UNIT 11 MEANING AND NATURE OF THE STATE

Structure
11.0 Objectives
11.1 Introduction
11.2 The State and its Derivations
11.3 Meaning and Definition of the State
  11.3.1 Elements of the State
  11.3.2 Distinction Between the State and Other Associations
  11.3.3 Is this Distinction Real?
11.4 Nature of the State: Different Theories
  11.4.1 The Liberal Theory
  11.4.2 The Marxist Theory
  11.4.3 The Gandhian Theory
11.5 Let Us Sum Up
11.6 Some Useful References
11.7 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

11.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with the greatest of all human association, viz. the state, which is the main concern of political science. There is such a great diversity in the uses of the word ‘state’ that it creates confusion. Thus, an attempt has been made to elucidate the basic features and tenets of the state in comparison to the synonyms of the state like nation, country, society and government. After reading this unit, you should be able to:

• Understand the meaning and derivations of the term state and know its basic characteristics;
• Differentiate the state from its various synonyms; and
• Understand the major theoretical framework about the nature of state.

11.1 INTRODUCTION

As mentioned before, one of the ways of studying political science is to study the state in all its varied manifestations. But the word state has often been used indiscriminately to express a general tendency or an idea like the “state” of a man’s health, of his mind or of his economic conditions. In political science too, it has been used in different shades; as a synonym of government, federation or its constituent units. So, what ‘is’ the state, does it promote progress or restrain it, how much powers should the state have and in what spheres of human activity, how is it different from other existing institutions and what is the exact explanation about the nature of state?

These questions have been the concern of political philosophers since the days of ancient Athens; however, conscious efforts to formulate principles concerning the state of political theory began in the western world, along with the ancient Greeks. Thus, it becomes imperative to understand the concept as a basic theme of the discipline.
11.2 THE STATE AND ITS DERIVATIONS

As has been stated, one aspect of political science is to deal with the state, the highest of all human associations. The Greeks used the word “polis” for which the word city-states corresponds most closely to the English term ‘Civitas’, which also means the same along with the notion of ‘public welfare’. The Teutons employed the term ‘status’ which forms only a part of the phrase. The modern term ‘state’ has been derived from the word “status” earlier employed by the Teutons. It was Niccolo Machiavelli who first used the term “state” in political science. Thus, it becomes very clear that the term state did not become very popular until the sixteenth century. The people living in a greater part of Medieval Europe did not know the concept of modern state. In course of time, the word became popular and acquired a neutral sense of authority.

11.3 MEANING AND DEFINITION OF THE STATE

Since the state is one of the important components in the study of political science, a clear understanding of what is meant by the term ‘state’ is important. From the beginning of social life, mankind has lived under some form of authority. This authority has varied in its nature and has exercised its function through different forms of organization. Beneath these differences in the concrete manifestation of political life may be observed a practical identity of purpose; and by disregarding non-essential elements and modifications that arise because of the demand of time, place and circumstances, we may discover the very essence of state, different from other organizations.

From a consideration of matters of terminology, we now come to inquire what the state is. Definitions of the state are, as the German writer Schulze remarked, innumerable. Naturally, these definitions are colored by the opinions of their authors and are effectuated by the point of view from which the state is envisaged. The sociologists view it as a social phenomenon, while the jurists regard the state as a juridical establishment; writers on international law emphasize certain elements, which the political scientists ignore, and finally philosophical writers formulate their definitions in abstract terms. However, we should remember that the state is both an abstract conception and a concrete organization. i.e. identified with physical elements. Thus, in all these senses, state can be taken to mean the following:

i) An organization of individuals i.e. mankind viewed as an organized unit
ii) Politically organized people of a definite territory
iii) An organization of public law that is monopolistic over the use of violence against a group or population
iv) An organization which in internal matters carries out its functions through a unified set of institutions known as the government.

