

# UNIT 6 FEUDAL SOCIETIES

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## 6.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit our intention is to give you a very brief idea of slavery. After this, we discuss in detail Feudalism as it existed in Europe and India. After reading this Unit, you should be able to explain.

what is slavery and its various forms,  
the various theories about the origin of feudalism in Europe,  
the main features of feudalism and feudal societies,  
the nature of institutions which gave feudalism its dynamism and the causes of its decline, and  
the nature of feudalism in India.

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

The Assyrian, Egyptian, Babylonian and Indus civilizations were not slave economies as they had no clear idea of chattel property.

It was classical Greece which first transformed slavery into a systematic mode of production. This was true of Rome as well. Slavery was a superior means of extracting surplus in comparison with other methods of exploitation. The great advantage of slave labour was that slaves were exempt from military service. The three basic components of slavery were:

- 1) the slave's status as property,
- 2) totality of master's power over him, and
- 3) his kinlessness.

War and trade supplied Greece and Rome with slaves. After having existed for several years despite occasional revolts and reforms, slave mode of production slowly gave way to change. As large-scale conquests stopped, the door to acquisition of slaves was also closed and slaves began to settle down on farms as serfs and retainers in households. The system gave way to feudalism.

What is today identified by historians as feudal society in Western Europe began to take shape about the fifth century A.D. The term 'feudum' came into use only towards the end of the ninth century. Interestingly, a systematic study of feudal society began only in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Scholars devoted themselves to analysing the factors leading to the rise of feudal society. Several theories of its origin have been offered.

Feudalism contributed to increased ruralization of economy, use of new technology of agriculture and emergence of a class of worker, the serf. The position of the serf was neither like that of the 'Slave' in Antiquity who was completely separated from the means of production, nor it was such that he could be absolute owner of these. The serfs enjoyed an intermediate position between the slaves of antiquity and free wage labour of industrial capitalism. An elaborate system of rights and obligations characterised the relationship between 'Serf' and his 'Lord' to whose land he used to be attached.

Feudal society in Europe had a dynamism of its own. Expansion of agriculture increased food production. It contributed to rise in population and invention of new technologies of waterwheel and windmill. The surplus population spread out to remote parts of Europe, cut down forests and thus vast land reclamation took place. The small peasants took initiative in this process. Lords also began to release serfs from bondage by charging them 'commutation' fee. The free serfs turned into peasantry, but as agriculture was capital intensive, only a few succeeded, a vast majority lost their borrowed capital too. All this was alien to feudal economy and marked the beginning of capitalist farming.

Feudalism in India has been associated by scholars to a phase of history when trade declined, and currency became scarce. This motivated the state to give land to Brahmins and officials for economic expansion. These classes subjected peasants who cultivated their land to their own control, contributing to the growth of feudal relationships. Whether feudalism really existed in India, continues to be a matter of debate among the scholars.

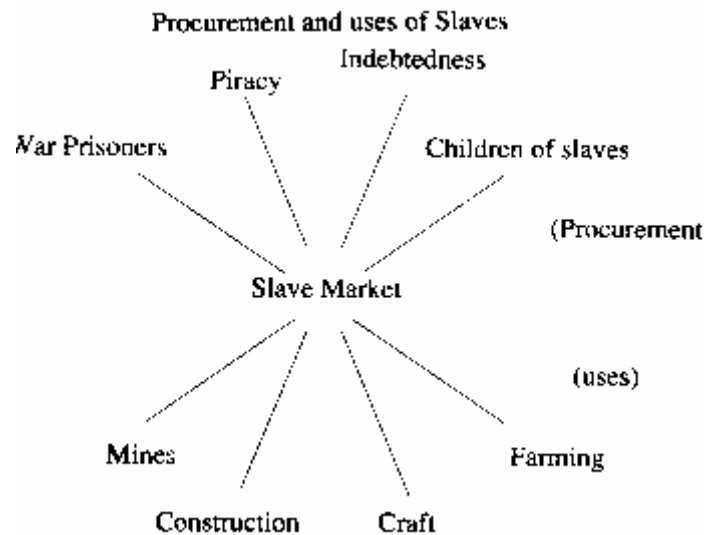
## **6.2 SLAVERY**

Before we go onto study feudalism, we must have a look at the system of slavery and the slave mode all

production. It is only then that one will be able to understand the transition from slavery to feudal serfdom which occurred as a gradual process.

