

## UNIT 28 EARLY STATE FORMATION IN SOUTH INDIA (TAMILAHAM)

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### 28.0 OBJECTIVES

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

- what eco-zones constituted Tamilaham or south India of the early period
- how the various forms of subsistence co-existed and interacted
- how the different kinds of chiefdoms functioned, and
- how they represented different levels of political control,

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### 28.1 INTRODUCTION

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In Unit 27 you learn about early state formation in the Deccan under the Satavahanas. A similar situation is not seen in Tamilaham during the period. We do not see the existence of a state power in the region, but only chiefdoms. State presupposes the existence of a centralised political authority over a territory. Its authority would be based on the control of the territorial resources. It would have a regular system of taxation and organised defence. Facilitating both taxation and defence, the state would have a bureaucracy or a team of officials of different ranks and functions. On the other hand, a chiefdom would have no such evolved features. A chiefdom would be a society of hereditary status, ruled by a chief. His authority would be the one based on the control of his people bound by the concerned tribal or clanish ties of kinship. The chief would be the embodiment of the kinship relations of his people. There would be no regular taxation or periodic exaction of any revenue from the people, but only occasional voluntary payments to the chief. In this unit you will be made familiar with the variety of chiefly powers and their levels of political development.

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### 28.2 THE REGION

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The land in between the hills of Venkatam and Kanyakumari is called Tamilaham. It includes the whole of modern Tamil Nadu and Kerala. With forested hills, undulated terrains, pastures, arid zones, wet-lands and long sea coast, the region represented a combination of diverse eco-zones. The three principal chiefdoms, the Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas had their strongholds both in the interior as well as on the sea coast. The Cheras had Karur in the interior and Muciris, the well known ancient port, on the west coast. The Cholas had Uraijur in the interior and Puhar on the coromandel coast as their strongholds. Similarly, the Pandyas had Madurai and Korkar as their interior headquarters and port respectively. These were the most important political centres of the period in the region.

## 28.3 THE FIVE ECO-ZONES AND SUBSISTENCE PATTERN

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The ecological differences of the region are reflected in ancient Tamil poetry. This is in the form of the concept of **aintinai** or five eco-zones. In ancient Tamil poetry Tamilaham is portrayed as a combination of five **tinai**s, viz., **kurinji** (hilly backwoods), **palai** (arid zone), **mullai** (pastoral tracts), **marutam** (wet-land) and **neital** (sea coast). There could be areas in which one **tinai** or the other dominates. But generally most of the **tinai**s are fragmented and mixed up all over the region. The mode of human adaptation varied from **tinai** to **tinai** depending on its ecological conditions. The social groups also varied. The people of **Kurinji** took to hunting and gathering. **Palai** being dry land, the inhabitants over there could not produce anything. They took cattle lifting and plundering. The people of **mullai** practised animal husbandry and shifting cultivation. In the **marutam**, the people could pursue plough agriculture and in the **neital**, fishing and salt making. Thus Tamilaham had different forms of subsistence as determined by the ecological conditions of the five **tinai**s. People from each **tinai** went out interacting with the peoples of the other **tinai**s and entered into barter of goods. For example, the people from the hilly backwoods came down to other zones for exchanging their resources like honey, meat, fruits and other wild goods. The people of pastoral tracts exchanged their dairy products and the coasted people fish and salt. Agrarian zones attracted all of them. The small, self-sustaining **tinai**s grew up into larger eco-zones through such interaction and interdependence. There were larger zones of productivity as well as non-productivity. The zones of better productivity had a relatively developed social division of labour. In the zones of lesser productivity the society was essentially simple and consisted of clans. By and large the peoples of Tamilaham represented a complex society of unevenly developed components which shared a common culture. The political level of the society varied from the simple chiefdom of clans to complex chiefdom of ruling houses. A full fledged state power was yet to take shape.

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## 28.4 EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL SOCIETY

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The earliest recognisable phase of the evolution of political society can be seen in the chiefdoms of clans. There were several chiefdoms of clans, some big and others very small. The chiefs of clan-chiefdoms were addressed to in the poems as the great son (**perumakan**) or chiefly son (**Ko-makan**) indicating the relation between chiefs and their clan members. What is really indicated is the basis of kinship. Some such chiefdoms must have grown beyond kinship through the conquests and subjugation of other clans. The relatively larger chiefdoms of complex nature were born out of conquests and subjugation. Marriage alliances of chiefs also were responsible for the formation of larger chiefdoms, but the real basis of the enlargement of chiefdoms was their wealth. Chiefdoms with large agricultural areas constituted the most powerful ones. There were three such most powerful chiefdoms in contemporary Tamilaham, viz; the Chera, Chola and Pandya. These chiefdoms represented the phase of the evolution of a political society anticipating the emergence of a real state.

