# UNIT 9 DECLINE OF FEUDALISM AND THE MEIJI RESTORATION

**Structure**



## 9.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- explain the tensions which were created in the Tokugawa structure and the inability of the rulers to deal with these problems,
- know about the new social forces which were generated by economic development,
- understand the intellectual currents which undermined the ideological support of the social order.
- know about the intrusion of Western imperialist powers and the crisis it created in Japan, and
- discuss the nature and meaning of the Meiji Restoration.

## 9.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit discusses the transition from the Tokugawa period to the Meiji Period. This transition marks the emergence of Japan as a modern nation-state and it was a complex and contentious process.

The decline of the Tokugawa **Bakufu** was a long and gradual process. Scholars have examined it in a variety of ways. A major concern has been to explain the sources of Japan's strength for it alone among countries in Asia was successfully able to make the transition to a modern nation-state and compete with the Western powers on terms of equality, if not acceptance. This concern has led historians to look at Tokugawa society as having undergone experiences similar to Western Europe. This is in stark contrast to the earlier views which dismissed the Tokugawa period as feudal and traditional during which the majority of the people, who were agriculturalists, were living at a bare, subsistence level. Such a view arose in part because in the first flush of modernization everything Japanese was associated with outmoded tradition and consequently to be discarded. Today scholars have built a much more complex picture of the Tokugawa period and what is clear from this is that, in spite of problems it was a period of dynamic growth and development. The nature and manner of this development also led to tensions and troubles, such as peasant rebellions. But even during the period of Tokugawa's decline there were areas of creative growth. In fact, it was the long experience which enabled the Meiji state to build within a short span of time a modern state structure, industrialize the country and deal with the threat of colonization effectively. It also conditioned the nature of Meiji development emphasising the absolutist and expansionist character of the regime.

In this Unit we shall consider the Tokugawa system and the causes of its decline within the context of Western imperialists' intrusion.

## 9.2 TOKUGAWA DECLINE

The Tokugawa system and its functioning have been dealt with in Block I, Unit 3 in detail, but here it might be useful to recapitulate that the Tokugawa system emerged at the end of a long process of the unification of the country and in the seventeenth century the Tokugawa had eliminated rivals and regularized a system of rule which lasted till 1868. The system which lasted for over two hundred and fifty years had its own strengths and weaknesses. Though we should not underestimate the former, here we shall mainly discuss its weaknesses.

### 9.2.1 Feudalism

The question of feudalism is also one which needs to be carefully understood. The Tokugawa political and social structure was not feudal in the classical sense but represented the emergence of a political system which was closer to the absolutist monarchies of Europe in the seventeenth century. The relationship between the **Shogun** and the feudal lords or **Daimyo** was fundamentally unequal and in all important matters the **Shogun's** authority was paramount. Thus, the **Daimyo** had to spend a certain period every two years in the capital Edo and during the period of their absence leave their families as hostages. During crisis, such as large-scale peasant rebellions the **Shogun** intervened directly, in spite of the theory of **han** (feudal fief) autonomy. The Tokugawa had also, through seizure or when a **Daimyo** died heirless, reallocated **Daimyo** so that they were in no position to challenge the overriding authority of the **Shogun.** The **Baku-han** system functioned with many checks and balances to prevent the unity of any opposition group being realized and the paramount authority lay with the Tokugawa **Shoguns** in Edo.

The character of the ruling **samurai** elite had also undergone considerable change. The policy of separating the **samurai** from the land begun by Hideyoshi had resulted in their concentration in castle towns. The income of the **samurai** was derived in part from land and in part from a stipend which he received for a job. The **samurai** class was divided by status distinctions which restricted the nature of their jobs and many were unemployed. Thus the employed **samurai** gradually evolved into a bureaucracy where merit and performance became integral criteria for judging them. Later burcaucratic legacy was in no small way responsible for the way in which the Meiji Government achieved its objectives of developing modern institutions and implementing new policies.