Slavery is generally defined as "a system in which one is subject to the power of the other contrary to nature". The slave as a "possession" or "property" of his or her master is essential to the understanding of slavery. In a slave society, the slave was reduced to the level of a near commodity. Aristotle (Greek Philosopher) described the slave as a "property with a soul". The relations between the slave and his master lay out in any kinship bond or formal contract but were determined by the circumstances of birth into a category of dependents, on debt, or on other conditions of bondage. The slave had no freedom or choice of action.

Slavery existed in all human societies in some form or the other, but it was mainly in the Graeco-Roman world that slavery attained its greatest functional significance and numerical strength. In these societies slavery evolved into an institutionalised system of large scale employment of slave labour. It was the slave mode of production which provided the ultimate basis for the rise of these civilisations. The rise and fall of the urban culture in Greece and Roman was closely related with the dominance and decline of the system of slavery. These societies were known as slave societies due to their large scale-dependence on 'slave labour'.



The significance of slave labour lay in its two contradictory attributes:

- i) it represented the degradation of labour in which human beings were converted into inert means of production and had no social, political and economic rights.

For example, the Roman law even called the agricultural slave as instrument vocale i.e. the speaking tool. Slavery developed into the most oppressive form of labour extraction. Under this, the human being was not selling his labour but he himself was a saleable commodity. He was sold and purchased in the market and put to various forms of labour by his master. Generally, slave labour was used in transport, mining, construction and agricultural operations.

- ii) The slave mode of production led to large-scale generation of surplus. This provided the ruling class a life of luxury and leisure while slaves led a life of misery. Slaves, at times, opposed their inhuman treatment. Very often, we find that slaves attempted to escape or

revolted against the tyranny of their masters. In such cases severe punishments were imposed on them.

## **6.2.1 Slavery in the Indian Context**

Slavery did exist in Ancient India. There were different categories of slaves depending upon the mode of procurement. For example, some were slaves by birth because they were born to slave parents. Slaves were mostly employed as domestic servants and as agricultural labourers. In the 'Arthashastra' of Kautilya, we find the recognition of the institution of slavery. But at the same time, Kautilya at length discusses the working conditions of slaves and even lays down the conditions for freedom of slaves. For example, if a child was born to a woman slave from the master, she would be considered a free person. Similarly, a slave could earn for himself by working extra and in cases, even buy back his freedom. In fact, slavery did not develop as a mode of production in India. Megasthenes, the Ambassador of Greeks in the court of Chandragupta Maurya commented that "no Indian is a slave". This was because the nature of slavery was so different in India when compared to the slavery in the European world that he could not notice the form of slavery which existed in India.

## **6.2.2 Slavery, Serfdom and the Peasant Societies**

Slavery represents absolute subjection of a person, or persons by another where the subjugated person loses all rights and freedom. Serfdom represents an intermediate stage between the slavery of the ancient society and the free wage labour of industrial capitalism. Peasant societies are societies having agriculture as the main source of living for majority of the people, where landholdings are generally small and family provides both the necessary labour as well as the consumer of the surplus.

Slavery and serfdom are not mere social formations of two types, but both of them represent two different stages of historical development of society. Slavery, in its absolute form is characterised by the slave mode of production, while serfdom which belongs to feudal society forms part of its mode of production. The former is the preceding phase and the latter, the succeeding phase in the course of historical development.

The transition from slavery to feudal serfdom was a gradual process. In Rome, when the conquests stopped, fresh supply of slaves also stopped. This improved the condition of the already existing slaves in the society. The internal sale of slaves also stopped since each family of slave-owners tried to preserve its own hereditary slaves. As a consequence, slaves grew more attached to the households or lands of their masters. Diminished supply of slaves led to rehabilitation of free labour. Freeman had always existed in the society as artisans, public servants, etc. They sometimes worked on farms too, as hired labourers.

The reorganization of state occurred in such a way that occupation and social status became hereditary and fixed in a manner, not much different from the Indian caste system. These changes diminished the Freeman's mastery over himself or his power to determine his occupation. It reduced the distance between him and the slave, and slowly the latter together with free domestic servants and workshop labourer etc. passed into the common condition of serfdom. Thus, slavery, serfdom and peasant societies are the characteristic features of dynamic socio-historical development in societies.

