UNIT 1   PRE-STATE TO STATE[1]

Structure

1.1   INTRODUCTION

Our understanding of the transition to the state in early India has developed and been refined over decades through painstaking investigation by scholars. What have emerged are possible scenarios that may help us trace what was, in any case, a complex, complicated process.

Theoretically, the state is not an institution of universal or ubiquitous nature to be located in any historically existing society, for it is found only in a differentiated economy or stratified society. Logically, then the following ideas emerge: non- stratified societies are pre-state societies; the origin of the state is not external; the state is inevitably *sui generis*; it gets neither diffused nor transplanted and; the concept of secondary state formation is a misnomer. The most crucial question, therefore, is the nature of the social formation that presupposes the absence or presence of a state. In history the state appeared as kingdoms and empires that were institutional outcomes of political processes in class-structured societies. Hence, we equate the state in history with the dynastic rule or monarchy and study the history of state formation as the history of the transformation of the chiefdom into the kingdom.

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[1]This Unit is adopted from MHI-04, Volume 1.

It is generally accepted that the transition from pre-state to state took place in north-India in the mid-1st millennium BCE. In south India the transition came much later in the 6th century CE.

The theory of internal stratification regards caste structure as a system of stratification in which *Kshatriyas* were the ruling class and *Vis* comprised the peasantry. The superior position and status of the *Kshatriyas* contributed to the emergence of the state in north India. Thus, stratification was an essential pre-requisite for transition to state system. In south India the social stratification had a different composition and nature. Stratification creates conflicts and differences which necessitates the emergence of a power which can resolve and control conflicts. Another important precondition for the emergence of state is the establishment of peasant economy. Population growth and social circumscription also contribute to state formation. Social and cultural heterogeneity is another factor leading to state formation. Trade and urban centers are crucial to the emergence of state. In a state system the political power has jurisdiction over a territory and it delegates authority to functionaries. Resources are required for carrying out the managerial functions of the state. Therefore, income collection is of utmost importance for the state. Socio- economic differentiation is, thus, intrinsic to the process of state formation.

1.2 OUR SOURCES: PRE-STATE TO STATE IN EARLY NORTH INDIA

There are various sources for the study of the transition from pre-state to state in early north India. Some of these include the Harappan evidence, the Vedic texts, Archaeological evidence etc.

1.2.1 How Important is the Harappan Evidence?

One of the problems we face is in figuring out whether and how the Harappan evidence can be brought to bear on the issue. It is now generally conceded that there were state-like institutions in the Harappan context. However, in the absence of textual traditions, reconstruction of the specific nature of the Harappan state tends to range from reasonable, imaginative possibilities, to more speculative ventures. What is more, it is well-nigh impossible to trace continuities in political processes from the Harappan to post-Harappan cultures.

1.2.2 Vedic Texts

Alternative trajectories have been worked out, primarily through an analysis of early and later Vedic literature. The former includes the *Rigveda*, while the latter includes the *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda* and *Atharvaveda*, as well as the *Brahmanas*, and the earliest *Sutra* literature. These were probably composed and compiled over a millennium (*c*. 1500-500 BCE). The four principal *Vedas* consist of prayer or chants (*mantras*) while the *Brahmanas* and the *Sutras* are in the nature of commentaries on rituals. As such, they do not provide us with a direct account of political events/processes. Scholars have sifted through accounts of myths, rituals and legends to trace the development of political institutions.

1.2.3 Archaeology

There have also been attempts to correlate these texts with archaeological evidence. Perhaps, the most well-known of such attempts is the correlation between later Vedic

literature and the Painted Grey Ware (PGW) Culture. These are based on correspondences in terms of chronology as well as geographical spread: both the later Vedic texts and the Painted Grey Ware Culture relate to the mid-Ganga valley. In contrast, the *Rigveda* pertains primarily to the Indus and its tributaries, frequently mentioned as the *Saptasindhu*.

Several hundred sites of the Pained Grey Ware Culture have been found. Most of these settlements lasted for centuries, and in some instances (e.g., Kaushambi, Mathura), these developed into important cities (also political centres) subsequently. The Painted Grey Ware levels at these and other sites indicate a fairly simple material culture. There is evidence of agriculture, pastoralism, small wattle-and-daub huts and the use of some amount of iron. Apart from the Painted Grey Ware, which gives the culture its name, we find plentiful evidence for other kinds of pottery as well. In fact, the PGW was probably meant only for elite use.

1.3 SOME PROBLEMS TO KEEP IN MIND

You may have noticed that we have delineated a rather long chronological span as well as a vast geographical expanse through which we attempt to trace the process of state formation. Obviously, we cannot be too precise and specific. What is more, we need to remember that there were other developments taking place within the space and time-frames we have isolated. There is, for instance, evidence of settled agricultural population in Bihar which was marginal from the perspective of Vedic traditions. If we remember that south Bihar (Magadha) was the nucleus of one of the most powerful states in early north India that culminated in the establishment of the Mauryan empire, we will realise that Vedic literature does not help us in understanding what led to such spectacular political developments in this region.

There is another, more technical problem. Sometimes, the texts continue to use the same term, even while adding on new meaning to it. For instance, the term *bali* often has the meaning of an offering to the gods, especially in the early Vedic context. In later situations, the term acquires meanings of gifts that are more or less voluntarily offered to the chief, and still later, in the post-Vedic context it acquires the meaning of a regular tax. This also happens with the term *raja* (*rajan*) whose meaning gradually shifts from chief to king.

