
UNIT 22 PHASES OF FEUDALISM

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22.1 INTRODUCTION

The large empire built by Charlemagne (Charles the Great) began to disintegrate in the ninth century A.D. The collapse of central authority was accompanied by external invasions and decline of trade, commerce and the towns. Many of the military commanders and chiefs became independent rulers of their regions. During this period a new social formation was emerging in Europe which is termed as Feudalism. The feudal social formation contained Roman as well as Germanic elements. Feudalism as a form of political, economic and social system dominated Europe from around 9th to 14th century A.D. However, during this entire period the political, economic and social structures were not static and uniform. A number of changes were taking place and new relations were emerging. In this Unit we will study these changes in two distinct phases of feudalism. In each phase we will focus on some unique aspects of agricultural production, role of technology, agrarian relations and the state of economy.

22.2 TWO MAIN PHASES

In order to appreciate the complexities of the social and economic life in medieval Europe feudalism has to be treated more as an evolving process than as a static structure. The idea of two evolutionary phases in feudalism owes much to the pioneering research of Marc Bloch. According to him, the first phase, which began with the establishment of the barbarian successor states on the collapsed political system of the Roman Empire and lasted until the middle of the eleventh century, substantially preserved the basic social relations which characterised the late Empire. This phase corresponds to the organisation of a fairly stable rural territory where trade was insignificant and uncommon, coins were rare, and a wage-earning class almost non-existent. Ties of vassalage between the greater and lesser elements hierarchically linked the territorial

aristocracies who monopolised both the social means of coercion and the regulation of jurisdiction. Most of the peasants were either completely unfree in the eyes of the law or so dependent in various ways on their lords that, if they were free, their freedom was a mere formality. In this phase the agrarian economy was producing very little surplus beyond what was necessary to support the power and position of the landed aristocracy. Production for market was low; rents tended to be in labour or in kind; there was little money in circulation; and there was little effective demand for the luxury commodities of international trade since upper-class incomes were received in produce rather than in cash. Consequentially, western European life was predominantly rural and localised.

The second phase, from the mid-eleventh to the early fourteenth century, was the result of the substantial growth of population, the great land clearances, the considerable technical progress, the revival of trade, the diffusion of a monetary economy, and the growing social superiority of the merchant over the producer. During this period, Bloch argues, the evolution of society and the evolution of the economy began to move in opposite directions: the former, which was slowing down, tended to hone the class structure into closed groups, while the latter, which was accelerating, eventually led to freedom from serfdom and the relaxation of restrictions on trade and commerce. In the specific context of Maconnais, Georges Duby places the turning point a century later, about 1160 from when an increase in the agricultural surplus facilitated a greater involvement in the network of a monetary economy, an increasing differentiation between urban and rural conditions, and various forms of the general social upheaval. Jacques Le Goff points out that the shift from the first to the second feudal age was a remarkably slow and stretched-out process, and was not evenly or simultaneously accomplished across western Europe.

22.3 FIRST PHASE – 9th TO 11th CENTURY

Although technology never remains static, in this period it was extremely labour intensive and yields were low. Trade though scanty was never completely absent, but it was not the economy's driving force. Production was largely for consumption rather than for the market.

22.3.1 Agricultural Production: Means and Methods

From the present-day point of view, the productivity of land remained highly restricted in this phase owing to the limited effectiveness and inadequacy of the tools and of farming techniques. As a result, very limited returns were produced. The practice of ploughing three or four times was common as the heavy clay soils, the most fertile when properly worked, put up a stiff resistance. It was necessary to use hands, forks, sickles, spades and harrows for breaking clods, cutting thistles and weeds, and digging up the field deeply. Artificial chemical fertilisers were unknown and the available natural fertilisers were very limited. Soil exhaustion was a constant problem owing to the extensive practice of the slash and burn agriculture or the cultivation of burnt patches. The peasants lacked pesticides and used to keep pigeons and doves that would not only eat insects, but also provide a small but highly concentrated amount of fertilizer for use in the gardens. In the absence of herbicides weeds often posed a serious difficulty since the system of letting land lie fallow was the

most common measure to recover the fecundity of land. Technical shortcomings of subsistence agriculture kept it still highly vulnerable to bad weather. Wet springs could reduce ploughing time, rot seed in the ground, and so diminish the harvest. Fall rains could wet the grain before harvesting and make it impossible to dry and thresh.