## **Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

- 1) How would you differentiate between slavery and the slave mode of production Answer in about five lines.

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- 2) Discuss how the transition from slavery to feudal serfdom took place. Answer in about five lines.

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## 6.3 TRANSITION TO FEUDALISM

In 1887 a German Historian Brunner, concentrating on the military aspects, traced the genesis of feudalism to the horse stirrup. He argued that in 733 A.D, the emperor of France (then called Gaul, Charles Martel), defeated the Arabs in a battle at Poitiers near Paris. However, Martel could not pursue the Arabs because his army consisted primarily of infantry, whereas the Arab soldiers escaped on the far more mobile horsebacks. Martel realized the need for introducing a large segment of cavalry in his defence force. Maintaining a cavalry, however, was after all a more expensive proposition than an infantry. For this Martel needed more resources. Land being the chief resource in pre-modern societies, the Emperor began by acquiring land from those who had a great deal of it - the Church for example. But the acquisition of land did not solve all of Martel's problems. Medieval Europe was also short of money in circulation, because of declining trade, though it was not short of wealth. Thus, while Martel acquired land from the Church as well as his rich subjects, he could not pay his cavalymen in cash which was scarce; consequently, he began to alienate land to them in fief. This according to Brunner was the origin of feudalism.

Brunner's argument was supported and opposed with equal vehemence by subsequent historians for a long time. The chief weakness of the argument, however, was that it attributed the rise and development of a vast social, economic and political structure which lasted over a thousand years to one small device, the horse stirrup.

### 6.3.1 Henry Pirenne's View on Feudalism

Meanwhile, the concept of feudal society began to grow and included many more dimensions than the military one. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Belgian historian Henry Pirenne visualized feudal system in terms of the nature of its economy. Pirenne believed that Europe of antiquity was marked by a developed urban

economy based on long distance trade or the 'grand trade' as he called it. The long distance trade was possible owing to cheap navigation across the Mediterranean. However, in the late seventh and early eighth century, the Arabs invaded parts of Europe and occupied crucial control points of the Mediterranean; Gibraltar, the point of entry from the West, and Sardinia right in the middle of the Sea besides Alexandria, the eastern entry point, which was already under their control. Thus, alien control of these points of navigation disrupted the long distance trade and led to the localization as well as ruralization of the economy, or what Pirenne called the 'closed estate economy'. From the eleventh century, the Christian Crusaders drove the Arabs out of Gibraltar and Sardinia; long distance trade revived again, as also the urban nature of the economy; as that happened feudalism declined. Pirenne, thus posited a dichotomy between trade and feudalism-a concept that has been questioned and given up in European historiography but continues to exercise a strong influence on historians in other regions of the world, including India.

### **6.3.2 Thesis of Marc Bloch**

The great French historian Marc Bloch undertook a comprehensive analysis of feudal society, covering every dimension: the economic, the social, the cultural, the ethical as also the politico-administrative. He noticed that Western Europe was subjected to a series of invasions from a number of sources. In the fifth century, the Germanic tribes had barged into the region from Very long distances and had brought the grand edifice of the Roman Empire to pieces. The Arab invasions followed the Germanic. The Arabs in turn were followed by the Magyars of Hungary, and the series culminated in the Scandinavian raids in the tenth century. All these invasions had created a great deal of insecurity; they also disrupted the economy. Thus, everyone in Western Europe during the middle ages was searching for security and subsistence. This search for security and subsistence led to the formation of what Marc Bloch described as 'ties of interdependence'. All sections of society entered into these ties; peasants surrendered their lands and resources to the local lord who promised them security and subsistence and returned the lands to them on condition of their cultivating his fields without being paid wages. The local lord in turn, similarly, sought security and subsistence from the one more powerful than him by surrendering his lands etc., to be given back as fiefs on condition of rendering military service to the bigger lord. The smaller lord thus became the vassal of the bigger lord. The process went on until everyone became the lord of some and the vassal of others except the king who was the vassal of none and the peasant who was the lord of none. These ties of interdependence also produced corresponding religious ideology and cultural ethos. In all these views, the emergence of feudal society was attributed to some or the other dramatic event or events.

