
UNIT 17 STATE IN TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES

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17.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Distinguish between traditional and modern societies in terms of their politics;
- Discuss the nature and scope of centralised authority;
- Describe the grounds on which authority is legitimised; and
- List the institutions which prevent a ruler from abusing his powers.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit is concerned with centralised authority in societies which lie between the two poles of stateless societies and modern states with government and executive. These societies can be called traditional or pre-modern insofar as they lack developed forms of political institutions which are mostly found in modern nation states. In traditional or pre-modern societies, we find distinct and permanent political structures which are clearly dominated by religion and to a lesser extent by kinship.

After a brief description of various types of traditional societies, the unit discusses the nature and scope of political authority in such states. We, then, look into the bases upon which this authority rests and finally we also discuss restraints which are usually exercised upon the political authority.

17.2 TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES AS POLITICAL SYSTEMS

In contrast to modern democratic and totalitarian states on the one hand, and the primitive stateless societies on the other, we have the whole range of pre-modern societies with political traditions which have shaped the political thought and issues of modern times. By acquiring an understanding of these traditions it is possible to follow the complex political institutions of modern states, which are discussed in Unit 18 of this Block.

17.3 THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY

Taking the wide range of societies, as we have done within the category of traditional/pre-modern, it is natural that the nature and scope of political authority in them will vary to a large extent. The fact of centralisation of political authority is always a matter of degree. For example, clan-lineage based polities may have only a symbolic tribal chief, while politically centralised principalities and states with political heads may exist independent of each other, or, form part of a feudal systems.

17.3.1 The Central Authority

Let us focus on the nature of the political authority, considered to be central.

i) Chief Authority as a Titular Head

By acknowledging a more centralised concentration of power to a chief, a tribal group may achieve greater productivity without changing its technology. It may still maintain its segmentary social structure and acquire a political head to express the group's unity and identity. Surajit Sinha (1987: xi), an anthropologist, holds that, 'the chiefdom is a development of the tribal system to a higher level of integration.' In terms of secular power, a chief may or may not function as an executive head of state. He may be only a symbol, representing the entire group. Political implications of even a titular or symbolic authority are quite significant.

Such a ruler is often invested with a high degree of deference and is much feared by his people. He is considered almost divine. Politically speaking, a symbolic head of state is a potential source of becoming an authority with secular power. For example, among the Shilluk of the Upper Nile, Evans-Pritchard (1962) observed, the Shilluk king reigned but did not govern. In other words, he was only a titular head. Later, under the impact of British rule, this institution of a symbolic head turned into a secular authority, making political decisions.

ii) Secular Authority Endowed with Sacredness

Just as we noted the potential of a symbolic head being invested with real political authority, the secular authority of a king is also generally endowed with 'an aura of sacredness'. Let us take the Indian Rajahs. In Surajit Sinha's (1987: xv-xvi) words: 'The Rajas not only ruled over their kingdoms on behalf of the presiding deities of their lineages, they imbibed in their social being the sacredness of the Deity'. Almost all over the world, most monarchies reflect this tendency. Myths of divine origin of ruling families justify the ruler's claim to exercise political authority.

iii) Necessity of Acquiring a King

The secular authority is ceremonially ritualised in order to raise its status above the ordinary people. In some cases, the need to acquire a king of the appropriate status is so strong that persons of royal origin are stolen and reared to become rulers. Mahapatra (1987: 1-50) has shown that small-scale polities in ex-princely states of Orissa felt so insecure in the face of pressures from larger kingdoms that they were compelled to sponsor kingship. According to a legend, in 1200 A.D., Jyotibhanj of the Bhanja dynasty, reigning over Khijjings mandala, was stolen from his palace by the Bhuiyan tribals of Keonjhar in Orissa. This shows that they needed to acquire the necessary aura of sacredness in their ruler. Successors of such kings, then, had to enact the myth of origin through rituals and ceremonies.

iv) Territory and Demography in Relation to the Range of Political Authority

Both the territory and people are basic components of the nature of political authority. The area, in which the residents acknowledge the power of a king, defines the range of his political authority. The territorial aspect of a chief's power demarcates the geographical limits of his administrative and judicial measures. Except the political organisation in stateless societies, all other polities are bound by a territorial reference.