11.3.1 Elements of the State

The state, as said earlier, may be viewed as both a concrete thing and an abstract idea. A concrete thing means that it is a specific human group or association and viewed in abstract terms, it is a corporation possessing a juristic personality. The state is composed, therefore, of both physical and metaphysical or spiritual elements. These elements are:

i) A group of human beings, i.e. population (Population)
ii) A territory upon which they permanently reside (Territory)
iii) Internal sovereignty and independence from foreign control (Sovereignty)

iv) A political organization or agency through which the collective will of the population is expressed, i.e. government (Government)

Students of political science should, thus, understand that the absence of any one of these elements nullifies the state; all must exist together. The state is not the people, nor the land nor the government, but all of them and in addition, the state must possess that unity which makes it a distinct and independent political entity. These features are common to all states, irrespective of their historically specific manifestations. For instance, it applies to the Greek City states, the medieval kingdom, the modern monarchy and all the other kinds of states that exist today-liberal democracies, military dictatorships and communist regimes. So, this explanation of four elements is common to all the states; this does not, however, clearly throw light on the socio-political meaning of the state.

11.3.2 Distinction Between the State and Other Associations

The common man does not make any distinction between the state and many other institutions like society, government, nation and others. But the legalistic view of the state, which says that the state is a law making power, makes a distinction between the state and other institutions.

The distinction between state and society is quite important because society is much wider than the state. In a society, all the social institutions and social relationships are included, whereas the state only covers an aspect of society. Many idealists and monistic writers on politics have not made any distinction between society and state. But the liberal writers make such a distinction and contend that the state is the servant of society and is within the society; that society is much older than the state and does not have the four elements like the state; the state is a highly organized institution with sovereignty, while society may be even unorganized and does not possess sovereignty; the state is not a natural institution, whereas society is. The Pluralists have always given importance to the distinction between state and society, because they regard the state merely as an institution, equal to the other associations of society to serve the specific interests of society.

Government is one of the constituents of the state, but the two terms, state and government, have been indiscriminately used for each other. But as a matter of fact, government is only an agency of the state through which the collective will is formulated, expressed and executed. In terms of stability, sovereignty and extensiveness, the state is in possession of all these rather than the government. It is also important to note that the state is regarded as a recently developed institution, while government is very old. Even the most primitive human societies must have developed some elementary form of government to manage the common life of the community. Therefore, government is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for the existence of the state.

Pluralists do not make a distinction between the state and other institutions of society and maintain that the state is like any other association of society. But, generally, the state is distinguished from other social associations because of its sovereignty. In every liberal democracy, the material apparatuses of state sovereignty viz.: police, military, bureaucracy and prison have become stronger. Today, a sovereign state has got tremendous material power to crush revolts, which the other associations do not have.

The difference between state and nation stroke nationalities has been a matter of great dispute because modern states are also nation-states. But the students of political science should understand the main distinction between state and nation, which is that the basis of a nation is psychological and cultural unity, while that of a state is
physical and political unity. Nations emerged with the development of capitalism, whereas states existed prior to it. The essential elements of a state are not the pre-requisites of a nation.

11.3.3 Is this Distinction Real?

The legalist view of the state makes a distinctions between the state as a legal concept and other social institutions. But with the emergence of the welfare state, the difference between state and society almost disappeared; the distinction between state and government is merely a technical one and government for all practical purposes, is equivalent to the state. Similarly, with the emergence of the nation-state, the difference between nation and state is no more important and the differences between state and other associations were washed away by the pluralists.

The activities of state must be seen with reference to the whole society. The state should be understood as the whole of the political system, which is operating in society to perform certain functions, activities and processes in the whole static legal institutions having population, definite territory, government and sovereignty. The supreme power to make laws is a political system which performs the functions of maintaining stability and equilibrium, policy making and serving the common welfare functions in society.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
   ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What do you understand by the term state?
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2) Distinguish between the state and other associations. Is this distinction for real?
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11.4 NATURE OF THE STATE: DIFFERENT THEORIES

The state has been envisaged from various points of views. Every theorist conceives and defines the state in terms of his own discipline. Each has given his own theory regarding the origin, nature, sphere, function and ends of the state. These theories often differ from one another in form and substance. In this unit, we shall make an attempt to deal with the various theories regarding the nature of state.

11.4.1 The Liberal Theory

Before looking into the liberal theory of the origin and nature of the state, it will be proper to have some understanding of liberalism itself. With the emergence of the new bourgeois class (middle class) in the 16th and the 17th centuries, the philosophy of liberalism came into being as a progressive revolt against the reactionary forces represented by feudalism, the church and the monarchy. It was a voice for the recognition of the consent of the individuals based on individual’s rights and liberty. Its concept of the individual was that of the ‘possessive individual’ and it was a political movement for the establishment of a democratic government.