### **6.3.3 Perry Anderson on Feudalism**

It was Perry Anderson, an English scholar, who looked at the rise of feudalism as a long drawn process occurring at the base of society. For Anderson feudalism arose as a consequence of a mighty clash between two social systems, each in a process of transition. The European society of antiquity, based on the use of slave labour, was increasingly facing problems of productivity falling short of rising demand. The gap was widening because slave labour was essentially an inefficient form of labour where slaves had no interest in adopting new productivity raising devices. The ancient Graeco-Roman civilisation was thus facing a crisis. The tribal social organisation of the Germanic peoples too was facing a crisis of a different kind: its tribal egalitarian social structure was under strain partly due to the growth of stratification within and partly owing to contact with the highly developed Roman civilisation. Their clash in the fifth century resulted in the collapse of both, giving rise to a new social and economic system, named feudalism.

Feudalism is, thus, considered today by historians to be the result of complex interaction between various

forces of social existence-economic, political, cultural, institutional and so forth-at all levels of society. Its rise is thus a long drawn process rather than a sudden event.

## **6.4 GROWTH OF FEUDAL SYSTEM**

Historically, feudalism stands mid-way between slave society of ancient Greece and Rome and the modern day capitalist society. Here, we will discuss the main components of feudal system.

### **6.4.1 Form of Labour under Feudalism**

In slave society, the slave worked on land etc., which his master owned. The slave was paid no wages for his labour and had no formal right either over the land he cultivated or over its produce or over any part of the produce of his labour. He did not even have formally a family of his own in that his wife and children could be sold apart from him. He was treated by his master merely as a vocal instrument as distinct from the semi-vocal (ox) and the silent instrument (plough). He was, of course, completely separated from the means of production-land, implements, etc. over which he possessed no title.

Under capitalism too, the worker is separated from the means of production-the factory, the instruments, the raw material etc. with which he works. But he is entitled to wages in return for his labour; he is also free to move from one employer to another. These features mark him out from the slave of antiquity.

In between the two stands the medieval serf, who was neither completely separated from the means of production nor was he the absolute owner of these. A slave was like a piece of property which could be bought or sold anywhere, any time. The serf could not be sold apart from the land he worked on. In case the lord sold the land to another lord, the serf was automatically transferred to the new owner. The serf had the hereditary right of occupancy of land given to him by the lord, but he did not have the ownership right. The occupancy right was expressed in the phrase often used as a characteristic description of feudal society: "the peasant is tied to the land". This phrase had a dual meaning. If on one hand it meant that the peasant could not leave the land of his lord and go elsewhere, on the other it also limited the lord's right to evict the peasant from the land. Thus, even if the lord sold off a particular piece of land, the peasant could not be evicted from it; the land carried him to the new Matsue.

### **Obligations of the Serf**

Besides, the tied peasant or serf was fully entitled to the produce of his and his family's labour and of the land in his occupancy, even when the land formally belonged to the lord. And, of course, he had a family of his own. In return for the occupancy of the land, however, the serf was obliged to cultivate other fields, the produce of which went to the lord's household, without being paid for the labour. This was the rent he paid in labour for using the land which formally belonged to the lord. This was so even where the land under his occupation had originally belonged to the peasant himself but he had surrendered it to the lord in search of security and subsistence as we have seen above. The amount of labour rendered by him amounted to a half of his total labour.

The emphasis on the extraction of peasant's labour by the lord makes sense if we examine the production system in early medieval Western Europe.

## 6.4.2 Feudal Production System

Until about the tenth century, the fertility of West European soil was extremely low. It has been estimated that until then, the seed-yield ratio stood at 1:1.6 or at best at 1:2.5. And only about half the cultivated land was sown in one year, the other half lay fallow. This was because manure was the chief bottleneck in European agriculture and remained so until the coming of chemical fertilizers.

The natural low fertility was in turn reinforced by inefficient technology. The plough used by the early medieval peasant dug merely the surface of the soil; hence, it was called the 'scratch plough'. Because of lack of familiarity with the yoke, which would enable the ox to draw the plough with the strength of his shoulders, resulted in a grossly inefficient use of his draught power the plough was attached to his horns. The use of the horse for this purpose was still uncommon, again owing to inefficient harnessing. The plough was tied to a band which ran across the horse's breast; thus, the more forcefully the horse pulled it, the more his breathing was restricted. Other implements too were mostly made of wood and therefore, not the most efficient.