Ploughing did not go deep enough. The symmetrical (plough) share of the ancient swing-plough sometimes tipped with iron but usually made of wood hardened in fire, scratched rather than cut through the soil. In this respect, the introduction of the heavy plough with an asymmetrical share and a mouldboard with a movable wheeled front pulled by a stronger team represented a definite, considerable advance. By the sixth century it was introduced into the Po valley of Northern Italy (most probably from the Slavic lands) and by the eighth it was in use in the Rhineland. The wheels allowed the ploughshare to be matched to the furrow being ploughed. The mould-board turned over the sod. The iron ploughshare could make deep furrows and thus made more soil minerals possible and the traditional criss-cross double ploughing of fields unnecessary. Furthermore, it exposed much of those root systems of weeds in arable land to the open air and thus inhibited their growth. It was essential in the efficient use of the rich, heavy, often wet soils of northwestern Europe. Its use allowed the area's forests and swamps to be brought under cultivation. Open fields ploughed in long furrows were able to absorb great amounts of water, and because of the shape of the furrow, drainage caused little erosion. This tended to protect the rich, heavy croplands of northern Europe from heavy rains.

The problem with using a heavy plough was that it involved a great deal of tractive power. Since it took from four to eight animals to pull a full-sized mouldboard plough, few individual farmers could own the necessary number of oxen to pull this heavy plough. Le Goff also calls attention to the fact that the size and strength of medieval work-animals were noticeably inferior to those of the modern animals. Around the year 1000 a group of technical advances were popularised which allowed men to make better use of animal traction, to increase the work-output of the beasts and finally to replace the ox with the horse as the major draught and plough animal. These innovations included horseshoes, which protected the horses' hooves, and the new harness with horse collars that allowed the animal to carry the traction on the shoulders and did not compress the chest, thus permitting it to breathe more freely. Tandem harnessing also developed during the same time, which allowed as many horses as one had to be hitched to the same vehicle. This provided the medieval peasants greater tractive power and made possible the extensive use of the heavy plough. However, although horses were faster, had greater endurance than oxen and did not need an additional man in the plough team to guide it with a sharp pole (as was the case with oxen), ploughing with horses did not become rapidly or evenly popular because of the high nominal price of the animal and the difficulties of having to feed it on oats. As late as the thirteenth century the employment of oxen and donkeys remained unchallenged in many fields of southern France and the Mediterranean region.

22.3.2 Organisation of Agricultural Production

The village operated as a ploughing cooperative because the cost of plough and draught animals was too high to be borne by a single household. In flat or gently undulating country with good soils there were open fields, surrounding

the big nucleated village, in which the strips of land that made up individual family holdings were intermixed, and over which, once the grain was harvested, village gleaners could first work and subsequently village animals graze, with no distinction being observed between one person's land and the next. Beyond the arable fields usually lay the woodland and the waste, available to the village community for gathering timber, nuts and fruits, chasing rabbits and hare, and giving extra grazing to their animals. Each household had to observe a common routine of sowing and fallowing in the open field. It had to agree on the rules determining gleaning and concerning access to the commons. Rodney Hilton identifies this as the practical basis of village common action which eventually underlay the manorial system. We must keep in mind that there were many variations of open-field agriculture and neither strict rotational schemes characterised all of them nor were peasants' holdings always distributed evenly over the main divisions of the arable. But generally, each household owned portions in both of the two fields into which the arable lands of the village were grouped. One of the fields was ploughed in the early spring and planted in grain. The other field was then ploughed, but left unplanted to let the air and sunshine restore some of its fertility. Weeds were allowed to grow as they diverted some of the attention of insects and provided pasture for the animals that would manure the field as they grazed. Just before the weeds in the fallow field were ready to seed, the field was ploughed a second time and the weeds turned under. Though effective to some extent in restoring fertility and holding back weeds, this system carried a heavy price. For practical purposes, the villagers could utilise only half of their land each year while expending the effort of ploughing fallow land.

