
The Early State and Theorization on the Evolution and Character of the State in Asia: Some Preliminary Observations

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ABSTRACT

The Early State (TES), published in 1978, represented an ambitious initiative that sought to develop a theoretical understanding of the evolution of the state on the basis of case studies by a multi-disciplinary team of scholars studying varied geographical, and cultural zones. Studies on Angkor, China, Kachari, Maurya and the Mongol state formations were analyses of type of Asian states. A noteworthy aspect of the volume is the impact of the theory of the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) outlined by Marx and Engels on the delineation of the theoretical basis of the Early State, with Lawrence Krader's variant of AMP forming its core. However, in emphasizing on the 'bridging function' of the state, the editors diverge from traditional Marxist interpretations.

The Early State witnessed the division of society into two social groups, those involved in manual or mental exertion, with those drawn from among the latter exercising ruling power. This phase included experiments with 'democratic' forms of polity, when individuals of 'commoner' origin found it possible to ascend to even the ruler's position. The decision taken by the editors to de-emphasize 'despotism' in the characterization of Early State is clearly a welcome move. Association of king with divinity was widespread in Asia, but possibility of revolt was a deterrent to despotic tendencies.

It is suggested that the importance of irrigation as one of the factors in the development of the state deserves investigation.

A ruler with superior authority over chiefdoms would have been most convenient when the need arose for canals cutting across territories of chiefdoms or for reservoirs of large capacity requiring extensive mobilization of labour. The alienation of village communities from the strategic resource of irrigation water probably took place only with the appearance of large-scale reservoirs and inter-related irrigation systems equipped with sluice devices enabling owners to either release or withhold the outflow of water. Intensification of inequality was probably more evident between rather than within village settlements. The less fortunate settlements that found it difficult to produce the requisite quota of food were reduced to performing service functions in return for surplus produce from their relatively affluent neighbours. Not adequately recognized in discussions on irrigation society has been the fact that irrigation water was also exchanged in return for an additional share of the harvest. Parallel to the extraction of the surplus by the state, there were institutions (e.g., temples and monasteries) and individuals that also extracted a part of the surplus on the strength of their ownership of irrigation works.

A state of society prior to the appearance of property may well be hypothesized and built into theory as the editors have done. There may yet be a case for AMP to be modified (or restored!) to be in conformity with Marx's later, more mature and considered positions. Historians and anthropologists who carefully read TES will be thoroughly convinced that in providing a theoretical understanding of the pioneer stage in state formation in human history, Claessen and Skalník have made a most significant scholarly contribution. It is hoped that the preliminary review presented here would lead to a joint project in the future for a more comprehensive examination of the origin of the state in Asia.

The year 2008 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of *The Early State (TES)*, the considerably large volume of essays edited by Henri Claessen and Peter Skalník (1978). An ambitious venture that sought to develop a theoretical understanding of the evolution of the state and its configurations during its initial and emergent phase, it represented one of the earliest initiatives of its kind. The volume was divided into three parts titled 'Thesis', 'Antithesis' and 'Synthesis'. Four theoretical chapters represented

the 'Thesis'. The 'Antithesis' comprised twenty chapters utilized to present data from case studies. The 'Synthesis' contained four chapters, written jointly or individually by Claessen and Skalnik, and the previously outlined theoretical positions were re-examined in the light of the material presented in the second part. This pioneer venture, together with its impressive 'retinue' of successor volumes of 1981, 1985, 1987, 1991 and 1994, 1995, 1996¹ represented a deliberate attempt to draw in a multi-disciplinary team of scholars whose close collaboration contributed to the success of these volumes. These scholars had been studying varied geographical and civilizational zones, but in this project all of them focused attention on the evolution of the state. While the theoretical formulations elaborated in this corpus of volumes had the advantage of drawing on a rich collection of material, in return, the ideas presented in them were to bring to bear their influence on subsequent researches carried out in a wide variety of fields.

This major scholarly enterprise had been evidently undertaken after a considerable amount of careful planning, correspondence, face-to-face meetings with colleagues in distant locations and collective discussions. It is clear that the volume released in 1978 was the result of about five years of devoted and strenuous work. For a person who approaches the volume from what would appear to be a regionalist approach, that is attempting to assess the significance of the input of material from Asian studies for its theoretical formulations, it does not take long to realize that what one has taken on is an exceptionally formidable task. It becomes clear very early that *TES* has been organized by the editors in such a manner that geographical or regional concerns were not being given emphasis. Their approach was clearly one of deliberate choice.

Even in the arrangement of chapters in Part Two, *TES* clearly demonstrates that the focus the editors had in mind was very clearly global. It meant that the Eurocentric or West-centric approach, typical of a good deal of anthropological writings, was being deliberately avoided. This approach is found to be applied in the allocation of chapters to the main geographical regions and, in fact, even the arrangement of chapters in Part Two of the book. In this context, the problem chosen for the present paper would at first appear to be a case of misplaced emphasis. However,

the analysis of the specific features of the African state that Claessen (1981: 59–86) attempted in a successor volume, using a sample of eight states with ‘traditional African culture’, justifies a similar attempt with regard to Asia. The present essay may be considered a further continuation of this approach while specifically focusing attention on Asia.

It is interesting to note that even though Part Two contains twenty chapters, Claessen speaks of twenty-one case studies, and proceeds further to describe their distribution among the main geographical regions: ‘two from America, two from Oceania, eight from Africa ... three from Europe ... and six from Asia’ (*TES*: 533). The statement on the number of case studies, reflective perhaps of the ‘archaeology’ of the evolution of the volume, will receive our attention again later on. It is clearly evident from the passage quoted above that the African continent receives the highest emphasis with eight case studies. Some ‘shortcomings’ in the selection of case studies become immediately apparent. It is not difficult for critics to identify the relatively restricted focus on both Europe and Asia. Claessen himself commented that the number of essays assigned to cover Europe was ‘very few indeed’ (*TES*: 533). Additional studies on Greece (if not also Rome), England, Germany and Italy, would have contributed to a richer collection of material that some would argue to be essential to meet the chosen objectives. In respect of Asia, a similar argument may be made for case studies on Japan, Java, the Mesopotamian region, Sri Lanka and Tibet, for example. On further consideration, it would appear that categorization of case studies among geographical regions could indeed be difficult in the context of transcontinental movements of peoples that were not infrequent throughout human history. Similarly, as would be evident later on, one would also come across ‘borderline cases’ where the assignment of a specific continental identity becomes problematic. In fact, such considerations would lend support to the editors’ choice of arrangement of chapters on the basis of the alphabetical order of the names of states.

While the relevance and usefulness of such additional material for the study of the varied forms of the state in human society may not cause serious disagreement, it has yet to be recognized that the editors would have been compelled to strike a balance between

variety of material to be presented and the obviously compelling restrictions of space, that is the size of the volume they set out to produce. Recognizing the reality of such limitations, the reader will not fail to agree that a reasonable balance has been achieved. Some of the initial lapses in omission cited above have indeed been corrected in the successor volumes. Furthermore, it will no doubt be appreciated that the materials selected represent a wide variety of locations and time-frames. The editors can indeed be satisfied that putting together the pioneer volume constitutes a significant achievement of lasting value.

