

**AHOM STATE FORMATION IN ASSAM**  
**AN ENQUIRY INTO THE FACTORS OF POLITY FORMATION IN MEDIAEVAL**  
**NORTH EAST INDIA**

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

#### The concept

The state as a specific kind of social organisation and its origin and development to its modern sophisticated character, have occupied the minds of all social thinkers since the days of Aristotle followed by Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu and Rousseau. However, there was refreshingly a new approach to this most intricate problem and a significantly new light was thrown by L.H. Morgan<sup>1</sup> and F. Engels<sup>2</sup> which till now could be considered as the ground work in the studies of state formations. At present, the issue has assumed wider dimensions in view of the fact that the social scientists of different disciplines have put their heads together to arrive at an understanding of this very unique phenomenon in the annals of human civilisation.

The works of European scholars have produced endless theories and definitions on the process of state formation. But curiously enough, there is yet to be one which can be accepted universally. Each case study has produced different variations and generalisations. This is due to the fact that the process of state formation is varied in point of time

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<sup>1</sup> L.H. Morgan, Ancient Society or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery Through Barbarism to Civilisation, Macmillan & Co., London, 1877.

<sup>2</sup> F. Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, First Edition, 1844, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977.

and space. In a recent work<sup>3</sup> some of these theories and generalisations have been put to test by taking data covering some major parts of the world.

Two distinct categories of states have appeared from the researches so far covered. One is the 'Modern State' which is complex, industrialised and developing while the other one is the 'Early State', simple, non-industrialised and pre-capitalistic. This division is apparently based on the stages of development that the societies have passed through a historical process. The studies on the process of state formation relate to this second category of states which is termed as 'early' as these emerged out of egalitarian tribal bases.<sup>4</sup>

It can well be said that in India, as well as in the North Eastern region too, this area of study is less explored. Surajit Sinha, who in his Presidential Address to the Anthropology and Archaeological Section of the Forty-ninth Indian Science Congress, held at Cuttack in 1962, for the first time, had spelled out about the significant prospects of research in this area of study. The Centre for studies in social sciences, Calcutta, sponsored a Project in 1981 on 'Tribal Politics and State systems in Pre-Colonial

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<sup>3</sup>H. J. M. Claessen and Peter Skalnik, ed., The Early State, Mouton Publishers, The Hague, 1978.

<sup>4</sup>J. B. Bhattacharjee, "State Formation in Pre-Colonial North-east: A Case Study of the Dimas State (Reprint) The North-Eastern Hill University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vol. II, No. 3, July-Sept. 1984, p. 1.

and Northeastern India<sup>4</sup>, which resulted in the important contributions<sup>5</sup> from scholars. Such works have already laid the foundation for further enquiries into the factors and processes of state formation of this region, because all the states, viz., the Chutiya, Dimasā/Kachari, Koch, Tripuri, Meitei (Manipuri), Khasi (Khyriem), Pnar (Jayantia) and the Ahom state, have emerged from indigenous tribal bases in pre-colonial medieval Assam. The last named one, while migrating into Assam from Upper Burma, landed themselves into a valley of immense size where there was a seemingly political vacuum. There being no centralised political authority, the valley was in a ring of some tribal and tribal-like states as named above. Except the Chutiyas, who were conquered and absorbed by the rising power of the Ahoms by 1523, the other remaining tribes continued the elaboration and sophistication of their respective state systems until they came under British subjugation.

The emergence and growth of a large number of polity formations during the period from the thirteenth to sixteenth century is the key feature of the medieval history of Northeast India. The social organisation of these sedentary as well as segmentary states were dominated by their traditional customs and culture pristine in its form.

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<sup>5</sup>J. B. Bhattacharjee, *Ibid.*

Amalendu Guha, The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam: 1228-1714, Occasional Paper No. 64, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1983.

They gave away to a coercive authority which was separated from and placed above the totality. At what point of time, and why and how this has come to happen, is the pertinent question to be answered. Further, another imperative issue is that of identifying the retarding or accelerating factors connected with it in course of the emergence of these states corresponding to their ecology and economy which may have largely determined the forces at work in such socio-political formations.

Almost in all such state formations, some common elements are found in the factors and processes. These generally are:<sup>6</sup>

- (i) Appearance of private property in terms of differentiated land-holding or acquiring political control resulting in social stratifications and leading to the strengthening of the position of the chiefs.
- (ii) Military adventurism - arising out of direct conquests - subjugation of neighbouring tribes or their voluntary submissions for protective authority.
- (iii) The hydraulic culture - spread of wet rice cultivation, giving rise to Oriental Despotism; Asiatic mode of productions.
- (iv) Surplus productions leading to hierarchical structure and eventual centralisation of authority.
- (v) Contributions from immigrants.
- (vi) Hinduisation/Sanskritisation and the Brahmanical influence in the legitimization of the rule through divine origin and the creation of myths for further consolidation.
- (vii) The trans-cultural variations - language and culture based on inter-dependency and congruency values.
- (viii) Marriage policy and political incorporations.
- (ix) Charismatic and commanding dispositions of a chief or ruler.

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<sup>6</sup> J. B. Bhattacharjee, n. 4, p. 2. Amalendu Guha, n. 5, p. 4.

(x) The circumscription issues - population growth and pressure.

(xi) Growth of petty commodity production in a limited scale.

Such elements in some measure, in some specific cases, may appear prominently, while in some others may not.

Moreover, Claessen and Skalnik have formulated some functional and structural models of the emergent states. Functionally, the 'early state' is a continuous process in the regulation of the relations between the emergent social classes of the rulers and the ruled, while structurally, it is an independent socio-political organisation with a bounded territory and a centralised government; its economy is primarily agricultural, the surplus of which constitutes the income of the government; its population consists of two strata - the upper and the lower; the upper one includes the sovereign, his relatives and the aristocracy while the lower includes the common masses. The access to resources is based on inequality and the inequality comes out of birth, and in which the ideology appears to be based on reciprocity.<sup>7</sup>

The same source further suggests that (i) the population growth and its pressure, (ii) war, the threat of war or raids, or conquests, (iii) improved means of production leading to

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<sup>7</sup> Claessen and Skalnik, n. 3, pp. 640-41.

surplus and tribute, (iv) ideology and legitimization and (v) the influence of already existing states, are some of the important factors to mention amongst others, contributing to the rise and growth of tribal-like early states to full-fledged statehood in most cases.

