
UNIT 23 TRADE AND THE DECLINE OF FEUDALISM

Structure

- 23.1 Introduction
- 23.2 General Debate on the Decline
- 23.3 Technology and Productivity of Land and Labour
- 23.4 Growth of Urban Centres
- 23.5 Transformation of Rural Scenario
- 23.6 Other Views on Decline
- 23.7 Summary
- 23.8 Glossary
- 23.9 Exercises

23.1 INTRODUCTION

In the preceding three Units of this Block we discussed some important elements of feudalism in Europe. These included: i) various debates on the origin and nature of feudalism as a political, economic and social system; ii) forms and structure of feudal system and iii) the features of two major phases through which feudalism passed. These three units must have provided you a fairly good understanding of the feudal system in Europe. You must have also noticed that in the 14th century gradual decline of feudalism began and in due course of time it came to an end as a dominant system in Europe. Here, in this Unit we will focus our discussion on the process of decline of feudalism with special attention being paid to the role of trade in it. There has been considerable debate and difference of opinion among scholars on this issue.

Revival and expansion of trade and consequent growth of towns has been conceived by some scholars as the dominant cause for the decline of feudalism. Level of technology, agricultural productivity, demographic changes and transformation of rural scenario are some other issues which were considered important factors which contributed to the decline of feudalism in varying degrees. In this Unit we will analyse all these views to understand the process of decline. Our aim here is not to identify any one view as the primary cause but put before you the whole range of debate pertaining to the question of decline of feudalism. It is not possible to include the views of all the scholars who have worked on this theme therefore we have selected the main views only. The major scholars whose views have been included in this Unit are Henri Pirenne, Maurice Dobb, Kochuru Takahashi, Guy Bois, Marc Bloch, Georges Duby, Paul Sweezy and Robert Brenner.

23.2 GENERAL DEBATE ON THE DECLINE

The centrality of trade in both the rise of feudalism and its decline was established by the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne in the 1920s and 30s in his books, *Medieval Cities: Their Origin and the Revival of Trade, Economic and*

Social History of Medieval Europe and *Mahomet and Charlemagne*. For Pirenne, long distance trade, or 'grand trade' as he called it, was the driving force of all flourishing civilisations and its disruption, for whatever reason, brought the onward march of civilisation to a halt.

It was thus that European civilisation in Antiquity had attained glorious heights owing to trade across the Mediterranean, for it was not only an economic motor of society, but became the conduit for the cross fertilisation of ideas and cultures across long distances. Once trans-Mediterranean trade was disrupted by the Muslim-Arab invasions in the seventh century, and the Arab capture of crucial entry points to the Sea in both the East (Alexandria) and the West (Gibraltar) and the control of Sardinia in the middle, the European economy turned inwards and was ruralised; consequently it became sluggish, even as petty trade continued in pockets. Pirenne called it 'the break up of the economic equilibrium of the ancient world'. This also signalled the end of urban life, which could only be sustained by long distance trade, and the end of great ideas travelling long distances; life became dull. This was feudalism. However, the Crusades in the 11th century pushed the Arabs back into the Middle East, their homelands, and Europe was thus liberated. 'Grand trade' was revived and urban centres came to life once again. This marked the beginning of the end of feudalism. He quotes the saying 'city life makes a man free' to emphasise the transformation.

Pirenne thus established a fundamental dichotomy between feudalism and trade; one was irreconcilable with the other. This was a watershed in conceptualising European feudalism and became the centre point of emulation and discussion among historians for a long time. Its influence spread far beyond Europe's boundaries and the feudalism/trade dichotomy formed the basis of the construction of the notion of Indian feudalism, for example, and the one in the Near East (developed by E. Ashtor); both follow its contours almost to the last detail.

In some fundamental ways Pirenne's thesis altered history-writing altogether by widening its canvas so extensively as to encompass the whole society, whereas hitherto only small scale, particular causes were sought out to explain the rise and decline of feudalism. One theory in the nineteenth century even traced the origin of feudalism to the horse stirrup! The discussion of the Pirenne thesis understandably led to its questioning, and ultimately its complete rejection, especially its centre piece, the trade/feudalism dichotomy.