ASIA IN THE EARLY STATE

Of the six case studies mentioned by Claessen as representing Asia four, *i.e.* Angkor, China, Kachari and Maurya state formations, are readily identifiable. Lawrence Krader's essay on the origin of the state among the Mongols of Asia, even though classified by the editors as a 'theoretical' essay and inserted in the 'Thesis' category (*TES*: 93–108), would nevertheless be taken also as an analysis of a type of Asian state. Most probably, it was counted to make a total of twenty-one before it was upgraded later on into the 'theoretical' category. The sixth contender is Iberia. This name is closely linked with the Spanish kingdom so much so that the presence of another Iberia in history has been hardly noticed. Located between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, and protected by the Caucasian mountain ranges, this ancient kingdom occupied roughly the same area as modern Georgia. Iberia represented a strategically significant intermediate position between Europe and Asia. The close relations it maintained with the Mediterranean region meant that it was often mentioned in Mediterranean writings such as those of Strabo. On the other hand, it is equally important to note that Iberia maintained very close relations with the southwestern parts of the Asian continent and with the Iranian plains at the time of the Achaemenid kingdom. Perhaps as a consequence of these contacts, the Aramaic language and script were used in ancient Iberian documents. Further, the administrative reforms introduced by its ancient ruler Pharnavaz were modelled on characteristic features found in the Achaemenid kingdom. It has been argued that this is demonstrated by the division of the kingdom into such territorial units as *saeristavos* and *saspaspeto*, and the fact

that governors known as *eristavi* were placed in charge of such peripheral units (Koranashvili 1978: 268, note 9).

The case of the Scythians provides a lead for further investigation and is perhaps more open to controversy. While the early state of the Scythians described by Anatolii Khazanov occupied territories presently in Eastern Europe (Khazanov 1978: 425–440), this group of people represented migrants from the early Scythian haunts in Central Asia near the river Jaxar and Lake Issykkul. Their wanderings brought them into associations with West Asia and Egypt, the Achaemenid kingdom of Darius and territories that are presently under modern Azerbaijan, before they moved to the European steppes. Parallel to, but somewhat distinct from their migration to Europe, were the Scythian movements in the southern parts of Asia leading to the establishment of a base in Sīstān, watered by Farāh, Khash and Helmand rivers. The southern Scythian rulers were associated with the Iranian-Afghan area, and the South Asian subcontinent where they were known as the Śakas. The southern Scythian state issued a distinct variety of coins. The Śakas lent their name to a new era in South Asia, beginning with A.D. 78, while another system of reckoning years from 58 B.C. was also associated with them (see *e.g.*, Thapar 2002: 217–220). The distinct state-building activities of the northern and southern Scythian groups provide an ideal opportunity for comparative study and would have formed the seventh case study relevant to the study of the state in Asia. Both groups of Scythians represent processes of transformation of nomad migrants from the steppes into settled agricultural communities.

THE ASIATIC MODE OF PRODUCTION

A noteworthy aspect of *TES* is that Claessen and Skalník seek to draw on Karl Marx's exposition of the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) in their delineation of the theoretical basis of the Early State. The character and the special functions of the state in Asia has been the subject of comment by a long line of thinkers among whom Adam Smith, James Mill, Richard Jones, G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Frederick Engels and Karl Wittfogel have attracted particular attention. The views outlined by Marx on AMP, statements of Engels on the state in Asia and theories elaborated by Wittfogel on hydraulic society and despotism appear to be closely relevant

to a study of the state in Asia. The ways in which material derived from research on Asia informed the theoretical formulations developed in *TES* would constitute a main focus of study in the proposed paper. The majority of the authors of Asian case studies in *TES* were drawn from among researchers with considerable experience in the study of state formations. Since these writings are of an extensive nature, the more practical *modus operandi* of focusing closely on selected examples would perhaps be the inevitable choice.

It may be noted in this context that four of the authors included in *TES*, *i.e.* Krader (1972, 1975), Sedov (1969), Skalník and Pokora (1966) had earlier work on AMP to their credit. Both editors of *TES*, Claessen and Skalník, were evidently attracted by the usefulness of AMP in developing their ideas concerning the early state, as did some of the other participants in the project. Edward Steinhart, who contributed a paper on Ankole, located to the southwest of Uganda, stated that 'the use of a Marxist analysis derived from the application of the concept of Asiatic (or tributary) mode of production' would help the researcher to develop 'a dynamic historical perspective' (*TES*: 131). The contribution made by the late Lawrence Krader constituted a key intervention which set the framework against which the other writings on Asia could be studied and evaluated. It is quite clear that, in utilizing AMP, the preference of the editors and some of the contributors was for this variant developed by Krader which they considered to be 'a more or less universally applicable theory'. According to Krader's variant, 'irrigation works and despotism are only secondary traits, however, while the basic class opposition between the village communities with communal land tenure on the one hand, and the state organization with political, ideological and economic power on the other, provides the core of this theory' (*TES*: 9).

The preceding discussion helps to illustrate how a crucial element of theory in the early state was derived from ideas in the long traditions of the study of Asia. In its abstract and simplified, if truncated form, AMP provided the essence of the theory developed in *TES*: it isolates the state at the historical juncture of its *emergence* when the cleavage of society into 'the rulers' and 'the ruled' is taking place. This implied that 'the ruling class' had not yet come into being and, consequently, that the early state was not cre-

ated by 'the ruling class' as such. This theoretical position directs attention to an interesting paradox: The theory of the early state was intellectually derived, in an ultimate sense, from a Marxist concept, the AMP. Yet it diverges significantly from one of the traditional Marxist positions which held that the state was the creation of 'the ruling class'. Proceeding from this theoretical position Claessen and Skalník move in a positive direction to place particular emphasis on the 'bridging function' of the early state: the presence of the state implied the activation of a process that brought into being 'social mechanisms for bridging the gap between social classes' (*TES*: 649). It has to be recognized that *TES* makes a very significant contribution in proposing this original theoretical definition of the early state. Emphasis on the bridging function carries the implication that, rather than being an institutional device for the defence of a particular class, the early state served to assuage social conflict in the interests of wider cross-sections of society. It might be further added that the need for, and the execution of, this 'bridging function' continued in some parts of Asia well beyond the period of the early state and were apparent in the period of the mature state when social contradictions had begun to be increasingly apparent.

LESSONS FROM THE MONGOL STATE

In his studies Krader focused on the nomads, the people he described as having been active 'on the margins of the history and territory of the agricultural peoples of China, India [and] Persia' (Krader 1978: 96). He proceeded to describe and characterize a type of state that was identified as a response to the needs of its economic base of 'pastoral nomadism', supplemented by a limited extent of agriculture as well as hunting and gathering. These nomadic peoples subsisted on their own produce as well as products obtained from the outside world through exchange transactions with agricultural peoples they were necessarily in continual contact. Thus relations between nomadic and agricultural peoples represented a primary underpinning element that provided clues to understanding the emergence of the state among the Mongol people (*Ibid.*). While trade linked the 'pastoral nomads' with a variety of agricultural peoples of a wide extent of the Asian continent, such as those of China, India and Iran, military conflicts with

the same communities were also not unusual in the general pattern of events. This seemingly contradictory, yet real, nature of the complex relationship between pastoral and agricultural communities was to play a key role in the development of the state among the pastoral peoples of Asia.

