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## UNIT 2 STATE AND STATELESS SOCIETIES: POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

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### Learning Objectives



After reading this unit, you would be able to understand:

- the meaning of state and stateless societies and the anthropological contributions to the study of the same;
- relationship between kinship and power; and
- political organisations in some of the Indian tribes.

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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Mary Shepardson have emphasised that both state and stateless political systems are part of social structure through which political action takes place. Southall (1974: 154) has noted that social anthropologists are gradually more interested in studying the political aspects of contemporary times and intensive analysis of local political behaviour and processes. Thus, the interest in studying political pattern, behaviour and processes is gradually expanded with wider attention in both simple and complex societies. However, in this unit we are going to emphasise the political system in simple societies, be it state or stateless societies.

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## 2.2 STATE AND STATELESS SOCIETIES AND CONTRIBUTION OF ANTHROPOLOGY

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Anthropology has noteworthy contribution to the study of traditional societies, the tribes or peasant communities. The ethnographic contributions of anthropologists have helped us understand different aspects of social and cultural life and political system of these communities. Studies of tribes in India, Africa or in Australia have recorded the fact that every society has definite norms, values and recognised rules of conduct. Individuals violating such norms or values or breaching rules of conduct are punished or subjected to various sanctions. Within a locally defined community, an individual who commit some act which goes against the norms of the community invites punishment by recognised coercive authority. Political community, whether or not it is organised in the form of state has its own territory (Mair, 1962). Protection of defined territory and its individuals, organising social activities like rituals and religious activities, and organising economic activities entail organised authority. The authority decides over the level of punishment for each defied activity which goes against the societal norms or values. Every society has certain authority, whether centralised, decentralised or lack of centralised authority. Lucy Mair makes the useful remark that 'there is no society where rules are automatically obeyed'. Anthropologists like Gluckman and others have tried to show that in all primitive societies-ranging from small bands of hunters or fishermen to kingdoms-there exists some basic mechanism of social control which regulates the affairs of the tribe and resolves conflicts arising among its component groups (Eisenstadt, 1959: 201).

The general assumption is that most of these social control mechanisms are in one way or another common to all types of traditional or preliterate societies-whether segmentary, centralised or some other (ibid.). According to Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940) the societies which have centralised authority, administrative machinery, and judicial institutions were labeled as 'primitive states'. Some groups like the Zulu, the Ngwato, the Bemba, the Banyankole and the Kede are regarded as "primitive states". They observed sharp differences in the distribution of wealth, status and privileges, corresponding to the distribution of power and authority in all 'primitive' states.

were stateless societies. But the evolution of political system from stateless to state has taken place subsequently.

Like state, in the stateless societies, the political activities are supported by group behaviour. In stateless societies, the community members select the leader who possesses dominant characters with strong personalities, well-built physical feature, and may be with possession of wealth. In the study of the Nuer, Evans-Pritchard has reported the behaviour of the 'leopard skin chief' who is a dominant character selected from outside the clan group. However, this clan is not necessarily a dominant clan. He stands outside the lineage and tribal system. The leopard skin chief possesses bounty wealth in the form of cattle. He is offered cattle by community members or by the members of the guilty. Murder/killing of a fellow community member is often regarded as a serious offense to the community as a whole. Therefore, the leader takes appropriate action to compensate the kin of the deceased and the community he belongs to. Lucy Mair (1962) pointed out that in the absence of centralised political system if a man was wronged, his lineage supported him in seeking redress by force. When they got tired of fighting they invite an influential man to mediate between the two sides. However, collective action takes place in war or in maintenance of peace. The community members support the leaders in war and feud. This could be for protection of territory or could be for taking on revenge in case of murder of fellow members. While in more complex state societies, the guilty is punished by appropriate court of law or well developed judiciary system. In stateless societies there are no obvious political institutions like that in state. A leader is an institution in these societies. He also possesses ritual power. Appropriate quantum of punishment is decided by the leader. He maintains peace in the community. A leader resolves the disputes between community members both within and outside. In addition, the protection of territory or resolving territorial disputes is significant part of the decision making authority. Allocation and distribution of resources takes place with appropriate leadership. Both state and stateless societies protect social norms and values. Factors like religion, wealth and other socio-economic factors are closely interconnected with and determine political behaviour in stateless societies. In stateless societies, both kinship and politics are often diffused.

