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Module: V The Feudal Society its origin and its crisis: Historiography

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5.1 Definition

The term feudal comes from the word 'feud' which means land. So feudalism was a system in which service were obtained in return of allotment of land. In his book 'The Middle Ages', Myers defined feudalism as "...a special form of society and government based upon a peculiar tenure of land". It may be noted here that there is no universally applicable definition of feudalism but the most classic definition is that given by Marc Bloch in his book 'Feudal Society'. He listed the essential features of feudalism as follows- a subject peasantry; widespread use of service tenement (ie, the fief) instead of salary which was out of the question; the supremacy of a class of specialized warriors, ties of obedience and protection which bind man to man and within the warrior class assume the distinctive form called vassalage, fragmentation of society leading inevitably to disorder and in the midst of all these, the survival of other forms of

associations, family and state, of which the latter during the second feudal age was to acquire renewed strength.

5.2 Origin and Development of Feudalism in Europe

The Feudal system of Europe was of a composite character as it contained both Roman and Teutonic elements in it. When entrance into knighthood took the character of a Christian sacrament, feudalism became an aspect of medieval Christianity. According to Thompson & Johnson feudalism was a compound of Roman, Christian and German elements, molded into a new form by contemporary conditions of life. The beginnings of feudalism in Europe can be traced to the late Roman Empire, although it took its final shape only in the 9th or 10th century A.D. In order to understand the origin and development of feudalism in Europe, we need to trace the probable origin, as already noted, of its three prominent elements- namely, the fief, the patronage and the sovereignty.

The fief grew out of the *beneficium*, a form of estate well known among the Romans. Following the barbarian invasions, the leaders of the invading tribes appropriated large portions of land and in keeping with their custom, granted to their followers and friends parcels of their dominions, upon the simple condition of faithfulness. At first these estates were bestowed only for life, and were called by the Latin name of *benefices*, but in the course of time (about 9th century) as the royal land expanded by inheritance and successful wars, they became hereditary and began to be called *fiefs* or *feuds*.

Another important source of fiefs was usurpation. In the late Carolingian period, taking advantage of the weaknesses of its sovereigns, the counts, dukes, marquises and other royal officers made their offices hereditary, and then got their duchies, counties, and provinces regarded as fief granted to them by the king. Fiefs also arose when the owners of freehold tenures, during the anarchy and confusion of 9th and 10th centuries, voluntarily surrendered their estates to some powerful lords for protection and then received it back as fiefs.

The origin of feudal patronage (close personal ties between the lord and his vassals) lay, according to some, in the German institution of *comitatus* which bound the companion to the chief. Others have traced it to the Roman custom of *patrocinium* or patronage. Still others have traced it to the Gallic custom of *commendation*, whereby a person subjected himself to a more powerful lord for the sake of his patronage and protection. With time this peculiar personal relation, characterized on the part of vassal by pledges of fealty, service and aid, and on the part of the lord by promise of counsel and protection, came to be united with the benefice. The union of these two ties completed the feudal tenure.

The feudal sovereignty, the right of fief holder to administer justice, to mint coins, and to wage wars in their estates, which originally, was vested with the king, was acquired in two ways chiefly- by the king's voluntary surrender of his rights and by usurpation.

During the Merovingian and Carolingian period the rulers often conferred upon churches, monasteries, and important persons a portion of the royal power by *grants of immunity*. Thus a monastery by such a grant was freed from royal interference and allowed to administer in its area freely. This in turn weakened the royal authority.

As mentioned earlier, in the later Carolingian period, taking advantage of king's weaknesses, the royal officers often usurped the kingly power, and thus transformed themselves into petty sovereigns, only nominally dependent upon the king. By such usurpation the kingdoms into which the empire of Charles the Great was at first broken became still further subdivided into numerous petty feudal principalities, and the royal power was distributed down through the ranks of a more or less perfectly civil hierarchy.