Among the most serious challenges to the thesis was posed by a Marxist economic historian of the rise of capitalism, Maurice Dobb at the University of Cambridge. In 1946 he published *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, in which he began by examining the decline of feudalism. The question of trade was crucial for his examination. As a Marxist he would not accept trade as the autonomous agent in the working of an economic system. Trade on its own, for him, did not have the force to alter any economic system, for it could subsist with any and all of these, be it slavery, feudalism, capitalism, or any other. It would remain subservient to what he called the system's 'internal articulation', i.e. inherent class struggle. To elaborate this view, he recalled Frederick Engels' nineteenth century observation that far from dissolving feudal relations, the revival of trade in Eastern Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries led to 'the second serfdom' there. Serfdom was for Marxists like

Dobb the very hallmark of feudalism. Trade and feudalism were in his view thus quite compatible with each other.

What then in Dobb's perception caused the decline of West European feudalism was its 'internal crisis', a mode of analysis very dear to Marxists. The eleventh century Crusaders who pushed the Arabs back into the Near East went chasing them right into their home territories. There they were introduced to the hitherto unheard of Oriental luxuries, like perfumes, silks and spices etc. Having performed their duties as religiously fired crusaders, they now turned traders and sold these luxurious items back home to European aristocrats at fabulous prices. The introduction of Oriental luxuries to the West gravely altered the cultural and economic scenario, for the aristocracy began to long for them and would pay any price. If this longing encouraged low volume high value trade between Western Europe and the Middle East, it created a crisis of resources at home. For, the incomes of the class of landlords had become inelastic because the productivity of land – the chief source of income – had reached a plateau because of the 'low level of technology'. Thus the demands, and therefore the expenditure, of this class were rising, but the incomes remained static. There was however one mode of raising resources: squeezing the peasant further. The peasant in the agricultural economy being the primary producer of wealth could still be squeezed an extra bit to yield that extra money.

Here Dobb introduces another factor, which he shares with Pirenne: the revival of the city. Yet, if Pirenne links this phenomenon with the revival of trade, Dobb does not establish any causal links. He just seems to assume that the city was rising in Western Europe of its own will. The city in turn provided alternative avenues of employment to the increasingly impoverished peasant; inevitably, the flight of the peasant from the countryside to the city to escape the rising demands of the landlord was the form class struggle took in this case. Indeed, there was a three-way class struggle: between the lords and the serfs and between the lords and the urban bourgeoisie which was increasingly occupying economic space that was alternative to the feudal mode of production. The flight of the impoverished peasant from the countryside left the landlords helpless and it was thus that feudalism collapsed. If trade had any role in it, it was entirely subordinate to class struggle between the serf and the lord. The city and the urban bourgeoisie aided the process of the decline.

Basically then Dobb was questioning the Pirennean feudalism/trade dichotomy and instead establishing compatibility between the two.

The publication of *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* led to an international debate with resonances still not quite silenced. The book was reviewed by another eminent Marxist economist of the USA, Paul Sweezy. Sweezy by and large upheld the Pirennean thesis and the trade/feudalism incompatibility. Dobb responded to it. The debate was joined by other chiefly Marxist scholars from as far as Japan. Kochuru Takahashi, Japanese historian, was the one who introduced yet another facet to the debate by pointing out that capitalism did not arise from the debris of feudalism through the agency of the rising bourgeoisie alone; as in the case of Japan after the Meiji restoration, the State, and not the Capitalist class, became the agency for creating capitalist economy there, a view that was greatly appreciated by the other participants. The whole debate was published under the title 'The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism' in 1952. Later on others joined in and a new volume with the

same title was edited by R.H.Hilton and published again in 1978. The central problem in the debate still remained the role of trade and town in the decline of feudalism. The new edition had an additional contribution from John Merrington which specifically dealt with the varying views about town and country in the transition to Capitalism. Merrington does not give a 'yes' or 'no' answer and traces the history of the 'yes' or 'no' answers given by others; himself, he is inclined towards denying to town and trade the chief agency of the dissolution of feudalism. The extensive debate showed decisively that there was not one, single Marxist view and that Marxists were as capable of holding differences among themselves as with others.