Consequently, the deeper fertility of the soil remained unutilized, so that the roots of the seeds spread horizontally, rather than vertically. This in turn necessitated the sowing of each seed at considerable distance from the others, in order that each seed got adequate amount of soil for germination. Thus, vast fields had to be tilled for obtaining a dismal amount of yield. It has been estimated that until about the tenth century A.D., 100 acres of land was required to maintain a peasant family at the bare margin of subsistence, and an average estate of a lord comprised 4000 acres.

It is not difficult to imagine, therefore, that the process of agricultural production in early medieval Europe was extremely labour-intensive.

### Climatic Factors

But then there was yet another facet to the labour intensity of this process.

The sunshine in Western Europe lasts at the most four months. Therefore, the entire activities of agricultural operations, from tilling the field to harvesting and storing the crop, have to be completed within three to four months. It was, thus, that 120 days comprised the formal period of agricultural operations. This fact resulted in a concentration of the demand for labour during the four months in a process of production that was already extremely labour-intensive. Hence, the emphasis on labour rent. Hence, also the fact that early feudalism placed the heaviest burden on those with least resources, namely those who had nothing to give except labour with bare hands.

### Check Your Progress 2

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.  
ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

- 1) The militaristic explanation for the origin of feudalism has been given by (Check one of the following for the correct answer).
  - a) Marc Bloch
  - b) Perry Anderson
  - c) Brunner



- d) Henry Pirenne.

The average size of manor of feudal lords used to comprise (Check one of the following for the correct answer)

- a) 1000 Acres
- b) 2000 Acres
- c) 3000 Acres
- d) 4000 Acres

- 2) Why was agricultural productivity low during the feudal period?

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## 6.4.3 The Class of Lords

The primary objective assigned to the feudal society was to provide a small minority of lords with a life of extravagance. The class of lords, of course, composed several layers:

- i) At the base were the Knights who had been assigned lands in fief in return for military service. The fiefs, originally assigned for the duration of service, gradually acquired the characteristics of hereditary property. The fief holder had the land cultivated through a combination of unpaid labour, wage labour and sharecropping etc.
- ii) The main element of the class of lords was the manorial lord. The manor, or estate, on average comprised 4000 acres. It was usually divided into three parts: the *demeane*, the *tenement* and the *waste*. The *demeane* and the *tenements* were under cultivation and the *waste* comprised forests and pastures, etc. open for use by the entire community. The produce of the *demeane* went into the lord's house (or hall) and that of the *tenement* into serfs labour. Both the *demeane* and the *tenements* were scattered in strips in different parts of the estate.
- iii) At the top of the hierarchy were the banal lords who derived their power over men from their control over land. They also had a right to make arbitrary demands over the inhabitants within their jurisdiction. Their resources too were the largest within the class.

The power exercised by the class of lords over the peasants arose from obligations imposed on them by 'custom'. Custom, instead of codified law, indeed was the predominant source on which the administration of justice and regulation of the social order was based. Both custom and 'obligations' were rather flexible entities and required a great deal of interpretation. From about the tenth century the higher lords came to concentrate judicial rights too in their hands and this completed the subjection of peasants to them. On the other hand, the very flexibility of custom often worked in favour of the peasants who sought to resist newer 'obligation' on the plea that they were not customary. Of course, the peasants' plea always carried much greater weight if they mobilised their collective strength behind it.

Let us briefly recapitulate the basic features of early feudal society. A small minority of lords was

maintained in a life of luxury and waste by a vast majority of labouring people in a system of agricultural production where large number of labourers were required for the agricultural operations. The greater demand for labour had tied the peasant to the field. The peasant was not allowed to leave the land. Yet, he had the formal assurance of the subsistence and security for himself and his family. This was the case until about the end of the tenth century.

Clearly that society lived with an enormous amount of tension. These arose from the acute scarcity of labour during the four months of agricultural operations and its surplus during the rest of the year, when the demand for food at the lower social strata would gradually exceed the supply and cause 'famines'. That society must find some solution to the problem in order to survive and grow.