#### Case-1

The Polynesians of the Hawaiian Islands had an exceedingly complex political system based on hereditary rank and classes, and theocracy and divine right.

Among Polynesians, there are three hereditary social classes-commoners, nobles, and inferiors. Agriculturists, fishermen and artisans are the commoners, work under the shadow of nobles. The nobles are warriors, priests and political officials. The hereditary ranking of nobles was based on descent from the gods, genealogically traced. Rank of individuals and segments was traced in terms of birth order. The highest rank traced through first born child. The islands were divided into chiefdoms ruled by a paramount chief. The paramount chief's rule was administered and maintained through a cluster of high ranking nobles who served as priests, counselors and military leaders. The districts of chiefdom were in turn ruled by local chiefs of high rank. The nobles were supported almost entirely by tribute extracted from commoners in local areas which in turn were administered by chosen chiefs and overseers of lower rank. Being of the highest rank and sacredness himself, the chief approached the status of the god who conveyed on him these divine rights. This system was stable and immutable. The paramount chief is however not permanent and is often unstable and flexible. The political fortunes of paramount chiefs coaxed and waned by with their success in holding their chiefdoms together in the face of insurrection and intrigue.

### **Case-2**

A Nuer tribe is the largest group whose members are duty bound to combine in raiding and defense. There is no overarching government. The Nuer maintains a measure of unity and orderly political relations between the territorial divisions. Evans-Pritchard calls tribe to each territorial sub-division. A tribe is sub divided into segments. The relationship between segments is conceived in terms of hierarchies of patrilineal descent. There is fight between territorial divisions but when two neighbouring groups fight with third party both the neighbouring groups fight together against the third party. Disputes begin over many grievances such as damage to property, adultery, rights over resources, to name a few. The Nuers are prone to fighting and many disputes lead to bloodshed. Confrontation between members of different groups or villages can lead to use of spears and bloody war between men of each village. A leopard-skin chief is the mediator who resolves the disputes. Such a chief has ritual powers and a role as mediator and negotiator but he has no secular authority and no special privileges. His performance in peacemaking is possible because he stands outside the lineage and tribal system. The leopard skin chief was also a wealthy leader partly because of the cattle he received for his services as mediator who could mobilise the support of a substantial coalition of followers.

Source: Roger M. Keesing, Cultural Anthropology A Contemporary Perspective (2nd Edition), 1981, CBS College Publishing, New York, pp. 282-285

### **Contribution of Anthropologists**

In this section, we will briefly outline the contributions of anthropologists to the study of state and stateless societies. The contribution of anthropology to political thought has emerged from its apprehension with stateless societies. The growing interest in political anthropology has been observed in the early writings on primitive state and stateless societies by M. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940), J. Middleton and David Tait (1958), David Easton (1959), L. Mair (1962) M.L. Perlman (1969), Balandier (1967) and recent studies by J. Vincent (1990) and E. Wolf (2001) amongst others. The series of works by Hegel and Karl Marx and their argument on “state” have also contributed substantially to the study in political anthropology.

*Anthropology* has pointed out that definitions of state or political institution are usually too wide and consequently non specific.

Paige (1974) supported the argument of anthropologists about understanding relationship between systems of kinship and forms of political organisation. He further emphasised that the organisation of kinship and the organisation of the polity are closely integrated in stateless societies. Kinship roles frequently determine patterns of group interests and solidarity and lines of political cleavage and conflict. He derived the Gluckman's (1965) argument that the maintenance of political order in stateless societies depends on a network of cross cutting kinship ties. He has particularly cited Murphy (1957), Van Velzen and Vanwetering (1960) and Otterbein (1968) to argue that matrilineal and patrilineal residence rules produce different patterns of group ties and consequently, different pattern of political conflict. It has been assumed that both matrilineal and patrilineal descent rules should have similar effects on inter-group conflict. Swanson's original findings that patrilineal descent correlates with factional politics and matrilineal descent are consequence of the forms of political organisation has been contrasted by other anthropologists. Paige has, however, concluded that association between rules of descent and the organisation of the polity was a special case of a more general principle underlying patterns of group conflict and cleavage in all political systems.