If Dobb argued for the compatibility of trade and feudalism, another Marxist historian from France, Guy Bois, went a step further and established a causal link between the two, though he was not directly participating in the debate. In fact his book appeared first in his native French and then in English translation long after the debate had occurred. In his book, *The transformation of the year one thousand: The village of Lournand from antiquity to feudalism*, he examines one village in transition in France at the date that conventionally marks the break and notices that development of trade, far from weakening the feudal ties of lord and peasant there, was actually reinforcing them. Unlike Dobb, he does not take his lead from Engels and does not study Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century to make his point; on the contrary he concentrates on the land that formed the heart of feudalism and around the date when feudalism had reached its highest point.

However, even as the debate on the question of trade as the dissolvent of feudalism raged, and the participants often appeared divided on two sides of the fence, there was yet a considerable number of shared assumptions among them. Pirenne's low opinion of the level of technology and productivity of land and labour in medieval Europe, was shared by Dobb, Hilton and others. Also common between them was the view that the town was the critical element in the dissolution of feudalism and that town was external to the feudal system. If, as stated above, Pirenne gives us a reason for the revival of urbanisation, Dobb does not do even that; he just assumes that urbanisation must have occurred somehow, and having once occurred it acted as a magnet to the impoverished peasantry as a source of succour and shelter. It is time to examine both these propositions about 'low technology' and the town as the extraneous dissolvent of feudalism.

23.3 TECHNOLOGY AND PRODUCTIVITY OF LAND AND LABOUR

Whether technology is low or high is a purely relative question, relative to time and to space. Technology in any sector, or even in general, might be high or low relative to an earlier or later epoch in another space; or else, it might be low or high in relation to the same region at another point of time. For instance, the level of technology in the twentieth century in general can be said to be much higher than say in the fifteenth century around the globe, just as the level of technology in the automobile or the pharmaceutical sector can be said to be high in the U.S. than in Africa. In other words, technology is not low or high by itself. Secondly, technology is never static, though it might appear so in a short term context; it constantly keeps evolving in each and all sectors

over time even in the same region. By assuming the low level of technology in medieval Europe, both Pirenne and Dobb lost sight of the enormous changes taking place in the long period encompassed.

It is thus that production technology, which basically raises the productivity of labour – and in the sphere of agriculture, of land – was steadily evolving in medieval Europe, though the pace of its evolution stretched it out over what to us appear as very long durations, sometimes running into decades and even centuries. The long stretches of evolution leave us with the impression of changelessness. Since land was the primary means of creating wealth, and labour its chief instrument, an overview of changes in technology and productivity in this arena would demonstrate its enormous dynamism.

In what is termed as the early Middle Ages –fifth to eighth or ninth centuries – in most of Southern Europe and the region around the Mediterranean, which is the most fertile because of the prolonged sunshine, the seed:yield ratio was about 1:1.6 or at the most 1:2.5. That is for a seed of 10 Kilograms, the field returned at the most 25 kilograms of yield. Of this 10 Kgs had to be reserved as seed for the next year's crop, leaving just about 15 Kgs for consumption. The technology that was in use here was simple: a light plough scratched the surface of the soil, and was thus known as the scratch plough, or *araire*. This left the deeper fertility of the soil unutilised, for the soil there remained hard and would resist the spread of the roots of the seedling. This also necessitated large fields and a lot of manual labour input. On the other hand, the sunshine in the area lasted some four months in the year; hence all agricultural processes had to be carried out during this period. It was thus that there was constant tension at all levels in society over the demand for labour.

