UNIT 16   STATELESS SOCIETIES

Structure

16.0   OBJECTIVES

By the time you have studied this unit you should be able to:

- describe the stateless societies;

- explain some key features of stateless societies;

- explain the distinction between the stateless society and a society with state; and

- discuss the functions of stateless society.

16.1   INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit in the block "Political Processes". In this unit you are going to learn about politics and political organisation. You will learn about the stateless societies which generally lack a centralised system of authority. Here the significance of kinship organisation is dealt with in relation to political control. We have discussed here the

political principles which are present in stateless societies. We have also described the stateless tribes in India. Finally, we have discussed the emergence of government in stateless societies.

16.2   POLITICS AND POLITICAL ORGANISATION

Politics deals with the distribution of power in society. Political institutions refer to certain kinds of social relations which exist within a particular area. Thus, territorial area is an important aspect in the political process of any society. The territorial structure provides the framework not only for political organisation but for other forms of organisation as well. However, when we study political institutions we deal with the "maintenance and establishing of order within a territorial framework by the organised exercise of coercive authority through the use or possibility of use of physical force" (Fortes M. and Evans, Pritchard, E.E., 1949)

One of the important political institutions in society is state. It has been described as a human community which successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a given territory. State is different from government in the sense that government is the agency which carries out the orders of the state. Thus, we can say that political organisation consists of the combination and interrelationship of power and authority in the maintenance of public affairs.

In modern complex societies the police and the army are the instruments by which public order is maintained. Those who offend are punished by law. Law is one of the means by which the state carries out its function of social control.

There has been a progressive growth of political organisation in different societies. As societies have developed from the simple to modern industrial societies, all other aspects of social organisation, even political institutions have become more complex. There are stateless societies without any centralised authority. Unit 16 deals with such societies. Then there are those societies which have some form of centralised authority and administrative machinery. Unit 17 describes these traditional/pre-modern societies. In Units 18 and 19 are discussed developed forms of political institutions in modern societies.

16.3   POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND STATELESS SOCIETIES

Simple societies have very low population in comparison to modern societies. There exists a very indeterminate political community in these societies. Here, since face to face relation is possible no formal agency of social control exists. We are now going to discuss the political organisation in the stateless societies. In all types of stateless societies, however simple their organisation might be, they generally have an idea of their territorial rights. These rights are maintained through the notions of age, and social sanctions and social control.

Here, we must make it clear that we are talking generally about the African tribes. In these societies various forms of political institutions such as, councils, monarchies, chiefs, etc., exist. In the stateless societies power and authority are generally diffused in different groups in society. Political order is maintained through the ties of kinship and lineage systems.

A society is called stateless if it:

- has no rigid boundary or permanent physical territory,

- follows oral traditions, and the bureaucratic aspect is absent from it,

- has a single person holding several major powers of religious, economic and political offices within the society,

- there is no fixed rigidly spelt out ideology, and

- has simple economy

16.3.1   Sources of Data about Stateless Societies

There are three sources of knowledge about simple societies without government. It is from these that our information is derived:

- archaeological records about stateless societies,

- literature produced by missionaries, travellers and administrators, and

- monographs written by anthropologists.

The archaeological record is very important in the study of stateless societies. This leads to an important point. All the records of simple societies show that they have always been involved in a process of change, growth and development. We note here that there is no static simple society - they are all dynamic.

Anthropologists studying stateless societies have also used literature, produced by missionaries, travellers and colonial administrators. Last but not the least are the monographs written by anthropologists on stateless societies. These are our main sources of information, given in this unit.