### 9.2.2 Economic Changes

The decline of the Tokugawa order has its roots in a contradiction which lay in the structure itself when it was built in the seventeenth century. The contradiction was between the ideal which visualized a hierarchic status divided society based on a simple agrarian economy and the reality of a more complex commercial economy along with a social order which again was much more complex. The changes brought about by a long period of peaceful development generated such social and intellectual forces which questioned and undermined the basis of Tokugawa rule. The **Bakufu's** attempts to reform the system by returning to the basis of its simple ideas were increasingly ineffective. The **Kansai** reforms of 1790 carried out by a Tokugawa official Matsudaira Sadanobu were the last major effort by the Tokugawa to strengthen their shaky rule and reassert their authority. Their failure marks the beginning of decline which was precipitated by the coming of Western powers seeking to open Japan. The domestic troubles were aggravated by foreign pressure and resulted in the collapse of the Tokugawa and the emergence of the Meiji Government.

The Tokugawa economy though even at the beginning of the nineteenth century largely agrarian, had by now been transformed. In 1800 the population was somewhere between 30 and 33 million and it was growing slowly. Eighty-five per cent of this population lived in the villages but the cities of Edo, Osaka and Kyoto had over 2 million people where as the castle towns had populations ranging of from 10,000 to 100,000. Thus, Japan was far from just a simple agrarian society. Urbanization had given an incentive to trade and commerce. There also developed certain institutions for carrying out these activities.

Osaka, which was the commercial capital of Tokugawa Japan, along with the merchant guilds in the city (Ten Exchange Houses or **Junin ryogae**) enjoyed the patronage of the **Shogunate** . These privileges entitled it to trade in tax—rice, change money and develop money-lending operations. The commercialization of economy put strains on the Tokugawa but there prescriptions for the ever-growing financial deficits continued to be based on Confucian maxims i.e. restricting lavish life-styles and consumption. The output of rice grew slowly and since rice was the traditional tax base any increase in taxes led the farmers to engage in other more profitable crops.

The rural economy was rapidly changing in character and by the nineteenth century regional specialization had produced a variety of economic activity. In central and southern Honshu commercial activity had spread widely with many villages specializing in growing cotton, oil seeds, etc. In the area around Edo nearly a quarter of the rural population was by now employed in commerce and handicrafts. The cities had become the production centres of textiles, lacquer and pottery. But as these shifted from rural areas the cities became commercial and administrative centres and continued to attract unauthorized immigrants from rural areas.

The commercialization of the economy and a fairly constant tax base, because of the Tokugawa Bakufu's inability to effectively manage the new sources of wealth, led to financial problems for both the **Shogun** and the **Daimyo** and their **samurai** retainers. In 1830, for instance the domain of Satsuma owed thirty-three times its annual revenue and by 1840 Choshu owed twenty-three times its annual revenue. This deterioration in finances affected the **samurai** whose incomes were low even in the seventeenth century and who were now faced with rising prices and an inability to satisfy their increasing demands.

The **Bakufu** had taken recourse to various steps to alleviate these problems but their reforms failed to understand the nature of the problem. In 1705 the **Bakufu** had confiscated the wealth of merchants, like the rich and powerful Yodoya, but this was of no use. In 1720's Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684 -1751) took measures to reform the fiscal and administrative system in which he licensed the merchants but he also took measures to reduce consumption and money supply, a traditional prescription. The only attempt which was substantially different was by the **Bakufu** official Tanuma Okitsugu (1719-1788) who sought to encourage commerce and by taxing it raise government revenues. But these attempts were foiled and he was removed from office. His successor Matsudaira Sadanobu (1758-1788) sought to repeat the steps taken by Yoshimune and in 1841 Mizuno Tadakuni went so far as to abolish government sanctioned trading rights. These measures merely served to complicate and confuse the already grave situation and they had to be withdrawn.

The inability of the **Bakufu** to implement effective and suitable policies was matched by a growing increase in unauthorized trade between producers and local merchants, a trade which the domains were forced to accept or even actively support to overcome their own financial difficulties. In Choshu, for instance, in 1840 gross non-agricultural income was the same as net agricultural income but while agricultural income was taxed 39 per cent non-agricultural income was taxed only 10 per cent. By 1840 in the commercialized regions in Honshu and Shikoku villagers were firmly linked to a cash economy.

### 9.2.3 Tensions and Conflicts

The growth of a cash economy and the consequent changes in social relations generated tensions and conflicts. The divisions within the **samurai** prevented the formation of a communality of interests. The merchants too were not a monolithic bloc but divided by their interests. The Osaka merchants favoured by the **Bakufu** ; were closely tied to the Tokugawa structure and when it collapsed they too were finished, except for the Mitsui house which survived because of the farsightedness of its founder.