1.4 THE EARLY VEDIC CONTEXT

Historians have analysed the prayers contained in the *Rigveda* to suggest that the dominant social categories were dependent on pastoralism, especially cattle rearing. Apart from this, the horse was regarded as a prestigious animal and the horse-drawn chariot was a symbol of power. Occasionally, the term *gopati*, meaning lord and/or protector of cattle, was used to refer to deities. Many of the terms used to describe deities were drawn from the human context through analogies with the human situation and it is likely that protection/possession of cattle was regarded as a trait typical of powerful men.

We also have prayers for victories in cattle raids which were, presumably, led by chiefs who may have distributed the booty thus acquired in gatherings in assemblies such as

the *vidatha*. We are not sure how these resources were shared but it is likely that the chief, his close supporters and the priests who offered prayers and sacrifices for their success may have claimed most of what was won.

There are other terms used to address powerful gods such as Agni, the fire god. These include terms such as *vispati*, literally the lord of the *vis*. The term *vis* is the one perhaps used most commonly to indicate the community or the basic social unit. There is a sense of shared existence; this may include the sharing of resources, of responsibility for military activities with the *vis* functioning as militia and of common rituals; that can be reconstructed from the hymns. The *vispati* may have coordinated such activities. References to the *vispati* die down in the later Vedic context, perhaps because the *vis* itself became increasingly differentiated, leading to a change in the nature of socio-political relations within the community.

Interestingly, some goddesses are addressed as *vispatni*. Would this suggest that women could act as leaders of the community on some occasions? Like the *vispati* the *vispatni* finds no mention in the later tradition.

Many of the deities are addressed as *raja*. These include the principal deities, Agni, Indra but especially Soma and, typically, *Varuna*. A few goddesses are addressed as *rajini* but this is somewhat exceptional. A typical attribute of the divine *rajas* is the quality of *kshatra* with connotations of universal power. We also have occasional mention of human *rajas*, whose exploits are recorded by the priests. Such accounts become more common in the later tradition where the achievements that are celebrated or commemorated include victories in battle and generous gifts made to the priests.

1.5   THE LATER VEDIC SCENARIO

Later Vedic texts permit us to catch a glimpse of increasingly complex social and political relations and the attempts made by the priests and their patrons to regulate these through an array of complicated rituals including the famous *Rajasuya, Vajapeya* and *Ashvamedha*.

1.5.1 The *Brahmana* and the *Raja*

The virtual absence of references to *varna* categories in the *Rigveda* has been frequently remarked upon. By contrast, later Vedic texts are replete with discussions on the ideal relationship amongst *varnas*, especially the first three *varnas*. The relationship between the *brahmana* and the *raja/kshatriya* seems to have been marked by competition, tension as well as by a sense that each needed the other (perhaps, this was truer of the priest than of the chief/king).

One of the areas of conflict was related to ritual status. While *brahmanas* claimed the highest position in the ritual domain by virtue of being ritual specialists, with knowledge of the sacred language and lore as well as through birth in what were proclaimed to be prestigious lineages, *kshatriyas*, who were the chief patrons of the elaborate rituals, may have viewed the situation differently.

There was also the vexed question of sharing material resources. The *brahmanas* valued the wealth that constituted *dakhsina*, the sacrificial fee, that could include gold and other metals, cattle as well as other animals and cloth, slaves (men and women)

amongst other things. *Rajas* who were generous were praised but the problem which proved intractable was whether the donor or the donee could claim superior status on account of such gift-exchanges.

Yet, in spite of tensions, the ties between the two were consolidated, partly because of recognition of dependency, if not of shared interests. *Rajas* depended on priests for the performance of elaborate rituals that both legitimized and sanctified their claims to power and status. Very often, in rituals such as the *rajasuya* the priest actually announced that the *yajamana* (sacrificer) had now become transformed into a *raja*. These were also occasions when people brought in tribute when they were treated to a visual and aural spectacle and priests were clearly invaluable collaborators in conjuring up a sacred context. At the same time, priests too depended on patronage and their status was reinforced through the performance of these elaborate rituals.

1.5.2 What Happened to the *Vis*?

Perhaps, the most striking change we notice is in the treatment of the *vis*. The term was still used to refer to the entire community. For instance, on major ritual occasions such as the *rajasuya* and the *Ashvamedha* the sacrifice, who was consecrated through the *abhisheka*, was often proclaimed as the *raja* of the *vis*. At the same time, the *vis* was often used to designate a residual category, distinguishing it from the *brahmana* or the priest on the one hand and *kshatriya/rajanya* (the ruler and/or his supporters) on the other. (The term *vaisya*, meaning of or belonging to the *vis*, owes its origin to this root).

This residual category was now, moreover, often identified as one that could be legitimately exploited. The most vivid imagery of this occurs in the notion of the *raja/ kshatriya* as *visamatta*, literally, the eater of the *vis*, suggesting that the *raja* could appropriate the resources generated by the *vis* at will. In the earlier situation the *vis* seems to have had some claims to a share of the booty obtained from raids. Now, this relationship was replaced by one of appropriation. At the same time, the *raja* was still not in a position to claim a regular tax but depended on less structured mechanisms for garnering resources.

Rituals were also used as occasions to both construct and represent and, perhaps, by extension, ensure what was regarded as the ideal relationship between the *kshatra* and the *vis*. From the point of view of the *raja/kshatriya* the *vis* was ideally to be supportive but subordinate. So, we find the use of rituals and *mantras* to ensure this. However, there are indications that such ritual manipulations may not have always worked. One of the constant fears expressed in the texts is that the *vis* might leave the *kshatriya*. Can we suggest that this might actually refer to situations where people might migrate from the realm of a *raja* who have become excessively extortionate, thus depriving him of resources, labour as well as armed support?