16.3.2   Types of Stateless Societies

The stateless societies can be generally divided into four broad types of societies according to their socio-political organisations:

i)   First type of societies are those which usually live by hunting and gathering. Here the largest social units are the co-operating groups of families or close kin. There does not exist any other formal grouping besides this. There are no gradations or stratification's or even any separate institutions. No specific political organisation exists in this type of society. The authority rests with the senior members of these families. But this authority is very limited in scope. Some of the examples of these societies are the Bushmen of South Africa and some of the people of South East Asia, Jarwa of Andaman Islands etc.

ii)   Second type of society is that which is made up of village communities which are related to one another by various kinship and economic ties. They have formally appointed councils to maintain administration. In these councils the eligibility for membership varies from one society to another. Some of the criteria for eligibility are descent from either old family or reputed family etc. or any other social eminence such as economic power. Here we can see that there is an emergence of political order. Some of these types of societies are the Ibo and Yako of West Africa.

iii) In the third type, the societies have political control vested in age-set systems. This is a common feature of the societies in East Africa. In these societies the allocation of authority is vested in the elders of the society. Thus age-set

organisation is based on the principle of seniority. An example of such a tribe is the Cheyenne of America and the Nuer of Africa.

iv) Finally, the fourth type of societies are those in which political functions are performed through groups organised in terms of unilineal descent. The unilineal descent is traced along the line of either father or mother. In such societies there are no specific political offices. There are no political chiefs, but the elders of the society may exercise a limited authority. In this type of society the groups within the society may be in a state of balanced opposition. Some of the example of such type of societies are, the Nuer, the Dinka of Southern Sudan. This aspect will be explained later.

16.3.3 Kinship System as a Form of Political Control

Kinship system plays a very crucial role in the socio-political and economic organisation of simple societies. Its functions are extensive and overlapping with functions of the political and economic institutions. It takes up the task of maintaining order and balance in society. The principle of fission or conflict and fusion or cohesion works within the simple societies along the kinship and territorial lines. For example, the Nuer tribe is divided into segments. The primary sections or segment of the tribe is the largest and it occupies the largest territory, the secondary section is smaller than the primary and it occupies the next largest territory and finally the tertiary section, which is the smallest and occupies the smallest territory. This division of Nuer society is not just political or territorial but it is also a kinship distribution. In such a society conflict leads to alliances and opposition along the kinship and especially lineage lines.

Activity 1

Compare the Nuer society (as described here) with the socio-political order of your own society. Write a note on this comparison. Compare your note with other students at your study centre.

In all stateless societies where the society is segmented or divided into sections alliances take place along the lines of territory, residence, kinship, descent, heritage and marriage. Conflict leads to cohesion in such societies. For example, in case of conflict, all the members of a group, descended agnatically from a particular man, many see themselves as a unit against all the agnatic descendants of that man's enemy. The enemy might be a member of one's own lineage or another lineage. The segmentation of society maintains itself through the presence of actual or potential opposition to one another. This opposition is characteristically expressed in the institution of "blood feud" in these societies. If a person has killed a member of another section of the society, that other section will not be satisfied until the murderer or any member of his section is killed. However, these inter-lineage antagonisms are countered by other cross cutting ties like those of affinity and matrilateral kinship. Thus there are always people in opposing groups whose interest is to seek peaceful solution of disputes between lineage's.

Therefore, we can say that in stateless societies the kinship ties are performing political roles. The principles of **exogamy** - where a person marries only outside one's community, and **endogamy** - where a person marries within a particular community - play an important part. It is these principles which decide the nature of one's potential supporters or allies in case of conflict.

16.4 POLITICAL PRINCIPLES OF STATELESS SOCIETY

Stateless societies are very many, and their traditions have wide variation. Yet it is possible to distinguish some basic principles to which their organisation adheres. These principles seem to underlie and appear in all stateless societies:

● Society becomes united when different groups or segments unite. They initially owe loyalty to different groups but come together for some particular cause such as defence of territory or 'blood feud', etc.

● Authority, which is delegated or given to a subordinate, becomes independent. Thus juniors who are given power by seniors in a stateless society become powerful in their own right.

● Mystical symbols also 'integrate' and unify stateless societies. This is because the entire society regards these to be sacred and that which should be protected.