### 28.4.1 Different Kinds of Chiefdoms

There were three different kinds of chiefdoms in Tamilaham. They were of the **kizar** (little chiefs), **velir** (bigger chiefs) and **vedar** (the biggest chiefs) categories of chiefs. The **Kizar** were headmen of small villages (**Ur**), generally bound by kinship. Many **Kizar** are mentioned in the poems. They are referred to by being prefixed with the name of their respective villages. **Arnkantur-kizar** or **UrnturKizar** may be cited as examples. Some of them were subjugated by the bigger chiefs and had to serve them in their campaigns. Poems refer to **Kizar** doing **vidutozil** (obligatory services) to bigger chiefs like Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas in their campaigns. The bigger chiefs in their turn rewarded the **kizar** through gifts which included grant of predatory control over the subjugated villages. Such **kizar** sometimes received control over certain other villages also as reward for serving bigger chiefs. The **velir** were mostly hill chieftains, though there were **velir** controlling low-lands too. The hill chiefs were hunter chiefs, **vetar-koman** or **kuravar-koman** or **nedu vettuvan**. **Vetar**, **kuravar** and **vettuvan** were the major clansmen of the hills dominated by the **velir**. **Venkatamalai**, (the hills of

Venkatam), Nanjimalai (the high ranges south of Travancore), paramouralai (probably modern parampikkulam reserve forest near pollachchi), potyilmalai (high ranges in the modern Madurai district) are some of the important centres of the hill chiefs of the period. The Chera, Chola and Pandya were the three principal ruling houses of the biggest category of chiefs. They were known as Muvendar, the three cendar. These chiefly houses had control over peoples of larger areas. The Cheras controlled the peoples of the Kurinji dominated areas of the western ghats toward sea. The Cholas had control over the peoples in the Kaveri area and the Pandyas, in the south-central area toward seas. They had several lesser chiefs under their service and paying tributes (tiarai). There was no notion of a precisely demarcated territory. The political authority functioned through control over peoples rather than privileges over basic resources. For example, the control over the peoples like Kuravar, or vetar or vettuvar by their chiefs made them chiefs. The hills as well as plains were collectively owned by such peoples. The right of their chiefs emanated from their kinship with the people. The resources were inherited not by individuals but by groups whose members were bound by ties of common ancestry. These were descent groups and they made voluntary payments to their chiefs. Regular and periodic payment of taxes was not in vogue. However, the productivity of the chiefdom determined the strength of the chiefs. Compared to the chiefs of agricultural areas, the pastoral and hunter chiefs were less powerful. Powerful chiefs tried to subjugate lesser ones and extracted tributes from them. Plunder raid was the characteristic feature of contemporary political practice.

#### 28.4.2 Plunder and Booty Redistribution

All chiefs, big and small, had to resort to plunder raids for satisfying the needs of their people. The chiefs redistributed the booty among their warriors, bards and medicants besides their own kinsmen. The institution of gift-giving (Kodai) was integral to the practice of booty redistribution. Gift-giving was considered to be the most important responsibility of any chief. Most of the poems in Puranaruru (one of the anthologies under Ettuttokai) praise the generosity of chieftains. Generosity and bravery are the two major virtues of chieftains according to such poems. The insufficiency of local resources made chiefly plunders an economic imperative. A poem in Puranaruru, praising a chief namely Urtur-kizar, shows how meagre his resources were. When a dependent approached him for gifts, he called his blacksmith to get him a new lance, so that he could go for a raid and acquire booty to give gifts. Plunder raids and booty redistribution thus became the characteristic feature of contemporary polity. Chiefs of all kinds indulged in plundering against one another. Lesser chiefs joined hands with the big ones in plunder campaigns and obtained their shares of booty. Cattle and grain constituted the routine items of booty. The bards of the period sing about the gifts of elephants, horses, golden lotuses, chariots, gems and muslin. Sometimes the raids of bigger chiefs involved subjugation of villages beyond their control. In such cases the lesser chiefs assisting the bigger ones got the subjugated villages. It was not the land of the village that was granted but the control over the people there.