Field utilisation reached a new height in the ninth and tenth centuries when many villages began to divide their two fields into three, and plant them in a rotating sequence of beans, winter wheat, summer wheat, and fallow. With good planning, this could result in three annual harvests in place of the traditional one. The replacement of the biennial crop rotation with triennial rotation succeeded in leaving land infertile one year out of three rather than one year out of two, or rather in using two-thirds of the cultivable surface area instead of only half. The villages had been primarily organised for the growing of grain – wheat in most places, but also oats, rye, barley or whatever the soil and climate permitted. Peasants started using peas and beans as a complement to their grain crops. Legumes restored nitrogen to the soil and vines choked out weeds, provided a source of protein to the humans as well as an excellent fodder for the winter stock feed. Vines also kept the soil friable and thus made ploughing easier. To the improved method of crop rotation and limited diversification of crops, one must add the increasing utilisation of iron and the remarkable spread of windmills. There were certain other related changes in agriculture as well. To escape the problem of turning several teams and a rather cumbersome heavy plough around when the peasant got to the end of the field, the method of strip farming – or long-acre farming – came into vogue in the north. This distinguished the northern agriculture from the older Mediterranean variety that had always used smaller, square fields.

22.3.3 Subsistence Economy

In spite of several small innovations, the technical level of agricultural production, transport and distribution remained quite low and the amount of

surplus tiny. Human portage remained an essential form of transport. Roads were in a poor state. Carts and wagons were very few and very expensive. Even though there was an increase in tonnage in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries particularly in the north, the number of ships was extremely limited. The use of the compass became common only after 1280. The quadrant and the nautical astrolabe were introduced not before the Renaissance. Throughout the medieval period the human manual work remained the principal source of energy. And yet, the productivity of the working people was significantly constrained by their lack of access to appropriate food and proper conditions of living. Poor food and limited medical knowledge kept life expectancy remarkably low. Infant mortality was appallingly high. Malnutrition exposed the poor classes more gravely to the dangers of bad health and untimely death than the aristocracy. The conventionality and inadequacy of production techniques, endorsed by the governing ideology, condemned the medieval economy to stagnation, to the exclusive purpose of subsistence and of 'prestige spending by a minority'. Coupled with the relatively small market for agricultural commodities, it also prevented the scale of production from growing beyond the limits of a holding which could be worked by a family with at the most one or two hired hands. As a result the internal stratification of peasant society was strictly limited during the greater part of the medieval period.

22.4 SECOND PHASE – 11th TO 14th CENTURY

The second phase witnessed a number of dynamic changes in the feudal structures. The most significant change that took place was phenomenal rise in agricultural productivity and growth in population. This growth led to the extension of cultivated area and increased agricultural production. The organisation of production also underwent change and the community based production gave way to individual peasant production increasingly destined for the market. The non agricultural production increased leading to the growth of economy. The social structures changed and especially growing stratification of the peasantry was a new element. Let us take account of these changes starting with the growth of population.

22.4.1 Growth of Population

The growth of population at a noticeable rate is evident from the 11th Century. This increase continued till the middle of 14th century. Before taking into account the quantum of over all growth of population it is important to understand the factors that gave rise to this phenomenon. The main reason can be traced to the sharp decline in tribal attacks in the tenth century. The creation of feudal institutions for providing peace and security was also a contributory factor. Relaxation of legal restraints on peasant households helped in the process. Another important reason was the gradual improvement in technology and organisation of agricultural production without which it would not have been possible to meet the demand of food for growing numbers.