The rural merchants who had begun to play a dynamic role were excluded from the benefits of privilege and they were responsive to the need for change. As in the cities so also in the rural areas, too, economic changes disrupted the social fabric and disorders became both frequent and increasingly violent. In the 1780's and 1830's famine, price rise or excessive taxation resulted in peasant

protests. The Tokugawa peace had been enforced with vigour over the peasantry and as early as 1637 the Shimabara rebellion had been put down with great severity. Over the intervening years protests developed from mass petitions to violent actions involving thousands and spread over many villages.

Scholars have calculated that in the seventeenth century peasant rebellions averaged one or two a year while after 1790 they had gone up to over six a year. The early peasant actions had been as village solidarities, largely peaceful and concerned with reduction of taxes. But in the latter period they were often against the advise of village elders, violent and often destructive of property. Peasant protests also evolved, at times, a millennial character. Thus, for instance, even in urban centres protests increased in the last years of the Tokugawa. The most representative of these urban protests were called **Yonaoshi** (world renewal) which drew their inspiration from folk traditions and sought a restoration of righteousness. Rural unrest was as much a product of economic changes as it was of increasing education and awareness.

### 9.2.4 Education, Scholars and Ideas

Pre-modern statistics are not very reliable but it can be said that compared to most pre-industrial societies the level of education in Japan was high. A variety of schools ranging from the **terakoya** or temple schools to others sponsored by the **Daimyo** and **Bakufu** to private academies created a literate class of people. In the cities the spread of literary works testifies to the developed state of the publishing industry as well as to the education and cultural liveliness of the town dwellers.

The questioning of the values and ideals of Tokugawa society also gathered momentum and it sought its inspiration from a variety of sources. The questioning of the primacy of Chinese learning led scholars to search for the basis of Japanese culture and civilization in the past when it flourished uncorrupted by Chinese values. Motoori Norinaga through his study of the classic Heian novel by Murasaki Shikibu, **The Tale of Genji** sought to discover the true heart of Japanese culture which lay, according to him, in the divinely descended Emperor, in the **Shinto kami** or gods and in the primacy given to emotion over logical reasoning. These ideas, grouped under the School of National Learning came to emphasise the Imperial institution as central to Japanese culture and politics. Hence, the land of Japan was divine and the Emperor as a direct descendant of the Sun Goddess was a living god and hence Japan could not be compared to any other country. Motoori Norinaga's ideas were carried on by Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843) who was extremely critical of Chinese learning. Parallel to these ideas was the growth of historical scholarship around the Mito school. The **han** of Mito was a collateral branch of the Tokugawa and could provide a successor to the Tokugawa house. The **han** sponsored a history of Japan (**Dai Nihon shi**) and this too stressed on the role of the Emperor.

The Tokugawa **Bakufu** had virtually isolated Japan from international contact but they allowed the Dutch to retain a small trading station at Deshima, a man-made island off Nagasaki and this became a window to Western learning. There emerged among the Japanese a group of Dutch scholars (**Rangakusha** ), so-called because they studied Dutch and through the language translated various books on medicine, metallurgy, fortifications and other practical subjects. These scholars formed an important and critical side stream which played an important role during the close of the Tokugawa period.

Sugita Genpaku (1733-1817) who studied medicine wrote about the impact that Western books on medicine had on him. In 1771 he participated in the dissection of a human body, done in secrecy as it was forbidden, and he found that the Dutch books on anatomy were absolutely accurate in their description and he was struck by the "great difference between the knowledge of the West and the East." Other scholars, like Honda Toshiaki (1744-1821) advocated economic development and foreign expansion and Kaiho Seiryo (1755-1817) urged the government to engage in trade and commerce. These ideas were derived from their reading of Western works and studies of Western societies.

In the components of the new ideas prevalent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the awareness that the state must combine administrative,

entrepreneurial and military skills to create a new and stronger Japan. Also suggested was the central importance of the Imperial institution. These trends coalesced and came together when political criticism of the **Bakufu** increased. The **Bakufu** was increasingly unable to tackle the problem of coping with the Western powers who were demanding that Japan open her doors and allow free access to trade and diplomatic relations.