This was the setting for the evolution of agricultural technology. Heavy plough, the *charrue*, 3-field rotation in place of 2-field rotation, crop rotation, new crops like peas and beans which formed a better diet in that they provide vegetable proteins and whose roots left behind nitrogen fertiliser in the soil making it ready for another crop of a different kind, better harness of the plough yoke on the draught animal like the bull, increasing use of the horse for draught etc. etc. all raised the fertility of land and labour substantially by the 12th century. By then the average seed:yield ratio stood at 1:4, which actually doubled the amount of surplus available for consumption. Thus to take our earlier example, with the new ratio, consumable amount available from a seed of 10 Kgs would be 30 Kgs. There were other technological innovations too: the watermill and later the windmill took over many manual tasks and spared human energy for agricultural production. With more food available and better quality of diet, population too rose very substantially even as the amount of land required for providing food for each family declined because of higher productivity. The rising populace migrated out of the old established villages in search of virgin land. The twelfth century is the century of both what Georges Duby has called 'agricultural progress' and massive migrations into the heavily forested eastern German lands which were brought under the plough. The first migrations thus occurred within the countryside and not from the village to the city. Equally significantly, the march to this agricultural expansion was led by the peasant.

But this technology was capital intensive. It gave great advantage to those strata of peasants who could afford to invest in the heavy plough etc.; it also

gave them much higher returns on their investment. The gap within the class of peasantry, always present, began to grow. The very small peasant also began to invest his and his family labour and whatever savings he could manage in, say, growing a vegetable crop on his small field to sell it in the growing market and make some small gain. Sometimes he did manage to; at others, one crop failure and he lost the last resource and turned into a landless labourer. Of course the demand for labour, land and produce was also growing and the market was increasingly determining the patterns of production in the field. This was the process of differentiation within the peasantry that proved crucial for the decline of feudalism. We shall return to this point below. Before we do that, let us consider the role of the city on the decline of feudalism.

23.4 GROWTH OF URBAN CENTRES

Where did the medieval city come from? For Pirenne its origin lay in the revival of the grand trade across Europe. For Dobb, this is not a relevant question. But for both, the city remained extraneous to the feudal economy. Was it?

As we have briefly seen above, the face of the countryside was changing substantially, as the great historian of feudalism, Marc Bloch, had emphasised in his *Feudal Society*, and Georges Duby after him. The essence of this change lay in higher productivity and greater amount of production, availability of more and better food, growth of population at the lower rungs of society, growth of marketable surplus in the countryside and therefore growth of the market. All this allows sustenance of a higher level of urban population than was the case in the early medieval centuries. Thus the growth of cities is organically linked to developments in the countryside rather than in opposition to it.

Whether and to what extent did the rise of the urban centres contribute to the decline of feudalism remains debatable. While eminent historians like Pirenne, Dobb and Sweezy highlight the role, others dispute it. The phenomenal growth of towns in the thirteenth to the fifteenth century was yet incapable of absorbing more than about 10 per cent of the total population. Even as centres of production, their share in the economy was far from preponderant or decisive. Several historians have questioned the significance of the town as an influential factor in providing subsistence to fleeing rural populace or the extent of this flight; according to them the countryside still remained 'overpopulated' and that the number of large cities even in Flanders (parts of the modern Belgian-Netherlands-Luxemburg area), industrially and economically the most advanced in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, placed an unnatural economic burden on the countryside. Among several others, Robert Brenner, who initiated a major debate on the question of transition from feudalism to capitalism in the 1970s, questions the extent of rural migration to urban areas.

Historians have also opened even the role of economic liberation of the peasant attributed to the town to question. First, if the urban income levels for the rural migrants were higher, so too was the cost of living. Urban employment was thus not always an economic advantage to them and did not always function as an effective 'pull factor'. More important, it was more advantageous for the urban bourgeoisie to exploit cheap rural labour in the countryside itself where the cost of living and wages were lower and workers' guilds were absent. Besides, in the village the labour of the entire family of the worker could be

exploited through contractual labour, whereas in the town the worker laboured alone along with other similarly placed individuals. The fourteenth century thus saw the shifting of industrial production on behalf of urban merchants to rural areas first in Flanders and then elsewhere in Western Europe. This phenomenon came to be designated as Proto-industrialisation (Pi) in the 1970s and 80s. There is evidence too that the peasants were also forced by the cities in Flanders to bring grains to them at cheap rates.