5.3 Salient Features of Feudalism

- A prominent feature of feudalism was **the beneficiary nature of land**. Land was given in lieu of service. In general the duty of the vassal was service and that of the lord was protection. Service included military service in times of war and those of financial nature. The land granted was called a fief or feud. The person granting a fief was called the suzerain, liege or lord; the one receiving it his vassal, liegeman or retainer.
- It was **a hierarchical graded system** with king at the top, followed by different grades of lords, the knights being of the lowest rank, and the serfs at the bottom. The vassals or fief holders of various grades constituted a very small portion of the population, perhaps 5 percent or much less. The vast majority of the population comprised of different grades of serfs who were tied to the soil.
- **Serfdom** was an essential component of feudalism in Europe. The serfs who comprised the vast majority of the population were tied to the soil. They could not, of their own will, leave the estate or manor, nor could the lord evict them from their holdings. In return for the small plot of land they received from their lord, they had to pay a rent usually in kind and personal services. The peasants were subjected to many vexatious tax and forced labour. Legally a serf was the lord's chattel and not much better than livestock.
- There was multiple hierarchical rights and interest in land. A person receiving a large fief often parceled out in tracts to others on terms similar to those on which he himself had received it. This granting of land was known as **sub-infeudation**.
- The grantees enjoyed full or partial **rights of sovereignty** over those living in the state.
- The feudal economy was characterized by decline in commerce and subsequent decline of the urban centers. Land was the major productive force and was primarily based on **self-sufficient rural economy**.
- A fief was conferred by a very solemn and peculiar ceremony called '**homage**' which included the 'oath of fealty' and concluded by the act of investiture.

- Another important feature of feudalism was the institution of **chivalry**. It was a military institution or order, the member of which called knights were pledged to the protection of the Church and the defense of the weak and the oppressed.
- The castles of the nobles were another significant aspect of feudalism in Europe. These were strong stone fortresses, usually perched upon some rocky eminence, and defended by moats and towers. Strong walls were the only protection against the universal violence of the age.
- **Manorialism** is considered by some as a facet of feudalism in Europe. It was a system by which the whole village community participated in the work of cultivation. Ordinarily, a manor was formed of 500 to 2000 acres of land and included arable lands, meadow, pasture, woodland and waste land. The manor house, where lesser lord lived, was the centre of local administration. It was a system dependent upon the heavy toil and heavy taxation of the peasants.
- Feudalism in Europe, on its military side, primarily arose as a defensive military system and was the product of the anarchy and disorder that followed the death of Charles the Great and inability of the state to provide protection and security to its people.

5.4 Merits of Feudalism

- The greatest contribution of feudalism to the medieval society was the protection it gave to it after the break-up of the empire of Charles the Great. It was the feudal cavalry force and the impregnable walls of the feudal castle that failed the attacks of the Danes, the Saracens and the Hungarians.
- It imposed checks on the king. He had to depend upon the feudal lords for military assistance. This prevented the monarchy from being despotic.
- Feudalism gave a simple system of administration, protection and justice to the illiterate people of medieval Europe.
- Feudalism also contributed to the development of republicanism. It helped in the establishment of a free constitution in England and the feudal union in Germany. In England the barons greatly contributed to the Magna Carta, the house of commons etc.
- It fostered among its privileged members the spirit of liberty.
- Feudalism also gave impetus to certain forms of polite literature. Poetry and romance were fostered by the open and joyous hospitalities of baronial halls. "It is to the feudal times" says Guizot "that we trace back the earliest literary documents of England, France and Germany, the earliest intellectual enjoyment of modern Europe"
- It also created a nice sense of honour and an exalted consideration for woman which found its noble expression in chivalry.

5.5 Demerits of Feudalism

- Feudalism gave set-backs to national unity. People became faithful to their own feudal lords. For them not the nation but their own area was their own kingdom. France for example was divided into 150 fiefs in the 10th century. Many of these fief holders were stronger and richer than the king himself and thus imposed a challenge to the exercise of full sovereignty by the king.
- Mutual rivalries of the feudal lords created an atmosphere of chaos. Again, the army of different feudal lords lacked any harmony. Further the feudal lords were chief of justice in their respective jagirs. Hence there was no uniform justice system.
- The feudal lords could not pay much attention to agriculture, trade and art and literature because of continual fights. Hence these areas continued to suffer.
- The system caused tremendous misery and suffering to the peasants. They worked without wages, served their masters from dawn to dusk, and yet they did not get even adequate food.
- It also created a spirit of luxury loving among the privileged class. To satisfy their lust they did not hesitate to commit acts of cruelties. Hence their moral values suffered a decline.