In India, the forces of conquest and co-operation always mediated through the principle of territory. The separate units within the state always tried to lay claims to a tiny piece of territory in order to break away from the control of a paramount ruler.

Demography, or, the numerical size of a population, and not the special size, generally introduces elements of complexity in a polity. However, Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940: 7) warn us not to confuse size of population with density of population. Writing about two African tribes, they observe: 'It might be supposed that the dense permanent settlements of the Tallensi would necessarily lead to the development of a centralised form of government, whereas the wide dispersion of shifting villages among the Bemba would be incompatible with centralised rule. The reverse is actually the case.'

v) Economy and Centralisation of a Polity

Research findings on tribal politics and state systems in India point to an important link between the level of surplus growth and development of a centralised polity. Amalendu Guha (1987: 147-76) writes: '...in India, it was the use of the cattle-driven plough that ensured a relatively large surplus and therefore, also a higher form of political organisation. Larger the surplus, more developed was the state'.

On the other hand, research in Africa show that subsistence economy in most parts of the country provided little scope for surplus growth. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940: 8) report: "Distinctions of rank, status or occupation operate independently of differences of wealth". In such societies, the political authority has economic rights to tax, tribute and labour. In fact, through economic privileges the centralised authority is able to maintain the political system.

Activity 1

Visit a local governing body, such as, the Municipal, Civil, Electrical, or a Panchayat office (if you are in a village). Discuss the various aspects of administration with one or two officers working there and write a report of a page on "Political / Civil Authority and its Structure in My Area". Discuss it with other learners at your study centre.

17.3.2 Scope of Political Authority

The extent, to which a ruler exercises his authority over his people, defines the scope of his political power. It is actually the scope rather than range of power that makes a polity more or less centralised.

Sometimes, the head of state command only respect and recognition of his subject. In other cases, the ruler may also demand tribute or ritual acceptance of his authority from subsidiary vassals. In feudatory states of Orissa in India, the territory controlled by the king was surrounded by segmentary clan-lineage based units. These units acted as vassals and participated in the main rituals and ceremonies of the central kingdom. But besides this token acceptance of centralised authority, the extent of the political authority power exercised on them was almost nil.

In order to find the scope of a central authority, it is necessary to find what aspects of the people's lives are controlled by the political power. If the individuals are free to resort to force or violence, it is a clear indication of the minimal scope of the central authority. On the other hand, a political head, if he is powerful enough, will not allow the use of force. In other words, people cannot take the course of law in their own hands.

Among the Shilluks of the Upper Nile, the king's powers are minimal, as is clear from the fact that blood feud occurs commonly among them and the king has no say in its operations. On the other hand, in most feudal type of politics, homicide is considered a punishable offence by the state.

17.3.2.1 Patrimonial Authority

Scope of a centralised authority can also be discussed in terms of it being diffuse or specific. In many polities, the ruler's authority is quite diffuse, covering almost all aspects of his subject's lives. Max Weber (1964) has described this form of authority as patrimonial, which means that the scope of this kind of authority is not clearly specified, rather it subsumes all kinds of protective measures and cares of his people by the ruler. The ruler considers his subjects as his children and protects them. Mahapatra (1987: 25) remarks: 'The pata-rani or senior most queen was held in the highest affection and solicitousness by the tribal people as their 'mother' and she looked upon the tribesmen as her children'. Sometimes, even in modern context, vestiges of these expectations are found on the part of both the ruler and the ruled.