The knowledge of the Dutch scholars was used by men of affairs to analyze the changing situation. Watanabe Kazan (1793-1841) represents one such attempt. A retainer from the domain of Tawara he was an accomplished and intelligent man who saw that the strength of the Western nations lay "in the study of things, a sense of science, and a forward motion of events." Science, in Western societies was to aid "the other three branches of knowledge represented by religion and ethics, government, and medicine and to extend the basis upon which rest the various arts and techniques that are subordinate to them." Though Kazan was arrested and he later committed suicide others carried on with similar work. Ogata Koan (1810-1863) opened a school in Osaka in 1838 where the fruits of Dutch learning were imparted and many of the students of this school were to play an important role in the Meiji Restoration.

In 1825 Aizawa Seishisai's New Thesis or **Shinron** appeared. Aizawa, (1781-1863) aware of the advances of the Russians in the north saw that the strategy that could counter the Western threat required military strength as well as a cultural regeneration. The West used Christianity and conscription and hence Japan must modernize its weapons and revive its **kokutai** national essence. He wrote "The sun rises in our divine Land, and the primordial energy originates here. The heirs of the Great Sun have occupied the Imperial Throne from time immemorial." Aizawa was thus drawing on various traditions to put forward a new programme for meeting the challenges posed by the Western threat and he was using Western knowledge to reassert the primacy of Japan and Japanese values.

The loyalist ideals inspired by the imperial institution which sought to reassert the purity of Japanese culture and at times to incorporate Western technology to reinforce and strengthen these native concepts was further strengthened by other intellectual currents. The School of Oyomei or Wang Yang Ming, the Chinese philosopher, argued that conventional reasons were not helpful as guidelines to action and the individual must search for these within oneself and act accordingly. These concepts inspired Oshio Heihachiro, a low level official, to give up his job and lead a rebellion in 1837.

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) Discuss in about ten lines the economic changes in the rural areas during this period.

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2) What role did the **Rangakusha** (Dutch scholars) played in bringing about intellectual transformation? Answer in about ten lines.

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3) Which of the following statements are right or wrong? Mark (√) or wrong (×).

   i) The **Shogun** had no authority on important matters.

   ii) Foreign pressures aggravated the domestic crisis in Japan.

   iii) The Tokugawa methods to come out of financial deficits were based on Confucian maxims.

   iv) The **Bakufu** reforms were a success.

   v) Peasant protests were taking violent turns.

## 9.3 THE EXTERNAL CRISIS

The long-term internal forces which undermined the strength and legitimacy of the Tokugawa **Bakufu** were aggravated by the gathering external crisis. Japan (as seen in Unit 8) was becoming the object of external attention. Russia, while expanding across Siberia, had begun to explore the northern parts of Japan. The United States was looking for ports to provision and fuel its clipper ships on the China run. Britain and France were also major players in the region and all were interested in gaining access to Japan.

The Japanese reaction to foreign pressure and their attitudes to foreign policy had traditionally been divided into two ideals:

i) **Joi** i.e. drive out the foreigners, is seen as an irrational reaction advocated by naive patriots. **Joi** advocates the argument of a limited war which would drive out the barbarians and revitalize the country. This was not so utopian as the world had still to think of the idea of a total war.

ii) The **kaikoku** i.e. open country idea, was put forward in a variety of ways but all arguing that Japan was in no position to counter the Western threat and therefore needed time to preserve its integrity.

Instead of considering the history of the closing years of the **Bakufu** as a period when two static positions confronted each other it is more productive to consider these as instrumental devices by which ideologues and policy makers sought to realize certain social ideals. The **sakoku** or closed country ideal was based on the great peace of the Tokugawa, an unobtrusive Emperor and restricted foreign contacts. This ideal was gradually replaced between 1853 and 1868 by the **kaikoku** or open country ideal which put forward an active Emperor and a nation united by common cultural and ethical values and using the learning of the West to build a system which would be militarily strong. This shift from one to the other was supported by intellectual and economic changes which increased the level of public participation in the question of foreign relations.

The period from 1853 onwards when Commodore Perry landed in Japan can be divided into three sub-periods:

i) **1853-1858** : During this period the **Bakufu** tried to minimize foreign demands to open ports. Abe Masahiro, the **Bakufu** official, argued that rejecting Perry's demands for a treaty would invite the danger of war while acceptance would give them a breathing space during which they could strengthen themselves. The real danger, as perceived by the *Bakufu* was not so much to do with trade as the fear of social disorder. Foreign penetration threatened the capital Edo and even more importantly the Imperial capital of Kyoto. As a *Bakufu* official wrote, arguing that Yokohama should be opened to keep foreigners away from "the Imperial Palace, the shrine territories and the private fiefs" so that it could preserve the natural order by making only the minimum concessions.

