

## Theme 6 The Three Orders

*Sujith.K, HSS History, GVHSS Kayyoor, Kasargod*

The three orders of the European society between the ninth and and sixteenth centuries were: Christian priests, land owning nobles and peasants. The changing relationships between these three groups was an important factor in shaping European history for several centuries.

### Sources to understand Medieval European society

1. There is a lot of material in the form of documents, details of landownership, prices and legal cases. Churches had kept records of births, marriages and deaths. The inscriptions in churches give information about traders' associations, and songs and stories give a sense of festivals and community activities. All these can be used to understand economic and social life.

### 2. Marc Bloch and his ideas about European feudalism

Marc Bloch (1886-1944) was one of the earliest scholars of France who worked on the concept of feudalism. He argued that history is not all about political history but also includes international relations and lives of great people. He stressed on the importance of geography in determining human history and the requirement to realise the collective activities or approaches of groups of people.

His book **Feudal Society** talks about the European society between 900 and 1300 A.D especially of France. It had significant detailed social relations and hierarchies and land related affairs and cultural achievements of that period.

### Condition of Europe on the eve of rising feudalism

There were some socio-political changes that occurred in Europe between the ninth and and sixteenth centuries. After the decline of the Roman Empire, several Germanic groups of people of eastern and central Europe captured areas of Italy, Spain and France. Due to the absence of a single political power, there were regular military clashes in order to gather resources to continue hold on own land. Social institution was therefore revolved around the control of land. Christianity was the religion of land as it was spread in almost whole Europe. The church was not only a religious institution but also a political power. The church was a major land holder in Europe.

#### **Meaning of Feudalism**

The term 'feudalism' is derived from a German word '**feud**' which means '**a piece of land**'. It refers to the kind of society that developed in Medieval France and later in England and Italy. Feudalism was a system that centred around the principles of land related matters. Historians used the term feudalism to describe the economic, legal, political and social relationships that existed in Europe in the medieval era.

### Features of feudalism in Europe

The roots of feudalism can be traced back to the practices that existed in the Roman Empire. Feudalism became an established way of life during the era of French king Charlemagne. It was said to be emerged later and spread in whole Europe later.

Feudalism refers to a kind of an agricultural production which was based on the relationship between the lords and peasants. The peasants cultivated their own land and worked on the lands of the lords also. In lieu of labour service, peasants received military protection from the lord. The lords also decided the judicial matters of the peasants. Therefore, that lord was all in all proprietors of lands and peasant's fortunes. Thus, besides economic aspects, feudalism also began to cover the political and social aspects of life.

### History of the name 'France'

There was a province of Roman Empire named 'Gaul' which was had extensive coastlines, mountain ranges, long rivers, forests and large plain area suited to agriculture. A Germanic tribe named 'the Franks' gave their name to Gaul and it later came to be known as France. By the sixth century this region was a kingdom under the rule of Christian Frankish or French got strengthened when Charlemagne was given the title of 'Holy Roman Emperor' by the pope around 800 AD

### The Three Orders

The French priests were of the view that people were part of the one of three 'orders' according to their occupation. A bishop quoted that, "**Here below some pray, others fight, other still work**". So the three orders of society were generally the clergy, the nobility and the peasantry.

### The First Order: The Clergy

The Christians of Europe were directed by bishops and clerics of church. They made the first order of the feudal society. Above those bishops and clerics was the head of western church, the Pope, who lived in Rome. The Catholic church was the most dominant body which did not depend on the king. The church had its own laws, owned land granted by the king collected taxes of own. Almost all villages had church, where people gathered on Sunday pray and listened to the sermons of the priests. Men who became priest could not marry. Serfs, the physically challenged and women could not become a priest. The Bishops were nobles in religious field. They owned lands like lords, had vast estates and lived in grand palaces.

The church collected one tenth of share from peasants' produce every year called the 'tithe'. The church also got money in the form of donations by the rich for own and their relatives' welfare in the afterlife. Several rites and rituals of feudal nobles were copied by church to increase its influence. The act of kneeling while praying, with hands clasped and head bowed was identical to knights' act to take vow for their lord. The term 'lord' for God was also a debt from feudal customs.