1.5.3 Complex Rituals and their Implications

One of the major features of the later Vedic texts are elaborate descriptions and prescriptions for complex rituals such as the *rajasuya*, *ashvamedha* and *vajapeya*. Let us see what these rituals implied.

In the first place, they were extremely long. In the *ashvamedha* or horse sacrifice, for instance, the horse was let loose with an escort of armed men to wander for a year.

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During that period, rituals, including recitations of a range of traditions about the king in particular, continued at the sacrificial site.

Secondly, each one of these rituals involved the mobilisation of resources. These included raw materials for food for all those who were expected to witness the ritual as well as sacrificial materials, including animals, and of course the articles that were to be given to the priests as *dakshina*. Some of these may have come in as voluntary gifts, others were probably obtained through a show of force.

Thirdly, each of these rituals was marked by the ritualisation of what may have been actual contests for power. For instance, the high point of the *vajapeya* was the chariot race which inevitably ended in the victory of the sacrificer/*yajamana*. Similarly, the *yajamana's* victory was automatically ensured in the game of dice that formed part of the *rajasuya*. The ritualisation of contests meant that the outcome was a foregone conclusion and victory could be connected to divine support.

Fourthly, and perhaps most obviously, the ritual provided the potential or actual chief/ king with an occasion for displaying his power and resources. Most of the sacrifices would have included visual displays including ritual drama such as mounting the throne or the *abhisheka*, the sprinkling of *yajamana* with waters that were regarded as sacred and empowering. There are detailed discussions on those eligible to sprinkle the water and these included, as one would expect, the priest, kinsfolk of the sacrifice and a representative of the *vis*. The *abhisheka* was followed by the public proclamation of the change of status of the *raja* who was now announced as the *raja* of the *vis*, whom he could "eat", with the *brahmanas* claiming exemption from subordination to *raja* in the same context. Throughout, moreover, the *raja* was equated with the gods, especially with deities like Indra and Prajapati but also, to a lesser extent, with Varuna and Soma. It is clear that the objective behind such elaborate displays was to overawe spectators with a sense of the power of the *raja*.

Did the rituals have their desired impact? There are, perhaps, no easy answers. We can envisage situations where they did impress the people but there were other situations where the response was not so neat. In the first place, mobilising resources may not have been easy and those who did garner these may not have wished to "waste" them on performing rituals. We have long discussions on the futility of rituals in the Upanishadic, Buddhist and Jaina traditions, and in some instances the participants are identified as *kshatriyas*. Can we suggest that some *kshatriyas* may have been averse to ritual activity?

Secondly, many of the rituals were meant to ensure the subordination of social categories. For instance, in the *ashvamedha* the sacrificial animals were arranged so as to ensure that the other social groups (including women) remained subservient. One can suggest that these groups may have resisted such subordination and may have withdrawn from participation in the rituals. In any case, while these rituals did not die down completely they were replaced by other means of claiming and legitimising access to political power.

1.5.4 The "Jewels" of the Realm

The *rajasuya* includes a unique ritual known as the *ratninamhavimsi.* This provided an occasion for the *raja* to visit a group of ten or twelve men and women (the lists vary

from text to text), make an offering in their house and claim their support. Obviously, these were special people and, very often, they have been identified as forming the nucleus of an "administrative system". Their participation is evident in other rituals as well. For instance, the guardians of the sacrificial horse in the *ashvamedha* were drawn from the *ratnins*.

Some of these who are classified as *ratnins* or jewels are expected candidates such as the *purohita* (chief priest) or the *gramani*. Others included the charioteer or *suta*, the companion of the *raja* in his exploits, and the one who was expected to narrate tales of valour on a number of occasions. There is mention of the *senani*, the leader of the army, as well as the *sangrahitr* associated with gathering resources.

Other inclusions are more intriguing. We have references to the wives of the ruler, including the *mahishi* or chief wife, *vavata* or favourite wife and *parivrkti* or abandoned wife. Their inclusion may have been connected with the belief that they represented the prosperity and fecundity of the realm. It may also point to the importance of matrimonial alliances in consolidating political power. At the same time, many of the rituals graphically demonstrated the subordinate position envisaged for such women who were often assigned specific roles in the sacrifice. For instance, in the *Ashvamedha* the *mahishi's* participation was meant to ensure the fertility of the realm.

We also have a set of *ratnins* who are ritually never mentioned in later tradition. These include the *bhagadugha* or the distributor of shares, the *akshavapa*, in-charge of dicing, the *govikartr* who slaughtered cattle and the *palagala* or messenger. It is likely that they were connected with economic and social transactions that were gradually being marginalized. In fact, some of the *ratnins*, such as the *govikartr* and *palagala* are regarded as *shudras* with special rites of expiation being suggested to mitigate the 'sin' of including them within the sacrifice.

1.6 EARLY HISTORIC TAMIL POLITY AS DESCRIBED IN *SANGAM* LITERATURE

The early historic period in the historiography of south India used to be called the *Sangam* age after the corpus of ancient Tamil heroic poems popularly known as *Sangam* literature. Old-generation scholars have formulated what is called *Sangam* polity on the basis of political allusions in the poems. They have taken for granted that the ruling lines called Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas celebrated in the heroic poems were dynasties of monarchs. The Cheras ruled over the south-western part of *Tamilakam* (Tamil macro region including Kerala), the Cholas, the north-eastern part, and the Pandyas, the south and south-eastern parts.

The Cheras

The Chera region was a mixture of diverse ecological zones with the predominance of hills and forests. The resource base of the Cheras was also, therefore, diverse, though forest wealth was the main resource. A poem incidentally refers to the hill products and sea products of *Cheran Chenkuttuvan* and the gold that reached ashore by boats.

