

Recent Perspectives of the State and Debates in Early Indian History*

Indian Historical Review

39(2) 145–162

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SAGE Publications

Los Angeles, London,

New Delhi, Singapore,

Washington DC

DOI: 10.1177/0376983612461414

<http://ihr.sagepub.com>



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Abstract

This article tries to show how the study of the Indian state in the recent decades by focusing on the understanding of processes has led to a nuanced reading of the sources in their entirety, and coherent long-term view of early India, which at times disturbs some of our cherished notions of the past. These studies enrich our understanding insofar as they unravel the regional trajectories of socio-political transformations and locate them in the wider context of their trans-regional linkages. They straddle a wide range of issues ranging from *vana-kṣetra* and tribe–caste continuum, through hierarchisation of society and evolving structures of legitimation to expanding resource bases and questions of identity formation.

Keywords

Autonomous spaces, convergence, integration, ‘little kings’, negotiations, process, secondary states

In the middle of the 1970s and the early 1980s the study of the state in early India gained great momentum. This is not to say that the institution had not attracted the notice of historians earlier. The colonial and nationalist writings had much to say on the subject; we are familiar with the works of A.S. Altekar, K.A.N. Sastri and Surajit Sinha, among others.¹ However, the choice of the mid 1970s and after is determined by several considerations. On a lighter note that perhaps does justice to the expression ‘recent’ in the title of the article. More seriously, the 1950s and 1960s witnessed the emergence of a new historiography best represented in the writings of D.D. Kosambi and R.S. Sharma which raised history writing from uncomplicated narratives to the level of explanations and conceptualisations in all spheres, including the political.² Technology

*Revised and enlarged version of the paper presented at the International Seminar on The State in South Asia, organised by the Department of History, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, 18–21 October 2010.

¹ See, for example, Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas*; Inden, *Imagining India*, ch. 5; Sahu, ‘Ways of Seeing’; and Sinha, ‘State Formation and Rajput Myth’.

² Kosambi, *Introduction to the Study of Indian History*; Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas* (1st edn); Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*; Sharma, *Lights on Early Indian Society and Economy*.

and economic developments became the basis of analysis. That the state could have an economic basis or social foundation was an extremely stimulating idea in the intellectual climate of the times. It influenced minds across regions and emerged as the dominant historiography for the next twenty-five years. In the meantime from around the early part of the 1970s onwards some unease with the historiography under discussion was visible. It was realised that economic developments could be influenced by factors other than economic. Explanations based exclusively on technological and economic factors had to make way for the interplay of multiple processes. Stratification of society, social requirements, popular culture, negotiations in the cultural domain, and the distribution and channelisation of resources were seen to be as much important as their production and availability. The shift in perspectives on early India can be seen in the writings of Romila Thapar, B.D. Chattopadhyaya, G.W. Spencer, Burton Stein and Hermann Kulke.³ Interestingly, their studies are focused on political processes and flowing from it the structure of polities across historical and cultural regions, and are separated in time. While Thapar's interest is largely concentrated on the early historical phase, Chattopadhyaya and Spencer dwell on the early medieval centuries, and Kulke and Stein focus on the early medieval and medieval times. Notwithstanding their varied spatio-temporal concerns, what is of interest is that their processual studies of the state have come to provide and inspire an interconnected alternative vision of early Indian history. This perspective of early India is just not about the political; it derives from, informs as well as encompasses the social, economic and cultural domains too. These as also the works of younger historians, spread over different historical junctures and geographical locations, over the last two decades are focusing on not just the Indian past but our 'pasts' in its plural form, encapsulating the comparable experience and specificity of the regions, even sub-regions and localities, and the continuous interaction between the *kṣetra* and *vana* or the Brāhmanical with the autochthonous at different spatial locations and in diverse historical contexts. To put it differently, recent perspectives of early India, involving the fine-tuning and amendment of earlier positions and understandings, have been considerably derived from the enhanced interest in the state.⁴ That apart, the article also seeks to examine the larger implications of these developments.

After the initial perceptive observations of Kosambi in the 1950s about the tribal basis of early Indian history and the continued coexistence of peoples, cultures and social formations at different stages of historical evolution, these ideas were largely lost in the efforts to look for the general patterns of early Indian history at different stages within the dominant historiography. Despite the manifestation of continued interest in

³ Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*; Thapar, *From Lineage to State*; Chattopadhyaya, 'Political Processes and the Structure of the State in Early Medieval India'; Kulke, 'Fragmentation and Segmentation'; infra n. 7 and Spencer, 'Religious Networks and Royal Influence in Eleventh Century South India'.