The quantum of growth was impressive. Between the end of the tenth and the middle of the fourteenth centuries the population in the West doubled. Western Europe, according to an estimate by J. C. Russell (*population in Europe, 500 – 1500*), went from 22.5 million inhabitants in about 950 to 54.5 million on the eve of the Black Death in 1348 while Europe as a whole, according to another estimate by M. K. Bennett, had 42 million inhabitants in 1000 and 73

million in about 1300. The rise in population most probably steeped around 1200. The population of France, it would seem, rose from 12 to 21 million between 1200 and 1340, that of Germany from 8 to 14 million, and that of England from 2.2 to 4.5 million. This period of growth came between two periods of demographic recession when the population of Europe fell from about 67 million in about 200 AD to about 27 million around 700, and from the 73 million reached around 1300 to about 45 million around 1400.

22.4.2 Extension of Cultivation

This sharp rise in population was the main stimulus for the great economic venture of land clearance during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In most of the regions the available food resources could not keep pace with the demographic expansion, and in spite of considerable emigration the pressure on land was not effectively reduced. According to Le Goff, the focus of the new agricultural concern was a quantitative increase in the cultivable area (largely through land clearances) rather than a qualitative shift in the methods of enhancing productivity or improving tools. Enormous stretches of wilderness began to be settled after the first millennium. A great number of deserted tracts were irrigated and colonised in Spain and parts of southern France; large forests were cleared in Wales and eastern Germany, and a laborious reclamation of land from sea was successfully undertaken in Flanders. Duby chooses to see this wave of land clearance as both a pressure from below and a sanction from above: while the peasants found it necessary to bring new lands under the plough to provide for the additional population, the lords were equally alive to the necessity of increasing their resources. Land clearances also radically transformed the layout of the farmland by shifting the focus of extensive tillage from the central parcels of arable lands closer to houses to the 'assarted' or cleared area on the perimeter. Cattle farming was organised more methodically. Famines did not altogether disappear but considerably decreased in scale and frequency by the end of the twelfth century.

22.4.3 Changes in Organisation of Agricultural Production

Large scale extension of land under the plough and improved technology for cultivation and irrigation was bound to change the organisation of agricultural production. Duby contends that improved equipment now enabled the farmers to gradually withdraw from collective organisation of farming and promoted a rudimentary form of agrarian individualism. The creation of the free zones and 'sanctuaries' (where immigrants could be sure of enjoying clearly defined privileges, of being treated as 'burgesses', and of benefiting from the tax-relief by virtue of living there) forced lords of ancient estates to relax their grip to some extent and to curtail their demands. Hence freedom of a sort gradually percolated through the rural world. It was essential to make and respect large promises to those involved in the agricultural expansion. Except in certain regions such as the countryside of southern Gaul and northwestern Germany, the manse finally disintegrated and disappeared in the twelfth century and two new types of tenure – for rent and for crop-sharing payments – were becoming more usual on plots of land recently brought into cultivation on the margins of the existing arable. The annual rental was either fixed or proportionate to the harvest respectively. Precipitated by population growth, higher agricultural yields, and land clearances, the process was certainly helped by the relaxation

of seigneurial burdens. During the second half of the twelfth century, the lords frequently agreed to codify customary usages, regularise their fiscal powers and thus loosen the strongest bonds of servitude because such concessions helped to increase the number of peasant families subject to their authority and enabled the rural population to accumulate more cash. On the one hand, demographic growth led to the fragmentation and multiplication of agricultural holdings, and on the other, to the increased mobility of the rural population. An abundance of unoccupied land and a remarkable shortage of agricultural labour had marked the early medieval economy. Since landed property was valueless without the labour of the peasantry, the propertied class took special care to impose heavy restrictions on the mobility of the workforce. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries increased amounts of cultivable lands with higher productivity and an increased supply of labour accelerated the process of manumission and placed large areas of farmland into the hands of the non-nobles.