This theory is based on the liberal notion of man, which gives due importance to man as a free agent in this world, having a free will of his own. So as regards the origin of the state, it assigns due role to individuals, their natures, activities, interests and objectives. The state is seen as a necessity, an institution – evil or otherwise – which may establish law and order, peace and justice in society. The state is there to serve the general interest of society as a whole. It is regarded as an agency of human welfare, which will secure life and property of man. It is regarded as a contributor to moral and social development of man. Liberalism distinguishes between state and society and maintains that state is for society and not otherwise.

Liberal views on the functions of state have been changing from time to time. During the 17th century, the requirements of the capitalist class – which supported liberalism - were quite different and during the 18th, 19th and the 20th centuries, the requirements of this class changed, thereby necessitating a different role of the state in society. Classical liberalism of the 18th and the early 19th century, which supported the negative state with minimal functions, changed to modern liberalism in the later half of the 19th and the early 20th century that supported the positive state with welfare functions.

Classical liberalism is also known as the theory of ‘liassez-faire’ or the police state, or the theory of individualism that regards the state as a necessary evil. Necessary, because of the selfish nature of man and an evil, because it is an enemy of individual liberty. The state and individual freedom are seen as each other’s opposite and classical liberalism wants to give more freedom to the individual by increasing the sphere of his activities and decreasing the sphere of the state. The function of the state is to provide physical security to the individual so that he can develop his personality without state interference. In brief, it means minimal state function and maximum individual liberty. Adam Smith supported this on an economic basis and Bentham on a moral and political basis. Later liberalism or modern liberalism is also called the ‘theory of welfare state’, ‘revisionist’ or ‘reformist liberalism’. Here, the state is not regarded merely as a necessary evil, but it is assumed that the state can perform various functions of social welfare, can bring equilibrium and can satisfy socio-economic demands of the masses. Various thinkers - Mill, Freeman, Hobhouse, Lindsay, Keynes, Tawney, Cole, Barker, Laski and MacIver - gave the philosophy of the positive functions of the state.

Thus, the increasing democratization of the liberal state through the extension of franchise to all adults compelled the state to initiate policies of significant intervention
in the economy. It also meant transferring resources from the wealthier to the less wealthy through taxation and state subsidy. Unlike the minimal state, which was the original form of the liberal state, the welfare state was called upon to make public welfare one of its principal concerns. The welfare state was not simply a response to electoral pressure, but also a response to the increasing awareness among common people of their power, expressed through associations like the trade unions and public opinion. But the welfare state should not be seen as a radical shift from the classical minimal state. Rather, we should consider it as an attempt to give maximum concessions to the people consistent with the needs of a liberal, capitalist market economy.

Liberalism, in the late 20th century, has taken a new turn in the form of neo-liberalism. It may be regarded as going back to the ideas of classical political economy. The neo-liberal goal is to ‘roll back the frontiers of the state’, in the belief that unregulated market capitalism will deliver efficiency, growth and widespread prosperity. The neo-liberal view of the state is found in the writings of economists like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, and philosophers like Robert Nozick.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What are the salient features of the liberal theory of state?

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2) What is classical liberalism?

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11.4.2 The Marxist Theory

The Marxist theory of state emerged as a criticism of, and as an alternative to the liberal theory of state. If liberalism was a socio-economic and political philosophy of the working class, Marxism was a product of the capitalist economic system itself.

According to the liberal view, state is the product of social contract, consent and consensus, and is there to serve the general interest of the whole community by
maintaining law and order, and providing justice and welfare services. While according
to the Marxist theory, the state is a product of class division and class struggle and
serves only the interest of one particular class, because all the classes cannot have
a single interest/common interests. It rejects the state, associates its pressure with the
presence of classes, and suggests that by a revolution and the establishment of a
classless society, the institution of the state would be done away with. You should
know that in social sciences, the debate with regard to “consensus model” and
“conflict model” remained hot for a longtime. The consensus model on which liberalism
is based, maintains that the basis of society and social institutions, including the state
is shared values, norms, beliefs, interests, ideas and institutions. The conflict theory
gives importance to conflict and struggle and draws the conclusion that the state and
many other institutions are the product of conflict.