⁴ See, for example, Stein, *Peasant, State and Society in Medieval South India*; Spencer, *The Politics of Expansion*; Thapar, *Cultural Pasts*, sections 4 and 7; Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*; Chattopadhyaya, *Studying Early India*; Kulke, *Kings and Cults*; Kulke, 'The Integrative Model of State Formation in Early Medieval India'.

them in the works of Sharma, tribes were not central to the basic concerns of the narratives involved with the construction of large, durable structures cutting across time and space.⁵ There were what appears to be alternative voices, but some of these nuanced arguments seem to have been lost in the intense debates of the times surrounding the socio-political implications of iron and the idea of Indian feudalism.⁶ These perspectives gained ascendancy from the early part of the 1980s, though their genesis go back to the 1970s.⁷ It perhaps was no coincidence that the period witnessed some of the most debatable yet influential writings on the state. What easily comes to mind are the works of Thapar on the emergence of the state in the mid first millennium BCE in the middle Ganga valley and the reinterpretation of the Mauryan Empire, S. Seneviratne's secondary states in post-Maurya Andhra and Kalinga, the idea being later elaborated by Chattopadhyaya, and the contributions of Kulke and Chattopadhyaya towards the shaping of an integrative model of state formation in early medieval India.⁸ Burton Stein's segmentary state model, brāhmana–peasant alliance and the integration of the agrarian order in south India are all situated at the beginning of the period under discussion.⁹ What attracts attention is that all these writings were connected in terms of their concern and engagement with the question of differentiated spaces, plurality of peoples and cultures, their historical implications and gradual integration with general society or mainstream life as a consequence of the convergence of cultures, as against earlier tendencies to homogenise historical experiences.

Thapar's discussion of the origin of the state in north India besides demonstrating that the state in course of its emergence evolves from and influences numerous variables, also points to its dissimilar, uneven nature across spaces in northern India in the Age of the Buddha. States like Kosala and Magadha in the middle Ganga plains emerged as more viable political systems because of the convergence of several necessary prerequisites compared to those in the upper Ganga valley or the *Gaṇa-saṃgha* formations in the terai or Gorakhpur–northern Bihar region, where comparable conditions were not available. The compulsions generated by prestation economy in the upper Ganga valley or the community ownership of land in the *Gaṇa-saṃghas* were absent, whereas the region also had the advantage of being a natural habitat zone for high yielding paddy cultivation and concomitant developments. Moving on from there

⁵ Sharma, 'The Land System in Medieval Orissa (c. A.D. 750–1200)', in his *Indian Feudalism*, Appendix I, pp. 227–36; Sharma, *Social Changes in Early Medieval India*; and Sharma, 'Material Milieu of Tantricism'.

⁶ For example, see Thapar, 'The Study of Society in Ancient India'; Thapar, 'Image of the Barbarian in Early India'; also her *Ancient Indian Social History*.

⁷ Chattopadhyaya's contributions in the context of Rajasthan in the 1970s are available in his *The Making of Early Medieval India*, and Kulke's works of the same period are included in his *Kings and Cults*; Stein, 'Integration of the Agrarian System of South India'; Stein, 'The Segmentary State in South Indian History'; Spencer, 'The Politics of Plunder'; and Spencer, 'Temple Money-lending and Livestock Redistribution in Early Tanjore'.

⁸ See footnotes 3 and 4. Also see Thapar, *The Mauryas Revisited*; Seneviratne, 'Kalinga and Andhra'; Chattopadhyaya, 'Transition to the Early Historical Phase in the Deccan'.

⁹ See footnotes 4 and 7.

the Mauryan Empire is logically seen in terms of multiple differentiated social formations, eliciting differential presence of the state in its varied constitutive components. The face of the state and the depth of administration were not the same everywhere.¹⁰ It was determined by the levels of socio-economic attainments and, flowing from it, the potential for revenue generation. Archaeological evidence suggests that the material prosperity during the times was largely spread over Gangetic north India and its fringes in central India. Beyond it there was a scatter. The distribution pattern of the Mauryan inscriptions too ties up well with the emergent picture of the coexistence of developed, developing and underdeveloped regional societies within the empire. Uneven development can be seen in the visible political profile of secondary states or localities in post-Maurya Deccan and the east coast.¹¹ The history of the Mahārathis, Mahābhojas, Kuras, Anandas, and more prominently the Sātavāhanas and Mahāmeghavāhanas amply demonstrate it. In the far south the emergent picture during the same period is not very different. The *Tiṇai* concept or the idea of interrelated ecological landscapes, and associated everyday lives and popular forms of religion, and the trajectory of socio-political developments from Vēḷir and non-Vēḷir chieftains to the evolution of the *Mūvēndars* (three kings)¹² bear close parallels with the Deccan before the Sātavāhanas. The manifestation of localities (*janapadas*) and secondary states was an ongoing process across regions and centuries in Indian history. The Māṭṭharas and Eastern Gaṅgas of Kālīṅga, Ikshavākus and Viṣṇukuṇḍins of Andhra, Śarabhapuriyas of Dakṣiṇa Kośāla, Vākātakas of Vidarbha, Kadambas of Kuntala, Pallavas of Toṇḍai *maṇḍala* in an earlier context and the coming of the Rajput states in central India in the medieval times provide good examples. The regional/supra-regional states at the turn of the first millennium CE and beyond from Bengal and Orissa through Andhra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, to Karnataka and Maharashtra emerged gradually in a phased manner building on the foundations provided by the locality and sub-regional states in the respective regions. It will be good to remember that these successful political enterprises were also premised on simultaneous social, economic and cultural processes of change. In this perspective political systems are seen to be neither just the result of changes in other domains nor the harbinger of social, economic and cultural changes, as posited within the dominant historiography. The state is actually perceived to be influenced by and impacting changes in other spheres.