5.6 Causes of the Decay of Feudalism

- A chief reason behind the decay of feudalism was the hostility of the kings and common people towards it. In fact it was never regarded with much favour by any class except the nobles, who were the greatest beneficiary of the system. Kings opposed it and sought to break it down, because it left them only the semblance of power. The common people hated it because they were exploited and treated like dirt under this system.
- The **crusades**, or Holy Wars, that agitated all Europe during the 12th and 13th centuries did much to weaken the power of the nobles. It exhausted their resources and the power and influence passed into the hands of the kings or the wealthy merchants of the cities.
- The growth of towns also tended to the same end. As they increased in wealth and influence, they became able to resist the exactions and tyranny of the lord in whose fief they happened to be, and eventually were able to break away from its authority, and to make themselves little republics.
- Again, the improvements in the mode of warfare, especially those relating from the use of gunpowder, hastened the downfall of feudalism. It rendered the foot-soldier equal to the armor-clad knight. The castle now became a useless thing.

5.7 The Transition Debate

The period 1350 to 1650 is regarded as the period during which Europe underwent far reaching changes in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres. It was at this time Europe witnessed the first cracks in feudalism, underwent an age of transition and transformation and ultimately culminated in the birth of capitalism. While there is consensus amongst scholars in

accepting the 14th century which witnessed first cracks in the feudal system, they hold diverse opinions as to how feudalism declined.

It was **Maurice Dobb** who initiated the transition debate elaborately in his book '**Studies in the Development of Capitalism**' (published in 1946). The main argument of **Dobb** is that feudalism did not decline from external impact but from internal contradictions. Capitalism according to **Dobb** came about through certain changes within the feudal system, whereby the rural economy of the middle ages was threatened by the move from agrarian self sufficiency to the production of a surplus. This was followed by establishment of markets to sell this rural surplus and as this trade in agrarian products expanded, the feudal economy came under threat. Growing monetization made both the lords and the serfs prefer cash payments. Feudal dues were thus commuted to cash rents, which in turn further undermined the social fabric of the feudal system. As market economy further encroached into feudal preserves there arose conflicts between the rulers and the ruled and also between controllers of the new economy and traditional feudal power. The transition was therefore not just economic transition but social and political as well.

American economist **Paul Sweezy** has refuted the 'internal contradiction' theory of **Dobb** in his work '**Feudalism: A Critique**'. Following **Pirenne's** famous thesis, **Sweezy** held that expansion of Europe's overseas trade was the primary factor behind the gradual decline of feudalism in Europe. The crusades brought Europe in close contact with the East, which in turn boosted the North Sea and Mediterranean trade of Europe. Internal communication between the European states also improved. These intra-European trade routes later assisted the rise of numerous new towns and also helped to resurrect many dying cities in Europe. This process of urbanization in Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries not only increased urban based industrial production but also stimulated increasing demand among the city dwellers for agrarian products. Again, to meet and satiate their ever increasing craze for new products, the feudal lords started enhancing their revenue demands and accepting it in cash instead of kind. The serfs who failed to meet the exorbitant revenue demand fled to urban areas. This growing trend among the serfs caused a rapid growth in urban population and also provided the much needed labour for industries in the urban areas. Sweezy argues that as the scale of commercialization and subsequent urbanization was at marginal stage in East Europe, the feudal system in these areas survived for a longer period.

The 'demographic theory' was put forward by scholars like **Le Roy Ladurie** of the Annales School, **Michael. M. Postan**, **Guy Bois** and others. **Michael. M. Postan** dismissed both **Dobb** and **Sweezy's** view and has presented the demographic theory instead to explain the process of transition in Europe. In the 12th and 13th centuries population increased considerably in Europe but as the agrarian productivity failed to keep pace with it even after bringing fallow land within the purview of cultivation, the food prices started soaring. The feudal lords too started imposing additional taxes on the peasants. According to **Postan** these inter-related factors increased the peasant's dependency on their feudal lords. But increased pressure on land and consequent

reduction in the fertility of soil, famines, epidemics and other factors in the 14th and 15th centuries considerably brought down the population in Europe. As a result the demand for peasant labour became greater than its supply. To maintain its hold over the workforce for cultivation, the feudal lords now adopted damage control measures like reduction of taxes and relaxation of control over the peasants which led to commutation of rent, greater freedom for the peasant class and finally break-down of the serfdom and feudalism.