Let us analyse carefully the Marxist assumptions about the nature, function and
legitimacy of the state, which Karl Marx built through his various writings including
‘Das-Capital’ and ‘The Critique of the Gotha Programme.’ Though Marx himself
never formulated a theory of state separately, discussion of the state is scattered in
almost all the writings of Marx. Marx was busy with the historical analysis of the
capitalist mode of production, so he could not concentrate on specific issues like
the state. But Engels and other Marxist scholars and revolutionaries have written on
this aspect.

The main points of the Marxian theory of state deserve the attention of students of
political science. Marx made it clear in his early writings that the state is an organized
power of one class oppressing the other i.e. the economically dominant minority class
through dominant political dominance rules over the majority working class. Marx
regarded the state as an alienated and parasitical social force and rejected Hegel’s
idea of the state as ‘a march of god on earth’. He never regarded the state as a
higher morality ending conflicts in society and bringing unity and harmony. The state
to him was neither equal to society nor above it, but was merely its product at a
certain stage of historical development. Thus, Marx believes in a general theoretical
framework known as ‘Dialectical Materialism’ and in the materialistic interpretation
of history. Dialectical Materialism is a more general philosophical system from which
is derived the more specific theory of historical development, which is termed ‘Historical
Materialism’ or the materialistic interpretation of history.

Marxists hold that all phenomena that we experience are material, concrete and
objective, outside our mind and consciousness. Also, all the phenomena are
characterised by internal contradictions, leading to conflicts and then, eventually
rising to a higher level of development. This whole process is termed by Marx
as dialectical materialism. Therefore, to understand any phenomenon, one must
grasp the way it changes.

A capitalist society is one that is based on the capitalist mode of production, where
the capitalists (a minority class) own the means of production and the motive of
production is profit and the workers (a majority class) sell their labour power to the
capitalists for wages. In such a society politics, culture, morality and social norms are
determined by the capitalist mode of production and the society is sharply divided into
capitalists and workers. As the interests of these two classes are opposed to each
other, class struggle between them is fundamental. The western liberal democracies-
the USA, England, France, West Germany, Italy, etc – are examples of such societies.
For the abolition of classes, Marx gives the theory of revolution, which is the most
important aspect of the Marxian theory of state. The task of Marxist philosophy is
two-fold to understand the world and to change it. Marxism does not suggest reforms
of the exploitative capitalist system, but suggests that it should be overthrown by a
violent revolution and a socialist state and economy established. This socialist state
will be a temporary phenomenon; it will abolish private property and classes; and
thereafter, it will wither away.
Thus, the Marxian theory of state does not glorify the state; rather it is a theory of its overthrow, its withering away, in a classless society. According to the theory, politics and state are parts of the superstructure which is based on the economic system or the mode of production of a given society. Marxian theory of the origin of state is also based on this general view of state and politics.

A state originated with the division of society into classes and with the beginning of the struggle between classes. The historical analysis of the origin of state is that the state is by no means a power forced on society; rather, it is a product of society at a certain stage of development that is entangled in contradictions with it. The state has, thus, originated with the birth of classes and class struggle in society and is merely an instrument of exploitation in the hands of a dominant class. With the help of the state, ruling classes maintain their power over economically poor classes.

Check Your Progress 3

Note:  
   i) Use the space given below for your answer.  
   ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.  

1) Explain the Marxist theory of state in your own words.

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11.4.3 The Gandhian Theory

Let us now try to see how Gandhi conceptualized the nature of state. Before briefly examining it, we should note that it shows similarities and differences with the concept of state found in Liberal and Marxist perspectives. We may also note that though it is derived from the Indian tradition of thinking on state, it also shows some influence of western thinking on the subject.

First of all, Gandhi accepts the need of the state; though as an advocate of non-violence, he does see that the state implies the use of violence or coercion. This is because Gandhi accepts the idea that man is by nature non-violent and that this applies to man in the ideal sense. Taking a realistic view, he agrees that there is some need of the state since in practice, men may not possess the ideal qualities of non-violence and sociability. But having said this, Gandhi also holds that state as an institution of violence must be limited. In other words, Gandhi accepts the minimal state.