Space was neither immutable nor undifferentiated. The regional or supra-regional polities of the late early medieval centuries were forged by the gradual integration of the sub-regions and localities. The Yadava state comprised parts of the Konkan, Deśa and Vidarbha, while the Kākāṭīya dominions were constituted by the coming together of Telangana, coastal Andhra and Raylaseema. Regions were shaped by a conglomerate of differentiated spatial entities at varying levels of socio-political organisation.

¹⁰ Thapar, *The Mauryas Revisited*.

¹¹ Seneviratne, 'Kalinga and Andhra', Chattopadhyaya, 'Transition to the Early Historical Phase in the Deccan'; Sastry, 'Political System in Early Coastal Andhra'; Sahu, 'The Early State in Orissa'.

¹² See Gurukkal, 'Towards the Voice of Dissent'; Gurukkal and Varier (eds), *Cultural History of Kerala*, Vol. I, chapters 5 and 6.

However, integration was never complete and in it were embedded the historical roots of contestations and negotiations across regions. North Indian literature juxtaposes *vana/aranya* and *janapada/ksetra*. While the former represents forest or jungle, the later is identified with plough agriculture and settled habitation. The same distinction can be seen in Tamil literature between *vanpulam* (hard barren land) and *menpulam* (paddy land).¹³ These spatial segments were neither exclusive nor did they stand in opposition to each other. Their relationship was characterised by complementarities and continuum as was the continuum from tribe to caste. The continued manifestation of *janapadas* in the first millennium CE, such as, Kāmarūpa, Puṇḍravardhana, Rāḍha, Kaliṅga, Dakṣiṇa Kośala and Vidarbha, among others, makes the more general point about the gradual and phased transformation of space across regions. Notwithstanding the extension of the peasant frontier, there were areas outside the orbit of plough agriculture and organised state intrusion. Inscriptions and hero stones from the upland dry zones of Tamil Nadu continuously mention the simultaneous existence of the pastoral groups, their headmen, cattle raiding and heroic activities in the second half of the first millennium CE along with the Pallava and Pāṇḍyan states.¹⁴ Similarly, there is evidence for the coexistence of the pastoral sector in the *vīragals* or hero stones on the periphery of the Rashtrakuta dominions.¹⁵ Such spaces which are organised differently from the ‘administered territories’ have been envisaged as autonomous spaces. They involved alternative centres of authority within the frontiers of the state, and managed their affairs largely to the exclusion of its transcendent authority.¹⁶ However, the influence and/or the intervention of the state could not be entirely avoided largely because the intervention of the state was occasionally sought to resolve complex problems, and expanding states like that of the Cholas, Kākatīyas or the Later Eastern Gaṅgas did intrude even without invitation. What emerge are two larger issues: first, that the search for any kind of homogeneity within the territorial boundaries of the state will not be rewarding, and second, that these spaces under discussion did not exist in isolation; they were amenable to interactions and change, leading to cultural entanglements, intersections and overlaps. This perspective accommodates competition, contestations and negotiations, and sees the unfolding of history as neither linear nor one-dimensional. N. Karashima’s study in the Kaveri delta makes the point quite vividly by focusing attention on the differential history of settlements within the same locality during the Chola period.¹⁷ The non-brāhmana settlements experienced social stratification and the loosening of community ownership of land only in the post tenth century, while these features were intrinsic to the brāhmana settlements earlier. Moreover, even geographically proximate villages did not have the same constituents like a temple, a reservoir or a burial ground, making inter-village cooperation a desideratum.¹⁸

¹³ Sontheimer, ‘The *Vana* and the *Ksetra*’, p. 125.

¹⁴ Gunasekaran, ‘Cattle Raiding and Heroic Tradition’.

¹⁵ Elizabeth, ‘Hero-Stones in the Rashtrakuta Period’.

¹⁶ Chattopadhyaya, ‘Autonomous Spaces and the Authority of the State’.

¹⁷ Karashima, ‘Alur and Isanamangalam’; also in Karashima, *South Indian History and Society*.

¹⁸ Karashima, ‘The Village Communities in Chola Times’. Also in his *South Indian History and Society*.

With the growing realisation that tribes form the basis of Indian history, the world of tribes and their religion in general have become important for the historian, who hitherto essentially focused on the study of classical literature and the 'Great Tradition'. The tribes and developments emanating from their societies received their due in the writings of Kosambi systematically. From the Mauryan conquest of large tribal areas leading to the emergence of a few trading centres and subsequently, of small kingdoms through the brahmanas' introduction of a practical calendar, meteorology and knowledge of agricultural techniques to autochthonous tribal groups, who despite their knowledge of the digging-stick and hoe were unfamiliar with them, to the tribal origins of ruling dynasties and their absorption into general society, were the kind of issues which interested him largely because they were foundational and attested the mutual interaction of tribal and agrarian society as well as our local inheritances.¹⁹