To what extent and how far these elemental factors contributed to the emergence of these states to full-blown statehoods and how far these influenced the processes in course of time, shall be the main line of investigation in our study. State formation is varied in point of time and space. It had to go through several stages before reaching the stage of statehood in an acceptable term. These states have been broadly categorised into 'inchoate', 'typical' and 'transitional' as per the characteristics present in them.<sup>8</sup> We would look into such categorization when necessary, comparatively on similar models but with economic content, suggested by Engels in his analysis of the stages to civilisation.<sup>9</sup> But before this, we may look into the genesis of the state, and then, into some of its definitions and theoretical problems, to take up the whole issue in a broader perspective.

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<sup>8</sup> Claessen and Skalnik, n. 3, p. 23 & p. 641

<sup>9</sup> F. Engels, n. 2, pp. 23-29 & 154-175.

### The Genesis of the state

In the simplest term, the state is a human organisation comprising of a number of people, a certain delimited territory and a specific type of government. why and how states were formed, involves the problems of social evolutions raising moral and politice-philosophical issues. The state is the most unique organisation of mankind that has emerged in course of time with the progress of human civilisation from the most primitive, pristine and archaic times. AS a socio-political system, the state gives way to greater iniquity within its population and the fundamental issue is, why men give up or forced to give up so much local and individual autonomy to become part of and subordinate to despotic, sometimes quite cruel forms of government. why the state becomes the most powerful social organisation that alone creates and destroys?<sup>10</sup>

It literally moves mountains and redirects rivers, and it has on occasion sent untold thousands, even millions, to their deaths.<sup>11</sup>

How does such an organisation come to exist and shall continue to exist as long as the human race continues to exist in future amidst increasing human contradictions is the moot point which has been drawing the attention of all social scientists to day. Indeed, it is so complex that it is

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<sup>10</sup> R. Cohen and Elman R. Service, eds., The Origins of the State, The Anthropology of Political Evolution, Institute for

the study of Human Issues (ISHI) Philadelphia, 1976, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

not possible to say conclusively as to when and precisely at what point of time the state began.

It is no longer possible to think of the state as a conscious invention, suddenly introduced as an antidote to confusion and chaos. The state must have evolved from rudimentary and inchoate beginnings, by a process of growth that was so slow as to have been all but imperceptible ... Even if the full record of that development were available, we would not be able to say precisely when the state began.<sup>12</sup>

So the state as an organisation of the human society, by itself, is a complex phenomenon involving as it is, various forces which interacted and finally led to the birth of the state through the stages of development and of course, in time and space.

Apart from this, we are confronted with different kinds of states. For example, there are city states, empire states, oligarchic, autocratic, feudalistic and democratic states, stratified by class, caste and social status.<sup>13</sup> We shall have to trace the general form in which type of these states and how far back in time, it manifested.

#### On some definitions of the state

To define the state covering its entire facets which would be commonly acceptable to all, is indeed a difficult task. However, we have at our disposal some definitions generalised by scholars through their intensive researches so as to have a basic concept for our working purpose. So

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<sup>12</sup> E. McC Sait, Political Institutions: A Preface: New York, Appleton Country, 1938, p. 105, cited by Morton H. Fried, The State, the Chicken, and the Egg; Or, What came first? in: R. Cohen and Elman R. Service, ed., n. 10, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence Krader, Formation of the State, Prentice Hall, INC., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1968, p. 3.

we find that the state is distinct from the society. It maintains its political authority within fixed territorial limits. It acts through a governmental machinery with defined agencies and divisions of functions. It is formed out of a people conscious of its unity and identity as such. It is embeded in a type of society which is stratified by wealth, prestige and power and is divided thereby into classes. The source of moral judgement lies outside the state. When a central authority establishes a monopoly of coercive force in a society, the limits of extension of that force which may have been vague until then, at this point, is precisely determined. Thus the state is the ultimate organ of highest political authority and power in which it is found. It is an organ for social integration, internal regulation, and common external defence. Societies lacking the state accomplish these same ends by other means, but the state performs these services for society and in doing so also serves its own ends.<sup>14</sup>

There are also definitions based on classification such as (a) stratifications (b) authority structure, and/or information processing (c) diagnostic traits. Definitions based on stratifications are commonly associated with Marx and Engels emphasizing the formation of social classes in which the ruling class obtains control over the means of productions.<sup>15</sup> Fried also accepts this view.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. pp. 27-28.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 25

<sup>16</sup> M. H. Fried, The Evolution of Political Society, New York, Random House, 1967, p. 186.

Definitions based on authority structure throw lights on the structure of governmental system. Herbert Spencer, L.H. Morgan and Henry Maine were the advocates of this approach. But Hobhouse, Wheeler and Ginsburg have applied it more clearly and defined the state as a centralised hierarchical system of authority relations in which local political units lose their autonomy and become subordinate to the central government.<sup>17</sup> With minor additions, Evans-Pritchard has used the same approach in outlining the state and non-state forms in the study of the African politics.<sup>18</sup> Service also holds the same view when he says that the centralised government has a monopoly over the use of force.<sup>19</sup>

Another approach to define the state is that of information processing. The state as a hierarchical political structure calls for the means by which information is processed<sup>20</sup> and energy is obtained and utilised.<sup>21</sup> The socio-political

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<sup>17</sup> L.T. Hobhouse, G. Wheeler and M. Ginsburg, The Material Condition & Social Institutions of Simpler Peoples, New York, Humanities Press, 1915, cited in: Cohen & Service, n. 10, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard & M. Fortes, ed., The African Political System, London, C.U.P., 1940, cited in: Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Elman R. Service, Origins of the State and Civilisation. The Process of Cultural Evolution, New York, Norton, 1975, cited in: Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> H. T. Wright & G. Johnson, Population Exchange and Early State Formation in South Western Iran, American Anthropologist, 77:267-289, cited in: Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> R. N. Adams, Energy and Structure: A Theory of Social Power, Austin, University Press of Texas, 1975, cited in: Ibid.

life focuses on such information or transaction flows where-  
in the decision of the higher levels affects other levels  
in the authority structure. Thus based on archaeologists'  
data, the state is also defined as that type of hierarchical  
political organisation in which there are three or more  
hierarchical levels from the centre to the peripheries.

