UNIT 6 : THEORIES ON STATE FORMATION

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6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will able to-

- *discuss* the different theories of state formation
- *identify* the different circumstances under which a state may be formed
- *describe* the common characteristics of a state.

6.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall learn about the different theories of state formation. What is a 'state'? How did a state come into existence? Was it a voluntary process or was it achieved by force. What were the factors that resulted or contributed to the formation of a state? These questions are best answered by examining the characteristics of a state. Although when we look at history we find different forms of a state, all states have certain common characteristics. Some states may be monarchical, others may have an oligarchy, some may be republican and some may even exhibit democratic characteristics. Yet all have some common features and certain conditions need to exist before a state can be formed. In this unit we shall discuss the different theories of state formation.

6.3 THEORIES ON STATE FORMATION

There are different theories regarding the formation of a state. But we first have to understand the nature or characteristics of a state. Only then can we understand how a state is formed and the factors leading to it.

6.3.1 The Characteristics of a State

Kautilya (Chanakya) the Prime Minister of the Mauryan Empire, the first historical state in India, describes the characteristics of a state in his treatise the *Arthasastra.* According to him, a state has seven limbs or parts known as *Saptanga.* A state refers to a demarcated territory known as the *Janapada* that includes both the land and people. It consists of a central authority in the form of a ruler termed as the *Rajan,* who governs with the aid of a council called the *Amatyas* or *Mantri Parishad.* They collect taxes and tributes from the people and deposit them in a treasury or *Kosa,* from which the state is maintained. Authority is enforced by means of *Bala* or *Danda,* i.e. force. The state is protected by fortifications termed as the *Durga.* The state also maintains diplomatic relations with other states. These friendly states are termed as allies or *Mitra.* The *Kalika Purana* in a section designated as *Rajniti* or Politics also refers to these seven constituents of a state.

Historians like Romila Thapar, D.D. Kosambi, R.S. Sharma, amongst others have also described the characteristics of a state that loosely correspond to the *Saptanga* theory discussed above. According to Romila Thapar, “A State has been described as a sovereign political entity and its rise assumes a complex network of conditions. These would include a density of population with a concentrated drawing on resources, agricultural or other; control over a defined, recognized territory; an urban centre as the location of authority, which would also be the location for craft activities that were produced for both local consumption and commercial exchange; diverse communities coming within a network of stratification and accepting unequal statuses; a political authority managing the incoming revenue from taxes and their redistribution through at least a minimal administration; the assertion of authority through a monopoly

of the agencies of coercion, both of armed force and the imposition of regulations and obligations; the awareness of diplomacy; and the sovereignty of the State being represented in the King as the focus of authority. The emergence of a State system frequently coincides with unequal power relations and access to resources and some social disparity. Such changes would also have sought support from various ideological justifications."(Thapar:2002:138.)

Claessen and Skalník in their *Early State* also define the state by a number of structural characteristics that correspond to Kautilya's *Saptanga* theory. According to them "the early State is a centralized and hierarchically organized political system in which the central authority has control over the greatest amount of coercive force in the society. Sub-units are tied into the hierarchy through their relations to officials appointed by and responsible to a ruler or a monarchical head of State. These officials maintain the administrative structure of the system and attempt to ensure its continuity by having among them a set of electors who choose and/or legitimate a new monarch." (Claessen and Skalnik:1978:36). However, in their definition of the state structure or factors responsible for the formation and maintenance of the state, a common ideology is also given importance. But an ally or *mitra* finds no mention.

Robert L. Carneiro describes a state as "an autonomous political unit, encompassing many communities within its territory and having a centralized government with the power to collect taxes, draft men for work or war, and decree and enforce laws." Thus according to Carneiro, a state can be defined as a form of government in which there exists "a centralized authority, hierarchical differences in access to power and basic resources between individuals, reinforced by institutionalized coercion, usually accompanied by the decline of kin structures."

It is also necessary to enquire into the conditions that enabled the formation of a state, i.e. the causes of state formation.

6.3.2 Causes of the Origin of a State

There are different theories about the origin of a state. These

can be broadly divided into two categories, namely **voluntary** and **coercive**. According to traditional beliefs, a state was created **voluntarily**. The Greek philosopher **Aristotle** who was unaware of any other form of political organisation than the state believed that the "state" had always existed naturally and did not require any explanation. Early Indian writers subscribed to the theory that people voluntarily created a state with a king in charge. According to this theory of origin of kingship, i.e. before the creation of a state, ***matsyanyaya***or anarchy prevailed. So the people entrusted a person from among themselves to govern them and end this state of anarchy in which there was only the rule of the jungle where might is right. For maintaining law and order and protecting the people, the ruler or chieftain would be paid in cash or kind. This same theory has been echoed by the French philosopher **Rousseau** who enunciated the theory of **Social Contract.**