In the writings of R.S. Sharma some of these ideas continue to be visible at a general level; however, in the works of the next generation of historians within the dominant historiography they more or less suffer eclipse. Interestingly, social anthropologists and Indologists interested in popular religion and cults continued their engagement with the world of tribes. The names of A. Eschmann and G.D. Sontheimer easily come to mind. As the *kṣetra* or state society moved into the *vana*, the tribal cults were integrated slowly, but steadily over time. The tribal cults were superimposed with Hindu elements and in the process the two coexisted, each defining the relevance of the other. The local was being gradually universalised and the translocal and regional flows were being localised in the process of the transformation and reinterpretation of the autochthonous deities.²⁰ Even today the coexistence of layers is observable at places like Pāṇḍuranga/Viṭhobā of Pandaharpur in Maharashtra or Jagannātha of Puri in Orissa, and such examples can be multiplied. Eschmann's observations on Stambheśwari (the Lady of the Post) and her incorporation into the Jagannātha cult as Subhadrā, and Narasimha's (lion-man deity) association with Jagannātha brought to bear new perspectives on our understanding of the socio-political implications of the transformation of tribal deities and culture.²¹ Life in the *kṣetra* or 'nuclear areas of agriculture' was more hierarchical and complex than in the *vana* or *vraja* (pastoral tracts) and the rules of routine conduct did not apply in the same way in the latter compared to the former.²² As a consequence of continued interaction and change resulting from the internalisation of new values through the adoption of new ideas and institutions tribes were reduced to castes and assigned a place in the asymmetrical social system with reference to the dominant scheme of social organisation, while many of their

¹⁹ Kosambi, *Introduction to the Study of Indian History*; also see his 'The Basis of Ancient Indian History', and 'What Constitutes Indian History' and other relevant essays in Chattopadhyaya, ed., *D.D. Kosambi: Combined Methods in Indology and Other Writings*.

²⁰ For a good analysis, see Sontheimer, 'The *Vana* and the *Ksetra*', p. 129.

²¹ See Eschmann's contributions in Eschmann, Kulke and Tripathi, eds, *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*.

²² Sinha, 'State Formation and Rajput Myth', see footnote 1; Singh, 'A Study in State Formation among Tribal Communities'.

rituals and practices simultaneously found way into Brāhmanic orthodoxy. Sharing of cultural ingredients even between seemingly orthodox groups and communities on the margins of general society was mutual and the state on several occasions provided the context for their necessary convergence. These ideas have been continuously engaged with, elaborated and enriched in the writings of historians in recent years, working on different regions in early India, though their lineage may be traced to the influential contributions of Surajit Sinha and K.S. Singh.²³ If Chattopadhyaya demonstrates the emergence of the Rajputs as a ruling strata from within local societies in early medieval Rajasthan and the symbiotic relationship between the state and forests, Kulke explicates the transformation of chiefs and chiefdoms to Hindu rājās and early kingdoms and their implications for the evolution of the structure of polity and legitimisation in early medieval India, with special emphasis on Orissa.²⁴ J.B. Bhattacharjee has produced comparable writings for north-eastern India.²⁵ Unlike Burton Stein's hypothesis in the case of south India tribal societies did not suffer sustained displacement at the hands of caste organised societies. In fact, the arguments of Chattopadhyaya and Kulke are premised on the idea of tribe–caste continuum, the gradual expansion of the nuclear areas and the integrative role of the land grants to brāhmanas, temples and monasteries. Scholars in course of the 1990s and the last decade drawing their evidence from varied regions, such as, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Orissa, Bengal and Uttar Pradesh, in the context of studying the state have considerably supplemented these findings and added to our understanding of the processes at play in early medieval India.²⁶ The interaction between the Brāhmanical and non-Sanskritic popular cultures at different points in time and locations, including festivals, and their mutual enrichment and interface with the state has been perceived as the normal prevailing condition across early Indian societies.²⁷ The Hinduisation of the tribals and tribalisation of Hindu rituals, motifs and practices has been demonstrated in successive studies in the last thirty years and does not spring a surprise to anyone any more.

Outside Gangetic northern India the simultaneous emergence of *tīrthas* and local/translocal states and the association of chiefs and kings with many of these sacred centres in the course of participating in the ritual ceremonies as well as extending largesse unmistakably brings out their interrelationship. *Tīrthas* mostly emerged in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra, Orissa and Jharkhand.

²³ See Sontheimer, 'The *Vana* and the *Ksetra*', p. 138.

²⁴ For Chattopadhyaya's earlier works, see *The Making of Early Medieval India*, also see his 'State's Perception of the Forest and the Forest as State in Early India'; for Kulke, see his *Kings and Cults*, op.cit, and idem, 'The Early and the Imperial Kingdom'.

²⁵ Bhattacharjee, *Social and Polity Formation in Pre-colonial North East India*; also see his *Bhāuma-Naraka Legend and State Formation in Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa*.

²⁶ See, for example, Sinha, *State Formation in Rajasthan*; Veluthat, *The Early Medieval in South India*; Subbarayalu, *South India under the Cholas*, pp. 207–60; Heitzman, 'State Formation in South India, 850–1280'; Talbot, *Pre-colonial India in Practice*; Panda, *The State and Statecraft*; Schnepel, *The Jungle Kings*; Chakrabarti, *Religious Process*; and Sharma, 'Negotiating Identity and Status'.