Cohen has shown that the key of diagnostic feature is  
that of fission. The enormous potential of states emanates  
from the capacity to co-ordinate human efforts to carry out  
public policy. To do so, states evolve a 'ruling class' or, in  
structural terms, a governing bureaucracy.<sup>22</sup>

However, all these definitions bring home the point that  
the state is a specific kind of social organisation, express-  
ing a specific kind of social order in a society. Accord-  
ing to Radcliffe-Brown, it is :

a collection of individual human beings connected by a  
complex system of relations. With that organisation  
different individuals have different roles, and some  
are in possession of special power or authority.<sup>23</sup>

By the term 'state' then we understand that it refers to the  
existing relations in a society and to ideas relating to  
power, authority, force, justice, property and many other  
issues. But it is society's own creation to solve out the

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<sup>22</sup> R. Cohen, *The Political System*, in: R. Naroll & R. Cohen, ed.,  
*Hand Book of Method in Cultural Anthropology*, New York,  
Natural History Press, 1971, see *Ibid*, p. 4. Also see, *State  
Origins: A Reappraisal*, in: Claessen & Skalnik, n. 3, p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Preface*, in: E. E. Evans-Pritchard & M.  
Fortes, n. 10, p. xiii.

contradictions and antagonisms. As Engels has succinctly shown:

... it is a product of society at a certain stage of development; it is the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has split into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to dispel. But in order that these antagonisms, classes with conflicting economic interests, might not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, it becomes necessary to have a power seemingly standing above society that would alleviate the conflict, and keep it within the bounds of "order"; and this power, arisen out of society, but placing itself above it, and alienating itself more and more from it, is the state.<sup>24</sup>

And following Engels, we have Krader's view that the state is no one's discovery, no one's invention :

The state is the product of particular social conditions, whereby society divided into opposed social classes produces a central organism of political authority within its midst : the entity in its abstract form which arches over the entire society. Concretely, historically, the state controls and regulates the relations between and within the social classes by means of particular agencies.<sup>25</sup>

It is to be noted that all the definitions widely vary.

This is due to the fact that different types of states existed and are existing in different places in different times all over the world. The data from which such definitions have been derived by different scholars do not point to a universality in different state systems. However, the basic concept of the state is clear from these definitions, as to what the state is.

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<sup>24</sup> F. Engels, n. 2, p. 166.

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence Krader, The Origin of the state among the nomads of Asia, in : Claessen & Skalnik, n. 3, p. 104.

### On some Theories of State Formation

There are endless theories mostly advanced by European scholars. These theories have been formulated at different times in different places by scholars of different disciplines based on data covering almost all parts of the globe. Each new theory has thrown new light on each different aspects of the factors and processes of state formation.

It is, Marx and Engels who occupy the foremost place in scientific investigations in the field of research based on the materialistic conception of history.<sup>26</sup> Engels traces the origin of the state owing to the growth of private property in human society, which in turn, leads to the rise of classes accompanying all the conflicts, contradictions and antagonisms within the society, and finally to preserve this class interest, the state emerges.

... the state arose from the need to hold class antagonisms in check, but because it arose, at the same time, in the midst of the conflict of these classes, it is as a rule, the state of the most powerful, economically dominant class, which, through the medium of the state, becomes also the politically dominant class, and thus acquires new means of holding down and exploiting the oppressed class.<sup>27</sup>

Engels has also shown that sometimes in particular cases, the influence of military force, of war and conquest, play a considerable part in the origins of the state. Thus to him,

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<sup>26</sup> F. Engels, n. 2, pp. 5-6.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 166.

the German state was born directly out of conquests in which the subjugated tribes were exploited by the conquering group and in which the gentile constitution became incompatible to rule over the subjugated people. But in case of Athens, the state sprang up mainly out of the class antagonisms in a classical form.

To Engels, slavery is another aspect of class formation. According to him, slavery not only leads to the growth of exploiters and exploited to obtain surplus productions but also gives rise to the distinct classes in society which he finds in the formation of the Greek state. Thus by taking data from the Greek, Roman, Athenian and German history, Engels has singularly demonstrated the fact that how class formation and with it state power came about, and thus leading to the necessity of a political organ in confirming the lasting supremacy of the dominant class.<sup>28</sup>

The rise and growth of medieval states, to Marx, is dominated by the 'Asiatic mode of Productions' to use his own terminology. He highlights the dichotomic relations between agricultural communities and the state organisation conditioned by the necessity of constructing and maintaining irrigation systems. What he found in these agricultural communities is that they were not exploited because of the existence of private property/ownership of the means but

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 106.

but because of inexplicable allegiance to a deified despotic ruler in whom the state is personified. Thus there was a flow of regular or irregular tributes in kind, or even in cash which was meant for the state and its public purposes. In Marx's view, this was the first form of class society representing the transitional stage from the pristine to the early type of civil societies. This was the first economic formation of the society and the beginning of the political society and economy. Thus the substance of his theory is the growing class conflict represented by the village agricultural communities with communal land tenure on the one hand, and the organisation of the state with political, ideological and economic power on the other. The other aspects like the irrigation works and deified despotism are but secondary issues.<sup>29</sup>

Oppenheimer, the German sociologist, developed the 'conquest theory' in the origins of the state. Like Engels, he too believes that the state is an instrument of oppression to maintain social inequality but he finds this inequality arising out of conquest and subjugation of one people by another for the sole purpose of economic exploitations.