### Monks and Monasteries

There were devout Christians in feudal society known as monks. They opted to live isolated in contrast to the clergy who lived in towns and villages. They lived in religious communities called abbeys or monasteries away from human settlements. Monks vowed to stay in the abbey for the rest of their life. They spent their time in worship, study and manual labour like farming. Their life was different from priesthood and was quiet open to both men and women and women became nuns. Most of the abbeys were single-sex communities. There were separate abbeys for men and women. Like priests, monks and nuns did not marry. Two well known monasteries were one established by **St. Benedict in Italy in 529 and another of Cluny in Burgundy in 910.**

### Relation between the Church and Society

Christianity entered Europe and influenced most of the people. But they did not forget old beliefs in magic and folk traditions. Christmas and Easter became important dates from the fourth century. They replaced old pre-Roman festival as which were based on solar calendar. The Easter day marked the crucifixion of Christ and his rebirth from the dead and it was celebrated on replaced date of old festival based on lunar calendar. On coming of spring, people used to travel around their village lands on that day. Holiday or holidays were welcomed by overworked peasants as free days, they usually spent more time in fun and feasting rather than prayer.

### The Second Order: The Nobility

The nobility possessed a central role in the social processes. They had control over lands, which was the result of old custom known as 'vassalage'. The nobles of kings were big land holders and they used to be vassal of the king whereas the peasants were vassals to the land owners. In France the rulers were linked to 'vassalage', similarly the Franks of Gaul also followed the same tradition. In that tradition a noble accepted the king his seigneur or lord in all matters and

king had to give a mutual assurance that he would protect the vassals. Under that link both seigneur and the noble had to make vows with the Bible in the church. The vassal received a written charter or a staff or even a clod of earth as symbol of land granted by his lord. The nobles enjoyed several privileges. They had judicial powers and even right to issue coins. They also had power to raise their army known as feudal levies. A noble was lord of each and every person settled on his land. He possessed huge tracts of land which included his residences, his personal fields, pastures and the fields of peasant-tenants. The house of noble was known as manor. The peasants cultivated their fields also, worked as cultivators on his fields and as the foot soldiers in time of military need.

### **The Manorial Estate**

A lord house was known as manor-house in feudal society. He would control peasant's villages in the manorial estates either in small number containing few dozen of houses or in large number consisting of around fifty to sixty houses of peasants. The manorial estates were self sufficient economic centres, where each and every requirement of daily life was fulfilled in the estate. The grains were grown in the fields, blacksmiths and carpenters maintained the lords equipments and refurnished the ornaments, whereas stone masons managed their building. The women prepared fabrics and children worked in lord's wine-presses. The estates consisted of woodlands and forests where the lord did hunting. The estates also contained pastures. The church was part of estate and the castle was there for defence, where knights lived. In England, the castles were developed as centres of administration and military strength under the feudal system.

### **Knights: A Distinctive Group**

There were regular localised wars in Europe. The insufficient amateur peasant soldiers and lack of good cavalry had created problems. This led to the evolution of new section of people in society known as Knight. They were under the lord, who were subordinates of the king. The knights paid his lord customary fees and pledged to fight for him in war. The lords granted a piece of land called fief, for knights in lieu of their services as their protectorate. The fief of knight could be hereditary and was of any size from 1000 to 2000 acres or more. A knight's fief consisted of a house for him and his family, church settlements of dependent together with water mill and wine press. The peasants cultivated the land of the fief. In exchange, the knight paid his lord a regular fee and promised to fight for him in war. A knight could serve more than one lord but remained loyal to his own lord.

### **The Third Order: Peasants, Free and Unfree**

The third order consisted of vast majority of people which were mainly cultivators. The cultivators had two categories: free peasants and serfs. The free peasants were those who had own lands but worked as tenants of the land. They had to give military service for least forty days in a year. They had to work on lord's fields for three days generally in a week in the form of labour-rent. Together with this they had to provide unpaid services for works like digging ditches, gathering firewood, building fence and maintaining roads and buildings. Women and children had to do several tasks together with work on fields like spinning thread, weaving cloth, making candles and preparing wine from grapes. The free peasants had to pay a tax 'taille' to king from which clergy and nobles were exempted. The serfs tilled the land of lord. Most part of the produce was submitted to the lord. They had to work on the lands of lord without wages. They were not allowed to leave the estate without prior permission from the lord. The lord claimed several monopolies at the cost of his serfs. Serfs could use only lord's flour mill, his oven to bake their bread and his wine-presses to distil wine and beer. The lord decide whom a serf should marry or might give the blessing to the serf's choice but on a payment of a free.