²⁷ Sahu, 'Legitimation, Ideology and State'; Chattopadhyaya, 'Festivals as Ritual'.

An attendant development was the proliferation of temples. Ruling lineages patronised their construction and maintenance. Instances of the association of temples with tribes are numerous. The Chenchus at Srisaïlam, Boyas at Draksharama, Sabaras at Puri and Kurubas at Tirupati should suffice to illustrate the point.²⁸ In the process of transforming the world of the tribes Brahmanical society was also absorbing some of their inheritance and changing somewhat too. That *tīrthas* and the processes of acculturation and state formation were inextricably linked has been brought to light by several studies. M.L.K. Murty's work on the Eastern Ghats in Andhra Pradesh pointing to the strategic location of Shaivite and Vaishnavite cult centres and *mathas* atop hills and on passes lucidly demonstrates their role in the integration of tribes.²⁹ *Tīrthas* as sites of integration of tribal and pastoral people/territories became centres of political interest, as were the *maṇḍis* and *peṇṭhās* as nodes for revenue generation for the state in north India and the Deccan respectively. Inscriptions attest the building of temples for aboriginal deities by local kings. Ekalingaji in Mewar, Danteswari in Chhattisgarh and Jagannatha in Orissa provide good examples.³⁰

Historians instead of taking popular support for granted have found it useful to examine the devices kings used to perpetuate and extend their authority. The strategies employed provide an entry point to contemporary social and cultural processes insofar as they usually move in tandem. These are tied up with the larger issue of the constitution of authority, its sustenance and changing forms in time and space. As against the earlier macro-generalisations spanning centuries, which perceived legitimation of power in simple reflective terms, over the last thirty years it has been realised that conceptions of power and status are culturally determined and, flowing from it, the constitutive elements in the structure of legitimation are specific to particular societies.³¹ Therefore, the interrelationship between temporal power and the sacred domain is no more seen in static terms, but as absorptive, dynamic and as continuously evolving, involving constant engagement, contestation and negotiation. A structure of legitimation was not usually imposed, nor was it easy to do so. It was designed to accommodate, incorporate and tap what was available in local societies. In Bengal and Orissa, as elsewhere, brahmanas validated local beliefs and religious practices.³² Similarly, Ekalingaji, Jagannātha and even Brihadeśvara at Tanjavur unambiguously reveal the continuous negotiation and integration of competing traditions, from autochthonous deities to Brāhmaṇical elements. Recent perspectives on legitimation, besides providing insights into the structure of politics in early India, have also unraveled the making of regional cultural traditions.³³

²⁸ See Nath, 'From Brahmanism to Hinduism', pp. 43–44; Durga and Reddy, 'Kings, Temples and Legitimation of Autochthonous Communities'.

²⁹ Murty, 'Environment, Royal Policy and Social Formation', pp. 621–26.

³⁰ See Kulke, 'Royal Temple Policy and the Structure of Medieval Hindu Kingdoms'; Sinha, *State Formation in Rajasthan*, chapter 5; Singh, 'Hinduism and Tribal Religion'.

³¹ Sahu, 'Legitimation, Ideology and State'.

³² Chakrabarti, *Religious Process*, chapters 5 and 6.

³³ *Ibid.*; Eschmann et al. (eds), *The Cult of Jagannath*; Bakker, 'Throne and Temple'; Nandini Sinha-Kapoor, *State-Formation in Rajasthan*; and Teuscher, 'Creating Ritual Structure for a Kingdom'.

In view of the kind of impact the idea of Indian feudalism had on the minds of people in the 1960s and 1970s, some of those who grew up with the idea, even those who were inspired by it, started pushing some of the inherent arguments in the context of the regions a little farther. Issues surrounding the study of the state such as state formation in pre-state areas, evolution of the structure of polities and strategies of legitimation, and the processes leading up to them threw up new sets of questions, problematised some of them and resulted in the reinterpretation of the land grants. It was increasingly realised that all land grants need not be seen in terms of the parcellisation of royal sovereignty or the fragmentation and undoing of the economic foundation of the state. In virgin territories or tribal frontiers through the very act of making a grant royal authority was being articulated and asserted for the very first time.³⁴ It had much to do with making royal authority real and tangible in areas where it was earlier only assumed to be present. It involved the beginning of the creation of a subject population, and by implication the extension of royal authority. Flowing from it, it has been argued that in such territories the transfer of revenues or privileges need not be read as actually happening, but may have to be seen only as a conventional repetition of realities in developed and developing areas or as an expression of intent to be actualised in the future with the extension of plough agriculture. The cumulative impact of several land grants to brāhmaṇas, temples and monasteries by successive dynasties across regions beyond northern India in the early medieval centuries is then perceived to have resulted in a slow, but steady broadening of the agrarian frontier; together with the gradual extension and consolidation of the authority of the state.³⁵ The latter point gets amplified in the grants made in developed areas where agriculture and habitation already had a long earlier history. The donees helped in the dissemination of Śāstric-epic-purāṇic ideas, as in the developing areas, and created the cultural milieu for monarchical states to survive, insofar as they propagated *varṇa* ideology and the ideal of Hindu kingship and in the process familiarised people with the norms of state society.³⁶ That apart, Brāhmaṇic settlements and temples and comparable institutions helped the ruler to establish a chord and reach out to his people; in doing so they provided the necessary validation to the socio-political order. In fact, land grants on copper-plates, and more particularly those engraved on stone, are also being seen as channels for communication, facilitating the transmission of ideas and values.³⁷ Temples, like collective rituals (bathing, *kirtana* and processions), are perceived to be sites of cultural dissemination and imbibing of ideas and ideologies.