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<sup>29</sup> Karl Marx, Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations, Tr. by J. Cohen, ed., New York, International Publishers, 1965, see Claessen & Skalnik, n. 3, p. 8.

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... at all places on this planet where the development of tribes has at all attained a higher form, the state grew from the subjugation of one group of men by another. Its basic justification, its *raison de etre*, was and is the economic exploitation of those subjugated.<sup>30</sup>

In an evolutionistic approach, rather than historical, he further observes,

The moment when the first conqueror spared his victim in order permanently to exploit him in productive work, was of incomparable historical importance. It gave birth to nation and state, to right and higher economics, with all the developments and ramifications which have grown and which will hereafter grow out of them.<sup>31</sup>

The theory was further developed by Thurnwald and Westermann. However, scholars find it untenable since there were states which emerged without conquests and moreover, the theory does not take account of the internal factors. Some states might have been affected by this on their way to statehood but its universal acceptance is out of question.<sup>32</sup>

The 'irrigation' or 'managerial' theory, according to Stewards, needed organisation, power and co-ordination, leading to a large concentration of people, in the process of the formation of the state.<sup>33</sup> Wittfogel also says that the

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<sup>30</sup> Franz Oppenheimer, The State, Its History and Development viewed Sociologically, Tr. by John M. Gitterman, New York, Vanguard Press, 1926, p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 68.

<sup>32</sup> Claessen & Skalnik, n. 3, p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Julian Steward, The Theory of Culture Change, Multilinear Evolution of the State, Illinois University Press, 1955, p. 199, also see Claessen & Skalnik, n. 3, p. 11.

effective management of the irrigation works largely depends upon efficient organisation. Its main feature is hydraulic economy with intensive cultivation and co-operation on a large scale leading to the division of labour. Thus the managerial role invariably becomes an important factor.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Hunt and Hunt have shown that when an area is predominantly marked by irrigation dependent ecology, the co-ordinating activities tend to influence the processes. It becomes a major force of political action leading to the birth of elite power. But Hunts have also said that it relates primarily to the strengthening of the centralised authority and not necessarily a cause of statehood. As such, the theory does not seem convincing since there were states emerging without irrigation.<sup>35</sup>

In dealing with the issues of stratification and unequal access to resources, Fried says that the moment communal property is replaced by private property and with it a growing population pressure, stratification is the natural outcome. The state then emerges out of the necessity to maintain the unequal access, if required with force. If this

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<sup>34</sup> Karl A. Wittfogel, Oriental Despotism, New Havens, Yale University Press, 1957, London: O.U.P., p. 22.

<sup>35</sup> R. C. Hunt & E. Hunt, Canal Irrigation and Local Social Organisation, Current Anthropology: 17, see Cohen & Service, n. 10, p. 9.

power is not developing, there may be the retarding factors<sup>36</sup> as demonstrated by Leach in his study of the Kachin society.<sup>37</sup>

Carneiro elucidates this population pressure factor by combining it with war and conquest, and argues that these factors are mechanisms that would lead to statehood after specific conditions created by either environmental circumscriptions or social circumscriptions. The first is related to a growing population in a territorially confined area delimited by mountains, jungles, deserts or seas, while the second refers to a situation in which the extension of the territory becomes impossible without subjugating the neighbouring population, and in which case, the conquered tribes would have only one chance of survival, that is, total submission to the conqueror.<sup>38</sup>

Service, on the other hand, disagrees with the theory of economic inequality. To him, the beginning of political leadership is more concerned with the personal qualities of charisma and outstanding personality of the leader rather than with economic differences. Inequality is institutionalised in case of hereditary rule. It is only a chiefdom and

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<sup>36</sup> M. H. Fried, n. 16, also see Claessen & Skalnik, n. 3, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> E. R. Leach, Political system of Highland Burma, A study of Kachin social structure, London School of Economics and Political Science, 1954.

<sup>38</sup> Robert L. Carneiro, A Theory of the Origin of the State, Science: 169, see Claessen & Skalnik, n. 3, p. 13.

not a state, as long as the rule remains peaceful and within theocratic norms. But the moment it gives way to 'secular sanctions' backed by force or threat, the state is bound to appear. Thus relegating other conditions, he emphasizes more on 'the benefit of being part of the society'.<sup>39</sup>

These theories reveal two aspects of state formation. Firstly, the state emerges out of inequalities in the human society and secondly, that the state was formed on the basis of a social contract. Engels and Fried belong to the first category while Service to the second. Oppenheimer, Thurnwald and Carnero added the external factors to the first, while Service not totally denying the factors of inequality and exploitation would still maintain that the state could emerge only through a useful association of the people or social groups deriving benefits from the effective central authority.<sup>40</sup>

To this, the archaeologists and the social anthropologists have made a common system approach. They see state origins as multiple feed back system in which pre-state polities in various situations respond to their selective pressures by changing some of their internal structures, or by subduing a competing group, or by establishing themselves

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<sup>39</sup> Elman R. Service, n. 19, see in: Claessen & Skalnik, n. 3, pp. 15-16.

<sup>40</sup> Claessen & Skalnik, n. 3, p. 16ff.

dominant in a region, or by gaining control of water resources, or whatever. The initial shift produces a chain of reactions on other changes that leads ultimately, whatever might be the beginning, to the same end - the state.<sup>41</sup>

In short, there is no end to the arguments and explanations of this kind in the theories of state formation. Since state formation is a complex issue varied in point of time and space, and with unfathomable complexities in human relations both individually and in groups, such analyses and interpretations are, but natural. However, to our understanding, and following Wright, we may broadly categorise these theories:<sup>42</sup>

- I The Irrigation/Hydraulic/Managerial theory,<sup>43</sup>
- II The synthetic theory,<sup>44</sup>
- III The Internal Conflict theory,<sup>45</sup>
- IV The External Conflict theory.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Cohen & Service, n. 10, p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> Henry T. Wright, *Toward an Explanation of the Origin of the State*, in : *Ibid*, pp. 49-52.