Hegel and Karl Marx are pioneers in contributing to the study of state and political systems. Their thoughts still found to be very relevant and contemporary to the studies in political anthropology. Hegel starts from describing the state and makes man the subjective aspect of the state. He believed, democracy starts from man and makes the state into objectified man. People make the constitution. Democracy has relation with other forms of state. Democracy is the essence of all constitutions of the state and is considered to be Old Testament in relation to other political forms. Socialised man is the particular constitution of the state. All that exists, law, constitution, democracy and other political forms are for the benefits of man. But it is not that man is there for benefit of law or other political forms. Law has a human existence and in other political forms man has only a legal existence. That is the fundamental character of democracy (McLellan, 1971:215).

For Karl Marx state in many ways is a most characteristic institution of man's alienated condition. State is a negation of man, similar to religion, law and morality, and equally based on a particular mode of production. Meanwhile, he also talked about positive elements of state. The early work of Feuerbach's critique of Hegel's philosophy and his own experience as editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* could help him in to elaborate his ideas on the state. He narrated his ideas in a manuscript as a critique of Hegel's political philosophy. Marx provides an idealistic form of government where the state and civil society are not separate, but directly correspond to the 'essence of socialised man'. He called this 'true democracy'. In a democracy the constitution, the law and the state itself are only a self determination of the people and a particular content of them in so far as it is a political constitution (KMSW: 29). He viewed state like religion, as a statement of man's ideal aims and also a compensation for their lack of realisation (McLellan, 1971). He differentiated between state and polity. He pointed out that the more political the state is and the more it constitutes separate sphere, the more incapable it is to solve the society's problems.



considered state as a part of society. He discussed about origin of the state and other social institutions. The state is a manifestation of interest of certain dominant class by which the individuals of a ruling class assert their common interests. Sometimes Marx says that the state need not be representative of the whole of a class but only a section of that class. State acts as intermediary among fully developed classes for benefit of one and other classes and sometimes it acts independently where the classes are not fully developed. The state acts as an intermediary in the formation of all communal institutions and gives them a political form. The state in turn modeled other social institutions.

Marx considered America as a modern state. He considered bureaucracy to be the most essential part of this modern state apparatus. His manuscript, Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State in 1843 with special focus on Prussia described how the bureaucracy had eventually become a caste which claimed to possess, through higher education, the monopoly of the interpretation of the state's interests. The real aim of the state thus appears to bureaucracy as an aim against the state.

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## 2.3 POLITICAL UNIT

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Now let us discuss about what should be the unit of study for political system. While most of the studies have highlighted the tribe as a social unit or as a political unit, we should remember that the political unit is not only confined to one unit, the tribe; it could be a horde or clan as well. In seeking to define the political system, as suggested by Radcliffe-Brown, we have to look for a territorial community which is united by the rule of law. Thus, it could be a tribe, a local horde or clan. Middleton and Tait (1958: 8) have noted that "the basic unit of the political system is also a joint or extended family based on a three or four generation lineage. Its component families are generally the productive and consuming units, but the joint family is the largest purely domestic unit and is under the domestic authority of a single head who may also represent it as a corporate unit in political and ritual situations". The units are distinct in case of defined political system such as state. However, in stateless societies there is no spatially defined distinct political unit. It is noteworthy that the political unit in the societies with a state organisation is numerically larger than in those without a state organisation. The largest political groups among the Tallensi, Logoli, and Nuer cannot compete in numbers with the quarter to half million of the Zulu state (in about 1870), the 101,000 of the Ngwato state, and the 140,000 of the Bemba state. But it is suggested that a stateless political unit need not be very small. But it is probably true that there is a limit to the size of a population that can hold together without some kind of centralised government. Similarly, a political unit with state organisation should not be very large (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, 1940: 7).