One of the important theoretical conclusions derived in *TES* on the basis of materials from the history of Asian societies appears to be that the state among nomadic peoples emerged *after* the state had emerged in the agricultural communities. The chronological distance between these two phenomena is estimated at 'a thousand or more years' (Krader 1978: 96). No less important than this conclusion on the relationship in time between these phenomena was the observation on the conditions determining the emergence of the state. Krader was to state emphatically that the nomadic peoples had developed their state 'in relation to, and in opposition to' the state of the agricultural peoples (*Ibid.*). The conditionality attached to the statement could, by implication, diminish the significance of the emergence of the state among nomadic peoples. Perhaps realizing this, Krader (*Ibid.*) further stated that the nomads 'developed the state, at first as a *marginal and emergent historical phenomenon*', and immediately added that they 'later developed it into a *fully fledged element of the history of these regions of the world*' (my emphasis).

FROM THE MONGOL STEPPES TO CHINA: EARLY STATE IN AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY

While recognizing the serious responsibility of historians to identify the contributions made by diverse Asian states of varying size to the cultural development of mankind, it also needs to be admitted that three areas within the continent demand particular attention. These are the extensive landmass of China, the wide region known today as South Asia and the territories grouped around the Euphrates and the Tigris. They constituted three major centres of civilizations in Asia, and obviously deserve recognition as crucial sources of influences that affected the development of the state in Asia. Their influences ranged widely within the continent and, in certain instances, appeared to promote similar developmental trends. Even though problems relating to chronology become discouragingly acute the further one goes back in history, as a civili-

zation characterized by a developed historical sense early in its history, China provides the historian with data relevant to the study of the state, marked by a noteworthy degree of reliability.

The extensive period of Chinese history from Shang times till the foundation of the Ch'in Dynasty dated by some in 221 B.C., was chosen by Timoteus Pokora (Pokora 1978: 191–212) for his chapter in *TES* on the early state in China. The division of society into two social groups as those who were primarily involved in manual or mental exertion, with those exercising ruling power drawn from among the latter, was recognized early in China. The ruling class was recruited, apart from among kinsmen of royalty, also from families of other dignitaries in the kingdom. The upper stratum removed from production of food as well as the emerging group of craftsmen were both supported by 'the little men' (*hsiao-jen*), the category which included mostly the peasants. Exchange of products in this society continued to be based on barter and tribute to a considerable extent even after the use of coins developed in the latter part of the period of the early state (*Ibid.*: 201). Integration of city life and its potentialities may have suffered from the fact that movement of goods was being regulated by political rather than economic factors. It is not unlikely that there were attempts at experimenting with 'democratic' forms of polity, as in the case of the Warring States period (453–222) or (403–222) when a multitude of city-states came into being. It was a time when some individuals of 'lowly' social origin found it possible to acquire very high positions in the socio-political order, including even that of the ruler (*Ibid.*: 209). However, it is particularly noteworthy that the urban centres did not easily convert themselves into centres of political power and were to face elimination through aggression unleashed by the more powerful amongst them (*Ibid.*: 204).

In order to preserve his hold over the vassals, as also to ensure the continuous inflow of tribute, the ruler followed the practice of going on regular tours of inspection. Under these circumstances, the Early State in China was obviously interested in developing and maintaining the road network which was of crucial significance for the preservation of the state. It is interesting to note that Pokora (*Ibid.*), who observed that the inflow of goods to the capital appeared to have been stimulated by political rather than economic stimuli, refrained from applying the popular concept of 'redistribution' to the period he studied. He claimed that he could detect only

‘unidirectional flow’ in the system: hence, he brusquely stated that ‘there was no redistribution’ (Pokora 1978: 207). It would thus appear that the principle of reciprocity, emphasized by Claessen and Skalník as the basis of the early state, does not appear to have been operative in the picture presented by Pokora. At the same time, the conditions described here do conform to the characterization of the dominance exercised by the ruling hierarchy in the early state as being of ‘political and ideological than economic in character’ (Skalník 1978: 604).

Of considerable significance in the functioning of the early Chinese polity were two social groups, the aristocracy and the gentry (*shih*). The former, drawn from among the kinsmen of the royal family and the most prominent lineages of the land, provided the personnel for the senior and prestigious positions in the polity. Despite their social origins and associations, they were ‘not obliged to live at court’ (Pokora 1978: 203). This would perhaps imply they had considerable influence in the provinces as well. Despite the junior status ascribed to *shih* as a group in terms of ‘blood’ and prestige, they were to play a crucial role in the polity. They enjoyed access to literacy, and their familiarity with the traditional sources of knowledge earned them respect in society. In fact, some of the most important contributions to intellectual development in China have been made by the *shih*, the social stratum that produced most scholars, philosophers, administrators and military leaders who left their impact on the art of war (*Ibid.*: 208). The introduction of the system of official examinations based on literary knowledge represented a major advance in respect of the development of administrative institutions in China. This development, dated as far back as the age of Chou (Zhou), represented a major initiative to draw into government a segment of society that was literate and also versed in traditional knowledge. As the prototype of the systems of official examinations that were to be adopted in Europe and elsewhere at a later time, it ranks as a major contribution of the Chinese civilization to world heritage (*Ibid.*: 205).

STATUS OF WOMEN IN AN ASIAN STATE: THE CASE OF ANGKOR

Leonid Sedov, who contributed the study on Angkor had previous experience in the study of AMP as already noted, and has attempted to interpret the history of Angkor along those lines. Ana-

lyzing the historical processes in the Angkor kingdom, Sedov (1978: 114) draws attention to the integration of self-sufficient agrarian communities as delineated in Marx's letter to Vera Zasulich drafted in 1881 (Marx and Engels 1955: 339–340). At the same time, by emphasizing the actual limitations on the ruler's powers as a result of 'tribal and clan traditions and norms' Sedov (1978: 115) meticulously steered clear of the notions of 'unlimited despotism of Oriental monarchs'. A feature of the essay, that attracts particular attention in the context of numerous attempts to emphasize the patriarchal aspects of Asian society, is the emphasis that the author places on the prominent role played by women as a noteworthy characteristic of state and society of Angkor.