The chief **Bakufu** official Hotta Masyoshi advanced the idea of **kaikoku** or open country. He argued that in the new conditions trade and alliances with other countries were vital and necessary. Japan had to reconsider her policy of isolation because "military power always springs from national wealth and the means of enriching the country are principally to be found in trade and commerce." This was a new argument for the ruling establishment as up to now traditional wisdom had seen only agriculture as the basis of wealth and commerce and merchants were frowned upon.

Hotta was advancing a new proposition but he was still bound in the old dream of keeping the foreigners at bay. He was proposing that Japanese go out to acquire this wealth but such arguments still did not concede the right of residence in Japan to foreigners.

The **Bakufu** signed the treaties in 1858 which allowed trade at Yokohama and permitted foreign residence in Edo from the following year in 1859. These moves gave an impetus to opposition movements and the "revere the Emperor, expel the barbarian" **(sonno joi)** movement gathered momentum particularly when one of the loyalists assassinated Ii Naosuke, a **Bakufu** official.

ii) **1860-1864:** During 1860 and in 1863 there was an unsuccessful attempt to restore the Emperor.

In this fast paced political scenario there were other attempts to broaden the base of political participation. The great **Daimyo** who had been excluded from power and kept out of the decision-making councils sought to use the beleaguered **Bakufu's** weakness to increase their role and strength. One such move was an alliance of Court and **Shogun (kobugattai).** This move wanted to bring together a coalition of high ranking members of the nobility and the **samurai** to work in unison for national unity. This move too was unsuccessful but the danger of civil war was averted for the time being. The overriding fear that foreigners would make use of internal disunity was ever present in the minds of the leading political actors. The 1860's saw the foreigners still excluded from the area around the Imperial capital of Kyoto called the **Kinai** and steps were taken to ensure its defence and protection.

In 1864 the **Bakufu** agreed to indemnify foreigners rather than allow foreigners in the **Kinai** and in 1865 the Court approved the treaties but refused to allow foreigners in Hyogo, even though this was agreed to in the treaty. The **Bakufu** had to accept a ruinous rate of tariffs in lieu of this provision.

The bombardment of the **han** of Satsuma and Choshu (discussed in Block-2, Unit 8) marked a clear lesson which showed the futility of both the policies of the forceful expulsion of foreigners and of giving limited concessions. By 1865 it was clear that **sakoku** or closed country could not succeed.

iii) **1865-1868:** This period marks the triumph of an open country policy and an acceptance of the new order. The **Bakufu** sent official embassies to London and Paris in 1867 and even before that an official Ikeda Nagaaki wrote, after a tour of Europe, that "to lay the foundations of national independence it is fundamental that national unity be attained within Japan." He advised that it was imperative that the Japanese sign treaties and travel, gather information and study the Western countries. In this changed situation the **Shogun** Yoshinobu could write: "if we alone, at such a time, cling to outworn custom and refrain from international relations of a kind common to all countries, our actions will be in conflict with the natural order of things." These statements could not have been made earlier. They indicate clearly the intellectual transformation of the Japanese. No doubt their ideas had been transformed under the pressure of circumstances but the choice they made was a part of their creative response to a new situation.

The final decade of the Tokugawa **Bakufu** saw a new pattern of relations emerging. Satsuma and Choshu had come closer to England and the **Bakufu** was friendlier with France. This pattern was potentially dangerous as these imperialist powers could create a civil war by supporting their favoured friends. This danger was perceived and the situation did not deteriorate because of the Imperial restoration which brought about a centralized bureaucratic state.

## 9.4 THE MEIJI RESTORATION

The return of power from the **Bakufu** to the Emperor in 1868 marks the Meiji Restoration. The Emperor was given the posthumous name of **Meiji** or enlightened government and this came to be used to denote his period from 1868 to 1912. The abdication of Tokugawa Keiki was announced by an Imperial Edict on January 1868. This marked the formal end of the long rule of the Tokugawa. In April the Court announced the Charter Oath which laid down the policies the new government would follow and in October, 1868 the Emperor Mutsuhito selected the Chinese characters meaning "enlightened rule" or **Meiji** by which his reign would be known.