## **6.5 THE DYNAMISM OF FEUDAL ECONOMY**

Roughly from the eleventh century, Western Europe enters into what Marc Bloch has called the 'Second Feudal Age'. Some extremely important technological and socioeconomic changes characterised this period. The old 'scratch plough' gradually gave way to a heavy plough which dug deeper into the soil and thus, opened up the deeper fertility to agricultural use. The new plough also broke the clods thus evenly spreading soil nutrition. The growing knowledge of the yoke enabled the cultivators to use the ox more efficiently. The horse too was harnessed more effectively replacing the earlier leather band across his breast with a solid circumference around his neck to which the plough was attached. The knowledge of horse shoe in turn prolonged the life of his shoe-nails (hooves) and enabled him to drive into hard virgin soil. The spread of oats cultivation at this time suggests increasing use of horses in agricultural as well as in other activities. Agricultural practices also changed. Some new crops such as legumes (beans, lentils) came to Europe at this time. Growing of legumes had several advantages:

- i) They provided vegetable protein to peasant diet which till then primarily consisted of carbohydrates and occasional animal protein when they killed some wild beasts.
- ii) The legume roots went deep into the soil and used its low lying fertility which corn plants did not.
- iii) The legume roots fertilized the soil with nitrogen even as the plants were growing.
- iv) The legumes and some other new crops improved the system of crop rotation so that two-thirds of the cultivable land, instead of a half as earlier, began to be sown each year. In other words, the system of two-field rotation gave way to three-field rotation.

The net consequence of all these developments was the raising of the seed-yield ratio from 1:2:5 to 1:4, which doubled the amount of food grains available for consumption. In former ratio, of the 2.5 grains, 1 had to be preserved as future seed: thus 1.5, were available for consumption: with the later ratio 3 grains would become available for it. This development also reduced the demand for labour with bare hands. With the yield rising, 25 to 30 acres sufficed to maintain a peasant family as against 100 acres earlier. Thus, the wastage of labour in traversing the fields was minimized.

### **6.5.1 Growth of Population**

More and better food also raised population at the lower strata of society to unprecedented levels. If population had grown by a hundred per cent in the three-and-a-half centuries preceding 1000 A.D., it grew by 170 per cent in the next three-and-a-half centuries from 20 million to 54 million. Thus, even as less

labour was required for agricultural operations as fields became smaller, the population was growing faster than ever before.

There was yet another technological development which contributed to this process. The coming first of the waterwheel and then the windmill to Europe took over many jobs earlier performed by human hands; the most widespread of these jobs was grinding of corn. As a result, more of human labour was spared for agriculture.

## **6.5.2 Trade and Urbanisation**

The technological and socio-economic changes which took place in the 11th-12th centuries altered the face of Western Europe. The growing population spread out to the uninhabited parts of Europe, and cut down forests to bring more land under cultivation; pastures similarly receded before the plough. The twelfth century in particular is a century of a great movement for land reclamation in Europe. This movement began with individual initiatives of petty peasants; the lords joined in later on to give it an organized form. With labour demand declining and population rising, the serf was released from being tied to land. In return for this release the serf paid a commutation fee to the lord: the lord used this money to buy labour in the growing labour market at steadily declining wages. It has been estimated that one lord obtained money in commutation equivalent to four times the value of labour that would have been due to him from his serfs. Paid labour was also far more productive than unpaid labour.

The rising productivity and production levels in the countryside also gave a fillip to trade as well as urbanisation. Now, countryside had more to sell than earlier and thus, the growing trade could maintain a larger segment of the population in cities. Trade 'was never absent anyway; now there was more of it. Agricultural production also came to be guided more and more by the profit motive and this brought merchants, both rural and urban, on to the agricultural scenes.

## **6.5.3 Growth of New Economy**

As we have noted, this agricultural progress was not based as much on labour intensity as on the intensity of capital investment in the form of heavy plough, the yoke, the horse etc. Thus, only those few peasants who could afford this investment benefited from it. Other small peasants, the vast majority of them, took loans to invest in land. One small crop failure or even a slight fall in prices deprived them of their lands and other equipment and drove them into the swelling ranks of the landless agricultural workers. On the other hand, the smaller lords, no longer in command of unpaid labour of serfs, and merchants, took to agricultural production with a view to earning profit; thus, they produced only those crops which fetched them high prices; and they employed wage labour.

This was a new kind of economy, alien to the feudal economy. This was an economy worked by the emerging capitalist farmer and the wage-earning landless agricultural worker, who would freely move to places where wages were the highest. The feudal extravagance also yielded to a new kind of ethos where reinvestment, rather than wastage of profit would enlarge the scale of production, and bring in even more profit.

### **Check Your Progress 3**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

- ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.
- 1) How do you differentiate between demeane, tenements and waste?

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- 2) What was "commutation fee"? Write in five lines.