17.3.2.2 Delegation and Distribution of Authority

In polities with wider scope of authority of the ruler, we also notice the mechanism of delegation of authority. The ruler may seem to possess absolute power, but he distributes it among others. This system gives us a pyramidal formation of authority, i.e. the king on the top and successive grades of subordinate officials below. Each person in the official hierarchy functions under the authority above him. We may mention here the Meiteis of Manipur state, during the first phase of state formation in 18th century R.K. Saha (1987: 214-41) says: Under the kingship the services became institutionalised under distinct categories, **famdun** (prestigious posts), **lalup** (non-menial service) and **loipot** (menial service). We can clearly see the gradation of function, performed by the officials. This delegation of power among the state functionaries takes two forms:

a) Delegation of Authority among the Relatives of the Ruler

Quite often, the ruler selects men from among his kinsmen for higher posts. To take again the example of the Meitei of Manipur State. R.K. Saha (1987: 272) reports that the office bearers were recruited at all the three levels of prestigious posts from the genealogically senior most persons. We may say that in such political systems, governing becomes a kind of family affair. From Africa, we can give the example of some Southern Bantu states, such as the Swazi, which follow this pattern (see Kuper 1947).

b) **Delegation of Authority among the Loyal Subjects**

In many states, relatives of the ruler are considered as rivals and therefore not trustworthy. They cannot be invited to share the ruler’s authority, lest they conspire and usurp all of it. The distribution of power is then among the trusted and loyal friends. Great value is placed on one’s personal loyalty to the ruler. The loyalty is rewarded by the king in the form of a share in his authority. The fact that power is not shared with kinsmen but with loyalists, does not preclude the possibilities of subordinate chief becoming too powerful and eventually deposing the ruler himself.

17.3.2.3 Delegation of Authority as the Balance of Forces

The power of the central authority is reinforced by the institutions of hereditary succession to kingship, distribution of power to kinsmen, and supernatural sanctions of king’s status. However, other institutions, such as king’s council, royal priest, queen mother’s courts, impose checks on the king.

Once the power is distributed between the central authority and regional chiefs, the balance mechanism begins to operate. If a ruler becomes autocratic in his ways, subordinate chiefs may secede. On the other hand, if a subordinate chief becomes too powerful the king may decide to remove him or suppress his power with the help of other subordinate chiefs. In trying to keep all his vassals very much under his control a paramount ruler may also set one against the other. Thus, we can see that delegation of power to regional chiefs is not simply an administrative mechanism. It is also concerned with the representation of various groups and interests in the machinery of government. Or, in other words, we can say that there is always a balance between authority and responsibility. Though abuse of power is noticeable in the forms of constitutional arrangements in practice, in every political system the balance of forces is recognised and instituted in theory. So also in traditional societies, each centralised authority is subject to these forces of balancing mechanism which characterise its nature and scope.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space below for your answers.

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) How do we define the scope of political authority? Use two lines for your answer.

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2) Among whom does a king delegate his powers? Use two lines for your answer.

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17.4 THE BASIS OF LEGITIMACY OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY

In discussing the question of the basis of political authority, we study the process of state formation to see if the state developed as an **endogenous** growth or came into existence as a result of an interaction with **exogenous** state systems. This kind of inquiry provides us with a historical dimension. Ethnographic data at our disposal is full of both types of state formations.

States endogenously come into being as a result of evolutionary process from within, without outside influences. These are sometimes also called 'primary states'. Exogenous state systems are built by conquests. Or, their particular formations are affected by systems from earlier periods or from outside their own territories.

As mentioned earlier, some tribal groups in Orissa, lacking the mechanisms of a centralised authority, took the extreme step of stealing not the idea of kingship but the king himself. Southall (1956) has described how, among the Alur people of Western Uganda, centralised political authority was instituted by peaceful means among uncentralised tribals.

17.4.1 Legitimacy in Primary States

A state based on endogenous evolutionary process reflects a kind of homogeneity in society which is found to be lacking in states of conquest type. The process of state formation among the Meitei of Manipur state, described by R.K. Saha (1987), seems to be the result of inter-clan feuds within the tribal groups in Manipur valley. This case can be given as an example of a primary state. The basis of legitimacy of power in a primary state is rooted in its indigenous traditions. Political relations in such a society are perceived in terms of common structural principle. It may be unilineal kinship, or, it may be military and political groups of states, coming together yet remaining independent in internal affairs.

