

# UNIT 6 FEUDAL SOCIETIES

## Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Slavery
  - 6.2.1 Slavery in the Indian Context
  - 6.2.2 Slavery, Serfdom and the Peasant Societies
- 6.3 Transition to Feudalism
  - 6.3.1 Henry Pirenne's views on Feudalism
  - 6.3.2 Thesis of Marc Bloch
  - 6.3.3 Perry Anderson on Feudalism
- 6.4 Growth of Feudal System
  - 6.4.1 Form of Labour under Feudalism
  - 6.4.2 Feudal Production System
  - 6.4.3 The Class of Lords
- 6.5 The Dynamism of Feudal Economy
  - 6.5.1 Growth of Population
  - 6.5.2 Trade and Urbanisation
  - 6.5.3 Growth of New Economy
- 6.6 Decline of Feudalism
  - 6.6.1 Shortage of Labour
  - 6.6.2 Peasant Rebellions
- 6.7 Feudalism in the Indian Context
- 6.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.9 Key Words
- 6.10 Answers to Check Your Progress /Exercises

## 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