22.4.4 Growth of Economy

The areas of dense population saw the most rapid development of towns and of the political importance of their inhabitants. Technological innovations not only increased production, but also increased the peasants' productivity to such a degree that a smaller portion of the population had to be directly engaged in the raising of food and a number of people could now devote themselves to the full-time pursuit of non-agricultural activities. As we have already mentioned, the towns in late medieval Europe were sharply distinguished from those of the classical world in their emphasis on the non-agricultural functions. In these towns the merchants, the craftsman, the moneychangers, the doctors, the notaries, and the like did not have to acquiesce in an inferior social position when they acquired wealth. Over the course of time they emerged as the politically, socially and culturally dominant urban group. Many drew their income from banking and mortgaging land, which could raise considerable sums when the members of nobility and upper clergy were running into financial difficulties. Particularly the Jews, who were not bound by the Christian prohibitions on usury, played a central role in these activities. There also developed large-scale manufacture and long-distance trade. The three major items of export for this trade were slaves (taken by the Germans on their eastern border or by the Vikings, and particularly in demand by the Cordoba caliphate), Flemish cloths and woollens (increasingly manufactured from English wool in the towns of Bruges, Lille, Bergues, and Arras) and silver from Saxony. Through Italy and the inland waterways of Russia these goods were traded for luxuries from the east (particularly silks and spices) which were at once valuable and relatively easy to transport.

Loans for consumption was the main, if not the only, form of loan during most of the feudal period. Loans for production remained almost non-existent. Interest made on loans for consumption was forbidden between Christians and was considered as usury, which was strongly condemned by the Church. The strong economic pressures against credit opposed all accumulation indispensable for economic progress. The lay aristocracy usually squandered its surpluses in gifts and alms and in shows of munificence in the name of the Christian ideal of charity and of the chivalric ideal of largesse whose economic importance was considerable. The dignity of honour of lords consisted in spending without

counting the cost; the consumption and waste used up almost all of their income. When there was any accumulation at all, it took the non-creative economic form of hoarding. Precious vessels and hoards of money, which were melted down or put into circulation in the hours of catastrophe or crisis, came to satisfy bare survival at difficult moments, and did not feed a regular, continuous productive activity. The higher clergy similarly used up its revenues on unproductive expenditure like construction and adornment of churches and in liturgical pomp. However, a sizeable part of the revenue of the church was also used for the subsistence of the poor who were reduced to the living minimum by seigneurial exactions.

Money, historians now agree, never entirely disappeared from use in medieval west. Apart from the Church and the nobles, who always had a certain supply of money at their disposal to acquire luxuries, even the peasants often had some little amount of money with which they bought things such as salt, which they could neither produce nor receive and only rarely buy by barter. But the monetary circulation, as a whole, was weak and inelastic. The existence of non-metallic currency, such as oxen, cows, pieces of cloth, and especially pepper was common. In the first feudal age, money was appreciated not because of its theoretical value, but for the real value of the precious metal which it contained. During the thirteenth century Le Goff notices a 'monetary renaissance', or a return to the striking of gold coins. This coincided with the striking of the silver groat in Venice, Florence, Flanders, England, France and Bohemia. The strong pull exerted by the Muslim centres of production in the south prolonged a phase of raised prices right up to the start of the eleventh century which coincided with the end of the period of the monetary economy. The eleventh century and the first half of the twelfth saw a fall in prices, indicative of a phase of natural economy, the preceding phase having accomplished the demonetisation of the Christian kingdoms. From the middle of the twelfth century, on the other hand, a phase of monetary economy evolved again when the quickening circulation of money encouraged the lords to extend the role that money played in rent. The small fines imposed in the private courts where the master settled disputes between himself and his tenants over services, 'new rents' to replace '*champarts*', and cash payments to buy off labour services, drew into the manorial household a larger share of the cash which passed through the peasant hands. Nevertheless, the proportion of feudal money income remained small.

22.4.5 Social Stratification

The evolution of the economy enhanced differentiation within the society in general and stratification within the peasantry in particular. Most peasant *hospites* or settlers obtained exemptions and freedoms on the newly cleared land. A process of liberation occurred over all the landed estates of western Europe which improved the legal conditions of peasants if not their material welfare. Seigneurial exactions were restricted by replacing labour services with a due or *census* which was often fixed, and a fixed total (a quit-rent or *taille abonnée*) of the principal payments was determined by a charter. The lords were compelled to compound their rights into fixed dues and granted defined customs to their citizens which in turn accelerated further immigration. At this time began the commutation of labour services into lump sum cash payment to the lord. While this enabled the peasant to obtain complete freedom to pursue

his own dream of either migrating or devoting his entire time to his own piece of land, it also ensured that the lord obtained liquid cash with which he could purchase labour in the growing labour market. These processes symbolised and brought about certain advancement for the higher segment of the peasant classes, especially for the labourers or ploughmen who owned their own teams and gear as opposed to the less skilled farm-workers. While among many of the lesser peasants the social dependence and economic inferiority was accentuated by the process, for many others in that echelon, the opportunities to rise high were opened up. The increasing gap within the class, itself growing out of the process of differentiation, redefined the social relations to a great degree.