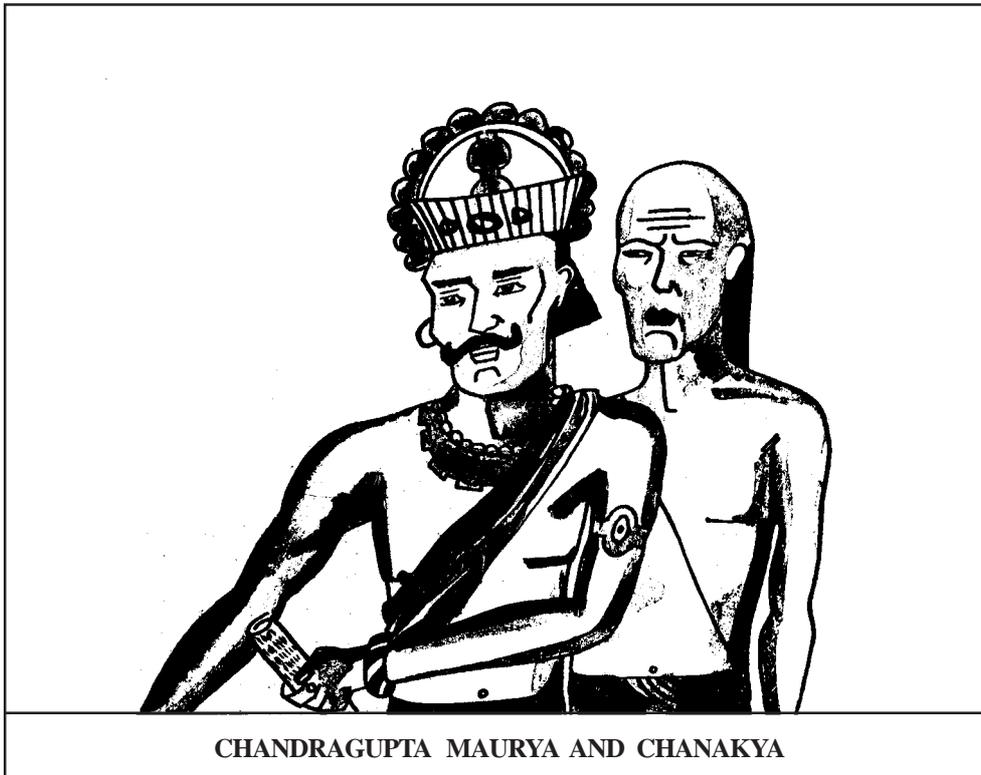
17.4.2 Legitimacy in Conquest Type or 'Secondary States'

The conquest type, also known as 'secondary state', emerges after smaller political units are conquered by more powerful people. The conquest may be in the form of an actual warfare. When the political institutions of neighbouring states influence the process of state formation in an area, even without an actual conquest, a secondary state is born.

Invariably, non-indigenous political institutions are superimposed on conquered groups. In some cases, super imposition of foreign political traditions is quite superficial, that is, the values and ideas behind it are not fully accepted by the conquered people. Subsidiary principalities are therefore able to maintain older polities along with the imposed political order.

However, in most cases, kinship-based community relationships of the peasant groups (e.g. in Indian villages) come in sharp contrast to the feudal type political relations, which are associated with the foreign government. In such a situation, the centralised authority has only the legitimate power to collect taxes and carry out public works. This then, is, the scene of subordinate units trying to break away at the first possible opportunity. Any student of Indian history can see this process at work in the development of political unity in India. Attempts to unite India as a political unit were made from time to time by the Hindu empires, the Muslim dynasties and also by the British colonial powers. During the entire span of Indian history, the control

authority was constantly challenged by smaller political entities. In fact, Wittfogel (1957: 98) has shown that a political authority in Asiatic societies has to be coupled with religious sanction in order to gain legitimacy. A king, advised by a priest (purohit) was the Indian ideal of legitimate political authority.