The restoration or **ishin** as the event is known was carried out by some sections of the nobility and particularly the **hans** of Satsuma, Chosku, Hizm and Tosa. It was supported by sections of the **samurai** and rural rich who found the constraints of the Tokugawa system increasingly restrictive. These groups wished to share power with the **Bakufu** and when foreign pressure made it difficult for the **Bakufu** to maintain its position these groups asserted themselves.

Foreign demand to open the treaty ports and the **Bakufu's** vacillation allowed these groups to rally around the Imperial Court and demand that the Tokugawa hand back power to the Emperor. In this demand they were supported by the loyalists who genuinely wished to have an active Imperial Court. The **han**, particularly Satsuma and Choshu had initially been at loggerheads, each leading their groups but they came together and used the court to topple the Tokugawa **Bakufu**.

In 1854 the Treaty of Kangawa was signed and by 1859 Japan's foreign relations were established on the basis of the unequal treaties as in China. The pressure to open treaty ports, (Algashi, Habobati, Yokohama, Nigata, Kobe) created a sense of crisis in which various critics of the Tokugawa came together. For instance, even conservatives within the Tokugawa camp who disapproved of the treaties allied with the Kyoto nobility and they tried to reform the **Bakufu**.

Satsuma and Choshu played a dominant role because they were "outside lords" (they had been defeated in 1600 by the Tokugawa) and they were excluded from power. Their **han** were far from the Tokugawa areas and their territories integrated. These **han** were even able to try internal reform as well as build their forces to resist the Tokugawa.

### 9.4.1 The Debate

Whether the events of 1868 mark a restoration or a revolution are questions which scholars are still debating. Tetsuo Najita, for instance writes that, "The Japanese Emperor did not have a specific structure of power to restore, and whatever grandiose images came to be associated with him after the **ishin** [restoration] were the result of the ideological construction of the modern state and not the legacy of recent history." The events of 1867 and 1868 were not of a cataclysmic nature and if only this period is considered, then the transition from Tokugawa to Meiji seems easy and with little conflict. However, when viewed from the beginning of the nineteenth century then it can be seen that the changes which were brought about profoundly altered Japan and created a new nation state. The view of the nature of this transition has been influenced by the concerns of the writers and their times.

A well-known Meiji intellectual Tokutomi Soho had argued that it was not Meiji leaders but the circumstances which helped to create a modern Japan. He saw feudal Japan as already weakening with the emergence of rural leaders whose strength was based on a productive and rich economy but who were denied political power. Others, including the last Tokugawa **shogun** Yoshinobu, who wrote his memoirs in 1915, argued that it were the forces of Imperial loyalism which were responsible for bringing about the restoration.

### 9.4.2 The Marxist View

A very influential analysis of the Meiji Restoration was made by the Marxists in the 1920's when internal repression and an aggressive foreign policy led them to

re-examine the nature of the modern Japanese state. A vast range of detailed and scholarly works were produced and the views were divided into two broad groups:

- The Labour-Farmer group (**rono-ha**) saw the restoration as fundamentally a bourgeois revolution which ended feudalism and laid the basis for capitalist development.
- The other group, which took its name from the series or lectures they produced i.e. the **koza** group, argued that the Meiji Restoration was not a successful capitalist revolution but one which ushered in an absolutist rule. This was based on the "Emperor System" and the power of this system rested on feudal relations which had continued in the countryside.

The Marxist arguments were closely tied to their political programmes. If feudalism had ended then it was not necessary to fight the Emperor which would bring about the proscription of the party but if feudalism was still important then the Emperor system had to be countered and this meant the party would be banned.

An influential Japanese ideologue Ikki saw the restoration as a restoration-revolution recognizing both the forward looking elements as well as the constraints of the past which continued. In a work which was banned almost immediately after it was published he forcefully put forward this view.

### 9.4.3 The Post-War Debate

In post-war Japan the debate has continued. E.H. Norman in his path breaking work put forward an interpretation which has influenced many scholars. Norman saw the restoration as the work of a coalition of "lowers **samurai**" and "merchants". This coalition was crucial to creating the Meiji state and it was responsible for the features which were developed, namely foreign expansion and internal centralization. However, other scholars have found this framework difficult to substantiate by detailed studies.