The flight of the peasants in later phase of feudalism in Europe was then largely confined to the countryside itself; peasants fled from one rural area to another in search of land with more favourable conditions. When the West European peasantry burst into rebellions of continental dimensions in the fourteenth century, one of their chief demands everywhere was the right to free mobility, and the cities by and large looked on passively when they were not helping the feudal lord in suppressing the uprisings. Italian towns did however give freedom to the peasants; but this freedom was ‘neither general, nor always very lasting’ in the words of historian Guy Fourquin. The cities also proved to be much more oppressive than the lords, using every means to lower the peasants’ standards of living while at the same time granting them juridical freedom, observes another historian, L. Genicot.

23.5 TRANSFORMATION OF RURAL SCENARIO

While we are still involved with discussing the role of trade and the town in the dissolution of feudalism, we might take note of another perspective on the theme developed quietly, though emphatically, by a very distinguished French historian, Georges Duby, who bore no affinity with Marxism or with Pirenne. He took the debate away from the contours set by Henri Pirenne, Maurice Dobb and others. It is significant that Duby never participated in these discussions himself; yet his own work, published in two books of great importance, *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West* and *Early Growth of European Economy*, decisively altered the paradigm. Duby concentrated on the internal development in the sphere of land and labour through the medieval centuries in Western Europe and brought forth a picture of enormous dynamism. He did not seek out this dynamism in dramatic upheavals, but in the slow alterations in the labour process in the field in daily toil. This slow alteration, accumulated over centuries, completely transformed the rural scenario. One of the major driving forces of this change was the process of differentiation within the peasantry at the lower end of society as well as within the class of lords at the upper end. Let us look at this process in a little detail.

The estates of the lords in the countryside were huge establishments comprising on an average 4000 acres, often running into 10,000 acres and more. The management of the cultivation, storage and disposal of the produce of these estates was left by the lords in the hands of bailiffs, provosts etc. who were themselves peasants of a slightly higher rank, for social values deterred the lords from engaging in these activities themselves. Gradually these bailiffs and provosts accumulated resources of their own through the operation of the lords’ estates, for not all the grain collected from the demesne would go into the lord’s hall and not all the money collected from the sale of these grains would be honestly passed on to the lord’s treasury. By and by the bailiffs

themselves started taking parts of the estate 'on farm' from the lord for a year, two years and longer. 'On farm' or 'farming' here meant taking the responsibility for the cultivation of land on oneself by contracting to pay a fixed amount of either grain or money to the lord. The profit or loss from this contract would accrue to the bailiff, now the contractor or 'farmer'. The lord's right to collect tolls and taxes from his estate could similarly be taken 'on farm'.

On these 'farms', the bailiffs would employ wage labour, because they were not entitled to unpaid labour services of the serfs as the lords were, and they would cultivate the land with the sole purpose of selling the produce in the market for profit. Thus profit motive and wage labour – characteristics of capitalist economy whether in agriculture or industry – began to make inroads into the feudal economic system. This was the emerging class of capitalist farmers or kulaks, the much maligned *nouveau riche*, short on the finesse of feudal culture and long on showing off its newly acquired wealth, the butt of social ridicule, yet increasingly beginning to dominate the sphere of the economy. This happened over very long periods of time, extending over a couple of centuries.

Two other segments of feudal society also helped in the process: the allods and the lower orders of the class of lords. The allods, whom we have encountered in Unit 20, by cultivating their own lands with their own family labour and often selling the produce in the market, were a divergent element within the feudal economy. With the market both in the rural and urban areas increasingly determining the patterns of production in the countryside, the allods were quick to attune production on their fields to crops that yielded the highest profits. This too turned them, especially the higher echelons among them into proto-capitalist producers, contrary to the feudal ethos.

So far we have spoken of the class of lords as if it were a homogenous group. Such however was not the case, for this class too was highly stratified, like the peasantry. While the higher levels were entitled to several rights of extraction of free services and goods from the peasants, the lower ones were not so endowed. They had the rights to their lands but not to the multifarious services. With labour becoming migrant and its wages rising, the smaller lords too were driven by resource crunch and were compelled by the developments to take to cultivation for the market by employing hired labour.