In his work '**Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe**', **Robert Brenner**, has dismissed the commercialization theory and also the demographic theory of feudal decline in Europe. In analyzing the commercialization theory **Brenner** argues that if commercial revolution had stimulated demand for new products among the feudal lords on both sides of Europe, why then changes culminating in the birth of capitalism in West Europe did not occur in East Europe? With regard to the 'demographic theory' Brenner's questions are more direct. Population increased on both sides of Europe in the 11th and 12th centuries and similarly declined in the 13th and 14th centuries, why then, similar events produced diverse outcomes.

Brenner opines that the aforesaid theories prioritized economy and undermined the polity. According to Brenner distribution of political power in the West and East Europe were not similar. Even during the peak phase of feudalism in West Europe, the legal presence of state power existed as a byproduct of Carolingian political tradition (France, England, German Empire, Netherlands) and there was always a struggle for supremacy between the state and the ruling class (feudal lords). And indeed it was for this reason that the serfs in West Europe could retain some rights which the feudal lords could not violate. As the demographic pressure on land increased in the 11th and 12th centuries, the specific rights enjoying peasant class took the initiative to cultivate fallow land. The lure of more revenue motivated the state power to extend its cooperation to these peasants. In the face of combined opposition from the state power and its subjects, the feudal lords in West Europe were forced to concede defeat which consequently led to commutation of rent, collapse of serfdom and the final decline of feudalism.

In East Europe the scene was different. Here the state power was comparatively weak. The responsibility of providing security was entirely upon the feudal class. As a result the merchants in these areas functioned as agents of the feudal lords, and for which commercial revolution failed to benefit other classes in East Europe, except the feudal class. Hence difference in the distribution of power structure between the East and the West caused the decay in feudalism in West Europe (13th-14th centuries) much earlier than East Europe.

5.9 Glossary

Benefice a Latin term for rewards given for life by the Roman Empire in return for services rendered.

Beneficium	a Latin term used by the Roman Empire to describe the benefits given to an individual for services rendered.
Chivalry	a military institution or order, the member of which called knights were pledged to the protection of the church and to the defence of the weak and the oppressed.
Comitatus	a Latin term for armed escort or retinue used especially in the context of warrior culture of the German tribes.
Commendation	a formal ceremony during the early medieval period to create a bond between a lord and his fighting man called his vassal.
Crusades	great military expeditions carried on intermittently from 1096-1273 A.D. by the Christian of Europe for the purpose of rescuing from the Muslims, the Holy Place of Palestine and maintaining in the East a Latin kingdom.
Fief	an estate of land, especially one held on condition of feudal service; a fee.
Homage	a solemn and peculiar ceremony which took place at the time of conferring fief to a vassal; it meant an expression of willingness on the part of the vassal to be completely the lord's man.
Oath of fealty	a promise on the part of the vassal to be faithful to the feudal lord given at the time of the ceremony of the homage.
Patrocinium	an ancient Roman institution whereby wealthy and influential persons would keep themselves surrounded by followers called clients who were dependents of their patrons and enjoyed their aid and support.
Serfdom	a form of peasant servitude in feudal Europe in which a tenant farmer was bound to a hereditary plot of land and to the will of his master.
Sub-infeudation	regranting or parceling out of feudal lands to others on terms the fief holder had himself received it.

Vassal a holder of land by feudal tenure on condition of homage and allegiance

5.9 Suggested Readings

Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, Vol. 1, Taylor and Francis

Rodney Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism: Essays in Medieval Social History*, Bloomsbury Academics

P. V. N. Myers, *The Middle Ages*, The Athenum Press, Boston, USA

Rila Mukherjee, *Europe Transformed (1350-1789)*, Progressive Publishers, Kolkata

Meenaxi Phukan, *Rise of the Modern West*, Trinity, New Delhi

K.C. Chaudhury, *The Middle Ages*, New Central Book Agency, Calcutta