Sedov observed that some women residents of the Angkor state were well versed in astronomy as well as the art of politics and were held in such high regard as to be appointed to positions in the judiciary. Prāna, consort of King Rājendravarman, headed the staff of private secretaries of his son Jayavarman V. The Angkor palace was characterized by the overwhelmingly large presence of females that included not only royal concubines (Sedov places the number of concubines at 3,000–5,000) but also a large group of women courtiers who enjoyed exclusive rights to enter the inner chambers of the palace. An armed women's contingent served as royal bodyguards. Under these conditions the support of women at the palace sometimes became an important factor in court politics (Sedov 1978: 116–117). There is little doubt that what Sedov highlights is an extremely interesting and highly important aspect that had not received adequate attention in most historical accounts of ancient and medieval Asian polities. This contribution of commendable originality deserves close attention from students attempting to arrive at an understanding the early state in Asia as well as those seeking to break free from traditional characterizations of women in Asian society.

However, no historians familiar with the grandeur and artistry of sculptures and edifices at some of the more important sites of the Angkor civilization would agree with Sedov's poor estimate of the abilities of the craftsmen of Angkor as producers of works replete with 'repetitive mistakes', and confined to relying on 'greater use of simple cooperative labour methods' because 'no division of labour had as yet evolved' (Sedov 1978: 125). The author was

influenced by the pioneer French scholar G. Groslier (1921), and was perhaps also following Marx's comment in 'British Rule in India' where large-scale mobilization of labour in Asian society was associated with conditions conducive to restrictions on the human mind 'within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies' (Marx 1969b: 94).

It is interesting to note that Sedov's statement quoted above contrasts with his own observation made slightly earlier that 'skilled craftsmen, not engaged in agriculture, served the court as well as their communities' (Sedov 1978: 124). One may also point out that linking artistic quality too closely with the levels of development of labour specialization could be misleading. One should perhaps also keep in mind that movements of Asian artists and craftsmen were on a much wider geographical scale than imagined by scholars in the early decades of the twentieth century. As another Groslier pointed out closer to our own times, an ancient statue found in the Celebes, described as a masterpiece 'of the greatest beauty of form and finish', presented serious problems to students of art in respect of the identity of the location where it was manufactured (Groslier B. P. 1962: 50–51). The scholar cited above was of the view that, even though it was found in Southeast Asia, it could have come from Amarāvātī in southern India or from Sri Lanka. It could also have been produced by a craftsman who had come to the Celebes from elsewhere, or a local sculptor deeply influenced by South Asian art.

Marx's comments on 'British Rule in India' cited earlier appeared in the *New York Daily Tribune* on June 25th, 1853. This article was one of his earliest writings on Asia. A more careful and mature assessment was to evolve by the time *Capital* and *Theories of Surplus Value* were written. As evident from such later writings, the high levels of quality in workmanship achieved by Asian artisans were to leave favourable effects on Marx's thinking. The achievements of weavers of South Asia provided good examples in this respect. Marx was quite impressed by the reports provided by Hugh Murray and James Watson (1832: 449) on the excellent quality of fabrics produced by the weavers from Dhaka and the Coromandel Coast. He expressed the opinion in *Capital* (Marx 1961: 340) that it was as a result of the Asian weavers' oc-

cupation being hereditary that they were able to achieve such a high degree of proficiency in their skills. This made it possible to acquire special skills and to transmit them from generation to generation, thereby providing for a process for the continuous accumulation of these special skills. Marx (1969a: 277) was to further theorize that, consequent to the artisans being few in number, they even had the opportunity to enrich themselves by selling their products at 'monopoly prices'. This last remark, however, appears to be based on a rather surprising underestimation of the restrictive conditions under which artisans of South Asia worked.

EARLY STATE AND 'EMPIRE': UNDERSTANDING THE MAURYA POLITY

It requires a deliberate and formidable intellectual effort to avoid seeing conditions in South Asia between the fourth and second centuries BCE through a vision fashioned by the impact of British rule in Asia. It is under the pervasive influence of colonial and post-colonial experiences that ancient sources including fragmentary literary materials and inscriptions were collated, translated and studied for a long time. Unless carefully fortified by caution, the scholar can be easily led astray. In modern South Asia historiography, especially from the period leading to and immediately after independence, the tendency to interpret ancient polities in terms of highly centralized administrative structures was particularly noticeable. The historiography of the Maurya dynasty was one that was deeply affected by this tendency. A mature and self-critical approach, reflective of an understanding of the generally slow pace of change in human institutions, has been emerging, but has not taken root deeply in South Asia.

The contribution on the Maurya state in *TES* is of special interest because of the importance of the material it presents as also for the formidable problems it poses. As is usual in attempts to formulate theory on the basis of case studies, certain case studies do not always conform to some of the theoretical postulates. Of the Asian case studies in *TES*, the study on the Maurya state would provide one example. Its author Sudarsan Seneviratne was a young graduate student at the time he wrote this chapter, and the fact that he had been chosen for this responsibility and had also acquitted himself quite successfully stand to his credit. Seneviratne (1978: 389)

has sought to carefully blend together information from a variety of sources, including epigraphic data and material from Mediterranean and South Asian literary sources. Searching for causes of the collapse of the Maurya polity, the manner in which he focuses on the internal contradictions of this complex polity in the running of which diverse languages and scripts had to be employed (Seneviratne 1978: 397–400), is most commendable.

Seneviratne's presentation on the Maurya polity was, as would be expected, heavily influenced by his research supervisor Romila Thapar's well-known and admired work of 1961. The extensive Maurya state is described by Seneviratne (1978: 383) both as an 'empire' and also as being 'unitary' in character. Seneviratne argued that the presence within the empire of a 'large standing army' and a 'well-paid bureaucracy' provided the bases of the unitary state. The picture that emerges in his chapter is of an intensely centralized administrative apparatus endowed with 'safer and more efficient communication' that is credited with establishing 'law and order for the sake of *free movement* within the empire' (my emphasis). The reader's attention is immediately directed to the problem of the compatibility of the concept of the early state as defined by Claessen and Skalník with the concept of the empire (cf. Pokora's position on the term in his chapter in *TES*). The questions that come to one's mind are: 'What were the characteristics of the empire in ancient history, and how differently would one define it in comparison with the theories of modern imperialism?' In other words, the concept of the empire as posited in ancient history demands investigation at greater depth and further clarification in terms of its theoretical basis.

Subsequent to the publication of *TES*, Professor Thapar (1981, 2007) has made two attempts to inquire further into the concept of the 'empire'. In one of her most recent contributions she has posed the question whether the Maurya polity 'was a highly centralized bureaucratic system as most of us had argued in our earlier writings', and raised the possibility that it could have been 'a more diversified system as some of us began arguing in our later writings' (Thapar 2007: 240). The reference here seems to be *inter alia* to Thapar's own previous writings, including the paper on the concept of the empire of 1981, where she had stated that the Maurya state did not attempt to reduce the vast possessions representing signifi-

cant degrees of diversity and differentiation ‘to a *single uniform pattern*, but on the contrary, maintained the differentiation and merely attempted to control the revenue which these differing systems provided’ (Thapar 1981: 414–415, my emphasis). In Thapar's later thought, enriched by decades of further reflection on the problems focused upon, emphasis begins to be placed correctly on ‘diversity’, rather than ‘uniformity’².