State in Traditional Societies

Then, there is also the element of two levels of political organisation and process. At the first level, lacking a basic political integration, the central authority acts, as a tax collecting and public works body. At the second level, the unity of subsidiary states is maintained according to the obligations of local community membership. In the case of India, the caste system and religion remained as constant factors of unity of the society, no matter how many types of polities were superimposed on its people. Generally, even the people are conscious of the opposition and conflict between two levels. These factors obviously influence the grounds on which people accept the claims of political powers over their lives.

17.4.3 Legitimacy Derived from Myths

All political systems have stories about their origin. Such myths basically reflect the attitudes and values of the society. Stories about the genesis of the system of political authority can be considered as its 'mythical charter'.

Generally, myths show the divine origin of the ruling line. The effect of such myth is to legitimise the existing political authority. In a closed system of stratification, such as the caste system, the political role of priests required religious validation. In India, the law books were created by the priestly class and law in India has always maintained a religious base.

Not only this, as Surajit Sinha (1987 : xi) observes, the ideology of caste system, more than any other feature of Indian society, provided a broad frame of state formation in the tribal regions. It can be said that in India and perhaps so also in Byzantium, the Inca Empire and ancient Egypt, the political role the priestly class has shaped political thought and religion.

17.4.4 Grounds on which People Accept Authority

Max Weber (1964) speaks of three bases upon which the authority can be accepted by people. According to him, there are three types of authority: i) traditional, ii) charismatic and iii) rational-legal. We find that in most of pre-modern political systems the authority is accepted on traditional grounds. When people accept a ruler because of his personal qualities of leadership and they are attracted to him because of his personal charm, he may be described as having charismatic authority. Of course, where such authority becomes institutionalised, it becomes an integral part of traditional authority.

The last type of authority, which Weber called rational legal, is based on the assumption that people recognise a need of being governed and submitting to a rule of law. Many myths and proverbs, in pre-literate societies, reflect this attitude of faith in orderly life. In literate societies, usefulness of a government and its machinery' is discussed at length in their law books. Material components of political relations are mostly expressed by people in terms of their utilitarian and practical functions.

17.5 INSTITUTIONS TO PREVENT ABUSE OF AUTHORITY

Maintenance of kingship rests on a constant adherence to its constitutional principles. A king's powers may appear to be absolute but, in practice, their various components function through different offices. The co-operation of all these parts enables the king to govern his people. Thus, it is necessary to recognise that it is not easy for a ruler to disregard certain social institutions which check and control the centralised authority. This does not mean that there are no despots. In fact, history of many political systems is full of such figures. In that sense, no constitution can really prevent a ruler from becoming an oppressor. All the same, tendencies towards despotism are checked by well-recognised mechanisms in most traditional societies. Some of them are given below:

- i) The transmission of power from one to the other ruler is either by inheritance according to patrilineal or matrilineal principles or election/ popular choice. Both ascribed and achieved criteria may be combined when the subject selects a particular son of the king as his successor. On the other hand, not following the rules of proper behaviour may have quite tragic consequences.

J.B. Bhattacharjee (1987: 190) mentions in his article on Dimasa State Formation in Cachar that Govindachandranarayan (1813-30) became unpopular because he married the widow of his elder brother. This was allowed by neither Hindu nor Dimasa rule in Cachar. That is why the ruler was deposed and when the British reinstated him, he was assassinated in 1830 and the Dimasa rule came to an end in Cachar.

- ii) Ceremonies of oath-taking and exhortations by the councillors to the new king also act as guide-lines for proper conduct on the part of the new ruler. For example, Busia (1951) describes how the Ashanti chief was exhorted by his councillors at the time of his accession. In tribal societies, it is common for councillors to reprimand the ruler and even fine him. Interestingly enough, in pre-colonial Jaintia state in north-east India, 'the role of a raja was much despised in the eyes of the people. The office of the raja was viewed with such disdain as a lowly office which no respectable person would occupy' (Pakem 1987: 287).