16.4.1   An Example: The Tonga

Let us take the **example** of the African tribe Tonga. The Tongas live in small villages in the hope of escaping raids upon them. These raids are performed by unfriendly tribes to steal food and valuables. In this tribe the headman has little power. This is one of the key features of stateless societies. This tribe is nomadic (moves its locations from time to time) due to agricultural needs. In doing so many new friendships are struck up and often old friendships break. Tongas belong to a matrilineally related kin group called the **mukowa**.

Now it is important to note that **no marriage may link up two mukowa**. This principle of exogamy is a primary mechanism for establishing the various alliances and linkages. A very interesting feature is that Tonga clans are related by what are called joking relations' between cross-cousins. A 'joking relationship' is where merriment is made into a ritual and is created perforce. The persons cannot talk normally but must joke and laugh. This institution is very important. Among the Tonga this joking has important political consequences.

This is because "clan joking" creates a large number of friendships, among all the people concerned. Further it provides the privileged go-betweens and judges of morals in a society an opportunity to intervene in the lives of people without looking authoritative. This is because during joking, 'counselling' and 'warnings' are allowed to be given as part of the jokes exchanged. Society functions without the mediations of political power and authority.

16.4.2   An Example: The Lozis

In some stateless societies there are institutions which protects the rights of all the members of society where food is scarce or limited. Since in these societies the concept of accumulation of property and food does not exist, there is always the problem of distribution. Amongst the Lozis of Africa there exists an institution called **kufunda,** which literally means legal theft. It is present in some other tribes also. Any person of the tribe can take any article or food from one's kinsmen's house. It solves the problem of hunger because one can always get food from one kinsman or the other. A person in these tribes has to share his or her food with the others. Thus kufunda or legal theft is a political institution and gives meaning to kinship and economic structures of the society.

Kufunda : Legal Theft

Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space below for your answer.

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) Explain what is meant by a stateless society? Use about five lines for your answer.

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2) Stateless societies are also called simple societies.

        Yes   No

3) A 'blood feud' is a method of making group members donate blood.

        Yes   No

4) What are the three sources of knowledge about stateless societies?

    i) ....

    ii) ....

    iii) ....

5) A "joking relationship' is: (Tick the answer)

    i)   A meeting of humorists.

    ii)   Competitions of jokes.

    iii)   A form of institutionalised behaviour.

    iv)   To make fun of each other.

16.5 STATELESS TRIBES IN INDIA

This section would enable you to explain how the 'stateless' tribes of India function and organise themselves within the Indian nation. This section will show how in contemporary India certain tribes fit into the category of stateless societies. As you will see they have a rich and complex life and maintain order. Sociologically speaking, they have their own inner logic of functioning and to a large extent they still live by it. However, it should not be assumed that they have not changed with time. In fact, they are increasingly getting modernised and attempts are being made to help them to develop.

16.5.1 Political Organisation in Indian Tribes

Political institutions in Indian tribes are based on

i) Clan and lineage

ii) village unit and

iii) group of villages.

Every clan has a common ancestor to which it can trace itself. Over time every clan "breaks" or "splits" up into several lineages.

Lineage segmentation or division into smaller sections is very important as a principle of political structure in stateless societies. Among the Bhils the lineage is structured with a depth of five to six generations as one unit.

16.5.2 The Lineage System

The political functioning and conflict in the lineage system among the Santal, Oraon and Bhil can be illustrated diagrammatically as follow:

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                              (1)
                    ┌──────────┴──────────┐
                   (2)                    (3)
              ┌─────┴─────┐          ┌─────┴─────┐
             (4)         (5)        (6)         (7)
           ┌──┴──┐     ┌──┴──┐    ┌──┴──┐     ┌──┴──┐
          (8)   (9)  (10)  (11) (12)  (13) (14)  (15)
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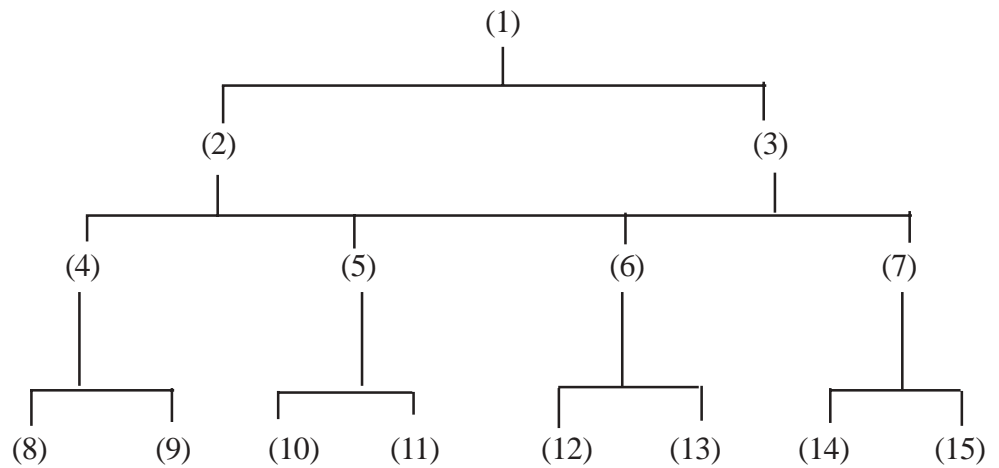
Diagram 1 : Political Functioning in Stateless Societies

In this diagram the members represent lineages of different orders. They all claim descent from (1) The male line goes down from (1) to (2) and (3) and two lineages are formed. After this the lines segment further into (4)–(5) and (6)–(7) respectively. In the next generation we find the lineage segmenting into (8), (9), (10), (11), (12), (13), (14), (15) respectively. This structure is very important for conflict regulation.

Now it often happens that there is enemity between members of (8) and (9) as per the diagram. In such a case all the members of (8) and all the members of (9) are potential enemies. All the other branches of the lineage such as (4), (5), (10), (11), (2), etc., are not involved. This is also true of (12), and (13). It is therefore a general principle in case of any conflict within a tribe which, apply to all segments.

Now consider carefully a different situation. If a member of (8) or (9) is engaged in conflict with a member of (10) or (11) then all (8) and (9) "fuse" (unite) or regard themselves as one group. Thus members of (8) and (9) will be pitted against the 'fused' group of (10) and (11).

At a yet higher level of consideration let us see what would happen if a member or members of (4) or (5) were engaged in hostilities with the members of (6) or (7). In such a case the whole lineage directly tracing descent from them will be united under them and be ready to fight for them. That is, lineage members of (8), (9), (10) and (11) will become enemies of lineage members of (12), (13), (14), and (15).

If there is a conflict at a still higher level between members of (2) and (3), all segments subsumed under them will become opposed to each other. Finally if clan (1) become opposed to another clan, all members of the clan (1) would fuse into one group for feuding with the opposing clan members.

When the hostility is over, then "fission" (division) or return to original position in the diagram takes place. This process is important not only in India but elsewhere as well most notably in Africa among the Nuer tribe, discussed in detail by Evans-Pritchard in his book, The Nuer (1940).

Activity 2

Try to find out from other members of your family or kinship network about a recent dispute. Write a note about this dispute in about two pages describing the various factors involved, the reason for the dispute and who all (i.e. their social status); were the people who managed to resolve the dispute.

Compare your answer with those of other students at your study centre.

16.5.3 Conflict Regulation

The territorial separateness prevents casual conflict occurring with other lineage which are bigger or of a different generation.

The tribal village is an active political unit. We find that the way of regulating the village goes downward in authority:

- village officer, and

- village administration.

The political mechanism functions through its officers who are known by different designations in various tribes. In minor tribes (Birhor, Juang) all these activities are in the hands of one man. Among major tribes (Santal, Bhil) authority is rested on two headmen. One is for secular and the other is for sacred purposes. Very often they have assistants.