While a political unit could be a tribe, local hoard or clan, the political system expands beyond one tribe, a local hoard or a clan. One important point discussed by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940) is that societies which have a high degree of general cultural resemblance need not have the same type of political system. Within a single linguistic or cultural area we often find political systems which differ from each other in important features. Conversely, similar political structures are found in societies of different cultures.

## 2.4 KINSHIP AND POWER

There is a close relationship between kinship and power. Political anthropologists have revealed the complex ties between these two systems. They have analysed and developed the theory of kinship and power relation. There is little differentiation between political functions and kinship institution. In stateless societies, the kinship ties often determine the political behaviour. Balandier (1967, 1970) has cited Van Velsen's case of Tonga of Malawi that the political relations were expressed in terms of kinship and the manipulations of kinship are one of the means employed in political strategy. The relationship between state and kinship often seem to be complimentary as well as antagonistic as discussed by Durkheim. The most important characteristics in centralised chiefdoms such as Zulu, Ngoni, Swazi, etc. are that the political sphere is distinct from that of lineage and kinship relations, and political positions acquire a certain degree of autonomy. In the above said chiefdoms, the relative importance of corporate descent groups, lineages, clans and the like for the definition of the territorial units of society and for the general political life of the tribe is insignificant than among the various segmentary tribes (Eisenstadt: 210-211).

### 2.4.1 Segmentary Lineage System

Smith (1956) pointed out that 'the lineages are corporate groups of a segmentary character defined in terms of unilineal descent'. An important feature that separates political character of lineage system from kinship association is that the political character of lineage organisation is linked with the corporate character of lineage groups. This feature normally lacks in kinship associations. Lineages are local groups which discharge political functions within their areas. This condition provides a subdivision of the population into territorial segments and the correlation of these territorial segments with the genealogical segments of the lineage units in stateless societies. Segmentary lineage system is common feature of every society. In stateless societies the political authority is often passed through lineage system or internally organised on a lineage basis. Lineage principles provide substitute for governmental organisation. The usages of lineage systems vary across societies with different degree and freedom. This may be used to express and validate forms of common action, such as reciprocal help and protection, joint responsibility in bride wealth and blood compensation, help in feud and war, regulation of inter marriage and observance of responsibility to the dead (Middleton and Tait, 1967: 6). In stateless societies the lineage system possesses key features of political relations and other social relations. The political power and authority are exercised between groups and statuses. External political relations of local groups are often conceived in lineage terms when there is no centralised political authority. The internal political authority could also be attached to lineages while this could be attached to other structures such as age-sets and age classes, ritual congregations, village councils and associations, ritual congregations, secret societies and other associations (ibid.).

Stateless societies do possess lineages or other type of segments. These grow or change through fission, accretion, and fusion of various units (Fortes, 1945, Smith, 1956, Easton, 1959). Depending upon the kind of kinship structure, stateless societies break down into two subclasses. One subclass is characterised by corporate lineage segments. Order is maintained in such societies by means of equilibrium of competing lineage segments. The other subclass is distinguished by a pure kinship structure in which no segmentation takes place. In centralised

primitive states, the segmentation may not be corporate lineages but localised groups, age-regiment, or associations. In complex modern ones there is segmentation and the units of division are quite different and take the form of political parties, interest groups, political leaders with specific followings, etc. (Easton, 1959: 222).