According to **V. Gordon Childe**, states evolved naturally. "The invention of agriculture automatically brought into being a surplus of food, enabling some individuals to divorce themselves from food production and to become potters, weavers, smiths, masons, and so on, thus creating an extensive division of labour. Out of this occupational specialization there developed a political integration which united a number of previously independent communities into a state." However, agricultural surplus is dependent upon many factors like technology, climatic conditions, geography of the land, etc. and seldom happens naturally, and many agricultural communities that existed contemporarily with states, did not produce any surplus. According to **Friedrich Engels** "….At a certain stage of economic development, which necessarily bound up with the split of society into classes, the State became a necessity owing to this split." (Engels:1884:170.) It was, according to him, with the gradual emergence of private property that the process of State formation began. Thus the formation of a state was inevitable or natural.

Another voluntary theory is **Karl Wittfogel's** "hydraulic hypothesis." He believed that "in certain arid and semi-arid areas of the world, where village farmers had to struggle to support

themselves by means of small-scale irrigation, a time arrived when they saw that it would be to the advantage of all concerned to set aside their individual autonomies and merge their villages into a single large political unit capable of carrying out irrigation on a broad scale. The body of officials they created to devise and administer such extensive irrigation works brought the state into being." (Wittfogel:1957:18). However, many states developed well before large-scale irrigation.

The theory of coercion holds that groups of people that resided in villages under a chieftain were coerced or forced into submission by the chief of a more powerful village or settlement and the latter created a bigger settlement with a centralised form of government to form a state. Sometimes different settlements may have initially joined hands for more efficient management of resources. Their increased prosperity may have attracted other settlements to conquer them and control their resources, thus creating a larger unit with more complex division of labour and diversification of arts and crafts. That war or conquest lies at the root of state formation has often been observed throughout history. Herbert Spencer in his *Principles of Sociology* states that war or force led to the formation of states. European writers like Ludwig Gumplowicz Gustav Ratzenhofer, and Franz Oppenheimer also support this theory of coercion or warfare in the formation of states. Historical and archaeological evidence indicate that in the early stages of state formation in Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, China, Europe and South America, war played a decisive role. However wars have been fought in many parts of the world where the state never emerged. Thus, while warfare may play an important role in state formation, it cannot be the only cause.

According to **Robert L. Carneiro** certain factors are common to areas of the world in which states arose indigenously, as for example in the valleys of the Nile and Tigris-Euphrates in Africa, the Indus Valley in Asia and that of Mexico and Peru in South America. Although these areas differ from one another in altitude, temperature, rainfall, soil type, drainage pattern, and many other features, they

are all areas of limited agricultural land. Each of them is surrounded by mountains, seas, or deserts and these environmental features sharply delimit the area that simple farming peoples could occupy and cultivate. Thus, to increase the land under cultivation and produce surplus powerful communities or chiefdoms had to necessarily conquer the land of the less powerful chiefs as extension of agriculture was not possible beyond a certain limit.

We shall now examine how far the above theories can be applied to the valley of the Brahmaputra in ancient Assam. A study of the historical process in the region indicates that the first historical state emerged around the fourth century C.E. under Pusyavarman, a contemporary of the Gupta monarch Samudragupta. Pusyavarman ruled over the kingdom of Kamarupa and we also find evidence of another kingdom in the Kapili-Jamuna valley, known as Devaka. While not much is known about the latter, the sources indicate that Pusyavarman and his successors primarily used force or conquest to enlarge the boundaries of their state and engaged in constant warfare with their contemporary rulers. But how did the state emerge in the Brahmaputra valley? An examination of the Brahmannical literature indicates the penetration of the Indo-Aryans into the region around 700 B.C.E. Prior to their advent we do find references in the Epics to legendary chieftains like Naraka, Bhagadatta, Vajradatta and Bana who are said to have ruled over Pragjyotispur and Sunitpur. The *Kalika Purana* refers to the settlement of Brahmans in the valley during the time of Naraka. Prior to that the land was known as belonging to the Kiratas or Mongoloid people who were pushed further east beyond the Dikkaravasini after the death of their leader Ghataka, a non-Aryan chieftain. The penetration of the Indo-Aryan groups into the Brahmaputra Valley set in motion the process of state formation.

The valley of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries comprise of rich alluvial flood plains. The valley is surrounded by a chain of mountains like the Eastern Himalayas in the north and the Barail Range in the south. With more than a hundred tributaries on both banks of the river, the topography and climate were eminently suitable for the cultivation of rice and other agricultural products. The region

beyond the flood plains was full of forests where wild elephants roamed. Thus agriculture in the valley was restricted to the region along the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries where people practiced cultivation but probably produced no surplus till the advent of the Aryans. The archaeological remains belonging to our period of study indicate the riverine nature of the early settlements.