#### 28.4.3 Muvendar and Other levels of Political Control

The antiquity of the Muvendar as the principal ruling groups goes back to the Mauryan period. Asokan Edicts mention them. The bards praise the Muvendar as 'crowned kings' and mention that the whole of Tamizakam belonged to them. The title of crowned kings need not necessarily indicate the establishment of state power. A state presupposes the existence of standing militia, regular taxation, bureaucracy and local administrative bodies. These had not evolved as yet. Nonetheless, the authority of the Muvendar was significantly different from that of the other categories of chiefs. Their subjugation of lesser chiefs was an ongoing process. The main concern of all the three ruling groups—Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas—was subordination of velir chiefs who were next in importance. The velir also had great antiquity. Along with Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas, Satyaputras or the Adigaiman chiefs are also mentioned in the Asokan Edicts. Satyaputras were of the status of the velir chiefs. They held sway over the communities in the high ranges of upper Kaveri area. The other prominent velir chiefdoms lay on the highlands and sea coast along the fringes of the areas of Muvendar. The modern districts of Dharmapuri, Nilgiris, Madurai North Arcot, Tiruchirapalli, Padukkottai are the chief places of the hills and plains occupied by the velir chiefs. There were about fifteen important velir chiefdoms in all as scattered in Tamilaham. Some of them had control over communities in strategic centres like points of exchange, ports, junctions of highways and hill stations. Certain places and resources determined

the nature of their power. With the coming of the period of Indo-Roman trade and control over strategic centres and trade goods added to the importance of the chiefs. Pari of Parambumalai (near Pollachchi), Ariyar of Podiyilmalai (Madurai), Andiran of Nanjilmalai (south of Travancore), Irunko-vel of Kodunbai (Pudukkottai) were some of the prominent velir chiefs mentioned in the poems. Velir Chiefs controlling such strategic centres had to face severe challenges from the superior chiefs like Muvendar. Sometimes such competitions led to the annihilation of the weak. The destruction of the domain of Pari, the velir chief of Parambunadu by Muvendar is a well known example. Apart from direct combats, the bigger chiefs tried to gain access to the velir domains through marriage relations also. There were several instances of the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas taking their brides from velir families. In the case of the village chiefs of strategic areas the bigger chiefs adopted the method of military control. They were subjugated and made subservient to the bigger chiefs. Muvendar had several such subjugated chiefs as their subordinates serving them in plunder raids.

It is obvious that the Muvendar was most powerful political authority in contemporary Tamizakam. Next to them was the political authority of velir. The village chiefs of Kizar constituted the primary level of political authority. Although this gives the impression of a political hierarchy, there was no determinate chain of political control uniting these three levels of political authority. Integration of the lesser chiefs was in progress under the subjugative and marital policies of Muvendar. But a unified political system was still in the making. The traditional authority over resident communities based on kinship remained fundamental to contemporary political control. Traditional assembly of elders transacted the day to day affairs in every settlement. The assembly site was called manram, a raised seating around the foot of a tree. It was also called podiyil. The chief was assisted by a council of elders called avai (Sabha), the structure, composition and functions of which are not known. Two other bodies often discussed as part of early Tamil polity are aimperumkuzu or the five great groups and enperayam or the eight great groups. These were relatively later bodies probably developed after third century A.D. The structure and functions of these bodies also are not known.

**Check Your Progress**

- 1) Read the following statements and mark right (✓) or wrong (X)
  - i) The chiefdoms of Tamizakam were based on payment of regular taxes.
  - ii) The political authority of the period was based on the control of people rather than resources.
  - iii) Muvendar were fullfledged state systems.
  - iv) Gift giving was a chief's primary social responsibility.
- 2) How did different categories of chiefdoms co-exist and interact? Write in ten lines.

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**28.5 LET US SUM UP**

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In this Unit you learnt about the various eco-zones, their subsistence pattern and the various details of the chiefdom level political formation. You also learnt how the system of plunder raids and booty redistribution functioned as the crucial factor in the political practice of the time. Another important point you learnt is the basis of clan ties and kinship in the political authority. You could also learn about the gradual process of institution formation during the period after the third century A.D.

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## 28.6 KEY WORDS

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**Eco-zones:** A small area with its own ecological characteristics such as climate, soil conditions, organisms etc.

**Tinai:** A region with its special ecological factors, social groups and subsistence pattern.

**Chieftdom:** A society of hereditary status controlled by a chief who collected voluntary tributes from his people.

**Muvendar:** The three principal ruling groups, namely Chera, Chola and Pandya.

**Velir:** The chiefly groups next to the principal ones.

**Kizar:** The smallest category of chiefs who had virtually the control over their descent groups.

**Manram or Podiyil:** A raised seating around the foot of a tree.

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## 28.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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- 1) (i) × (ii) ✓ (iii) × (iv) ✓
- 2) See sub-sec. 28.4.3