Most tribes have a proper 'judicial' machinery to deal with breaches of peace and social offences. There is usually a village council or an assembly of elders. For example, among the Malers, the council of elders of the village is presided by Majhi. The **goriat** acts as the public prosecutor. The Panchayat is called at the instance of the **majhi** by the **goriat.**

Informal control over behaviour is done in the evening meetings. Here criticism is very pungent and effective. Public disapproval is also very effective in controlling or rectifying behaviour. This includes making clear what a member would suffer if he goes beyond the unwritten tribal laws. In short the evening meetings are called to keep those going out of line on line. In this way their problem does not become so severe as to call forth punishment.

16.5.4 Crime and Punishment

However there is no society which does not have criminal cases. These cause a severe disequilibrium in society. This has to be rectified by punishment.

The evidence that is called for, while deciding a criminal case, is:

- **Oath,** taken on a sacred deity, and

- **Ordeal,** undergone by tribal standards.

Among the Malers the **oath** taken is of loss of life. The suspect touches the knife at a sacred centre (holy spot etc.), and swears he will tell the truth or die. Here it is both society's pervasive influence as well as the person's own faith that produces a result. The result is almost always true and just.

In the case of **ordeal** the suspect is innocent if he remains unhurt by grasping a red hot axe or putting his hand in burning oil. Malers have the **saveli** ordeal, in which a red hot axe is to be grasped by the accused. In the **pochai** ordeal ritualistic rice beer is used. Only the innocent can grasp the axe or drink the ritualistic beer and get away unscathed. The guilty suffer burns or die of poisoning.

Oath and ordeal are both threatening alternatives as, they serve as a means of voluntary submission of the accused to law. The fine for the guilty depends upon the seriousness of the crime. The most serious punishment is excommunication. The tribals with beating of drums desecrate the house of the accused. They defile it with rubbish and may burn it down.

This symbolises their dislike and hatred for the crime and the criminal. **Bitlaha** (excommunication) occurs in cases where the crime is so severe that the very person

who has committed it would be intolerable. One of these crimes is that of marrying among the taboo or forbidden category of persons. Again a person who disrespects the tribal deity and attacks it, breaks it, spits on it, is liable to be excommunicated.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a)   Use the space below for your answer.

b)   Compare your answers with those at the end of this unit.

1)   Describe briefly the process of "fission' and 'fusion' in stateless societies. Use about five lines for your answer.

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2)   Give the names of three 'stateless' tribes of India.

i)   ....

ii)   ....

iii)   ....

3)   Describe briefly the method of 'informal control'

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4)   In the saveli ordeal the person is made to fast till death.

Yes   No

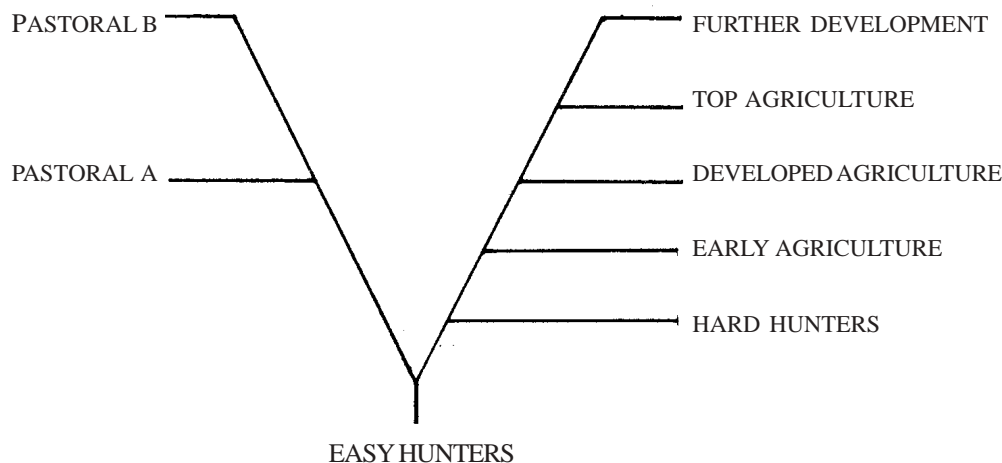5)   Bitlaha is the name of the Santal God.