A notable fact about the Cheras is that they are invariably praised as the performers of *velvi* (Vedic sacrifices) though they are also described as devotees of Korravai, the war goddess, and Murugan. The poems equate Cheras with the Vedic gods such as

Surya, Agni, Marut, the *Panchabhutas*, the constellations and the *navagrahas*. Poets eulogise the Cheras as wearing garlands made of seven crowns. A poem says that just as a mother fosters her child, *Kopperunceral Irumporai* protects his people. All these attributes of the Cheras are indicative of a high degree of influence of the Vedic Brahmanic as well as the Buddhist culture. What one can see in the anthology is the gradual making of an ideology of political power and its cultural paraphernalia drawing heavily from Vedic *itihasa*-puranic-shastric Brahmanism.

In many songs the Cheras are described as the overlord of all monarchs in the land between the Himalayas and Kanyakumari. Valluvan, the chief of Nanjilmalai, is mentioned in a poem as a Chera subordinate with military obligations. The chiefs of Payar Malai and Vettaru were the other known Chera subordinates. Ceraman Celvakatunko was the recipient of *tirai* (tribute) from a number of *mannars* (warrior chiefs). The prominence of the Chera lineage is clear from the songs which form a separate collection. The Cheras are the only line of chieftains with a collection of eulogizing songs – *Padirruppattu* – solely for them. It is said that originally there were ten units of ten songs each dedicated to ten Chera chieftains. The surviving eighty songs (eight units of tens) dedicated to eight Cheras in the anthology give us valuable ideas about the structure of political power, sources of legitimacy and nature of authority in contemporary Kerala. There are references in the poems to the Cheras possessing an army of the classical four-fold division, conquering many rulers and subjecting them to a subordinate level. They are poetic stereotypes for praising the *Ventar* (chiefly lineage) and not expressions of reality. A poem claims Ceraman Perumcorrutiyan to have conqured the land of the Pandavas and to have given a feast both to the Pandavas and Kauravas after the Bharata war. The measures taken by some Ceras to prevent the pirates on the western coast and the 'arrangements of lights made on the shore as indicators of the coastline for the ships at night are mentioned in the Sangam literature. Utiyan Ceralatan, Imayavarampan Netum Ceralatan, Cenkuttuvan, Celvakatunko and Atukottuppattu Ceralatan are some of the most important chiefs of the Ceras.

The Colas

The Cola who is well known as 'kaviri kilavon' in the poems had his land in the Kaveri delta, rich in paddy and sugercane. There are a few poems in praise of the chiefs enati (Senapati)Tirukkuttuvan, enati Tirukkilli, and enati Tirukkannan as enati of the Cola. Pannam, the kilan of Cirukuti and Aruvantai the kilan of Ampar were the Cola subordinates with tributary and military obligations. In the case of the Cola it is clear that the Ventar used to exact puravu (paddy) from the people. A poem refers to the maravar warrior chiefs or men) of Cola Nalankillio as pataimakkal meaning fighters. There is the well known tradition of Karikala Cola causing the anicut to be built. Karikalan, Perunar Killi, Killivalavan, Nalan Killi are some of the very important among the Cola rulers.

The Pandyas

The Pandya also had a mixed ecological region dominated by pastoral and coastal tracts. A Pandyan calls himself the head of the land of numerous new resources. Nakan, the Kilavan of Nalai and Nampi Netunceliyan are mentioned as Pandya subordinates with military obligations. Pandya Netunceliyan refers to his people as those living under his shade. A poem eulogises Pandya Maran Valuti to have been ferocious enough to

frighten the north Indian Kings. Mutukutumi Peruvaluti, Maran Valuti are some of the most important among the Pandya rulers.

The Political Structure: Historical Perspectives

The old generation historians have attributed a centralised political structure to the Ceras, Colas and Pandyas. They have characterised their government as having an organised system of central and provincial administration by applying the ideas of the typical monarchy reconstructed from the epics, puranas and the Arthasastra at the instance of allusions in the poems. The political structure has been conceived as consisting of ministers, the king's council, standing army of fourfold division, delimited territory, periodic taxation, and officialdom. N. Subrahmanian has discussed at length the government at the center, municipal level and village government, warfare and military organisation, law and justice, revenue and finance in the Sangam age.

Sabha, aimperukuzhu and enperayam are the bodies or councils mentioned in the literature such as Cilappatikaram, Manimekhalai, Maduraikkanchi. V. Kanakasabhai says that Aimperumkuzhu consisted of the representatives of the people, the priests, the physicians, astrologers, army chiefs, envoys or ambassadors, ministers and spies. According to N. Subrahmanian Enperayam comprised of accountants, clerks, treasury officials, guards, elders of the city, infantry chiefs, cavalry chiefs, infantry chiefs, etc.

However, recent researches show that these are unfounded generalisations, made under the inspiration of patriotic sentiments and a sense of regional pride and without enough caution about the chronology, contents and context of the literary source.

1.7 PRE-STATE SITUATION IN SOUTH INDIA

The conventional historiography has always attributed dynastic and kingly status to the ruling lines called the Cera-s, Pandya-s, and Cola-s in the Tamil macro region (Tamilakam) that broadly corresponds to the landmass between Tiruvenkatam in the north and Kanyakumari in the south. An inescapable contingent of the South Indian historiography, this assumption continues to influence the students of history. Recent historiography has made a departure by identifying the aforesaid ruling lines as chiefdoms, quite typical of pre-state societies. This departure is founded on studies that show the socio-economic and political set-up of the region largely undifferentiated and non-stratified, enabling to categorise the aggregate as a pre-state social formation.