Even after making allowances in pursuance of Professor Thapar's later comments, it would be difficult to avoid the impression that the Maurya polity appears to be more developed than what would be called an ‘early state’ as characterized by Claessen and Skalník. In this characterization, the early state is closely associated with the ideology of reciprocity and an atmosphere of ‘consensus’ (Skalník 1978: 613). With the transition to ‘a non-reciprocal system and an ideology reflecting class antagonism’, as a consequence of a long, gradual process, Claessen and Skalník maintained, ‘the early state ends’ (*TES*: 646). To locate such an ‘early state’, one may have to go back in time in ancient South Asian history, beyond Maurya polity to the ‘age of the Sixteen Mahājanapadas’. In fact, this seems to be what Thapar is hinting at when she states that ‘urbanization in the Ganges plain in the sixth-fifth centuries B.C. was linked to the emergence of state systems and varieties of economic exchange’ (Thapar 2007: 241). Claessen and Skalník considered the early state as being characterized by ‘considerable elaboration of social inequality’ as a consequence of which the society was divided into ‘at least two social categories’. The Mahāsammata story from the age of the Sixteen Mahājanapadas reflects how emerging social divisions were being masked by myth that provided a justification for dues collected from the ruled population, as predicted in the theory of the early state (*TES*: 644). Mahāsammata is presented in myth as an ‘ideal ruler’ whose right to a share of the harvest in exchange for the services he afforded was held to be based on an agreement with the ruled populace (Aggacça Sutta. See Rhys Davids 1965: 88–89).

STATE AND THE PROBLEM OF MONETIZATION: DATING THE APPEARANCE OF COINS IN SOUTH ASIA

The unrealistically early dates assigned to the beginning of the use of coins represent one of the serious problems in South Asian historiography. Historians as well as archaeologists, who were influ-

enced by references to coins found in the Buddhist canon, tended to assume that the circulation of coins had already become current by the time of the Buddha. Not paying adequate attention to the possibility that such information may have crept into Buddhist texts after the time of the Buddha, they tended to push back the use of coins in history. Thus we see even D. D. Kosambi, who generally worked with remarkable dedication, observing that ‘regular coinage such as the *kārsāpaṇa* goes back *only* [my emphasis] to the 7th century B.C.’ (Kosambi 1975: 282). Kosambi’s statement was, as evident from the use of the word ‘only’, intended to make scholars cautious about assigning too early dates to the appearance of coinage on the South Asian subcontinent. More recently, a review of the traditional date ascribed to the Buddha resulted in a fairly wide consensus among scholars that it would be plausible to date the death of the Buddha around *circa* 400 B.C. (Bechert 1991–1992; Cousins 1993).

The Indian archaeologist S. C. Ray (1959b: 20–21, 24) drew attention to the occurrence of punch-marked coins at Rupar III, Mathura II, Purana Qila II, and Hastinapur III and assigned them a date in c. 600–200 B.C., suggesting a wide chronological range. It is particularly relevant to note that, according to his own investigations, no coins were found at Ahicchatra in contexts datable to a period prior to 300 B.C.; in fact, the earliest incidence was in level VIII (300–200 B.C.) where cast coins were found (Ray 1959b: 2). Gupta (1959) has suggested a date of about the third century B.C. for the Bhir mound coin hoards. On the other hand, Narain (1957: 102) considered these hoards to be not earlier than the second century B.C. The continued use of punch-marked coins is evident from such archaeological contexts as Bahal III (c. 300 B.C. – A.D. 150); however, at Amreli II (first century B.C. – first century A.D.) and Candravalli II (first century – third century A.D.), the dates for this variety of coins are considerably later. Such late dates are not surprising for, even in Rome, despite the Greek heritage, coinage began around the third century B.C. (Williams *et al.* 1997: 40–41). The evidence presented above tends to support the emphasis placed by Professor R. S. Sharma on the period between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. as significant in the spread of the use of coins in the South Asian subcontinent, even if one may find it difficult to proceed further with him and to speak of a ‘money economy’ being prevalent during this period (Sharma 1983a: 145).

The study of the economic aspects of the Maurya state is confronted by serious discrepancies between data obtained from the archaeological excavations and epigraphic material on the one hand, and material from literary sources on the other. Scholars are prone to heavily rely on material in the literary text, the *Arthasāstra*, for their studies on the Maurya polity. As Thomas Trautmann (1971) has pointed out through his computer-aided study, this text represents a palimpsest of passages dating from varied periods and possibly by different hands, rather than a single uniform text. Obviously, Seneviratne could not benefit from comments made by Sharma in 1983 on problems besetting the dating of the appearance of coins on the historical scene, but the approach adopted was also not adequately tempered by the need for caution urged by Trautmann. Seneviratne (1978: 382, 384) tends to somewhat carelessly use the terms 'money' and 'money economy' with reference to the Maurya economy. His assertion that 'the majority of punch-marked coins occur in strata related to the Maurya period' (*TES*: 392) is unattested and does not conform to the evidence cited above. Seneviratne even uses the term 'wage labourer' (*Ibid.*: 387, 389) without adequate care, failing to note that the term 'hired labourer' would have been more apt in this context. Apparently, he is also quite keen to suggest that the dues collected by the state 'were paid in cash and not in kind' (*Ibid.*: 392) and proceeds further on this basis to hold that 'taxes in cash promoted the circulation of coins'. No sources are cited to substantiate his claim, and it is perhaps most unwise to completely rule out transactions as well as state exactions in kind at this level of economic development. The term *bali*, often used in religious ritual when referring to propitiatory offerings made to the dead and maleficent spirits as well as donations to kinsmen was also used to denote oblations made to rulers. The impression one forms is that the term conveyed the meaning of a voluntary offering (Gunawardana 1981: 138). The understanding of the evolution of the state would have benefited from such a focus on the possible transition that was taking place from voluntary donations to the ruler to a system of regularly enforced taxation. However, it has to be admitted that Seneviratne's contributions are often most useful. Particular emphasis has to be placed on his observation (1978: 390) that landownership had already come into existence in the Maurya polity, at least in units of smaller extent.

This is in contrast to reports ascribed to some Greek authors, and the maturity shown here in ferreting out unreliable evidence in ancient reports is most commendable.