Yes   No

16.6   POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIETY

Hunting and 'food gathering' societies can be divided into "easy" and "hard" hunters. The easy hunters live almost completely by gathering fruits, vermin, and insects. They live in temporary tenements of branches and leaves. Apart from the dog they have no domestic animals. The hard hunters are more evolved and go for larger animals. They use horses for travelling. Their sense of territory is much more definite. They keep domestic animals and have secondary arts such as spinning, weaving and pottery. In these societies we find that some form of complex centralised authority has emerged. We will examine this aspect now. Diagram 2 shows the levels of development of simple society.

PASTORAL B

PASTORAL A

EASY HUNTERS

FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

TOP AGRICULTURE

DEVELOPED AGRICULTURE

EARLY AGRICULTURE

HARD HUNTERS

Diagram 2 : Levels of Development

We would like you to note three important facts. These are:

- the anthropologists' account and the information which comes from archaeology are in close agreement.

- there were no successive stages of pastoral and agricultural development. These were simultaneous and in different directions of growth from the social condition of the higher hunters.

- it was only from the highest basis of settled and mixed agriculture that large scale social systems, including state-formation, were able to grow.

That is to say stateless societies, with their hunting and herding can carry the development of the social system to a point. They cannot go beyond this point. Let us now consider briefly what emerges from these developments.

16.6.1   Emergence of Simple Form of Government in Society

First we find that there is the emergence of 'government' in simple form within each community. In the easy hunters there is a very simple form of government but at the top agricultural and pastoral levels settled government is established.

Secondly, there is a clear extension of settled government to embrace wider groupings. In only twenty-five percent of easy hunters does "government" extend beyond the primary community which is the family and kinship group. Almost eighty per cent have proper government with an administrative machinery.

There are several interesting features to note. We find that chieftains usually possess 'authority' within the pattern of custom. This type of government also involves a Council of Elders. All have to observe customary rules. It is called a government by discussion.

The same development is clear in the organisation of law,. In the stateless societies, kinship solves disputes. Some customary procedures of retaliation and retribution such as 'blood feud' the 'customary fight' and so on as found in some African tribes like the Nuer, exist. However in these forms of retribution the guilt of the individual is not involved. There are also forms of compensation where retribution is still visited upon the guilty kin group but punishment takes the form of restitution. This aspect has been discussed earlier.

At the highest pastoral and agricultural levels systems of public justice are established. This is regular with reference to attacks on the social system but sporadic in small-

scale conflicts. In such cases customary procedures can be applied provided they do not become socially distruptive. In more complex societies there is regular public justice.

As a stateless society changes there is a marked movement from tribal concerns and religious offences by corrective punishment towards claim and counter-claims of restitutive punishment. Oath and ordeal are used less and less. The matrilineal principle of descent predominates among the hunters and gatherers. While amongst pastoralists the patrilineal principle of descent predominates.

16.6.2 Political Aspect of Religion in Simple Societies

The function of religion in the simpler societies is two fold: It serves ecological functions, by giving men an interpretation of their relationship with nature. It indicates to them how they should relate with it. Religion also serves social and political functions. It binds men together, and gives meaning and legitimacy to authority. In the higher pastoral and agricultural societies higher forms of authority systems appear. These are the doctrines, rituals and worship.

Though morality is not directly linked with religion, the latter requires regulation of wide areas of behaviour, including various do's and don'ts. In simple societies, religion does not hold the individuals responsible for all their actions.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space below for your answer.

   b) Compare your answers with those at the end of this unit.