The simultaneous emergence of local states and the phenomenon of land grants across historical regions strike one in the face, and brings to the fore their inherent interrelationship.³⁸ It may be interesting to have a closer look at the larger implications

³⁴ Kulke, 'Fragmentation and Segmentation', p. 247.

³⁵ Kulke, 'The Early and the Imperial Kingdom'; Chattopadhyaya, 'Introduction', *The Making of Early Medieval India*.

³⁶ Sahu, 'Legitimation, Ideology and State'.

³⁷ Kulke, 'Some Observations on the Political Functions of Copper Plate Grants in Early Medieval India'; Sahu, 'Profiling Daksina Kosala'.

³⁸ Chattopadhyaya, 'State and Economy in North India'.

of the land grants. In case land grants undermined the political and economic foundations of the state then it becomes inconceivable as to why dynasty after dynasty, in region after region, in post Gupta India engaged in the act of land donations. The story gets a little more complex as one examines the object and quantity of the donations. Usually it is a settlement that is donated, and all settlements were not villages (*grāmas*); they included hamlets (*palli*), parts of a settlement (*pāṭaka*), a herders' settlement (*goṣa*), etc.³⁹ While more than a settlement was donated in some cases, so were certain measures of land in the varied regions. The general point that one is trying to make is that the land grants made across regions between the middle of the first millennium CE and the thirteenth century need to be placed in perspective in terms of their numbers spread over about eight centuries. Likewise, it will be useful to remember that the brāhmanas were not always introduced to the historical regions along with the coming of land grants. There are instances of them being present as addressees in some early land transfer documents. References in inscriptions to the idea of *Kaliyuga* had been adduced to supplement the literary references to the same and argue for a historical crisis at the end of the early historical period, which was then conveniently used to explain the transition to the early medieval times. However, a contextual analysis of the said term in the inscriptions of the regions clearly reveals that it was used as a trope to highlight the virtues of the king and add colour to the portrait of kingship by distancing him from the very idea of *Kaliyuga*, which stood in opposition to the idea of *dharma* in its broader sense. Kings are continuously represented as preventing the entry of *Kaliyuga* or washing away its sins, even being associated with the *Kṛtayuga* (the opposite of *Kaliyuga*), in the *praśasti* (eulogy) sections of the early inscriptions from several regions, unambiguously attesting to the formation of local states within the Brahmanical ideological framework.⁴⁰ Such recognition has not only disturbed our earlier understanding of the transition towards the early medieval, but has also led to the fruitful pursuit of alternative theoretically sound and empirically valid explanations.⁴¹

In the late 1980s and early 1990s historians moved away from the bipolar world of the peasants and lords during the early medieval times and discovered in many cases the region-specific social and political intermediary groups. In the case of Karnataka the *gāvunḍas* were seen to constitute the local notables or rich peasants who were identified and incorporated into the service of the Hoysāla state so as to allow the state to intrude into the localities.⁴² Perhaps all the *gāvunḍas* did not share the same fortune because the segment was differentiated into *prabhu* and *prajā gāvunḍas*, the latter as the prefix suggests may have been the poorer cousins.⁴³ Simultaneously, Gupta and

³⁹ For rich discussions, see Choudhary, *Early Medieval Village in North-Eastern India (A.D. 600–1200)*; Chattopadhyaya, *Aspects of Rural Settlements*.

⁴⁰ Sahu, 'Conception of the Kali Age in Early India'.

⁴¹ Chattopadhyaya's *The Making of Early Medieval India* is a good example.

⁴² See Veluthat, 'Landed Magnets as State Agents', pp. 118–23; also in his *The Early Medieval in South India*.

⁴³ Chattopadhyaya, 'Kalikatti: An Early Medieval Village in South India', in his *Aspects of Rural Settlements*.