ENHANCEMENT OF THE RULER'S STATUS IN ASIAN SOCIETY

The search for ideological tools for the enhancement of the position of the ruler often crossed political and geographical boundaries. The association of the king with divinity spread over a wide area in Asia, from China and Japan to the Iranian plains and the South Asian subcontinent. The concept of the sacrality of the ruler in China's early state was buttressed by emphasis on his special relationship with the Heavens. The Chinese ruler bore the title 'son of Heaven' (*ti'en tzu*). Special state rituals were utilized to demonstrate and affirm this relationship before the ruled populace (Pokora 1978: 201). The impact of these ideas of kingship were not limited to the territory controlled by the early state within China, but wielded a clearly discernible influence over Central Asia, and even well into the South Asian subcontinent during the period of Kuṣāṇa rule. References to *devaputra*, the equivalent title, have been found in Khotanese documents in Central Asia (Narain 1981: 266; Konow 1929: lxxiv). As Narain (1981: 266) has shown for instance, the traditions drawn upon by the Kuṣāṇa rulers for the purpose included not only Indian, but also Graeco-Roman, Iranian, Central Asian and Chinese elements. In considering these divine associations, it has to be kept in mind that the reference was often to a pantheon with many denizens rather than a monotheistic milieu. The titles *mahārāja*, *rājātirāja*, *theos*, *theotropos epiphanoys*, *devaputra* and *kaisara* were of diverse origin, traceable from China to the Mediterranean, and their adoption by varied Asian kings may have helped to further the processes of legitimation. Nevertheless, the moves carried implications very different from those in a monotheistic society. The early centuries of the Christian era when Kuṣāṇa ruler prevailed probably represented the initial phase of the transition in the identification of the king with divinity. After the Kuṣāṇa times, the association with divinity gathered pace in the subcontinent and was incorporated into such major texts as the *Mahābhārata* and the *Manudharmaśāstra*. However, as Narain (1981: 266) has emphasized, associations with 'divinity did not imply infallibility in India'.

An attitude of questioning divinity of kings and of emphasizing their 'human status' did persist in South and Southeast Asia in the Buddhist (especially the Theravāda) tradition. In the Maurya polity, the king had been merely 'one who is pleasing to the gods'. Sylvain Lévi (1934: 1–21) has drawn attention to the passage in the Buddhist text *Suvarṇaprabhāṣottama Sūtra* where the title *devaputra* is discussed. In response to a query why the king, though being a human being, is referred to by this title, it is explained that, among other things, 'the thirty-three gods contributed to his substance'. Though the 'human status' of the king did persist, even in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition the king was elevated to the highest status among the laity and was often considered a *bodhisattva* or a future Buddha. The *bodhisattvas* tended to be accorded many attributes of divinity. In both South and Southeast Asia, the reigning king sometimes provided the physical model for the sculptor seeking to produce an image of the Buddha (Gunawardana 1979: 174–175).

AMP, DESPOTISM AND OWNERSHIP OF PROPERTY IN ASIA

Despotism has been a prominent element in European characterizations of Asian society. Marx had inherited the concept of the Asian despot from his predecessors and contemporaries in Europe, especially Hegel (1956: 18, 161) who had drawn a rigid distinction between the European monarch and the Oriental despot. It will not be difficult for the reader to note that, even though despotism is described as a mere secondary trait in AMP, it did remain a noteworthy residual element. 'The monarch is a despot who has absolute power over his courtiers, clients, retainers and slaves', Krader stated, adding further that 'he regards them as his property; he enriches and confiscates, holding all the property of his kingdom in his power'. However, it is also noteworthy that Krader also sought to limit the sweep of the ruler's power to the groups mentioned above, leaving out in particular the village communities (Krader 1976: 114). The ruler is presented as an isolated 'despot', linked with the commoners only by the processes of taxation and military action, but mutually ignored at other times. Following Krader, Skalník (1978: 612) speaks of a monarchy the despotic power of which did not reach very far, and hence could not consistently

touch the lives of the ruled. It is perhaps important to note that Skalník admitted that what was presented above was 'only one side of the picture'. 'Reciprocity' and 'consensus' were important functional principles on which the early state was based. Implicitly, they counterbalanced trends toward despotism (Skalník 1978: 612–613).

Even though 'the despotism of the Orient' had been a popular refrain among some propagandists, especially after Karl Wittfogel (1957), many scholars have found it lacking factual basis. Despite his earlier statements about the 'general slavery of the Orient', Marx laid emphasis on his observations about the presence not only of the patriarchal non-democratic type of village community but also of 'democratic' type of community led by heads of families. Further, he was to remark that even if a single ruler held power at the top, there would be thus a 'democratic' flavour in life at the level of the community of the latter type (Marx 1973a: 88, 495–496; Marx 1965: 197; Gunawardana 1976: 342, 379). An examination of the non-monarchical type of rule among the sixteen Mahājanapadas cited earlier, such as that led by the Licchavis, the favourite polity of the Buddha often cited by him as an example to be followed by rulers in general, would have provided more information on non-despotic types of rule from South Asia. The potential trends towards the growth of despotism tended to be discouraged by the possibility of revolt, a phenomenon not unfamiliar in both South Asian and Chinese contexts. Mencius had recognized the right of the subjects to revolt against unsuitable rulers. The option to revolt was not merely a right recognized theoretically: revolts did in fact take place necessitating recourse to assistance from armed detachments to deal with them (Pokora 1978: 207–209). Not less effective than the possibility of revolts was perhaps the option before oppressed peasant subjects to migrate from the territories of a would-be dictator (Thapar 1981: 416), and this would have been a factor which discouraged and curbed the rise of despotism. It will have been evident from the preceding discussion that the decision taken by Krader, Claessen and Skalník to de-emphasize 'despotism' in the theory of AMP was a welcome move.

Closely associated with the concept of the Asian despot was the view that no private property in land was to be found in Asia and that the king was the sole owner of all property in land. This

view had been actively propagated by the East India Company which levied from the peasantry exactions of such high proportions that they could not be justified as 'taxes'. These levies had thus come to be presented as the portion of the agricultural produce claimed by the king as landowner. Marx initially adopted this picture of Asian society marked by the absence of property as presented by some of his contemporaries (see Venturi 1963: 139). He did not, however, take long to recognize the invalidity of this view. As he progressed in his study of Asian institutions, he was to eventually drift away from the positions he initially adopted, and to accept the presence of property rights in Asia. Writing of India, he was to observe that 'in the hill-country south of Crishna [the river Krishna], property in land does seem to have existed' (Marx and Engels 1964: 268–289; Gunawardana 1976: 372). It is the earlier of the views that has been adopted as the basis of the theory of the Early State. This appears to tie up with a type of society characterized as one in which individuals and institutions had not as yet accumulated large extents of property and become independent of the state. Once such conditions had arisen, the phase of the early state was considered to have terminated (Skalník 1978: 611). The Asian steppes, including the lands traversed by the Mongols and some of the areas inhabited by the Scythians, may have conformed to the earlier view, but in the South Asian subcontinent and in East Asia, especially Japan, Marx was to eventually recognize that strong types of property in land had developed (Gunawardana 1976: 372–377). In Japan he had found feudal property to have developed to such an extent that it provided 'a much truer picture of the European Middle Ages than all our history books' (Marx 1961: 718). It may be observed on the basis of the foregoing discussion that the view that no property in land existed in Asia was a misunderstanding and mistake that was later corrected by Marx. However, since a state of society prior to the appearance of property may well be hypothesized and built into theory as Claessen and Skalník have done. On the other hand, if Marx's ideas were to be utilized in a meaningful way in the further study of social formations in Asia, AMP has to be modified (or restored!) to be in conformity with Marx's later, more mature and considered positions.