In this all encompassing flux, one could expect several movements up and down. 'Commutation' of labour services that the serfs owed to the lords, i.e. purchase of freedom in return for lump sum payment to the lord, went some distance in helping some peasants too, now free to move to greener pastures or to rise above their station through sheer hard work, a few sagacious decisions and a little bit of luck. Other peasants, given their very small surviving power, were rendered resourceless by any one stroke of bad luck – a crop failure or the death of the draught animal or any other. Of course these small peasants still had their labour to sell in the expanding labour market. In the class of lords too, not everyone made good in the market, to which they had to adjust as to a new, unfamiliar situation.

This then was the general scenario of great dynamism, accumulated over slow developments stretched out in time in which everyone – or most — were

progressing, but some rising higher and faster than others. Sharp social differentiation was the net result and no class, old or new, was immune to its effects. This is also the scenario where new forms of economy and new classes were emerging which were to strike at the very foundations of feudalism. The decline of feudalism came not through an external push of trade or pull of cities, but through a process internal to the feudal economy. The decline was the result not of the static nature of feudalism but the very opposite, i.e. its own internal dynamism. The growth of trade and town is not an autonomous variable, but is integral to this dynamism.

It was thus that Georges Duby quietly but decisively effected a paradigm shift in the discussion of this problem. There was also another shift that was effected in the way history is studied. Until about the 1950s or 60s, constituting binary opposites was the chief method of studying history and indeed social sciences in general. It was studied through the prism of lord vs peasant, capitalist vs worker, and slightly later women vs men etc. In the case of both Pirenne and Dobb, the binary categories were trade vs feudalism, or town vs country. In the binary oppositions, change occurred as a dramatic consequence of a head on collision between the two, in the form of rebellions or clashes. The collapse of a system too was a dramatic event rather than a long drawn process.

If, however, one moves one's attention from the dramatic events to everyday forms of life, change acquires a different meaning altogether as in the historiography of Georges Duby and several others. Change in this perspective does not occur merely in a dramatic event like a rebellion or a revolution, a battle or an assassination; nor does it follow merely a catastrophic collision between two adversarial classes. It occurs too in everyday life, in everyday contacts between any two persons and it occurs at every level. Social differentiation was one such process which could not be compressed into any one day or a year or even a couple of decades; yet it decisively altered life in medieval Western Europe. It was this slow, almost imperceptible process of change that Duby sought to capture in his historiography.

23.6 OTHER VIEWS ON DECLINE

Somewhere along the line during the 1960s and 70s, a neo-Malthusian explanation of the decline of feudalism too was advanced. Malthus had propounded the notion in the nineteenth century that natural resources like land, forests, water etc. etc. could sustain a certain quantum of population. Whenever in history the total human population had exceeded this sustainable level, famines, pestilences, wars etc. have occurred that would bring the population figures down again to levels that corresponded to the resources. Some historians, like Emanuel Le Roy Ladurie, argued that the growing population in medieval Europe had similarly exceeded the sustainability level of agriculture. Therefore, the famines of 1314-15 and the devastating pestilence of 1348-51 that caused the Black Death which wiped out something like a quarter of the European population was such a manifestation of the Malthusian law. This upset the entire equilibrium in medieval Europe and brought about the transition to capitalism.

The Malthusian theory has always been subject to great controversy; understandably therefore the explanation of the collapse of feudalism on this score found sharp critics. The basic flaw in the Malthusian theory is the

assumption that resources are relatively inflexible and can sustain only a given level of population. Its critics assert that resources can always be enhanced through better technology and better management and the same amount of land, for example, can yield much higher output with a better method of cultivation. It is therefore fallacious to assume that population levels in medieval Europe had exceeded what agriculture could sustain. Such an explanation draws one's attention away from social factors arising from the social structure.