### **England the land 'Angles'**

The Angles and Saxons came from central Europe and got settled in England during sixth century. The name of the country England is a modification of 'Angle-land' as England was inhabited by Angles.

### Factors Affecting social and Economic Relations.

There were several processes which were affecting the social and economic relations.

#### The Environment

Between fifth and tenth centuries, Europe had undergone an extreme cold climatic change. This shortened growing season for crops and reduced agricultural production. By the eleventh century, Europe entered a warm phase. Increase in temperature had a deep impact on agriculture. Peasants had a longer growing season and soil could be easily ploughed. This resulted in the expansion of agriculture.

#### Land Use

Agricultural technology used by peasants initially was primitive. They had to use wooden plough drawn by couple of oxen, which could only scratch the surface of earth instead of drawing full fertility of soil. So, fields needed to be dug by hand, regularly once in four years. Agriculture was therefore very labour demanding. An unproductive method of crop rotation was in use; in which the land was divided in two halves. In one winter wheat was grown in autumn and other left fallow and vice versa. Rye was grown in other half. This was a system of destroying fertility of soil and caused frequent famines. Chronic malnutrition occurred and life of the poor became more difficult. The lords were apprehensive to increase their income, as it was difficult to increase output from land. So they forced the peasants to work on his manorial estates more than the legal time.

#### Technological Changes in the Field of Agriculture

The eleventh century saw several changes in the field of agriculture.

- ◆ The heavy iron-tipped ploughs and mould-boards replaced old wooden equipments. These ploughs dug much deeper and mould-boards turned soil suitable which resulted in better use of nutrients from the soil.
- ◆ The shoulder-harness replaced neck-harness of animals that allowed animals to wield great power. Use of iron horseshoes prevented foot decay of horses.
- ◆ There was increased use of wind and water energy for agriculture. All over Europe wind and water powered mills were established for the purpose of grinding corn and pressing grapes.
- ◆ There was introduction of three field system for land use in place of older two field system. In that, a peasant could use two out of three fields by sowing one crop in autumn and another crop in spring a year and half late. They could grow wheat or rye in autumn in one field then in second field they could grow peas, beans and lentils during spring and could grow oats and barley for horses also. The third field was left fallow and by that they could rotate the use of all three fields every year.
- ◆ With the improvement in agricultural technology there was instant enhancement in food produced from every unit of land. The greater use of plants like peas and beans meant increase in protein diet of Europeans and better source of fodder for animals. Now cultivator could produce more food from small land. The average holding of peasant's farm shrank from 100 acres to 20 or 30 acres. Now small holdings reduced the requirement of labour and could be efficiently cultivated which gave time to peasants for other creative activities.
- ◆ During the eleventh century the personal bonds base of feudalism weakened. The lords asked for rents in cash instead of kind, also peasants found it easy to sell their crops to traders. The increased use of money began to influence prices, which became higher in times of poor harvest.

#### A Fourth Order? New towns and Towns people

- The advent of new agricultural technology resulted in growth of agriculture which was accompanied by progress in three related areas: **population, trade and towns.**
- The population of Europe rose from 42 million in 1000 to 62 million around 1200 and 73 million in 1300. Due to better food the lifespan increased. An average European could expect to live 10 years longer in the 13<sup>th</sup> century than 8<sup>th</sup> century.

- The growth of population resulted into development of towns in the Roman Empire. Peasant needed a place to sell their surplus produce and buy tools and cloth. This led to the increase in holding regular fairs and small townships. These townships gradually developed into town with features like town square,a church,streets where merchants built shops and homes,an office where administrators of city could meet. The towns developed along large castles,bishops' estates or large churches.
- Instead of services,people paid taxes to lords who were the owner of the land on which the town stood. Towns offered the prospect of paid work and freedom for young people of peasantry.
- '**Town air makes free**' was a saying popular in medieval Europe. Many serfs escaped from their masters and hid themselves in towns. If they successfully completed one year and a day without being discovered by their masters ,they could become freemen.
- There was a large number of shopkeepers and merchants,later there was a need of skilled individuals like lawyers and bankers. The bigger towns had population of around 30,000 which might form the fourth order.
- **Guilds were the basis of economic organisation in the medieval Europe**. Crafter industry was organised into guild. These guilds controlled the quality,price and the sale of the goods. The guild- hall was part of every town where heads of all guilds met. Due to the expansion of trade and commerce also the town merchants became wealthy and powerful and completed with power of the nobility.