<sup>43</sup> Karl A. Wittfogel, n. 34.

<sup>44</sup> R. McC. Adams, *The Evolution of Urban Society: Early Mesopotamia and Pre-hispanic Mexico*, Chicago: Aldine, 1966, see Cohen & Service, n. 10, p. 54.

<sup>45</sup> I. M. Diakonoff, ed., *Ancient Mesopotamia*, Moscow, Nauka Press, 1969, see Cohen & Service, n. 10, p. 51.

<sup>46</sup> Robert I. Carneiro, n. 38, (1970), *Science*: 169, pp. 733-738.

The details of the variables, their total relations leading to the birth of the state, has been drawn graphically in these theories by Wright.<sup>47</sup> Thus we find that in hydraulic societies, the ruling class and the managing bureaucracy are identical with professional governments. The hydraulic activities require a certain kind of management and any change in such management leads to the involvement of increasingly professional administrators or say increasingly despotic rulers. In theory II, the synthetic view of state formation is projected. It admits the necessity of a monopolised force to maintain a balance in the society arising out of the external conflicts and the managerial issues. The substance of the theory is that the state is a territorially and hierarchically organised society in which the 'order' is maintained with a monopolised force. In theory III, it has been shown that differential access to wealth, conflict or threat of conflict and the growing inequalities necessitate a sort of mediation which comes out of the state organisation. Theory IV refers to the social conditions in which a certain social group seeks to dominate over the other social groups to control the means of production. The organisation which maintains this domination is the state.

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<sup>47</sup> Henry T. Wright, n. 42. See the graphic illustrations of Wright at the end of the chapters in Appendices.

We see a Fried - service debate in the conflict theories. Fried maintains that the external theory is based on competition of groups leading to the centralisation of authority which might occur through conquests, through increasing population density that presses on resources to be unequally possessed by one group over another. To him, this unequal access to resources is the fundamental cause in the birth of the state which has to maintain the stratifications arising out of this.<sup>48</sup>

Service, on the other hand, argues that social stratifications are co-extensive in range with the development of the state. Thus in the conflict theory, the appearance of stratification is the first premise. In this way, Service also disagrees with Marx and Engels, and says that stratifications might be a result and not, in fact, a cause of state formation.<sup>49</sup>

These theories and definitions lead us to certain conclusions:

1. The state has been defined in various ways. But the most common definition appears to be that the state is a kind of government or a kind of society with a hierarchical structure and some specialised functions. Some speak of the maintenance of a monopoly of force by the state.

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<sup>48</sup> M. H. Fried, n. 16. See Cohen & Service, n. 10, p. 6

<sup>49</sup> Elman R. Service, n. 19, see Claessen & Skalnis, n. 3, p. 51.

2. That in the formation of the state, a number of variables interacts and some such variables are specified as prime movers amongst others.

3. The theories refer to the implicit or explicit multiple feed back variables in the emergence of the state, but not to the stabilizing or retarding factors.

4. The theories do not make it clear as to the interrelations between management and internal conflicts, external conflicts, and others. The other variables governing the growth and stability are also not specified. However, Wittfogel, Diakonoff and Adams have specified the investments in irrigation while Carneiro adds the military capacity variable leading to the rise of stronger governments.<sup>50</sup>

Theoretical Limitations  
in Ahom's Case :

And yet, to formulate a general theory of state formation in case of the Ahoms, some limitations<sup>51</sup> appear before us. One is that the Ahoms already had some sort of social organisation as their gentile constitution would suggest. Further, they were literate and had the capacity for surplus productions. They were somewhat politically organised and,

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<sup>50</sup> Henry T. Wright, n. 42.

<sup>51</sup> Anandendu Guha, n. 5, p. 11.

sukapha<sup>52</sup> the founding father of the Ahom state was already a successful ruler in his paternal state in Mong-Mao for about eighteen years.<sup>53</sup> The other limitation is that they landed in a region which was not politically void. The existence of the petty Bhuyan chiefdoms in a fragmented political structure still carried the political heritage of the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa. In addition to this, there was the emerging powerful states of the Chutiyas in the easternmost corner of Upper Assam, followed by the Kacharis at the centre in a scattered manner, and the Kamata/Koch states of Kamarupa in the west, all throughout the Brahmaputra valley in the plains of Assam.

Therefore, the inter-actions of the variables in the factors and processes appear enormously complex.<sup>54</sup> However, it remains to be seen in the subsequent chapters as to how far we can relate these definitions and to what extent we can put these theories to test in case of the Ahom state formation from the available data.

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<sup>52</sup> We have followed here the common orthography after Bhuyan, Gait and Guha in keeping with the norms of pronunciation in the Assamese language. To avoid possible confusions, we have not followed the orthography of P. Gogoi (n. 53) and of J. N. Phukan (see Lik Phan Tai, the Journal of the Tai Historical & Cultural Society of Assam, Guwahati, Vol. III, 1986, p. 27.).

<sup>53</sup> P. Gogoi, The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms, Guwahati University, 1968, p. 253.

<sup>54</sup> See our discussions relating to secondary state formation at the end of the next chapter.

The Ahom state, in many ways, resembles to the rise of the Magadhan kingdom of ancient India. Both had gold bearing rivers, a large number of elephant population in the extensive forests and were naturally fortified with surrounding hills and mountains. Both produced a highly centralised authority by doing away with petty principalities; wiped out foreign invasions and gave birth to a cohesive unity of the land and its people.

The thirteenth century Assam not only witnessed the advent of the Ahoms from the east but also of the Mussalmans from the west. The Ahom-Mughal relations mark an important epoch in the history of Medieval Assam. While the first made Assam their permanent home by braving repeated invasions, the second failed to make a permanent footing although their contributions were no less in the socio-political history of Assam.