Anthropological studies indicate that the Brahmaputra valley lies in one of the great migration routes of the world. The earliest settlers of the region were the Australoids who came from the south east of Assam in the remote past. Represented by the Khasis and Jayantias, the Mon-Khmer language used by them is spoken by the Kols, Mundas and Nicobarese of India, and in parts of Myanmar and Vietnam today. These Mon-Khmer speakers gave the many geographical features, especially the rivers their names. For instance, the name of the river Dihong is derived from the Australoid word *hong*, meaning water, to which was later added the prefix *di* by the Tibeto-Burmans who followed them, *di* being their word for water. Many of the rivers of Upper Assam, even today, reveal their linguistic antecedents: Dihong, Dibang, Dihing, Disang, Dikhow, etc.

The Tibeto-Burman speakers came from western China. They followed the Brahmaputra up to Dhubri. Some turned south of the river, and occupied the Garo Hills and Tripura. Others went up the Kapili valley into North Cachar. Others occupied the Naga Hills and became the ancestors of the different Naga tribes. A group from Myanmar settled in the Lushai (Mizo) Hills, Cachar, and parts of Manipur and the Naga Hills. The Tibeto-Burmans that had established themselves in different areas of Assam, in course of time, came to be known by various names like the Rabha, Kachari, Bodo, Tiwa, Karbi, and Dimasa.

Linguistically, the Tibeto-Burmans can be divided into two main branches: North-Assam and Assam-Burmese (Myanmar). The tribes of modern Arunachal Pradesh like the Abors, Akas, Daflas, Miris (Mising) and Mishmis form the North-Assam branch. The Assam-Burmese group includes the Bodos, Nagas and Kuki-Chins. The term “Bodo” denotes a large number of people who speak the

Bodo group of languages, like the Garo, Rabha, Kachari, Koch, Mech, Hajong, Lalung (Tiwa), etc. Before the advent of the Aryan speakers this Bodo group of speakers occupied almost the entire Brahmaputra valley, including the Garo Hills, northern Bengal, Cachar, Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) and even Tripura (Barua:1986:7-8)

From the west came the Aryan speakers with their Vedic culture (Barua:1986:9). In circa 700 B.C.E. they entered into Assam (Barpujari:1991:23.) from the plains of the Ganga, from Mithila (Bihar), Kasi (Uttar Pradesh), Gauda (Bengal) and Pundra (North Bengal). According to the *Kalika Purana,* Naraka and his son Bhagadatta made Aryan settlements in Assam. Their descendants actively patronized them, especially the Brahmins, as indicated by their land grants. Naraka, according to legends had replaced Ghataka, the ruler of the Kiratas (Mongoloid people). His descendants later began to rule over a major part of the Brahmaputra valley. The three main historical dynasties of Assam – the Varman, Salastambhas and Palas – who ruled from circa fourth century to twelfth century C.E., trace their descent from the legendary Naraka in their land grants. The inscriptions of ancient Assam reveal that they actively patronized the Brahmins who came from Bengal, and the areas which today incorporate modern Bangladesh, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh by granting them rent-free land called *agrahara* grants. These lands were situated along the banks of the river Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries or beside ponds and streams. Aryan settlements helped to Sanskritise the people of Assam, especially the Brahmaputra valley.

The Aryan speakers who came from the Ganga Valley (where we have evidence of state formation as early as the sixth century B.C.E) introduced new technology into the region they occupied. They brought with them an advanced method of agriculture known as “wet rice cultivation” in which the rice saplings are transplanted after being submerged in water by a system of creating waterlogged small plots of land through *bunds*. This new method greatly increased agricultural output. Secondly, they introduced the use of iron tools and implements like the iron plough-share and the iron axe which not only helped in the extension of agriculture but also increased efficiency in the cultivating

process. In course of time, with increased agricultural output and the creation of surplus food production, one finds diversification of arts and crafts as different professional classes emerged. Over the next few centuries, the Aryans also introduced their social institutions like the caste system into the region as they assimilated the non-Aryans into their fold through a process of acculturation that included marriage. The Aryans possessed a highly organised stratified social system – the *varnasramadharma*, a highly developed body of literature, namely the Vedic literature and philosophy, as also a written form of language like Sanskrit. These inherent advantages enabled them to "Aryanise" and "Sanskritise" the local people. As society and polity now became more complex state formation became possible and in course of time, Pusyavarman an ambitious chieftain established the first historical state by force or conquest. His successors further enlarged the boundaries of the state which later came to be ruled by other dynasties like the Palas and Salastambhas. The Brahmans sought to legitimise the rule of Pusyavarman and his successors by citing the necessity of maintaining social order to avoid *matsyanyaya* or anarchy. Thus the Nidhanpur grant of Bhaskarvarman states that Pusyavarman's son Samudravarman's reign was free from *matsyanyaya*. It further declares that Bhaskarvarman was born to "re-establish the *varnasramadharma* that had fallen into disuse". In the Guwahati grant of Indrapala it is specifically mentioned that the "king's reign was according to the rule of law as the four castes and four stages of life (i.e. the *varnasramadharma*) was properly maintained". The maintenance of this social order was regarded as *Rajdharma* or the royal duty of kings. Thus to a certain extent, an ideology was also used as a tool to legitimise the necessity of a state as embodied in the king or ruling authority.