Albert Craig has argued that "lower **samurai**" is analytically meaningless as "upper **samurai**" were a very small percentage and any movement would include a large number of lower **samurai.** Thomas Huber who, like Albert Craig studied the **han** of Choshu, has defined the lower **samurai** by their income and concluded that they included commoner village administrators. Shibahara Takauji has seen the popular anti-feudal sentiments as the driving force behind the restoration movement. Conrad Totman, however, argues that commoners took part on all sides and it is not possible to equate anti-feudal with anti-**Bakufu.**

The role of popular discontent is difficult to analyse. Certainly there were popular movements but, as one study points out, many of them took place in the Tokugawa areas which were relatively more prosperous than the anti-**Bakufu** domains. The role of merchants also needs to be carefully studied before it can be conclusively argued that they were supporters of the loyalist movement.

Marius Jansen has questioned the actual danger posed by foreign intervention arguing that the governments were not either really interested or in a position to increase their influence. However, he does concede that the Japanese perceptions of foreign threat were an important force in making the people take action. In particular the fear of foreign loans played a crucial part in this period as well as in the Meiji era.

The debates will continue and we need to furthur refine our understanding of the actual processes by careful and detailed study. However, it can be said that there are three major areas around which the debates centre:

i) The first is that the Melji **ishin** arose as a protective reaction agair t Western imperialist threat.

ii) Secondly, the real conflict lay between the forces of feudalism and the emerging capitalist forces and the Meiji state which emerged was a mix of these two elements.

iii) Thirdly, the debate continues on the nature and role of the lower **samurai.**

Conrad Totman has argued that the prime cause of the Meiji Restoration was the internal collapse of the Tokugawa **Bakufu** and this was brought about by a

long-term decline caused by an inability to respond to the new forces generated by the continuous peace and economic development. He sees the movements of the early 1860's such as the **sonno-joi** and **kobugattai** as voluntaristic but, he argues that they failed to unify the country. His analysis stresses the importance of national political considerations and consequently he does not place a crucial significance on domainal affairs and problems. The problem of the domains was important but not the crucial determining factor in the type of change that was brought about.

Harold Bolitho who has studied the **fudai daimyo** of Tokugawa Japan takes an opposite view. He argues that central authority had not developed but rather the weak **shoguns** had increased the strength and power of the **han.** The domainal interests then became the crucial force in the last years of the **Bakufu.** These **han** interests found symbolic leadership under the Emperor. This coalition of **hans** under the Emperor could challenge the **Bakufu** and press its demand for political change. The **kobugattai** movement was the main attempt to replace the **Bakufu** by this coalition. The **sonno-joi** movement was national in scope and brought lower and middle ranking **samurai** together against the **Bakufu.**

Thomas Huber, as mentioned earlier, in his study of Choshu focuses on the class nature of the movement which helped to bring about the Meiji Restoration. Huber agrees with Bolitho in placing importance on imperialist pressure but he disagrees with both Bolitho and Totman and argues that both domainal consciousness and national consciousness were not crucial in the anti-**Bakufu** movements. Huber's study of the movement called **Heaven's Revenge in Choshu** shows that it was a consciousness of class and a desire for social justice which was the prime driving force. Huber's examination of the **Bakufu's** attempts to reform the structure from within is less hopeful. He sees the **Bakufu** as essentially conservative and incapable of change and the reformers were at best marginal within this structure.

The events of the Meiji Restoration have been examined by scholars working on Japan but few specialists from other areas have tried to look at this event within the larger framework of how societies have made the transition to a modern state. The process is difficult and has not always been successful. Mexico experienced a peasant revolution in 1910 which was put down but after decades of capitalist development it still remains an underdeveloped country. Turkey, on the other hand carried out, under Kamal Ataturk in 1919, a national transformation but it too failed to develop. In Asia, China carried out a republican revolution in 1911 and in 1949 the Chinese Communist Party came to power but it too has not been able to successfully industrialize. Japan's Meiji Restoration thus is important as marking the successful transformation of a non-industrialized society into a modern nation state. This event needs to be considered as part of a larger historical process.

The Meiji **Ishin** was a period when society was thrown into turmoil and ideas and relations had not yet jelled into the later "oligarchic state" and therefore to impose an order from later interests restricts the field of inquiry, as well as casts that inevitability so apparent on historical writing on Japan. Testuo Najita has looked at the transformation that took place in the way knowledge and the political economy were perceived. The Tokugawa concerns were with "ordering society and saving the people" (**keisei saimin**) but with the Meiji the prime interest has become "rich country, strong army" (**Fukoku kyohei**). The change from "saving" to "mobilizing" the people occurred with the Meiji **Ishin.** This process occurred over a period of time and was preceded by debates and confrontation. The transformation of Japan was not something which was carried out through consensus and harmony. When we consider these questions it becomes difficult to accept J.W. Hall's view that "Japan saw little of the social antagonisms or political ideologies which the French or Russian revolutions saw..." The Meiji Restoration was neither bourgeois nor a peasant revolution, although both peasant and merchant were found among the individuals who led the attack on the Shogunate.