post-Gupta Bengal produced evidence for the emergence of a new category known as the *mahattaras* besides the ubiquitous middle peasant category called *kuṭumbins*. It has been suggested that the *mahattaras* were an inclusive category of men of substance, including both the *brāhmaṇas* and non-*brāhmaṇas*.⁴⁴ These categories have been reported from western India and Orissa too.⁴⁵ Their privileged placement in the list of enumerated addressees indicates that they were locally influential and the state recognised them as such. Over time a presumably more substantial category known as *mahāmahattaras* also surfaced. Kakatiya epigraphic records show the presence of peasant warriors with status titles like *nāyaka* and *reḍḍi*. They were given revenue assignments over a few villages (*nāyankārā*) and in return they stood by the state and helped to consolidate its authority in the localities. In some cases they were known as *raju*, *pregada* or *leṅka*.⁴⁶ *Pregaḍa* was a title usually borne by the *brāhmaṇas*, attesting to their being warriors as well. The *nāyaka* system in south Orissa (Kaliṅga) under the Gangas too was a socially incorporative mechanism.⁴⁷ The terms *veḷḷāla*, *nāṭṭār* and *satsudra* in the Tamil country similarly capture the dynamism of the times in terms of socio-political mobility. It may be of interest to note that some women did exercise political authority in Orissa, Andhra and Kashmir, notwithstanding the patrilineal norms and ideology of kingship. This was possible within the limitations of *Brāhmaṇical* gender ideology by queens displaying heroic prowess and cleverly negotiating with the ideological domain by adopting and wielding male symbols of power or owing to the centrality of the family, even social fluidity, in certain cultures.⁴⁸ The state and power had its own compulsions and socio-political realities did not always conform to normative textual prescriptions.

Broadly three phases have been visualised in the evolution of the structure of the state in the Gupta and post Gupta centuries. The first stage was characterised by the presence of tribal chiefs and chiefdoms and their gradual transformation towards Hindu *rājās* and early kingdoms. These *rājās* after their initial consolidation in the core regions of their respective nuclear areas extended their influence to the peripheries of their realm, and subsequently to other nuclear areas by defeating their kings. The defeated kings were turned into tributary rulers and formed a part of the emerging *sāmantaçakras* (circle of *sāmantas*). The imperial or regional states emerged through a repetition of comparable processes at the level of these larger sub-regional kingdoms. It is necessary to mention, what is perhaps obvious, that the structure of the state emerged stronger with the passage of time, accompanied by concomitant changes in the location of the

⁴⁴ Chattopadhyaya, 'Some Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in Gupta and Post Gupta Bengal', in his *Aspects of Rural Settlements*.

⁴⁵ Njammasch, 'Social Structure of the Village in Kathiawar in the 6th–7th Centuries A.D.'; Yadav, 'Historical Investigation into Social Terminology in Literature'.

⁴⁶ Talbot, 'Political Intermediaries in Kakatiya Andhra, 1175–1325'.

⁴⁷ Panda, *The State and Statecraft*, see footnote 26, pp. 77–87.

⁴⁸ For a stimulating analysis, see Talbot, 'Rudrama-devi, the Female King'; Kumkum Roy, 'Turbulent Waves: Construction of Gender Relations in the *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana', in *The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power*; Rangachari, *Invisible Women, Visible Histories*.

capital city, structure of legitimation, and lists of officials, revenue terms and administrative units.⁴⁹ Symmetrical changes were simultaneously in operation in the domains of economy and society. Agrarian growth, not unrelated to agrarian expansion initiated by the state and improvements in irrigation facilities, had its visible manifestation in the rise of exchange centres, such as the *hāṭṭas* and *mandīs*, across regions. Some of the latter given their nodal location, both economically and politically, emerged as towns subsequently. The prosperity under discussion had its bearing on society as well, insofar as it led to the emergence of the well-to-do and rich peasant categories in region after region. The forging of regional states was thus made possible by the mechanism of integration played out in several spheres. However, integration was never perfect, and the localities and sub-regions did not necessarily always merge their identities entirely in the shaping of regional enterprises. That accounts for the continuous making, breaking and realignment of political alliances in early medieval and medieval India. Kings who constituted the *sāmāntacakra*, discussed earlier, at various levels in a regional context are being increasingly conceptualised as ‘little kings’ or kings of ‘little kingdoms’. The idea has little to do with the size of their territories. It is largely based on relational, politico-ritual criteria because the fortunes of the parties involved in the act could shift and undergo rapid changes. One was a little king in relation to another who was perceived as great largely owing to the latter’s ability to distribute and dispense with land, titles and symbols of status, which signified the constitution of authority. Through such enactments the great king allowed others down the ladder to share his sovereignty and bound them in a hierarchical order that accommodated antagonistic tolerance, and deriving from it contestation and negotiation.⁵⁰ The little kings continued in different parts of the country well into the nineteenth century.

The use of archaeological data in the construction of early India, including political processes and the structure of polity, has gained momentum in the last three decades. Narratives of the origin of the state in north India in the mid first millennium BCE have made effective use of archaeological material to explain the processes of change and variation in time and space.⁵¹ Notwithstanding the acknowledgement of the transformative potentials of iron technology, the iron–productivity–surplus–urbanisation and state thesis formulated in course of the 1950s and 1960s has come in for serious criticism on several counts, such as, the size and quality of the available iron agricultural tools recovered from several sites in the sixth–fifth centuries layers, the nature of change in Indian society, technological determinism and the stereotyped straight line argument. It has been said that the argument oversimplifies agricultural operations and attributes undue precedence to iron irrespective of the varying land types and ecological zones in the country.⁵² Besides, it has been recognised that the state emerges out

⁴⁹ See Kulke, ‘The Early and the Imperial Kingdom’.