During the rule of the first historical dynasty of the Varmans in ancient Assam, Pragjyotishapura became the seat of the coercive authority that controlled the complex network of conditions, conducive for the smooth functioning of the state. The sources at our disposal indicate the presence of the different constituents of a state as defined by the *Saptanga* theory, in the state of Kamarupa established by the

Varman dynasty of Pusyavarman. Thus we find a specific territory, a king, army, treasury, ministers, fortified capital cities as well as an ally and an ideology, thus subscribing to the traditional view of a state. From the foregoing discussion we can conclude that no single factor contributed to state formation in the Brahmaputra Valley. Rather it was a combination of different factors. The location of the valley, i.e. **topography and climate** played an important role. These can be termed as environmental factors. Secondly, **migration** from the east and west led to increase in population as well as introduction of **new technology** that facilitated agricultural surplus. This in turn led to **diversification of arts and crafts** and the emergence of new professional classes. The need to control these resources led to more organised settlements and chiefdoms. Ultimately, an ambitious chief and his descendants used war and conquest to create a state with all its complex political and socio-economic constituents. They patronised the priestly class, the Brahmans, by granting them special favours in the form of rent-free holdings and important administrative positions. In turn the Brahmans created the myth of a divine origin of the ruling dynasties, making them descendants of Visnu, a Vedic divinity, thus assimilating the ruling elite into the Sanskritic Brahmannical fold. They also provided the rulers with the ideological justification – maintenance of social order to prevent anarchy – to seize power and assert their political authority to legitimise their control over the resources of the state.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Which is the first historical dlynasty of ancient Assam?

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Q 2: Who was the priminister of the Mauryan Empire?

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Q 3: What do you mean by 'Rajdharma'?

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Q 4: Who established the first historical state by force in Pragjyotispura?

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6.4 Let us Sum Up

After going through this unit we have learnt about the characteristics of a state and the different theories of state formation. States were formed either voluntarily or through coercion, i.e. the use of force. We have discussed about the different constituents of a state and the probable causes of the emergence of early states with special reference to the state of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam.



6.5 FURTHER READINGS

1) Carneiro, Robert *A Theory of the Origin of the State*, Science 169: pp 733-738, 1970

2) Claessen, Henri J.M. *The Early State: A Structural Approach* in *The Early State,* edited by Henri J.M. Claessen and Peter Skalník, pp 533-596. The Hague: Mouton, 1978

3) Friedrich Engels *The Origin of Family,Private Property an State,* London, 1884

4) Karl Wittfogel *Oriental Despotism,* Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, Conn., 1957

5) R.Thapar *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*, Penguin India, 2002

6) Dutta, H.N. *History, Art an Archaeology of DoiyangDhansiri Valley, Assam,* Lawyers Book Stall Publication, Panbazar, Guwahati, 2012.

7) B.K.Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam, Vol. I,* Guwahati, 1986.3rd Edition.

8) H.K.Barpujari, ed *A Comprehensive History of Assam, Volume I* PublicationBoard, Assam, Guwahati, 1991.



6.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Vanaras

Ans to Q No 2: Kautilya

Ans to Q No 3: Royal Duty

Ans to Q No 4: Pusyavarmana



6.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions (Answer each and every question within 50 Words)

Q 1: Difine social contract theory of state formation*?*

Q 2: What did Aristotle say about state formation*?*

Q 3: Mention four characteristics of a state stated by Kautilya.

Q 4: Who was Amatyas?

B) Short Questions (Answer each and every question within 150 words)

Q 1: Write a note on 'Saptanga Theory'.

Q 2: What do you mean by Varnarasanadharma ? Briefly explain.

Q 3: Prepare a short note on 'Kalika Purana'.

Q 4: What are the characteristics of a state ?.

C) Long Questions (Answer each and every question in between 300-500 words)

Q a: Explain the theory of coercion of state formation.

Q b : Who do you mean by 'State'? Disscuss the process of state formation in ancient Assam.

Q c : In waht ways Aryans contributed to the state formation?

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