The Russian historian Latyshev notes that between 1868-1873 there were over 200 peasant uprisings and he argues that it would be better to see the restoration as an "unaccomplished revolution". It is also important to remember that while the Tokugawa house was not killed but continued, the battles which brought

down the **Bakufu** at Toba and Fushimi involved 120,000 government troops and 3,556 were killed and 3,804 injured. Compare this with the 5,417 lost in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-5 and then only the magnitude of the struggle can be appreciated.

The upheaval of the Meiji Restoration has been examined from various perspectives. Irokawa Daikichi, an influential Japanese historian whose work on the democratic struggles of the people has established him as a major interpreter of Japanese history, has stressed on the confrontation between "civilization" and "westernization". He argues that the hopes of the common people in the Great Renewal (**goishin** ) as the Meiji **Ishin** was called were thwarted and with the arbitrary changes in customary practices their disillusionment increased and this discontent fuelled the anti-establishment struggles, such as peasant rebellions. It was also evident in the increased popularity of new religions, such as Maruyamakyo and Tenrikyo.

The tension between the demands for modernity and the destruction of the way of life of the common people was the driving force for the violent incidents during the restoration and immediately after.

In conclusion it needs to be emphasised that while the Meiji Restoration inaugurated a new era for Japan the reason for Japan's successful transformation lie not merely in the breathing space which it enjoyed. The Western imperialist powers were certainly more interested in the great China market and did not see any great potential in Japan. This gave Japan the chance to carry out a series of reforms but that she was able to conceive and execute these reforms, that she was able to use the chance that she had was more due to internal strengths and indigenous institutions.

**Check Your Progress 2**

1) What do you understand by the idea of **Kaikoku** ? List the arguments given in favour of **Kaikoku.** Answer in about ten lines.

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2) Mention in about five lines the Marxist view on the Meiji Restoration.

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3) Discuss in about fifteen lines the main arguments in the post-war debate on Meiji Restoration.

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## 9.5 LET US SUM UP

The decline of the Tokugawa was caused by the generation of new social forces and the tensions these created. **Samurai,** merchants and peasants found increasing problems, some of them due to increasing productivity and prosperity. The **Bakufu** was unable to creatively meet the new challenges. Coupled with the long-term changes in the economy there were also new intellectual trends which undermined the Tokugawa orthodoxy. The **Bakufu** may have met some of these challenges or there may have been gradual change but these problems were worsened by the imperialist pressure. The middle of the nineteenth century was the high tide of Western imperialism and Russia, Britain and France in particular were active in this region. Japan was saved the brunt of the onslaught because the powers were more interested in China. Yet it must be emphasised that Japan's transformation was carried out under imperialist threat and this conditioned and directed her responses in particular ways. The fear of being colonized, the fear of social disruption and even the fear of foreign loans which would enslave her attest to this pervasive sense of crisis.

## 9.6 KEY WORDS

**Fudai** : Hereditary vassals allied to the Tokugawa. The **daimyo** were divided into groups and the other major group was the outside lords or **tozama** who had initially opposed the Tokugawa eg. Satsuma, Choshu, etc.

**Jelled** : To take definite shape.

**Kokutai** : "National polity". An old idea which at times also implied that Japan was unlike other countries because of its divine origin and because it was ruled by the direct descendant of the Sun Goddess.

**Terkoya** : Temple schools attached to Buddhist temples and run by priest.

**Sakoku** : Closed country. Refers to the isolation policy followed by the Tokugawa though the word was used only in the nineteenth century.

**Sonno joi**: "Revere the Emperor and expel the barbarians." A slogan of the groups which wished to restore direct imperial rule.

## 9.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) Base your answer on Sub-Sec. 9.2.2

2) Base your answer on Sub-Sec. 9.2.2

3) (i) × (ii) √ (iii) √ (iv) × (v) √

**Check Your Progress 2**

1) Kaikoku means open country. Base your answer on Sec. 9.3

2) Consult Sub-Sec. 9.4.2

3) Consult Sub-Sec. 9.4.3