The pre-state social formation of Tamilakam was a combination of four different forms of subsistence viz., the hunting - gathering, cattle keeping, plough agriculture and crafts production, notwithstanding certain overlapping situations. Primitive agriculture and animal husbandry had politico-cultural dominance. The notion of *aintinai* (five eco-types) based physiographic division and their respective subsistence patterns and socio-cultural ideas and institutions embedded in the Tamil heroic poetics, is the perennial source for characterising the social formation. The overall socio-economic milieu was that of hunting - gathering and agriculture in the eco- types of hilly backwoods (*kurinji*), agro-pastoral subsistence in the grasslands (*mullai*), plough agriculture in the wetlands (*marutam*), fishing and salt making in the littoral (*neytal*) and predatory dependence on others in the parched zones (*palai*). Interspersed along these ecotypes some people engaged in a few metal and ceramic works. The peoples in the different ecotypes

(*tinai*-s) interacted with one another through formal and informal means of exchange and predatory relations.

Peoples of these various economies lived in groups of kindred descendants, each in the self-sustaining settlement called *Ur*, the basic unit of production with varying degrees of development depending upon its technology and productivity. Despite the developmental unevenness, all of them were largely undifferentiated economies of reciprocity and redistribution. The old Tamil language and a variety of shared beliefs and instituted practices rendered the economically diverse peoples to be linguistically and culturally homogeneous. The political structure of the social formation was characterised by chiefdoms of different sizes.

1.8 CHIEFDOMS OF TAMILAKAM

Our knowledge about the chiefdoms of Tamilakam is almost entirely based on the Tamil heroic literature. That is very well justified, for the formation of chiefdoms in Tamilakam synchronises with the emergence of the Tamil heroic literary tradition. The Ashokan edicts of the 3rd century BCE refer to the Tamil chiefdoms as the Ceras, Colas and Pandyas (Keralaputa, Coda and Pandya) apart from satiyaputa (Atiyaman) The allusions in the Tamil heroic literary compositions, Tamil brahmi label-inscriptions and Graeco-Roman geographers' (Ptolemy and Pliny) accounts would have us believe that the Tamil chiefdoms existed from the second century B.C and lasted till the close of the third century CE Archaeology of the chiefdom- level socio-economic processes goes further back in time to the mid first millennium B.C that witnessed the expansion of the iron using cultures, often distinguished by the megalithic monuments. Scholars have indicated the overlap between the cultures represented by the megalithic burial as well as habitat relics and the cultures represented by the heroic poems. It makes little sense in distinguishing cultures as tagged to the source materials and naming them as megalithic culture, black and red ware culture, Sangam culture and so forth. Instead, one should be able to visualise a scenario of the co-existence and interaction of peoples of different means of subsistence and shared cultural practices.

There are different levels of chiefly power represented in the poems that give us some clues to the pattern of distribution of power from the simple to the complex along the small and big descent groups. The heroic poems unveil before us an active scenario of co-existence and interaction of these unevenly evolved chiefly systems. They are mainly three: viz. the *Kilar*, *Velir* and *Ventar* systems.

The *kilar* chiefs were hunter chiefs of the descent groups called *vetar* and *kuravar*. Like the *Velir* chiefs, the *kilar* chiefs were also hunter chiefs either of *vetar* or *kuravar*. Certain *kilar* are also mentioned to have held sway over agrarian tracts who were relatively more resourceful. Kilar were also local big men in agricultural settlements.

The level of power represented by the *Velir* seems to be the most archaic and lineage conscious. A chief called Irunko-*vel*, (located in semi arid zone between the Kaveri and Vaigai Valleys) one of the traditional five *vels* is mentioned in a poem as *vetarkoman*, the chief of *vetar*, to have belonged to a long line of 49 generations of chiefs. The poems show that the *Velir* chieftains held sway over the *Kurinji* and *mullai* tracts, i.e. pastoral forest hills (*malai*). They were hill chieftains heading mostly the descent groups called *vetar*, *itaiyar* and *kuravar*. Venkatamalai, Kantiramalai,

Kollimalai, Mutiramalai, Kutiramalai, Parampumalai, Potiyilmalai, Payarmalai, Elilmalai and Najilmalai are the famous millet rich hill chiefdoms celebrated in the poems. Elilmalai was the most prominent hill chiefdom of Kerala and the lineage of Nannan, the hunter chief of *vetar* (*vetarkoman*) was related to that of the chiefs of Kantiramalai. Another chiefdom closely linked to the southern end of Kerala was Potiyilmalai. The poems celebrate the Ay as *kuravarperumakan*, the chief of *kuravar* in the hill called Potiyilmalai rich in honey, jack fruit, elephants and monkey. The Ay chief is addressed as *mavel*, the big *vel* and mentioned as belonging to the *Aykuti* (the Ay family). The association of the term Ay with *ayar* (pastoralists) and the claim of the later Ay chiefs to have belonged to the *vrishnikula* are there but as such there is no direct evidence to show that they were pastoral chiefs. Pari, the chief of Parampumalai; Ori, the chief of Kollimalai; Kari who killed Ori and became the chief of his hill, Elini, the chief of Kutirmalai and Pekan, the chief of Vanmalai, Kumanan, and the chief of Mutiramalai are the most celebrated hunter chiefs of *Vetar* or *Kuravar*. Sometimes the hill chiefs are called *vettuvar*. However, all the *Velir* were not hill chiefs, for instance, *Elini* the chief of Vettaru was a *vel* in control of agrarian low land.