⁵⁰ See Schnepel and Berkemer, ‘History of the Model’; Berkemer, ‘Little Kings or Little Kingdoms?’ pp. 11–20, 235–42.

⁵¹ Thapar, *From Lineage to State*; Sharma, *The State and Varna Formation in the Mid-Ganga Plains*.

⁵² See Sahu, ‘Introduction’, *Iron and Social Change in Early India*; Ratnagar, *Makers and Shapers*, chapter 10.

of and introduces changes in varied spheres. The recent understanding of the Mauryan Empire besides a reevaluation of the literary and epigraphic sources is considerably based on the pattern of the spread of material prosperity in India during the time of the Mauryas. Continued use of archaeological evidence is visible in studies related to secondary state formation or transition to early historical society in post-Maurya peninsular India and beyond, and they have produced significant results.⁵³ Cities were centres of convergence, spatially and socially, and of economic interest to the state. Political authority is either dominant or marginal in textual discussions of cities in early India, but they are never indifferent to it.⁵⁴ For example, popular revolt against authority constitutes the backdrop of Śūdraka's *Mṛcchakaṭīkam*. That the state did not exist since time immemorial and like other institutions came into being with the convergence of historical forces, changed with time, and acquired different forms with varying social foundations is generally agreed.⁵⁵ The impact of the studies on the state is clearly obvious from the fact that concepts, such as, lineage, chiefdom, state formation, structure of legitimation, typology of states, parcellisation of sovereignty or shared sovereignty, popular consent and surplus, among others, are a part of the vocabulary of good Under Graduate and Graduate students among the better universities. These concepts generally used to explain pre-state and state societies are tied to issues of social differentiation and social mobility. The study of the state thus easily subsumes ideas and debates in social and economic history, as well as across social science disciplines.

In a thought-provoking article on Kosambi, Romila Thapar recently touched on the question of the gains we have made in course of the debate on early medieval India in the recent decades.⁵⁶ A look beyond the cursory suggests that once the debate shifted from arguing on the terms laid down by the proponents of Indian feudalism around 1980, there was a shift in the ground of discussion and several new ideas differently nuanced like the segmentary state, ritual sovereignty, agrarian nuclear areas or segments/localities, the movement from processes to structure rather than the other way round, state cults and the integrative paradigm of state formation came into play. The focus on region-centred analyses of state formation gave rise to understanding the complex ways in which regional trajectories and traditions were constituted, which in turn spurred the construction of identities and some rethinking about the shaping of the idea of India.⁵⁷ It is being appreciated that the idea did not exist since antiquity; it was historically constituted.⁵⁸ Deriving from it there are two interrelated engaging ideas. The first is that there was change all through, but change through continuities. Second, as against the clichéd unity in diversity phrase which assumes a prior notion of unity

⁵³ Seneviratne, 'Kalinga and Andhra'; Chattopadhyaya, 'Transition to the Early Historical Phase in the Deccan'; Sahu, 'The Early State in Orissa'; Rajan, 'Situating Early Historic Times of Tamil Nadu'.

⁵⁴ Basant, 'Urbanism and Society in Early India'.

⁵⁵ Sahu, 'Ways of Seeing', see footnote 1.

⁵⁶ Thapar, 'Early Indian History and the Legacy of D.D. Kosambi'.

⁵⁷ Talbot, 'Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self', pp. 710–19; Mohapatra, 'Ways of Belonging'.

⁵⁸ See Kulke, 'Historiography and Regional Identity'; also see Chattopadhyaya, 'Space, History and Cultural Process'; Chakrabarti, *Religious Process*, see footnote 26.

into which diversities were accommodated, it emerges that the said unity was forged through a continuous process of networks of interactions, mediated by the spread and adoption of 'imitable models'; from Buddhism to Brahmanical ideology with all their accompaniments.⁵⁹ Researches on the state have had implications for issues like periodisation and causation. Today the period from the middle of the first millennium BCE to the fourth century CE is divided into two phases on considerations of the emergence of the *mahājanapadas* leading up to the making of an empire, and secondary state formation in the Deccan and Kalinga. Local state formation and the extension of state societies in the regions outside Gangetic northern India endows the fourth–seventh centuries with a distinct personality of its own.⁶⁰ It is generally agreed that the early medieval centuries admit two identifiable sub-periods: the seventh–tenth and the tenth–thirteenth centuries. In this perspective providing for a long-term alternative vision of Indian history by focusing on processes, the structural evolution of polity and the gradual integration of the economic, social, cultural and political domains, involving the movement from the local chiefdom stage through the early kingdoms to the regional/supra-regional polities, the transitions from the early historical to the early medieval and subsequently to the medieval times are negotiated without any breakdowns or empirical and conceptual discomfort. In short, studies of the state overlap with debates on a variety of themes in early Indian history, and provide us a picture of a mosaic of mobile and dynamic societies.

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⁵⁹ Chattopadhyaya, 'Space, History and Cultural Process'.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Sinha, 'Early Maitrakas, Landgrant Charters and Regional State Formation in Early Medieval Gujarat'; Kulke, 'Some Thoughts on State and State Formation under the Eastern Vakatakas'; Dayma, 'Political Processes in the Making of the Early Kadamba State'.

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