Middleton and Tait (1959) have identified several ways in which descent groups may be linked into a single system. First group, a single all inclusive lineage genealogy, which is sufficient to explain significant political identification of lineage with territorial segmentation, and the political institution is built upon a framework of agnatic lineages which are units into a single pyramidal system. This pyramidal system covers the whole jural community. It need not cover the entire society. Examples: the Tiv. The societies of this type, like the Lugbara and the Nuer, there is continual migration and spatial movement of groups. They are relatively economically and socially autonomous. These societies have little specialised political authority. The functionaries who are politically important are also primary holders of domestic or ritual roles. Second group, the political units of these societies consist of small descent groups, usually of shallow genealogical depth, which are relatively interdependent. They are grouped into overlapping clusters by ritual links of various kinds (often by forming the congregations of earth cults and other cults not based on descent) and by quasi- kinship ties. The internal hierarchical administrative organisation of any single major political units is based upon a single lineage genealogy. At the political level units are not linked by a single genealogy but rather by the recognition of mutual obligations. Exogamy is an essential aspect of ties of clanship where these provide a framework of political importance. They may be explained by the people as resulting from common agnatic ancestry, but they are explained in terms of clanship. Exact genealogical relationship is not reckoned. Examples of these societies are the Konkomba, the Amba, and the Tallensi. In these societies lineages are arranged in a segmentary organisation, but are concerned with inheritance, exogamy and family matters rather than with political relations proper. Third group, it composed of lineages from different clans, a compound structure of lineages which cannot be placed into a single pyramidal system. Relationships between all its territorial segments cannot usually be explained by reference to a single agnatic genealogy. These systems are characterised by the lack of an all inclusive lineage genealogy at any level of organisation except that of the nuclear group itself. They also have chief with certain specialised functions. Example of such type is the Dinka.

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## 2.5 POLITICAL SYSTEM AMONG THE INDIAN TRIBES

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Many primitive communities in India have transformed their political system from stateless society to state. The process of formation of state has been discussed by Southall (1974) and Sinha (1987) amongst others. The change in management of law and order from family and kinship ties to more centralised authority of the tribal chief is discussed in many studies. Village councils are the intermediary political institutions commonly found among the tribes in the country. However, these village councils have close connection with non-tribals too. F. G. Bailey has discussed about several political institutions in his study in highland village in Kandhamal district of Orissa. Village council and caste council are some of the well defined political institutions by Bailey in his study about political system. He observed that a village council is engaged in formulating new set of rules, allocating responsibility, organising labour, decision making in ritual process and festivals,



judicial process, etc. He found that formal management of the village lies in the hands of the village council (panchayat). The council has judicial, legislative, and executive functions (Bailey, 1957: 192). Mutha political institution has significant role in the Kondh tribal villages. A *mutha* consists of several villages. The political units like *mutha* and village councils have also significant role in determining economic behaviour. A creation of state, both *mutha* and village councils are engaged in collection of land revenues.

The study of political system in India has also been extensively discussed by Surajit Sinha and Harmann Kulke. They have discussed about formation of state. Surajit Sinha's study discusses about political system in eastern India as well as in the North eastern region of the country. The edited book on '*Tribal Politics and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North-Eastern India*' is a collection of essays by contributors who have discussed different aspects of political systems. Sinha (1987) has primarily focused on the evolution of political system from pre-state to sovereign states in this book. The levels and types of politics described in his book are: Small chiefdoms-Miso chieftaincies, evolved chiefdoms on the hills (mainly following pre-settled agricultural technology): Khasi Siyems, principalities in the forest regions of eastern India: Orissa Princely States, Chhotnagpur Raj and Mallabhum, and Archaic sovereign states in North-east India: Ahom, Jaintia, Manipur and Dimsa State of Sikkim. He stressed that in all the above cases the higher levels of politics were evolved by coagulation of lineage or clan based units of one or more ethnic groups and/or by conquest of segmentary tribes by larger principalities or states. Chiefdoms provide a centralised direction to a higher tribal society. They do not have true government. The chiefdom is a development of the segmentary tribal system to a higher level of integration. A chiefdom is however not a class society (Elman, 1963). Sinha has further mentioned that in the pre state level structures like the Miso Chiefdoms in North-East India are entirely dependent on stratification of clan and lineage segments. But in more complex political formations in Eastern India like Chotnagpur Raj, Mallabhum, Panchkot, Barahabhum and feudatory states of Orissa, it is observed that the controlled terrain of the Raja is surrounded by segmentary clan-lineage based political formations.