Apart from the higher peasants, many burgesses, powerful lords and big town churches also grew rich at the expense of the poorer and middling members of the knightly class who had to sell much of their lands as they sank into debt. In fact, the growing stratification within the class of the lords became an important feature of the period. It was not simply the division between the *milites* and the *bellatores* – the knights and the lords they served – which was intensified within the aristocratic class, but also the increasing differentiation between the banal and the smaller lords. The former increasingly turned to feudal privileges as a source of their sustenance while the latter can be seen as attempting to adjust themselves to the demands of the market and producing for it. The process of differentiation at both levels provided enormous dynamism to the latter phase of feudal economy and society.

In the late Middle Ages, the social classes underwent a period of fluidity. Economic conditions favoured the merchant and craft classes, and even the peasantry could demand better circumstances. Feudal obligations between lord and vassal were being replaced by contractual agreements based on payments of money. The economy began expanding from an agricultural base to include commercial and manufacturing interests. Also, Europe was no longer in a constant state of warfare and even the Crusades had ceased to be a focus for the energies of the martial nobility.

22.5 SUMMARY

The feudal system in Europe took roots and survived for almost five hundred years. In its initial phase it was not very well structured and was mostly confined to a sort of bond between the Lord and the Vassal. Over the years the bonds got defined and streamlined with various hierarchical levels. The feudal age also witnessed growth of new institutions. You must have noticed that the whole feudal period is not static and witnessed changes. In this Unit we have discussed them in two major phases – the first from 9th to 11th century and the second from 11th to 14th century A.D. These phases are not identifiable distinctly in all regions at the same time. There were variations in developments in terms of periods and specific areas of change.

You must have noticed these changes in the area of agricultural production, technology, pattern of cultivation and organisation of production between the two phases since land was the main source of wealth in feudal system. The demographic changes during the period influenced economic and social structures. During the second phase the economic growth was significant and social stratification was pronounced. From the 14th century the process of

decline of feudalism started which would be subject of our discussion in the next Unit.

22.6 GLOSSARY

Asymmetrical Share	: A form of plough with mouldboard etc.
Black Death	: Plague epidemic which struck Europe in the middle of 14 th century it is estimated that it killed between one-fourth and one-third of Europe's inhabitants.
Burgess	: The town resident contributing towards the customary payments due to the king from boroughs; in the late medieval period, however, "burgess" was frequently used to distinguish one group of privileged townsmen from a less privileged group. Burgesses grew in power during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, gradually building wealth based upon the commerce and production that took place in the borough.
Liturgical Pomp	: Display of public celebrations of worship or rituals or ceremonies.
Macconais	: A region of France
Manse	: See Glossary in Unit 20
Manumission	: The freeing of a slave or serf from indentured service.
Mould board plough	: See Asymmetrical share
Open fields	: Arable land with common rights after harvest or while fallow; usually without internal divisions by hedges, walls or fences but made up of plough strips arranged by furlongs.
Rhine Land	: Region adjoining to Rhine river in Germany.
Vikings	: Scandinavian traders and pirates of 8 th – 10 th century
Village gleaners	: Poor people in villages who used to collect ears of corn after the crop was harvested and taken away by cultivators.

22.7 EXERCISES

- 1) List main features of two main phases of feudalism.
- 2) Give a brief description of the changes in the agricultural technology.
- 3) Write a short note on growth of population and its effect on expansion of agriculture.
- 4) Compare the organisation of agricultural production between two phases of feudalism.
- 5) List the major changes in economy during the second phase.