The appearance of the Ahoms in the political scene of medieval Assam produced far-reaching effects in the history and culture of the Northeast India. Eminent authorities on Indian history largely agree to this fact.

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## Chapter VIII

### CONCLUSION

#### General considerations

'When exactly was the Ahom state born in Assam?', is difficult to say conclusively. We find that McC Sait has made it plainly clear when he says that the process of state formation is so slow covering wide time and space that even if the entire records are placed before us, it would not be possible to say precisely when the state began.

This is the most intricate problem faced by the students of state formation. It is true that the state is no one's discovery, nor did it sprang up all on a sudden, neither it owes its origin to one or the other factor, the multiplicity of which sometimes goes beyond the range of human imagination. The state, being the creation of human civilisation, is as complex as the human phenomenon itself is.

In Ahom's case, the issues involved are more surmounting. Firstly, a group of people from Upper Burma known as the 'Tais' landed themselves in the wide valley of Upper Assam and after humbling the local Moran, Borahi tribes,

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named the land of their new acquisition as Mungdunshun-kham, and in turn they got a new name as 'Ahom' from the local population. In due course, Mungdunshunkham was lost in the historical process, it was replaced by the Ahom state and under the process of development growing thereafter, the land of their new home came to be known as Assam; the state of the Ahoms, once again being replaced by the state of Assam.

Secondly, there were only some marginal differences in their traditional culture between the migrant Ahoms and the autochthones with almost an identical level in commensality and connubium, economic base and in the religious belief system tinged with animism. Therefore, intermingling was easy in social spheres. But in the sphere of civilization, the Ahoms were in an advanced stage of political culture. They lived in organised polities, had improved means of agricultural technique particularly in the practice of wet rice cultivation and above all, had the capacity for surplus productions. This was the main axle on which the process of Ahom state formation began to move at the very initial stage in which the social symbiosis, the congruency values and the transaction flows played a major role.

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Thirdly, the migrating Ahoms acquired Mungdunshunkham through their armed might. In doing so, they neither liquidated nor expelled the humbled population, but on the contrary took them within their political systems, where if not total consensus, at least partial consent was available without any hurdles for further elaborations. That is, a sort of legitimacy was infused to the Ahom occupations. This was the situation at least for the first three generations of the Ahoms where assimilation was more on reciprocal basis. The conquerors made the land they had seized as their home and at the same time could establish themselves as a cohesive and distinct ruling body apart from and above their new subjects. Unfortunately, we do not have enough data to probe into this period of state formation but by any stretch of imagination, it could not have been other than this. Because, by this time, in 1401 A.D. the boundary between the Nara and the Ahom kingdom was finally settled and therefore, the birth of the Ahom state was a reality in any sense.

Fourthly, within the given time and space of three hundred years, the Ahom settlements in Upper Assam faced no major happening. It was only by 1523, that the first major clash took place with the powerful Chutiya state. Thus the

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rudimentary polity formation of the Ahoms during this period, was still rooted in their southeast Asian heritage which speaks of their egalitarian tribal level base of social formations, more of, in an embryonic form. Thus the interregnums or the internal conflicts were mostly confined within the ruling body. It did not produce any serious internal contradiction so as to sweep over the existing social formations or so as to generate such internal social contradictions necessitating the state per se. Tribal level organisation still could continue.

But the situation could not remain as the same. The Ahoms displayed immense organisational capabilities in the given ecological potentialities of their new homeland. Agricultural surplus was ensured to set up a viable economy and along with this their military capabilities also increased. Thus the growth of Ahom power and prestige now visibly manifested. This took the Ahoms to a state of confrontation with the local powers. This was entirely a new turn in the process of Ahom state formation. The conquest and absorption of the Chutiya state and the pushing back of the Kachari power beyond the Dhansiri valley were of immense consequences which we have already profusely highlighted, often almost with repetitions, in the chapters. To cut short the

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thematic dimensions, this much can be said that the erstwhile tribal level organisation became incompatible to rule. New factors and variables provided the multiple feed backs which worked up homogeneously leading to the synthetic outcome - the state, if not state per se. (see the synthetic theory in Appendices)

It all happened and began to take place during the reign of Suhummung Dihingiya Raja. Meanwhile, the Brahmanical influence in the Ahom polity, provided a much needed fill-up in the ideology of the Ahom state. The Brahmins grafted the Ahom legends into the Hindu Myths and ascribed the Kshatriya character to the Ahom rulers by assigning them heavenly lineages like the Indravamsi (god of heaven), Suryavamsi (solar race) and the Chandravamsi (lunar race) etc. The image of the kingship was so projected that in the eyes of the totality it appeared as inviolable and sacred in the person of the king, which, in turn, led to the growth of a despotic monarchy. Henceforth, the official title of the king came to be known as Swargadev, in whom the state was personified. Growth of a highly centralised authority structure on hierarchical basis; the institutionalisation of the pyke system - all these in the name of the Swargadev

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came into being. Defence, putting down rebellions, undertaking of public works in the construction of roads, ramparts and dykes, animated the Ahom rulers in which the state fully manifested.

The process continued; gained momentum; stimulated the state building processes; accelerated its pace during the long reign of Sushengpha Pratap Singha. A monolithic bureaucratic structure sprang up with the creation of more new offices. The pyke militia underwent reforms so as to meet the challenges arising out of constant Muslim invasions and to maintain the agricultural productions unabated at the same time. The system so built up sustained the dreaded Muslim menace, in spite of the heavy set backs during the reign of Jayadhvaj Singha, till it was finally wiped out during the reign of Gadadhar Singha, by 1681.

Meanwhile, the Bhuyans and the Koches were also absorbed into the Ahom syndrome. With this the character of the population of the Ahom state changed greatly. There were now more of Hindu population. Moreover, the rapid growth of the neo-Vaishnavite movement with its increasing popularity produced new dimensions in the polity of the Ahom state. In the wake of the growing Hindu influence vis a vis the neo-Vaishnavite movement, the climacteric of Ahom rule set in.