The next category of political power is that of the *Ventar* represented by the three major chiefly lineages viz.; Cera, Pandya and Cola. These three are referred to in the poems as *muventar* or *muvar*. The poems show that they had their core areas in Karur, Madurai and Uraiyur respectively and the peripheral strategic points at Muciri, Korkai and Puhar respectively. The Ceras held sway over the *kurinji* dominated zones of the Western Ghats towards sea, the Pandyas, the *mullai, palai, neital* dominated zones in the south central region of Tamilakam and the Colas, the *marutam* dominated Kaveri region. There was no notion of precisely demarcated territory and apart from references to core areas of each, the poems give us no clues to the actual spheres of each one's control. The control got transmitted through subordinate chiefs towards the periphery where it waned and constantly fluctuated.

The Ceras are referred to in the poems as '*kanaka-natan*' (the chief of the forested *natu*) or *malaiyan* (the chief of *malai* or hill) which is suggestive of their ecological region. A poet praising Ceraman Kotai Marpan, expresses confusion as to how the chief should really be addressed. The poet asks whether the chief could be called *natan* as he had *marutam* lands or *uran* as he had *kurinji* lands or *cerpan* as he had coastal tracts. This would suggest that the Cera region was a mixture of diverse ecological zones with the predominance of hills and forests. The resource base of the Cera was also therefore diverse though forest wealth was the main resource. A poem incidentally refers to the hill products (*malaittaram*) and sea products (*kat-arrraram*) of *Ceran Cenkuttuvan* and the gold that reached ashore by boats. The Pandya also had a mixed ecological region dominated by pastoral and coastal tracts. A Pandya chieftain calls himself the head of the land of numerous new resources, '*yanar maiyar koman*'. The Cola who is well known as '*kaviri kilavon*' in the poems had his land in the Kaveri delta, rich in paddy and sugarcane.

The *Ventar* category of chieftains also appropriated the resources through prestations and gifts. It is implicit that the incipient mechanism of appropriation was predatory. The subjugation process seems to have involved three different methods viz.; subordination with tributary obligations, expulsion and marital alliances. There are many references in the poems to all these methods of enlarging the domain of the *Ventar*. Valluvan, the chief of Nanjilmalai, is mentioned in a poem as a Cera subordinate with military

obligations. The chiefs of Payar malai and Vettaru were the other known Cera subordinates. Similarly Nakan, the *Kilavan* of Nalai and Nampi Netunceliyan are mentioned as Pandya subordinates with military obligations. There are a few poems in praise of the chiefs *enati* (*senapati*) Tirukkuttuvan, *enati* Tirukkilli, and *enati* Tirukkannan as *enati* of the Cola. Pannam, the *kilan* of Cirukuti and Aruvantai the *kilan* of Ampar were the Cola subordinates with tributary and military obligations. Sometimes the lesser chiefs in the fringes had to be subordinate of more than one line of *Ventar*, say for instance both the Ceras and Pandyas. The poems show that the subjugated chiefs could remain fearless only by submitting a share of their resources to the *Ventar* in the form of *tirai* or *kol* (tributes) in kind. Ceraman Celvakatunko was the receipient of *tirai* from a number of *mannar*. However, it appears that often the *Ventar* had to raid the settlements for exacting *tirai* from many a chieftain. In the case of the Cola it is clear that the *Ventar* used to exact *puravu* (paddy) from the *kutimakkal*. All the three *Ventar* are referred to in the poems with the term *iraivan* which means he who exacts. This would suggest that they had exacted from the people what was feasible according to the resource potential of the region. However, there is no evidence for any regular periodic exaction in fixed measure or quantity by any of these chieftains, to call it tax.

The returns from exchange relations must have enabled the *Ventar* to possess gold and other prestige items. As already noted, it is not clear how they were involved in the process of exchange. The poems show that the major activity of the *Ventar* like the *Velir* was accumulation of resources and their redistribution following the determinate pattern of social relationships. Plunder was indispensable for them also since their redistributive network was much more elaborate and complex than what they could have afforded with their actual resources. They had a large body of dependents such as their kinsmen (*kilainar*) scholarly bards (*pulavar*) warrior chiefs (*maravar*, *kilar* and *mannar*) warrior men (*maravar*) bards (*panar* and *porunar*) magico-religious functionaries and so on. The poetic flower symbolism of *vetci* (cattle raid) *karantai* (cattle recovery) *vanji* (chieftain's raid) *kanji* (chieftain's resistance of a raid) and *tumpai* (preparation for raid) show how institutionalised and common the plunder was. There is no evidence for the *Ventar* maintaining a ready troop of warriors like a standing army or systematically organised militia under them. But they had enough people of the fighter clan who could be mobilised instantaneously by the beating of a battle drum. The term *enati* can only be the result of poetic approximation by the bards. The Ceras are the only line of chieftains with a collection of eulogising songs, *Patirruppattu*, solely for them. The prominence of the Cera lineage is clear from the songs which form a separate collection.

The only institution of some political character mentioned in poems is *avaiyam* (*sabha*) which seems to have functioned as an assisting body of *Ventar*. The members of this body seem to have been mainly the warrior chiefs and the *pulavar* (the scholarly bards). However, the ideas of instituted process of polity were quite well known albeit without any correspondence to reality. For instance the poets conceived the *muventar* as the three crowned kings of ancient Tamilakam. Poets eulogise the Ceras as wearing garlands made of seven crowns. A notable fact about the *Ventar* is that they are often praised as the performers of *velvi* (Vedic sacrifices), though they are also described as devotees of *korravai*, the war goddess and Murugan. The poems equate them with the Vedic gods such as *Surya*, *Agni*, *Marut*, the *Pancabhutas*, the constellations and

the *navagrahas*. The equation reminds us of the *lokapala* theory of the *itihasa-purana* tradition. All these attributes of the Ceras are indicative of a high degree of influence of Vedic brahmanism. But almost on equal footing the influence of the Buddhist ideas is also seen in their association with the *Ventar*.