### 2.5.1 Juang

Juang is one of the primitive tribes inhabited in Keonjhar District in Orissa. N. Pattanaik (1989) has reported that a *Pirh* is the village council among the Juang. Each *Pirh* is headed by a Sardar who maintains law and order, collect land revenue, etc. Each *Pirh* is divided into six sub *Pirhs* and each *Sub- Pirh* is headed by a Sardar. Pradhans are the village headmen of the village councils which are governed under Sub-Pirhs. A *Pradhan* takes decision on judicial matters and maintain law and order. A *Pradhan* also calls meeting which is attended by all village council members. Sacerdotal chief is called *Nigam* who takes decision on ritual and religious matters. The *Dangua* acts as messenger to the *Nigam* and the *Pradhan*. The village council consists of the formal leader and the *Barabhai* or elderly man of the village.

### 2.5.2 Hill Kharias

Hill Kharias are very primitive. The council of the traditional government consists of a headman called *Pradhan* which is mostly hereditary and a sacerdotal head. *Pradhans* are actively held and supported by the family heads. Since the family heads have consanguine or affine relationship with each other, the people under

the *Pradhan* may be considered members of a large family. Decision on disputes at individual level, family level, village level, quarrels, conflicts, contribution for religious and social affairs, marriage, social crimes and so on are taken up by the *Pradhan*. As a rule, the council meetings are arranged in the courtyard or verandah of the offender. It may also be held at times under a shady tree or in the house of the *Pradhan*. *Bhandari* is the village crier (Vidyarthi and Upadhyay, 1987).

### 2.5.3 Kondhs

N. Pattnaik (1988) mentions that Mutha Organisation is closely akin to centralised authority with marginal administrative and judicial institutions. Among Dongria Kondhs, a Mutha head is called Mandal. Among Dongria Kondhs, a village chief is called Jani who is also the spokesman of the village. Bismajhi and Barika work under the Jani. A sacerdotal leader is called Dishari. Among Kutia Kondhs village chief is called Majhi. Gonda is the village messenger. In the past the *Mutha* was an important socio-political organisation. The functions of *Mutha* organisation are to arbitrate cases like village boundary disputes, land disputes and disputes over bride capture.

### 2.5.4 Political Organisation in Other Tribal Inhabited Region

The traditional political organisation in Inumanda village in Paderu Block in Vishakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh studied by P. V. Rao (1987) has the similar structure like other tribes. The political organisation is in the hands of the village headman who works with a group of elders in the village who are collectively called Peddala Panchayat. Rich influential persons were recognised by the zamindars and local rulers as their representatives in the village for looking after collection of revenue and law and order maintenance. Such representatives are variously called as Naidu or Pettamdar. Naidu or Pettamdar is usually assisted by a Barika. Chellani acts as attendant to Naidu. Kula Panchayat is the body consists of all important members of the particular tribe. Village level issues and issues concerning persons from different tribes fall under the purview of multi tribal village elder council. Kula Panchayat is absent due to lack of sufficient strength of the tribe.

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## 2.6 SUMMARY

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The political system is a part and parcel of social system. Both state and stateless societies are part of political system. State is a dominant political feature with centralised authority, administrative machinery and judicial institutions. The centralised societies maintain some specificity and shares almost similar basic political and administrative structure. The stateless societies on the other hand lack centralised authority and lack well developed administrative machinery or judicial institutions. There are sharp differences in the distribution of wealth, status and privileges, corresponding to the distribution of power and authority, in all primitive states. Kinship is an important constituent of social structure and plays significant role in determining political behaviour in stateless societies. Lineage group is primarily segmentary and an important characteristic of stateless societies. However, lineage connection is also found in non-centralised societies, which is different from stateless societies and centralised ones. In stateless societies it is often difficult to differentiate between kinship and polity. Kinship is also an important political institution in stateless societies. Irrespective of position in both state and stateless societies, the central purpose in both these societies is maintenance of peace, and

stability of the society, protection of territory, values and norms, etc. The state is powerful force under the political system where more organised behaviour is controlled by political institutions.

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### **Sample Questions**

- 1) Mention important characteristics of both state and stateless societies.
- 2) Discuss how lineage segmentation is an important political feature of stateless society.
- 3) Identify important political institutions in stateless societies.
- 4) What are the common features of political organisation discussed among the Indian Tribes?