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- 3) Why did only rich peasants benefit from 'Agricultural Progress' ?

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## 6.6 DECLINE OF FEUDALISM

However, the rate of "agricultural progress" began to decline by about the second decade of the fourteenth century. This was to bear a major impact on subsequent history of the region.

The reason for this decline lay in the frantic land reclamation movement of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The fast growing population had cut down forests and done away with pastures at a pace that destroyed the delicate ecological balance between these on one hand, and the arable land on the other. The cutting down of forests led in the West European ecology to continuous rain. In 1315 and 1316 the sun did not shine; consequently, the crops failed and the ensuing famine wiped out a tenth of the population. The elimination of pastures on the other hand affected the health and numbers of cattle and that in turn, reduced the animal manure, chief source of fertilizer for the field. The productivity of land was therefore affected, and as a consequence, human beings' health suffered.

The fourteenth century as a whole was marked by numerous famines on one hand, which weakened human resistance to disease, and epidemics on the other which took a heavy toll of human lives. The Black Death of 1348-SI was only one, though the most disastrous in the series. It was caused by the plague and it brought death to anywhere between a fourth and a half of the population of Europe. Even if we accept the lower figure, the population of Europe had declined by 40 per cent at the end of the fourteenth century than at the beginning.

### **6.6.1 Shortage of Labour**

Understandably, such massive deaths caused enormous convulsions on the continent. The immediate result was a great labour shortage, and consequent rise in wages. But the prices of agricultural products declined in correspondence with falling demand, also owing to massive deaths. This trend was reinforced by the abandoning of less fertile lands and cultivation of the more fertile ones again for the same reason and paradoxically, this raised the production levels even as the demand was crashing. While the wage labourers gained double from this trend of rising wages and declining food prices, the lords were the chief losers. Their incomes from land declined even as the costs of production rose with rising wages. Moreover, the prices of luxury goods rose sharply because many of the artisans had died, and production levels therefore had fallen. Thus, the lords were faced with the dilemma; should they do without the luxurious life style to which they had been accustomed for centuries because their incomes were declining and the prices of these goods were rising ? Or should they squeeze the peasants instead and maintain their standards of luxury? Inevitably they chose the latter alternative. But they sought to squeeze the peasants through the institutional effort of the state rather than through individual initiative. The state, never a strong entity under classic feudal conditions when its power was distributed amongst the lords, now rose as a powerful institution to intervene on behalf of the lords.

### **6.6.2 Peasant Rebellions**

The peasantry responded by fleeing and rising in rebellions of truly continental dimensions. Massive peasant rebellions rocked France, and England in the fifteenth century, Spain and Germany. These rebellions were ultimately crushed, but the feudal reaction of the State which had triggered them off lay in a shambles by the end of the century. The state as a last resort tried to enforce feudal regulations on peasants. But the conditions were favourable for the peasant and the state power failed to achieve its aims.

The crisis of 14th-15th centuries or the crisis in the feudal economy of Europe contributed to the decline of feudalism and prepared the ground for the rise of capitalism. The European economy began to recover some of its lost strength from the fifteenth century onwards, but this recovery was made possible because the economy had turned its back on what was being increasingly rendered a backward looking system. The destruction of feudalism was the result of its own internal development over the centuries. The destruction did not come simultaneously in all regions of western Europe; in France the collapse of feudalism came much later than in England. In eastern Europe feudalism was still firmly established between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries; while by that time in western Europe it had merely become a subject of the historian's quest.

## **6.7 FEUDALISM IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT**

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the concept of feudalism was adopted by European historians and applied to the pre-modern history of different regions of the world, such as China, West Asia, Japan and India. In India Col. James Tod visualized the development of classic European feudalism in his own day, in the 1820s in Rajasthan. The application of this concept became possible partly, because of the European conquest of or contact with these regions and therefore, the analysis of their history and society in terms of European categories; and partly also because 'feudalism' was a convenient concept that could explain an entire range of situations. From European historians the concept was taken over by Indian historians, and its meaning somewhat enlarged.

In India the term 'Indian feudalism' portrayed the picture of an economy where trade had declined and thus a shortage of currency resulted. This obliged the State to give land to Brahmins in charity and to a lesser extent to officials. These land and assignees subjected the peasants to their own control and thus established feudalism. By the eleventh century trade began to revive; the peasants labour was subjected to 'commutation' and feudalism declined.