1) What are the stages of stateless societies?

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2) Easy hunters hunt big animals.

   Yes   No

3) What functions does religion serve in stateless societies?

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16.7 LET US SUM UP

We have seen that stateless societies are those which lack centralised power. There is **hardly any administrative machinery** in them. There are no judicial institutions. Sharp cleavages of wealth, rank and status are missing. These societies include the Nuer and Tallensi, in Africa. They also cover Bhils, Oraons and Santals in India.

In such societies without government, what gives them law and order? We have considered this in the preceding sections. However it is the segmentary lineage system which controls political relations between different territorial segments. Kinship in these societies is very significant in political organisation. This is due to the link between territorial grouping and lineage grouping.

In such societies political office carries no economic privileges. Wealth can confer status and help in acquiring political leadership.

This is because wealth itself accrues from superior status in stateless societies. It was previously held that stateless societies came under the control of those with a state. They were conquered in war and acquired a state. This theory has been questioned and is generally not accepted now. Further there is no association, class, or segment which dominates. It does not control the political system any more than another group. Force when used is met with opposing force. Again the important fact is coexistence: if one segment defeats another it does not try to establish political control over it. Since there is no administrative support, it cannot do so. There is no person or group with absolute authority. Thus stability is maintained by equilibrium at every point of separation.

More than this, unity and cohesion come in these societies through common symbols. These include myths, dogmas, persons, sacred places and so on. These are regarded as final values in themselves.

Thus we can say that stateless societies have an internal cohesion system that is strong and effective. They are 'stateless' but they do not miss out any component that creates efficiency. These societies are, in fact, fully formed political units, and must be treated as such.

16.8 KEY WORDS

Clan	:	A kin group with a common ancestor
Endogamy	:	A social practice that prescribes marriage within a specific group
Exogamy	:	A social practice that prescribes marriage outside a specific group
Kinship system	:	A system of social ties based on matrimonial (i.e. affinal ties) and blood ties. (i.e. consanguinal ties)
Lineage	:	A segment of clan based on ancestral heritage in one line, either father's or mother's
Matriarchal	:	A social system based on female domination and authority
Matrilineal	:	A social system where descent is traced through the mother
Patriarchal	:	A social system based on male domination and male authority
Patrilineal	:	A social system where descent is traced through the father
Sanction	:	Certain constraints prescribed by the society.

16.9   FURTHER READINGS

Evans-Pritchard, E.E., 1940. *The Nuer.*Oxford University Press: Oxford. (Chapter IV).

Gluckman, Max. 1965. *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society.* Basil Blackwell: Oxford. (Chapters 3 and 4).

Vidyarthi, L.P. and Rai, B.K., 1985. *The Tribal Culture of India (2nd Ed.).* Concept: Delhi. (Chapter 2, pp. 25 and Chapter 5, pp. 195-235).

16.10   MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1)   A stateless society has no rigid boundary. It has only oral traditions. Very often a single person is the chief of the entire tribe. There is no rigid boundary and economically these societies are primitive.

2)   Yes

3)   No

4)   i)   Archaeological record

        ii)   Literature produced by missionaries, travellers and administrators

        iii)   Monographs written by anthropologists

Check Your Progress 2

1)   Stateless societies comprising a single ancestor divide or create fission in the second or third generation for various purposes. They behave as opposed units. However when under threat from other stateless societies they 'fuse' or join their forces.

2)   i)   Santal

        ii)   Oraon

        iii)   Bhil

3)   Informal control is exercised during the evening meetings. The criticism is very pungent and effective. Public disapproval is another such method for informal control.

4)   No

5)   No

Check Your Progress 3

1)   a)   Early Agriculture

        b)   Developed Agriculture

        c)   Top Agriculture

2)   No

3)   Religion serves an ecological purpose. It also serves a social function and binds people together.

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ESO - 11
The Study of Society

Political Processes

5