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The civil constitution of the state faced the greatest test ever, during the period of weak rulers. The signs eroding the inviolability and sacredness of the Ahom sovereign Swargadeva, became apparent casting dark shadows. Only strong and efficient rulers like Gadadhar Singha and Rudra Singha with some sort of benevolent despotism, could hold on to the system. With weak, inefficient and debauched rulers, the system began to totter.

This leads us to look into one of the most important factors in the formation of the state. That is what has been said by the theorists that the state existed in its capacity to reconcile the growing social contradictions in an advancing society. This very important aspect, we would be taking up again in the 'end of the state' in order to arrive at an understanding of the theoretical validity as to what the state actually is.

Meanwhile, we may recapitulate what we have narrated so far in the foregoing chapters, how far our definitions on the state co-relate, how far the theories have been put to test and finally how far our data have helped us in finding out the road to statehood. In doing so, we once again heavily draw upon Claessen and Skalnik.

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## MAJOR FINDINGS

### I From definitions and theories

The two main theories which very much relate to the formation of the Ahom state are -(1) that the state emerged out of the inequalities in its social organisation in terms of unequal access to the resources which generally came out of birth, (ii) that the state emerged, only through a useful association of the people or social groups having benefits from the effective central authority. All other theories like the 'conquest' and 'irrigation' are just inter-related to these two theoretical aspects.

Structurally, the Ahom state was an independent socio-economic organisation with a bounded territory and a hierarchically structured highly centralised government. The economy was rooted in the practice of wet rice agriculture which produced a surplus sustaining the state structure. The population consisted of two main classes - the upper and the lower. The upper class included the sovereign, his relatives and the aristocracy, better known as Satgharia Ahoms or the seven lineage based clans who accompanied Sukapha. The lower class included the common masses known as pykes plus the servitors like the bandi-beti, logua-likchow etc.

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The access to resources was based on inequality and the inequality came out of birth.

Functionally, the Ahom state was in a continuous process of growth to regulate the relations between the 'ruler' and the 'ruled' the relations being characterized by the political dominance of the former and the tributary obligations of the latter. The state was distinct from the society and it was the highest central and political authority which had control over the greatest amount of coercive force. The territory was divided into a loosely demarcated territorial divisions by officers appointed from the Satgharia Ahoms and who responsible only to the monarch and who were instrumental in ensuring the continuity through a constitutional means, i.e. the powers of the three Gohains to depose an inefficient or weak one and to elect a new one as replacement. The state maintained its integrity against the threat of separation from within and aggressions from without.

It served as the level of integration and as an instrument of integrating the divergent ethnic groups. The government had well defined organs with the divisions of functions through the khel system - the titles of some of the officers itself suggesting this. The society was stratified

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in terms of unequal access to to the resources, political power, status, wealth and prestige in which the element of Hindu priesthood added new dimensions. Finally, the central government alone had the use of monopoly force.

## II Factors leading to statehood

We would now take up some of the factors, in utmost brief, which had a relatively direct influence in Ahom state formation from the data already placed in the chapters.

The organisational pattern of the Ahom state fully admits of the characteristics of the Asiatic mode of production. The hydraulic culture of the Ahoms or the irrigation hypothesis was at the root of the feudalistic character of the state.

The role of military adventurism or of conquest always remains as a complex issue because of its monothetic value. However, it did have some deep influence in Ahom's case as shown by the conquests of the Chutiyas, Bhuyans, Koch and Kachari territories and their incorporations.

The birth of the Ahom state owes to the charismatic and commanding dispositions of the rulers like Sukapha, Suhummung Dihingiya Raja, Sushenpha Pratap Singha, Supungmung Chakradhwaj Singha, Supatpha Gadadhar Singa, and Sukhrungpha Rudra Singha. Their roles are undeniable.

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While discussing the galactic state structure we have attempted to show that the contacts with the neighbouring states was one of the basic factors on way to the growth of a full-fledged statehood. The various outlying states were brought into the orbit of the Ahom polity through wars, conquests and matrimonial relations. The relations with the neighbouring states had considerable contributions to the formation of the Ahom state.

The Ahoms were numerically poor. But with the conquests and absorptions of the local population, the state witnessed population growth. The Ahom state needed more manpower both for defence and production. Thus population growth, to some extent, accelerated the formation of the state. But it is to be noted that there was no role of population pressure so as to appear as major factor.

The state witnessed major internal conflicts. These conflicts played a major role in the emergence of the state. Because, in the reconciliation of the conflicts, the state survived and it plainly brought out the fact the state was necessary to reconcile and regulate the affairs arising out of these conflicts. Particularly, the internal conflicts generated by the neo-Vaishnavite movement with all its ramifications put the Ahom state on its toes.

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The Brahmanical influence factor, with all its manifestations, happens to be the prime moving one in the formation of the Ahom state. Because, it transformed the egalitarian tribal base to one of a monarchical base and then to a feudalistic base which grew out of the agricultural routes. It not only brought the legitimization to the Ahom rule but also it allied itself with the feudalistic cults of the Ahoms to hold on to the unequal access to the resources. In fact, it contained the elements of a multi-systemic process which largely determined the processes thereafter.

The existence of social classes is discernible even before the Ahoms began their state building process in Assam. The Ahoms had already a three-tier stratified society in the Chaopha, his relatives; the nobles (Chaophrangmung, the Buragohain Chaothaolung, the Borgohain and other); and the commoners, most probably the pais or the pykes. With the conquests and subjugations, the exploiter and the exploited classes emerged to use it in Oppenheimer's sense. The non-Ahom subjugated people were called by the Ahoms as kha or xa (meaning slaves or culturally inferior non-Ahoms), who became the object of exploitation for all purpose, although slavery did not develop as an institution as it was in the Greek and Roman cases.