## Debate on Indian Feudalism

The concept of 'Indian feudalism' has been criticized in recent historiography. It has been argued that this concept implies a dichotomy between trade and feudalism; the concept also uses terms and categories of analysis derived from the European context, such as manor, serf, commutation etc. The criticism follows the argument that Indian ecology, technology and the social systems are fundamentally different from those of Europe and therefore the attempt to understand the pre-modern history of India as of other regions must be on its own terms rather than on terms derived from Europe.

However, the term feudalism continues to be used in popular as well as scholarly literature. This is partly due to its vague meaning so that it can be bent to cover many situations, as stated above. Some other variants of the term such as semifeudalism, proto-feudalism or "feudalism" (within quotation marks) have also appeared.

## Check Your Progress 4

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.  
ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

- 1) The fourteenth century Europe was affected by numerous famines because of  
(Check one of the following for correct answer):

- i) poor technology
- ii) poor motivation of peasants
- iii) climatic failure
- iv) increase in population

- 2) What were the reasons for the rebellions of peasant in the late 14th and 15th centuries

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Colonel James Todd believed that classical European feudalism existed in India in the state of (Check one of the following for correct answer)

- i) Uttar Pradesh
- ii) Gujarat
- iii) Bihar
- iv) Rajasthan

## 6.8 LET US SUM UP

Slavery existed in ancient societies and in some it took the form of "mode of production". But the kind of slavery that existed in India was very different from the slavery of classical societies of Rome and Greece. The transition from "Slave Society" to "Feudal Society" has been explained by several historians. Henry Pirenne attributed the origin of feudalism to specific economic changes in Europe that contributed to decline of trade and increase in ruralization. A more comprehensive explanation of feudalism came from Marc Bloch who associated the origin of feudalism to a number of social, economic and cultural changes that took place in Western European society during the fifth century. Its susceptibility increased due to successive invasions, insecurity of economy, and poor subsistence levels which necessitated emergence of a new set of 'ties of interdependence' among social classes, lords, vassals and serfs. Feudalism responded well to challenges of economy and innovations were made in agricultural technology and cropping patterns. A new labour class of 'serfs' came into being who enjoyed an intermediate position between the 'slaves' of antiquity and 'free wage labour' of industrial capitalism. The dynamism of feudal mode of production increased wealth, food production and population. It generated demand for more labour.

Feudal mode of agricultural production was capital-intensive and not labour-intensive as was the case before it. New technologies of seeds, ploughs and crop-rotation made increased yield possible on smaller tracts of land. Peasants and lords who could not afford new capital intensive agriculture were displaced from land and went in search of new land reclamation. It led to deforestation and ecological destruction which caused great famines of the fourteenth century. Peasant revolts broke out and thus, emerged a crisis in feudalism which ultimately led to its decay.

The historical debate on feudalism in India has been initially based on Western method of historiography. It is associated with decline in trade and paucity of currency which motivated state to parcel out land to Brahmins to generate land revenue. These higher caste feudal lords engaged peasant-serf for cultivation. Thus, feudalism emerged. But this theory is still being debated.

## 6.9 KEY WORDS

**Black Death:** a deadly epidemic of bubonic plague in England in 1348

**Commutation:** charges or fee for freeing the serfs from bondage

**Demeane:** a manor house with land adjacent to it (whose produce went to feudal lord)

**Feudum:** land held in consideration of military service

**Harness:** tackle, equipment or gear for draught animals

**Legume:** pulses

**Manor:** a landed estate belonging to noble men

**Tenement:** a holding whose produce belonged to the serf

**Wasteland:** the landed estate of feudal lord that was not cultivated

**Yoke:** frame of wood joining oxen at the neck

**Deforestation:** the phenomenon of decline in total land under forests.

## **6.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS/ EXERCISES**

### **Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) Read section 6.2 and write your own answer.
- 2) Find out from sub-section 6.2.2

### **Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) c
- 2) d
- 3) Read sub-section 6.4.2 and write in your own language.

### **Check Your Progress 3**

- 1) Find out from sub-section 6.4.3.
- 2) Read sub-section 6.5.2
- 3) Read sub-section 6.5.3 and write your own answer.

### **Check Your Progress 4**

- 1) (iii)
- 2) Find out from sub-sections 6.6B and 6.6.2
- 3) (iv)