There seems to be a lot of difference between the image that the poems try to build up for the *Ventar* and reality about them. We know that the whole of Tamilakam did not belong to them and there were other tribute-receiving chiefs like Atiyaman who were almost nearer to *Ventar* in status. A poem in praise of Netuman Anji warns all the chiefs of agrarian settlements to rush to him with *tirai* if they wished to keep their *ur* with them. Many of the hill chiefs were uncompromisingly opposed to the *Ventar*. Pari of Parampumalai is one good example. He offered strong resistance to the *Ventar*, though he was subsequently defeated and killed. So reality was that *Ventar* were also chiefs, but of a little higher category. In short, the political level of the period differed from that of a state system.

1.9 TOWARDS STRATIFICATION

The tendencies towards stratification were much more evident in the headquarters of the Ceras, Colas and Pandyas. In the ports and ruling headquarters several hereditary craftsmen and specialised functionaries drawn from hinterlands worked and perhaps got organised into corporate bodies (*nikamam*). In the ports like Korkai, Muciri and Tondi, there seem to have existed artisan/crafts folk settlements (*ceris*) of hereditary occupations. Probably both the ruling authority and organised merchant groups must have used labour of a class of servile people under conditions of coercion and relations of labour transcending kinship. Poems refer to captives working in pearl fisheries. The *ventar* level of political control implied the emergence of new hereditary occupations. In the process of predatory operations and redistribution, some kind of differential allocation of new position, status, roles and prestige within the complex redistributive relationships was natural. There was a slow emergence of hereditary occupations in the chiefly settlements with a greater proportion in coastal towns, marketing centres and ruling headquarters. The trend of differential allocation of positions and roles at the instance of the highest chiefly authority anticipated the formation of a hierarchy. However, the poems do not contain pointers to a clearly stratified society. Social differentiation was confined to the binary between *uyarntor* (the highborn) that comprised brahmanas and *ilipirappalar* (the lowborn), the people. That the second category comprised all people suggests a very flexible kind of social division, and lack of indications to the existence of intermediary positions confirms the fluidity. Similarly the differentiation in terms of the objective conditions of life was also confined to the binary division between *puravalar* (redistributors) and *iravalar* (redistributees/dependents).

The process involved the generation of a series of contradictions within the social formation. The most striking contradiction was the continued articulation of conditions totally uncongenial to the development of plough agriculture, which was the most potential form among contemporary forms of production. Predatory marches of chieftains, their destruction of agrarian settlements as part of the scorched earth policy in raids, and the dominance of the ideology of war and booty redistribution provided an adverse circumstance for the development of agriculture. As we have already seen, redistribution exerted pressure on production, but failed to translate itself as a motor of

intensified or surplus oriented production since there was no scope for it within the kinship based forms of production. Intensified labour mobilisation for better production was beyond the working power of contemporary political apparatus that had little coercive ability with no institutional means of surplus extraction and or appropriation. It was not possible for the social formation to persist on for a long time in a set up of complex redistribution, generating contradictions. Obviously the major trend in the process was that of the gradual dissolution of the social formation.

What began taking shape in the brahman households was crucial for the real beginnings of a hierarchy. The permanent workforce attached to the brahman households had the greatest possibility of being conceived hierarchically because of the stratifying system of production relations and the brahmanical tradition of social differentiation. The notion of hierarchy was implicit in the system of production in which the relation between two objectively antagonistic classes was fundamental. The mid-first millennium AD was thus a turning point in terms of stratification and hierarchical ordering. The process took more than two centuries to characterise the social aggregate. During the $5^{th} - 6^{th}$ centuries the agrarian societies of Tamilakam were perceptibly becoming class-structured. This was directly related to the spread of plough agriculture and the corresponding new relations of production that meant social stratification based on entitlements to the nature of land-use. It was primarily a tripartite stratification of the people into landholders, leaseholders and tillers. Since plough agriculture also meant specialisation of a variety of arts and crafts, a further stratification of the people who were grouped along the line of occupations followed gradually. The nature of rights over land and the level of entitlement to the produce determined the strata of the people of different arts and crafts. Divided largely into the upper and lower strata the people were soon woven into a system of differentiation within each stratum. The social relations of the period resulted from an aggregate of these.

1.10 THE FORMATION OF THE STATE

With the sixth century AD, we see the new agrarian system articulating its political control as manifested in the Pallava, Pandya, Cera and Cola ruling houses. The new political formation represented by the Simhavarman line of the Pallavas and the Kadungon line of the Pandyas owed itself to the developing agrarian society whose expansion was linked to royal patronage. The Colas of the Vijayalaya line at a later period represented the same kind of political authority engendered by the paddy-based economy. Though it is not clear whether the Ceras represented a comparable royal line of inheritance, the political authority represented by them too was engendered by the paddy economy. With the expansion of the new relations of production and the spread of wet-rice agriculture that characterised the period from $6^{th} - 7^{th}$ centuries, the society became class-structured and the birth of the state plausible. The birth of a new political structure different from that of the chiefdom was a major simultaneous process with the development and expansion of wet-rice agriculture. Its antecedents involved the transition from kin-labour to non-kin labour, multiple functionaries to hereditary occupation groups, clans to castes, simple clannish settlements to structured agrarian villages, and chiefdom to monarchy.

A perceptible institutional feature of agrarian expansion was the proliferation of *brahmadeya* villages throughout the fertile tracts of major river valleys in the region.