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It is conspicuous to note that the influence of trade and commerce was totally absent in the formation of the Ahom state. Whatever it had, cannot be used for our purpose. Why it did not develop is quite another matter. But the state had paid very little attention to this aspect, has been proved by some recent sources. Thus Guha records,<sup>1</sup>

Dupleix cast aspersions on the business ethics of the Assamese merchants and expressed doubts about the the prospects of future deals as well.

Although the period from 1681-1769 was one of comparative peace and prosperity, the trade and commerce of the state were utterly neglected. Therefore, this factor can be overruled, at least in case of the Ahom state formation.

We have cited some eleven possible governing factors (chapter I, p. 4) which might influence the formation of states. Our data now show that such factors invariably governed the processes in the formation of the Ahom state. These provided the multiple feed backs, covering a multi-systemic process. The ones which had no influence at all, have been mentioned above. However, it is to be noted that there is no clear-cut measuring device to put these into real test because of the vastness of the data on the one hand, and the enormous complexities particularly in co-relating the factors and processes, on the other. Any way,

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<sup>1</sup> Amalendu Guha, "Dupleix's Trade Mission to Assam, 1738-40", Proceeding of Northeast India History Association, Sixth Session, Agartala, 1985, p. 235.

we have attempted where possible and in doing so it is not unlikely that it might have been superfluous somewhere and sometimes. Indeed the issue is so multi-casual that we would conclude with what Cohen has observed :<sup>2</sup>

Each set of factors, or any particular factor, once it develops, stimulate and feed back onto others which are then made to change in the general direction of statehood. Although its roots may be multiple, once a society or group of them start developing toward early statehood, the end is remarkably similar, no matter where it occurs.

### End of the state

Now once the warfares were over, agricultural production was stabilised, the state witnessed a period of peace and prosperity during the period from the reign of Rudra Singha upto Rajeswar Singha. Some of the internal contradictions which appeared earlier, were now settled in the reign of Rudra Singha. Thus when Rudra Singha left, the Ahom state was in its full manifestations but yet to do away with the feudalistic cults so as to move toward a mature modern state.

The reign of Rudra Singha is important and significant for more than one reason. Firstly, he was the first monarch to evolve a 'Northeast' concept through the state of Assam by bringing into all the surrounding states under one and common flag in his attempt to put an end to the Mughal Bengal menace for good. Secondly, it was he who strived for

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<sup>2</sup> Claessen & Skalnik, The Early State ... p.624

the social harmony irrespective of class-creed formations by striking a balance in the socio-religious contradictions. His was an open way policy and encouraged outside contacts. In spite of his illiteracy, he possessed exceptional intelligence and power of initiative. No doubt, he was one of the greatest of all Ahom kings.

With him the ideology, so long sustained the Ahom state, ended. As long as the need to defend the state against constant Mughal invasions as well as to maintain the pace of agricultural productions existed, the ideology served the purpose of the state. But once such issues were over new dimensions of social antagonisms overtook the Ahom state. The relative peace, in fact, brought to the fore, the one pertinent question whether the feudalistic cult of the state could continue further or there must be some changes in the state authority structure, with necessary modifications. The monarchs after Rudra Singha were weaklings and at their behest the sanctity of the Ahom system was lost; the bureaucracy came to the top of highhandedness, arbitrariness and above all, the most crucial questions arising out of socio-religious issues were handled ineptly, impolitically. They failed to visualise the coming events and let

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the things to take a deteriorating turn. The result was the Moamoria factor which Maheswar Neog has termed it as 'intestinal commotions'.

It is true that no society can remain master of its own system for a considerable long time. New issues with new dimensions appeared as a challenge to the Ahom statehood. These burst open during the reign of Gaurinath Singha and the climacteric period in the Ahom state set in. This leads us to look into the very genesis of the state. Besides the questions of nature of power, the nature of good government and the problems of justice in human affairs, 'as a socio-political system, the state permits greater iniquity within its population than any earlier known form of association. Why do people give up, or why they are forced to give up, so much local and individual autonomy to become part of, and subordinate to, despotic, sometimes quite cruel forms of government? ... Why do those who create such systems attempt the task of reshaping their societies? (Chapter I, p.7.) If we find answers to these, perhaps, we may also find answers to such 'intestinal commotions', and also perhaps, answers to why and how the states are formed and what actually the state is.

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Perhaps, we may once again lean on Engels for an understanding of this unique phenomenon who has perceptively observed that :

The state is, therefore, by no means a power forced on society from without; ... Rather, it is a product of society at a certain stage of development; it is the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has split into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to dispel. But in order that these antagonisms, classes with conflicting economic interests, might not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, it becomes necessary to have a power seemingly standing above society that would alleviate the conflict, and keep it within the bounds of "order"; and this power, arisen out of society, but placing itself above it, and alienating itself more and more from it, is the state. (Chapter I, p. 12.)

The irreconcilable antagonisms were the feudal-tribal contradictions which we have narrated earlier (Chapter VII). That the society failed to strike a reconciliation with the substitution of a new "order" marks the end of the state. Feudalism was decadent under the new forces of development. Could it have been replaced by a democratic process of a modern state, are the questions still left to be answered. Be that as it may, we may close our discussions with this ideological factor having some answers in the

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questions raised as to the formation of the state as seen  
by Claessen and Skalnik<sup>3</sup>:

When the basic ideological concepts become empty of meaning, then the end is near. An efficient governmental apparatus will be able for sometime to conceal this, but the need for new concepts, new rationalisations, or a new myth of the society nevertheless become apparent. An important point to note in this respect is the state hierarchy's increasing orientation towards property. Land as the basic means of production becomes an object of private ownership and the state organisation becomes an instrument in the hands of the members of that social class which is defined by its monopolistic control of the means of production. The mature state thus supplants the early state.

No further argument is necessary to prove this in case of the Ahom state formation in Assam. Our data have sufficiently reflected such trends. Perhaps, the truth, and the whole truth, in the end of the state, is this.

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<sup>3</sup>Claessen & Skalnik, The Early State ... p.634.