IRRIGATION AND AMP

The significance accorded to the control of water, long recognized in agricultural societies, especially in Asia, tends to become crucial, depending on the patterns of variation and the total yield in rainfall within the agricultural year. The human response to intense variation in natural rainfall has been resort to water control, defensive measures against floods and provisions to store rainfall yield to permit judicious distribution to meet the overall needs throughout the agricultural year. In Asian lands that came under the monsoon regime, the adoption of wet rice culture enabled high levels of harvests to be sustained over very long periods. The essential requirement, however, was the controlled provision of water to suit the needs of the rice plant, demanding flooding the field to facilitate ploughing and to inhibit the growth of weeds, maintaining persistent wetness during the growth of the young plants and reducing the water when the seeds began to mature. It meant intense micro-management of the irrigation regime within the field. While these activities could be satisfactorily managed with moderate levels of cooperation, the construction of dams for flood control, and arrangements for the storage and diversion of water to meet enhanced needs of irrigation required higher levels of cooperation, including the participation of the state, as was evident in the southern parts of the South Asian subcontinent and in Southeast Asia, notably Myanmar.

One of the most tortuous problems that confront a student seeking to apply Marx's ideas in the study of the state in Asia relates to ascertaining the degree of emphasis that needs to be placed on irrigation activity. Marx correctly recognized that irrigation activity was not an exclusively Asian phenomenon and had included examples from Europe as well, citing Holland, Flanders, Lombardy, Spain as also Sicily among lands where irrigation activities could be found (Marx 1961: 514; see also Marx 1969b: 90). However, this did not direct Marx and Engels away from the view they held that the social need for the construction and maintenance of irrigation works, and the involvement of the state in such activities were among significant features of Asian society. Leaving irrigation out would substantially detract from the value of their theory. Both Marx and Engels were probably influenced by Adam Smith and Richard Jones. Smith (1961: 179, 181) had observed that

the state in Egypt as well as India paid special attention to the provision of irrigation facilities since its revenues were derived mainly from agricultural produce. Jones (1831: 119–120), too, had emphasized that agriculture in Asian ‘arid lands’ was possible only on condition that irrigation facilities had been provided. Perhaps to a greater extent than Marx, Engels placed emphasis on irrigation which he characterized as a ‘social function’ (*gesellschaftliche Funktion*) and on the role it played in the metamorphosis of the servant of society into its master. Engels seemed to further believe that irrigation activity was the monopoly of the Asian king as ‘the total entrepreneur’ (*Gesamtunternehmer*). From this position Engels proceeded further to argue in *Anti-Dühring* that ‘social function’ was *everywhere* the basis of political supremacy (Marx 1973b: 166–167). Of course, this was not reflective of the actual historical conditions. Apart from the king, other individuals and institutions are found to have participated in the construction and maintenance of irrigation works in Asia.

The total concentration of power in irrigation society as hypothesized by Wittfogel (1963: 4) has not been confirmed in studies conducted by a considerable number of scholars in several areas (see *e.g.*, Leach 1959; Adams 1960; Gunawardana 1971, 1981; Khazanov 1978a; Dheerananda 2004; Yi 2008). Perhaps as a result of the negative attention that Wittfogel received, some scholars of subsequent times have been sceptical about involvement in research on irrigation society. Among several prominent participants in the *TES* project, there has been a marked reluctance to pay adequate attention to the importance of irrigation in the development of the state. Skalnik grouped irrigation works as only one among three types of public works, the others being ‘ideological monuments’, a category that included temples and pyramids, while utility works such as roads and bridges represented a third category he termed ‘infrastructure’. His main argument was that, while a few Asian states, such as Angkor, China and Mauryan India, had the resources and organizational capacity to initiate and execute public works, at the same time, there were certain other early states, such as the ‘inchoate states of the Volta basin, Zande and Norway’, that were not seen to have created or to possess any public works (Skalnik 1978: 603). Khazanov, too, tended to downplay the significance of irrigation activity. He conceded that ‘the earliest states

did, in fact, come into being in irrigation areas', but was inclined to argue that 'the origin of the irrigation schemes here preceded that of the state'. He has stated emphatically that the idea of irrigation being the '*primary condition* of the emergence of the pristine early states' had been *refuted* by archaeological data from several areas including Mesoamerica and China (Khazanov 1978: 80, my emphasis). Even in other areas, he was to state continuing the argument, there had been Early States, including pristine states that had no association at all with irrigated agriculture (*Idem*: 83). The argument adopted in *TES* that the origin of the state was not linked with irrigation in most societies may not arouse serious opposition. It has in fact received the present writer's support (Gunawardana 1981: 142–143). However, the use of the term *refuted* in the context cited above was perhaps too strong, and the emphasis on the '*primary condition*' deserves to be noted. Even if irrigation were to be considered as not being a '*primary condition*', its importance among the activities of the state, and its role as *one* of the factors in the development of the state deserves investigation.

Of writers who followed in the wake of the publication of *TES*, Thapar (1981: 417) clearly rejects the possibility of irrigation having been a causal factor in the rise of the Maurya state. However, writing about the Kuṣāṇas, Narain followed a somewhat different tack. Even though he did not venture to connect irrigation with the origin of the state, he speaks of irrigation activity as an important aspect under the Kuṣāṇas and refers to 'extensive irrigation canals developed under a central organization'. He also gives the impression that the well-known underground conduits known by the term *karoḥ* dated as far back as those times (Narain 1981: 254). Citing the archaeological excavations in Central Asia, reported by Stravisky (1977), he states that they had 'proven that the Kuṣāṇas not only maintained the system but improved it both in quality and quantity' (Narain 1981: 260), and proceeds to describe continued involvement in irrigation-related activity by the Kuṣāṇas as well as their predecessors. Similarly, in ancient China the construction of public works by the state created a demand for contributions of labour from the subject population. Apart from roads, public works included regulation of the control and supply of water. This included not only the regulation of water level in the big rivers but also the needs of irrigating the fields (Pokora 1978: 207–209).

Kurumi Sugita, who selected the period of Japanese history from 3rd c. B.C. to 7th c. A.D. for her study, clearly shared the editors' deep interest in the application of AMP, for she specifically stated that her objective was to make a contribution 'to the discourse on the concept of the Asiatic mode of production' (Sugita 1981: 371). Her understanding of AMP as the simultaneous existence of the 'local community' with communal property and a 'superior community' representing the 'unity' of local communities, with access to communal property being mediated through membership of the local community, appears to approximate the views shared by the editors. However, problems do arise once a reader attempts to probe into the actual historical data on which her hypotheses are based. Sugita herself appears to be aware of this problem since she is sometimes found calling the second of these communities the 'superior community "in imagination"' (Sugita 1981: 372, 378). Despite such shortcomings, Sugita's contribution deserves close attention because of the emphasis she places on irrigation activity. Apart from the initial preparation of the rice field, the construction of irrigation ponds and channels called for a labour input that could be secured from within the village community through cooperation at a not very complex level.