- iii) Lastly, the subject had the right to appeal against the subordinate officials. Many a Muslim rulers have been known to keep a bell at the gates of their palaces for any one to ring in order to get justice from the king.

Activity 2

Do you know a folk tale where a despotic ruler was brought to his senses by the people whom he ruled. If so, write down the story and its analysis and share it with other students at your study centre. Focus on the political power aspect of the story.

Having looked at mechanisms through which rulers were to be prevented from abusing their powers, we need also to consider what happens when a ruler does not pay attention to these social institutions and abuses his authority. Those who know the story of Shaka, the Zulu ruler in South Africa, and his tyrannical rule, would also know how popular disapproval of his rule by the people prompted his brother to assassinate Shaka. To escape a tyrannical political authority, the following set of institutions can be activated:

- i) The people may decide to migrate to another area, outside the jurisdiction of the existing ruler.
- ii) The paramount ruler may depose his subordinate who has abused the power delegated to him.
- iii) The king may be made to feel scared of sorcery or assassination by disgruntled people.
- iv) Lastly, there may be a revolt against the intolerable government of a despot. Such a revolt is generally in the form of a rebellion, in which the tyrant is replaced by a just ruler. As no change is brought in the basic values of the society, the revolt does not amount to revolution. It is simply reinstatement of a lawful authority.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space below for your answers.

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) Define the primary and secondary state. Use three lines for your answer.

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2) Distinguish, in two lines, between rebellion and revolution.

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17.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed main aspects of political authority in traditional or pre-modern societies. We looked at symbolic and secular aspects of centralised authority and described its range and scope in terms of territory, demography and economy. Then we discussed the grounds on which authority is accepted and finally listed those institutions which restrain and prevent the political authority from abusing its powers.

Viewed as historical forms of modern political institutions, these dimensions of state in traditional societies throw light on the political processes in modern context. Today,

our life is dominated by politicisation of social issues and in order to fully understand the implications of this process, this unit will provide us with some categories to systematise our information.

17.7 KEY WORDS

| | |
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| Blood feud | : Hostility between two tribes/lineages with murderous assaults in revenge for previous homicide |
| Clan | : Group of people recognising common ancestry |
| Demography | : Vital statistics, showing numerical condition of communities |
| Despot | : Absolute ruler, tyrant, oppressor |
| Feudal | : Polity based on relations of vassal and superior arising from holding of lands in feud. |
| Homicide | : Killing of a human being |
| Kingship | : The institution of sovereign ruler |
| Legitimacy | : Lawfulness |
| Lineage | : Group of people with identifiable ancestors of independent state |
| Segmentary Social Structure | : Social formation of many parts form a single unit |
| Titular Head | : Holder of office without corresponding function |
| Vassals | : Holder of land by feudal tenure |

17.8 FURTHER READINGS

Beattie, J. 1964, *Other Cultures: Aims and Methods and Achievements in Social Anthropology*. Cohen and West: London (Ch. 9, pp. 139-64)

Bottomore, T.B. 1972. *Sociology: A Guide to Problems and Literature* Vintage Books: New York (Ch. 9 pp. 151-67).

Mair, L. 1985. *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*. (Second Edition and Impression) Oxford University Press: New Delhi. (Chs. 7 and 8, pp. 109-138)

17.9 MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The scope of political authority is defined by the extent to which it exercises control over the lives of people.
- 2) A king delegates his powers among either his kinsmen or loyal subjects.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) A primary state evolves from within, without outside influences. A secondary state is built by conquests or is affected by political systems from outside.
- 2) In a rebellion, a tyrant ruler or authority is replaced by instituting a just and lawful authority while in a revolution, basic values of a society are challenged and sought to be changed.