This was an organised affair under the royal initiative. A few copper plates, say Velvikkuti plates for instance, speak about the restoration of the villages originally gifted to brahmanas as *ekabhoga* and subsequently lost through misappropriation by others. All such lost villages were later restored as *brahmadeyas* under the corporate control as the cases like the Velvikkuti vouch for. This shift from individual holding (*ekabhoga*) to collective holding (corporate *brahmadeya*) is important in the context of the insecurity of the former. The ekabhoga holding continued but mainly as a grant in lieu of payment for a high status functionary. The proliferation of the latter meant the successful development of the new system of productive relations under a new institutional form and political patronage.

The social relations began to be further structured during the sixth-seventh centuries with the steady expansion of plough agriculture across the wetland. Expansion of agrarian settlements through the creation of *brahmadeyas* often involved the superimposition of the superior rights of the brahmans over the communal holdings and the clan families of the locality. It must have been an intricate process of transformation of primitive agriculture and clan settlements into advanced agriculture and farmer settlements, respectively. The main features of the process were differentiation, stratification, and political formation leading to the development of the state-system and authority structures. These were simultaneous developments taking place as supplementary and complimentary to one another, resulting from the growth of agrarian economy. Such developments were in their turn ensuring the further growth of the economy.

The relations of production in plough agriculture were expanding towards domination of the total society. This was a long institutional process involving the proliferation of occupational specialisation and its ordering into a hierarchy. The formation of agrarian localities was an ongoing process, and everywhere it accomplished a uniform structure of social relations. As agrarian expansion advanced, human settlements (*ur*) originally bound by kinship got penetrated by the mechanisms of stratification. In short the transformation of non-brahman villages into productive relations transcending kinship was a continuous process. The non-brahman villages are called *vellanvakai* in contemporary inscriptions. Such settlements began to be integrated as agrarian localities (*nadu*). This *nadu* was hence fundamentally different from the *nadu* that figures in the heroic poems. As agrarian localities of hierarchically structured social relations, the *nadus* subsequently acquired great political significance in the monarchical system.

Irrespective of the fact whether the villages were brahman (*brahmadeyas*) or non-brahman (*vellanvakai*) settlements (*ur*), the social structure remained the same everywhere. It was a hierarchy with landholders (*brahmadeyakilavar* in the case of *brahmadeyas* and *urar/nattar* in the case of *velanvakai* settlements) at the apex. The large number of leaseholders (*karalar*) who were mostly artisans and craftsmen, constituted the intermediary. At the bottom of the society remained the primary producers (*atiyalar*). Almost parallel to the leaseholders there emerged a category of independent agricultural families who held small strips of land as hereditary holdings (*kani*). Kani rights were also assigned to many intermediary holders either from the temple lands or as family holdings. They became hereditary in due course. Such holdings originally tilled by the holders themselves too began to be tilled by the primary producers. The hierarchy became more elaborate during the 7th and 8th centuries. There emerged different categories of people with diverse types of hereditary rights on land. The agricultural produce circulated in determinate shares from the bottom to the top. It

took a structured path through all the different categories of people enjoying the different levels of entitlement. The most benefited were the landholders who were ensured of goods and services by the settlers in their land while the most exploited were the primary producers. The state in South India was the structured outcome of the brahmanised agrarian society and polity.

1.11 SUMMARY

The textual traditions of the vedic period do not permit us to arrive at a complete understanding of political processes. Nevertheless, they point to important developments.

They suggest that there was an attempt to consolidate the power of the *raja*, and while the term may have referred to a chief in the early Vedic tradition, we can consider it as almost king — like in the later Vedic context.

The *raja* depended on support, drawn from priests, with whom the relationship was often tense. He also drew on support from an increasingly differentiated community, the *vis*, and on ties with certain individuals who performed functions that were more or less valued.

Nevertheless, the political structures that were evolving were not stable. They were subject to pressures and contestations, and seem to have been constantly modified. The pre-state system in Early Vedic period was characterised by the lineage society. According to Romilla Thapar "A lineage has been defined as a corporate group of unilineal kin with a formalised system of authority". The later Early Vedic period was a transitional stage between pre-state lineage society of Early Vedic period and emergence of incipient state in the form of gana sanghas and full fledged state systems viz. monarchies which emerged in the age of the Buddha.

In the south the pre-state social formation was a blend of four forms of subsistence patterns viz. hunting-gathering, cattle breeding, plough agriculture and craft production. The political structure was characterised by chiefdoms. The source of information about these chiefdoms is the Tamil heroic literature. The socio-economic and political system was undifferentiated and non-stratified. Thus it can be considered as a pre-state social formation. The transition to state in South India took place in the 6th century AD with the establishment of the rule of Pallavas, Pandyas, Ceras and Colas.

1.12 GLOSSARY

Abhiseka	:	Consecration
Constellations	:	Group of stars on the ecliptic near which the moon passes (Asvini, Krttika).
Itihasapurana	:	Ancient Indian historical tradition compiled by bards and panegyrists and it contains genealogical data.
Lokapala	:	Guardian of the universe (Indra, Varun, Kuber and Yama).
Marut	:	Spirit of Storm.

Murugan	:	Chief deity of ancient Tamils.
Navagrahas	:	Nine planets: Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Rahu and Ketu.
Pancabhutas	:	Subtle elements (ether, air, light, water, earth).
Purohita	:	Chief priest
Suta	:	Charioteer
Yajamana	:	Sacrificer

1.13 EXERCISES

1) Explain the process by which social and political relations became complex in the later Vedic period.

2) Discuss the nature of chiefdoms which evolved in Tamilakam in the early historic period.