Sugita (1981: 379) considered the appearance of funerary monuments termed *kofun* by the end of the third century A.D. an important development in the history of Japan, with implications for irrigation. She argued that the techniques used in the construction of *kofun* would have been useful for irrigation and drainage as well. It is suggested that the *kofun* culture paved way for more complex types of irrigation systems that demanded large-scale mobilization of labour (Sugita 1981: 381). They were evidently followed by a new type of rice-field of extensive size. According to Y. Kondo (1962), immense rice fields had been made possible because of another innovation, the technology of transplantation. While the rice plant is young, it is necessary to keep it in water to avoid the harmful changes in the temperature of the soil: this was hardly possible in rice fields of extensive size with the levels of technology available prior to the introduction of transplantation (Sugita 1981: 381). If as implied, the organizational needs of water control had been met by the 'superior community' represented by the ruler or/and the aristocracy, this could also point to a link between irrigation needs and the emergent state.

The role of irrigation in the processes of legitimizing the state has been accommodated by Skalník (1978: 615). Is it possible to proceed further? Even if the available evidence is not adequate to conclusively establish that irrigation was among the primary factors when state formation is considered in general, it may be worth considering its role in the evolution and development of the state in those societies in which irrigation has been closely and consistently associated with the activities of the state as in certain Asian lands, as distinct, for example, from areas in Europe where, even though irrigation was known, it was not an essential precondition for agriculture. Under certain conditions, it would appear that irrigation could be counted as a *productive economic precondition* with a decisive impact on state formation. However, this statement has to be distinguished from *mono-causal* type of explanations suggesting that irrigation was *the primary causative factor* behind the origin of the state.

It has been noted (Gunawardana 1981: 140) that the long process of state formation in irrigation society reflected similarities with what Claessen and Skalník presented as the formation of the early state, and at the same time, also with the characteristics described earlier by Khazanov (1972) as the age of class formation. At least in the initial phases, irrigated agriculture did not affect the early institutional arrangements in the village community, including community of land rights and labour arrangements. As in the case of Hawaii where small irrigation works were constructed without the intervention of the ruler (Claessen 1975: 55–56), it is likely that in South India and Sri Lanka the early irrigation works constructed with communal labour were communally owned. This meant that intensification of inequality was probably more evident *between* rather than *within* village settlements (Gunawardana 1981: 135). A ruler with superior authority over chiefdoms would have been most convenient when the need arose for the construction of canals cutting across the territories of chiefdoms, or reservoirs of large capacity requiring extensive mobilization of labour. The alienation of village communities from the strategic resource of irrigation water probably took place only with the appearance of large-scale reservoirs and interrelated irrigation systems equipped with sluice devices enabling owners to either release or withhold the outflow of water (Gunawardana 1981: 142). Even though

the relevance of technology to state formation has been questioned by Carneiro (1969), Adams (1975) and Cohen (1978), as a device conducive to social change the sluice may be compared with the wheeled plough and the stirrup in European history (Gunawardana 1981: 149). Successful irrigation ventures tended to create relations of dependence between more productive village settlements which benefited from them and the less fortunate settlements that found it difficult to produce the requisite quota of food and were reduced to performing service functions in return for surplus produce from their relatively affluent neighbours.

Irrigation activity by the state has been often understood as a service rendered to societies affected by shortage of water for agricultural use. The assumption was that in return the ruler benefited from the increase in harvest and, consequently, in the share he received as tax. Not adequately recognized in discussions on irrigation society has been the fact that irrigation water was also *exchanged* in return for an additional share of the harvest. A major socio-economic change evidently took place when the provision of irrigation water assumed the form of such an exchange relationship. With the introduction and spread of the use of coins, the requisite payment was made even in cash. This exchange relationship would be between the users and the providers of irrigation water, the latter being represented by the ruler and his officials or the owners of the irrigation works. While in certain situations, the ruler was also the owner of the irrigation work that provided water to the cultivator, the presence of individual owners of irrigation works, clearly evident at a comparatively early phase, reflects the incipient processes of class formation that were at work. It would appear that irrigation activity simultaneously played a developmental as well as an exploitative role in agricultural societies that relied on investment of labour for the provision of water essential for cultivation³. The right to such an income that owners of irrigation works enjoyed provided them 'with an effective mechanism' to extract a share of the produce 'even in situations where the direct producer was not alienated from the land' (*Ibid.*: 143). In these societies water as well as water-related products brought in income to those who controlled such resources. Reservoirs and canals could also be used for rearing fish, and owners of irrigation works enjoyed the right to harvest fish. This was an important alienable right in

Sri Lankan society at least by the fifth century A.D., and possibly even earlier. It is particularly interesting to note that this valuable protein supplement to the diet was also assigned an exchange value in terms of coin (Takakusu and Nagai 1927: 319). Thus, parallel to the extraction of the surplus by the state, there were institutions (*e.g.*, temples and monasteries) and individuals that also extracted an additional part of the surplus on the strength of their ownership of irrigation works.

Against the background of protracted, sometimes bitter, debate on the relevance of Marx's views to anthropological and historical research, Claessen and Skalník have demonstrated their usefulness in the study of the crucial problem of the evolution of the state on a global scale. Historians and anthropologists who carefully read *The Early State* will be thoroughly convinced that in providing a theoretical understanding of the pioneer stage in state formation in human history, Claessen and Skalník have made a most significant scholarly contribution. The theoretical formulation they have presented may be also utilized as a base for further elaboration in terms of 'variant forms' of the early state. Further inquiry along such paths may lead to investigation into such themes as 'early state in irrigation society' and 'early state in Asia'⁴. Focusing on such limited themes was clearly outside what the editors of *TES* had in mind. A tendency shared by several Asian states, marking them out from many early states, was the emphasis placed on literacy and textual knowledge in the recruitment of functionaries. As the scholar in the Confucian or the Buddhist tradition or as a Brāhmana representing the Vedic tradition, the Asian courtier embodied and reflected this emphasis. Prominence accorded to women at court is clearly attested in one state, but it is not clear how widely shared it was among other states. With or without divine associations, the ruler was assigned 'supra-ordinary status', and there were extraordinary expectations of him, in terms of generosity to the populace⁵, and impartiality in the administration of justice. Such characteristics may be identified as elements associated with the state in Asia, but the inadequacy in the number of cases studied so far does not permit reliable generalizations. It is hoped that the preliminary review presented here would provide a lead to a joint project in the future for a more comprehensive examination of the origin of the state in Asia.

NOTES

¹ The relevant publications are: Claessen and Skalník 1981; Claessen, van de Velde and Smith 1985; Claessen and van de Velde 1987, 1991; van Bakel, Hagesteijn and van de Velde 1994; van Bakel and Oosten 1995; Claessen and Oosten 1996.

² See also Fussman 1988 and Thapar 2000.

³ This point is due to be developed in a forthcoming paper by the present writer titled 'The Hydraulic Mode of Production'.

⁴ A commendable attempt at applying concepts derived from *TES* in studying the origin of an Asian state is to be found in Dheerananda (2004).

⁵ A model of this type of ruler is to be seen in the Buddhist text called *Vesantara Jātaka* (Fausboll 1964: 479–596). The hero in it is a king who gives away all worldly possessions before taking on to the life of the ascetic.

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