g. Manu V.73, XI.212–222), and atoning practices also include temporary retreats in the forest (*vane*) with hermit-like behavioural rules (Manu XI.73, 106).

However, it must be remembered that Manu’s position on meat eating is very complex because, in fact, the text openly reports divergent views. Generally speaking, that meat is food and ritual offering is taken for granted. However, after a series of stanzas (Manu V.4–26) summarising the discourse on food and various forbidden or permitted meats (cf. Olivelle 2002), we find a very pregnant and much discussed passage, from which the couple of stanzas quoted above (Manu V.48, 51) were taken. In this passage, Manu accepts the

¹⁵ *saṃrakṣaṇārthaṃ jantūnām rātrāv ahani vā sadā / śarīrasyātyaye caiva samīkṣya vasudhām caret // 68 // ahnā rātryā ca yāñ jantūn hinasty ajñānato yatīḥ / teṣāṃ snātvā viśuddhyarthaṃ prāṇāyāmān ṣaḍ ācaret // 69 //* Transl. Olivelle 2005.

¹⁶ Also note the criticism of agriculture because it harms the earth and the beings living on it (Manu X.83–84).

voice of those who oppose the eating of meat in the absolute and universal terms in the name of not suppressing living beings, juxtaposing this persuasion, one verse after another, with the opinion—which ultimately appears to be the one he most favours—of those who believe, on the contrary, that it is licit and even peremptory to eat flesh of animals killed for sacrifice (Manu V.27–56).

What can be deduced from this variegated textual situation is that in these normative works the value of ‘do no harm’ and the practice of vegetarianism slowly progress, running for a long time on essentially parallel tracks, which also involve the figure of the hermit, until their convergence is definitively expressed and commented on by Manu. From the (Brahmanical) perspective of these texts, dietary restrictions, including the renunciation of meat, are essentially part of wider behavioural norms involving the elimination of pleasure. In such a perspective, asceticism—in its broadest sense—as a choice of lifestyle, and momentary expiatory or purificatory practices assume similar features. As far as the hermit is concerned, the rules on food, dwelling, and clothing ultimately form a cluster closely related to *tapas*, austerities, which, together with the performance of sacrifices, are the main religious practices he is expected to carry out. We believe that, in the ample context of the spreading of values of ‘do no harm’ and vegetarianism in Indian thought over centuries, this is the path—let us say of special practices—along which Brahmanism initially included them in its system; up to, precisely, the striking passage from Manu (Manu V.27–56), where it is finally admitted, albeit almost reluctantly, that such values are not only closely related, but above all that they can take on a universal dimension.

Respect and peace

That said, the fact remains that the Brahmanical hermit’s way of life as expressed in these texts can also be interpreted in another way, i.e. as a specific mode of interacting with wild nature, and this is the

point on which it seems important to dwell here.¹⁷ In the vast majority of cases mentioned in the texts, the hermit appears to be a solitary individual, who modifies the environment in which he lives as little as possible, starting from the choice of abode. From the outside, so to speak, he brings only the sacrificial fire, which is an indispensable part of his religious role. Food consists only of gathering; clothing is made of fibres that, again, derive from the wilderness. The hermit aims to make himself one with the forest: indeed, as stated in the later Baudhāyana (BauDh III.3.22, see above), he should ideally become an animal among animals. In short, it is deemed essential that the hermit should try not to disturb the forest and strive to integrate himself as deeply as possible with it. Using contemporary terms, the norm for the hermit appears to be one of almost total respect for the environment, of intense ecological involvement—in this sense, the mere gathering of food seems particularly significant. Thus, the question we can ask is this: does this happen because the spaces in which the hermit chooses to live are considered invested with an aura of sacredness? The examined texts say nothing about this; on the other hand, the Brahmanical perspective may simply not have contemplated this aspect. Let us therefore go no further than the level of hypothesis: it is possible that the hermit's behaviour in the forest is also shaped by the idea that the forest has, or certain of its spaces have, a sacredness that includes the fact that they cannot be modified or exploited through human intervention without a precise and limiting norm. Conversely, the presence of Brahmanical hermits may have contributed to the demarcation of intangible spaces in the forest.

On the other hand, the attestations of non-normative sources offer another clue. As is well known and as already briefly mentioned above, the epics, and not only, stage a wide repertoire of hermits and *r̥ṣis*, who ultimately are nothing else than mythical hermits, who live in the wilderness, alone or with family, and often in communities. Here the picture appears largely idealised; it is difficult, in any case, to

¹⁷ See the considerations expressed above, footnote 10.

establish with any degree of certainty to what extent does it reflect any real situation, for instance, the hermitage of Kaṇva in Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, which represents the poetic culmination of the depiction of these supposed hermit communities. As we have seen, Olivelle suggests that the institution of forest hermits appears to have become obsolete already in the early centuries CE, "its memory preserved only in legend, poetry, and drama" (Olivelle 1993: 174). But there are some notable aspects of the places where these hermits of poetry live: the luxuriance and beauty of the vegetation and all natural elements, and the pacification of normally rival animals. The hermitage is the "refuge for all creatures" (*śaraṇyaṃ sarvabhūtānāṃ*, Rām III.1.3), where "tiger and deer live full of confidence" (*viśvastamṛgaśārdūlo*, Rām III.71.3). Analysis of relevant passages from the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* shows that, in general terms, the extent to which the pacification of nature is a prerequisite for, or a consequence of, the settlement of a hermitage is not unequivocal (Pieruccini 2006: 120–124; Pontillo 2009). However, here we can see another hint, faint but perhaps significant, of the relationship (imagined, hoped for?) between the practice of hermitage and the forest as a place where man and wilderness are united by a bond of peace and friendship, a bond much extolled by Kālidāsa in the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*. In short: the literature analysed here, particularly with regard to hermits, does not allow us to find irrefutable documentation of the ancient existence of sacred groves in the terms in which these places are understood today. However, these sources, belonging to the élite that formulated the records which uniquely have come down to us, may well allow us to glimpse a human-forest relationship that, at least to a certain extent, echoes some of the characteristics that sacred groves hold in the India of today. Traces that, in our opinion, are full of significance.

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