A yet another opening up of the debate on transition to Capitalism appeared first in the pages of the British journal, *Past and Present* in the 1970s and early 80s. The new debate was initiated by an American historian, Robert Brenner with an essay titled 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe' in 1976. Brenner essentially reiterated the superiority of the classical Marxist methodology of analysing history in terms of class struggle. Although he was not directly engaged in discussing the decline of feudalism, but the debate nevertheless overlapped with this theme inasmuch as it was seeking explanation of the different paths followed by Britain and France into the world of capitalism. The formulation of the problem itself has classic Marxist frame of reference. The debate that followed the publication of the article did not remain confined to Marxist historians alone, nor did agreements and disagreements remain bound by one's ideological loyalties. In 1985, the whole set of papers was published under the title, *The Brenner Debate*.

23.7 SUMMARY

In this Unit we familiarised you with range of views on the decline of feudalism. Henri Pirenne established the centrality of trade in rise and decline of feudalism. He believed that the revival of trade and urban centres marked the beginning of the decline of feudalism. Maurice Dobb challenged the position of Pirenne and said that trade on its own did not have the force to alter any economic system. He felt that the cause of decline was the internal crisis of feudalism. Dobb did concede that the urban centres were rising but he did not link it with the growth of trade. Dobb saw the collapse of feudalism a result of migration of peasantry to towns to escape feudal oppression which left landlords helpless. A form of class struggle ensued between the lords and serfs and between the lords and urban bourgeoisie. Kochuru Takahashi added another dimension to it and felt that the capitalism did not rise on the ruins of feudalism through the agency of bourgeoisie but state created capitalist economy; he referred to the case of Meiji Japan to make his point.

The improvement in technology increased the productivity with more surplus available giving rise to social stratification of peasantry. Many small peasants lost their lands and became labourers while richer peasants turned into contractors acquiring rights to collect rents. Capital intensive cultivation also crept in with large holdings of lords which were cultivated through hired labour. For Georges Duby this transformation of rural scenario led to the decline of feudalism. Rober Brenner was of the opinion that expansion of trade does not fully explain the decline and reiterated the Marxian theory of class struggle between the lords and the peasants as the cause for decline.

This Unit then does not purport to answer the question whether or not trade and town had contributed to the decline of feudalism in Europe; instead it

seeks to trace the ever changing contours of the question and its answers. In the end, the discipline of history does not provide final answers whether from one ideological vantage point or another; its significance lies in restlessness and renewed energetic exploration of ever widening horizons. The debate that we have encapsulated here is an excellent testimony to it.

23.8 GLOSSARY

- Demesne** : Land cultivated by serf with labour dues; its produce went to the lord's stores.
- Three Field Rotation** : See three field system in Glossary in Unit 20
- Two-field Rotation** : See two field system in Glossary in Unit 20

23.9 EXERCISES

- 1) How was the expansion of trade and growth of urban centres linked to the decline of feudalism in Henri Pirenne's view?
- 2) What was the role of peasant differentiation in the decline of feudalism?
- 3) How could the rise in urban centres have led to the decline of feudalism? Are historians unanimous on this?
- 4) Maurice Dobb and Georges Duby both emphasise internal developments within feudalism for its decline rather than trade; yet there is substantial differences between them. Can you locate these differences?

SUGGESTED READINGS FOR THIS BLOCK

Henri Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade* (Princeton, 1925)

Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1961)

Georges Duby, *The Early Growth of the European Economy: Warriors and Peasants from the Seventh to the Twelfth Century* (Ithaca, 1974)

Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980)

Georges Duby, *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West*

F. L. Ganshof, *Feudalism* (New York, 1964)

Lynn White Jr., *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford, 1962)

Jacques LeGoff, *Medieval Civilization* (Cambridge, MA, 1990)

Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London, 1974)

E. A. R. Brown, 'The Tyranny of a Construct', *American Historical Review* (79), 1974

Gerald A J Hodgett, *A Social and Economic History of Medieval Europe*

Henri Pirenne, *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe*

Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*

Rodney Hilton, ed. *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*

Harbans Mukhia, "Maurice Dobb's Explanation of the Decline of Feudalism in Western Europe – A Critique", *The Indian Historical Review*, vol. 6, nos. 1-2, July 1979-January 1980, pp. 154-184.