Secondly, Gandhi suggests that the state should be limited on the basis of certain considerations. On the one hand, the authority of the state should be reduced by a system based on decentralization of power, in which communities below the level of state should have greater autonomy and independence from the central state. The
State, Civil Society and Community

unit of such autonomy should be the village community. That community itself through a process of consensus should decide all decisions affecting the rural community. The Gandhian position is that insofar as the crucial local community decisions are taken at that level, the central state would be minimal, presumably concerned with the defence of the overall territory under its jurisdiction, foreign relations and any other problems affecting the territory as a whole. The power of the state is also minimized in the Gandhian perspective by the ethical norms embedded in the society as a whole through customs and traditions.

Thirdly, and only non-violently, the state is also limited by moral challenges arising from the individual “conscience” or the “inner voice”. In his great classic work, Hind Swaraj, he held this kind of polity in which political powers are dispersed over a large number of self-governing village communities, to be a Swaraj Polity. Gandhi claimed that this was a genuinely Indian political system evolved over centuries in India. However, the Gandhian state cannot be separated from its economic and social systems. Therefore, the concept of Swaraj or self-government extends to economic and social arrangements. Within the rural community itself, Gandhi emphasizes the significance of groups over individuals.

Thus, it would be wrong to call Gandhi an anarchist, if by that is meant a thinker who denies the need of the state. Certainly, he limits the state, but this does not mean that he dispenses with it. The case of the minimal state is that it involves minimal violence, and it also means the acceptance of the Gandhian political principle of Swaraj. While Gandhi’s emphasis on individual conscience has a parallel with the liberal emphasis on individual rights, it should be differentiated from the notion of individual right. Gandhian rights are not given to the individual on liberal grounds of individualism, but on moral grounds; that is, the claim that one has a duty to act morally. The Gandhian notion of Satyagraha or the political action of protest or resistance to untruth is a moral right and duty, and the Gandhian state is also subject to this type of action.

Gandhi’s conception of the state resembles the Marxist state in the sense that both regard the state as a system of violence. Gandhi also lays emphasis on duties rather than on rights, given his moral perspective. Further, the Gandhian state rests more on a moral, communitarian consensus than on any notion of a collectivity of individual wills. In many ways, the Gandhian state is a distinctively Indian form of state. Today, Gandhian elements are reflected in the notion of the Panchayat Raj or the ideals of democratic decentralization. In fact, one of the crucial issues in Indian politics has been whether and to what extent the Gandhian form of state can be introduced in India.

Summarising the three perspectives of the state, we may say that the Liberal state is based on individual rights; that according to the Marxists, the state is based on class dominance and class exploitation, and the Gandhian state is based on a moral and communitarian consensus.

Check Your Progress 4

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
   ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Enumerate the salient features of the Gandhian theory of state.

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2) Compare and contrast the Gandhian theory of state with either the Liberal or the Marxist theory.

11.5 LET US SUM UP

So far, different notions of the state have been analysed above, which confirms that the state is a historical entity. Its meaning, nature, functions and scope have changed with change in time and circumstances, which gives us a better understanding of the state. However, one situation is confirmed; that since society is a collection of diverse groups, interests and conflicts, the state remains a platform for the promotion and articulation of the common interests of society as a whole.

Politics should be understood as a dimension of social processes rather than merely the study of state and government. According to the liberal view, the state is not merely a legal institution, having sovereign law-making powers and the coercive power to enforce laws, but its most important aspect is to serve society and satisfy the maximum demands of the maximum number of people in society. While Marxism emphasized the class nature of the state, it maintained that the basis of society is the sub-structure- the mode of production that determined classes in society – and on this is based the cultural, moral and political super structure of society. This to them, is a coercive instrument belonging to one particular dominant economic class of society. On the other hand, the Gandhian state is based on a moral and communitarian consensus, with the ideals of democratic decentralization.

In all these various perspectives, the need of the state is greatly felt. Whether the state is viewed as a class organization or a power system, or a necessary or unnecessary evil, or the welfare system, or the very basis of life, it serves its purpose during the various phases of its historical development.
11.6 SOME USEFUL REFERENCES


11.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS Exercises

Check Your Progress 1

1) See Sections 11.2, 11.3 and sub-section 11.3.1
2) See sub-sections 11.3.2 and 11.3.3

Check Your Progress 2

1) See sub-section 11.4.1
2) See sub-section 11.4.1

Check Your Progress 3

1) See sub-section 11.4.2

Check Your Progress 4

1) See sub-section 11.4.3
2) See sub-section 11.4.3