### Cathedral -towns

The large churches were called cathedrals. By 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards, cathedrals were being built in France. The cathedrals belonged to monasteries. Different people contributed to their construction with their own labour,material or money. A cathedral was made of stone and took several years to complete. The area around the cathedrals became more populated and they became centres of pilgrimage. Small towns developed around them. Cathedrals were designed in a way that voice of the priest could reach all people assembled in the hall. Singing sound of monks and the chiming bells reached greater distance as a call for prayer. Stained glass was used for windows of the cathedrals. These glasses, during day time ,made the cathedrals radiant for the people who were inside and during the nights ,the light of the candles made them visible for the people outside. The stained glass narrated the stories in the Bible through pictures. So that illiterates could understand those stories.

### The Crisis of the Fourteenth Century

- By the early fourteenth century,Europe's economic expansion slowed down.
- In 13<sup>th</sup> century the warm summers of the previous years had given way to bitterly cold summers.
- Seasons for growing crops were reduced by a month.
- Storms and oceanic flooding destroyed many farmlands that reduced the income in taxes for govts.
- Population growth caused shortage of resources and the immediate result was famine.
- Trade was hit by a severe shortage of metal money because of the short fall in the output of silver mines in Austria and Serbia.
- The ships came with rats carrying the deadly bubonic plague infection(Black death).
- This catastrophe ,combined with the economic crisis, caused immense social disorder.
- Serious imbalances were created between agriculture and manufacture.

### Social Unrest

The income of lords was declining rapidly because of fall prices of agriculture products and rise in wages of labourers. In desperation,they tried to give up the money-contracts and revive labour-services. This was fiercely opposed by all peasants including better-educated and more prosperous one. The peasants revolted in Flanders in 1323,in France in 1358 and in England in 1381.Although the revolts were ruthlessly crushed but one significant thing was that they occurred with more brutal intensity in the areas which experience economic growth. It was a sign of peasant's attempt for securing their gains which they had made in previous centuries. The aggression of peasants made it certain that old feudal order would not be reinstalled. Thus the lords were able to crush the rebellions but were not

able to reinstitute old feudal privileges

### Political Changes between 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century

Development in the political sphere was parallel to the social processes. In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, emergence of triumphant rulers in Europe was stimulated by the social changes of 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries as the feudal system weakened. Both the powerful new states and the economic changes that were occurring were significant for Europe. The historians called these kings' the new monarchs'. The kings like **Louis XI in France, Maximilian in Austria, Henry-VII in England and Isabelle and Ferdinand in Spain** were absolute monarchs. They started the process of organizing standing armies, a permanent bureaucracy and national taxation and, in Spain and France began to play a role in European expansion overseas.

The monarchs dispensed with the system of feudal levies for their armies and initiated professionally trained infantry equipped with gun and siege artillery directly under their control. The resistance of the nobility collapsed in the face of the military efficiency of the kings.

The centralized power did not establish easily confrontation of aristocracies. The nobility managed a tactical transfer from being opponents to the new regime into loyalists. The king was at the centre of an elaborate courtier society and a network of patron-client relationships. All rulers powerful or weak required the assistance of those who could control power which could be arranged or acquired by way of money. The merchants and bankers acquired an important role because they could solve problem of money for the kings by lending it to them. Therefore, they got easy access to royal court. Kings, thus made way for non-feudal constituents in the state scheme. The later history of France and England was to be shaped by these changes in the power structure.

### Key words

**Medieval Era:** The term 'medieval era' refers to the period in European history between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries.

**Abbey** : Abbey is derived from the Syriac abba, meaning father. An abbey was governed by an abbot or an abbess.

**Monastery** : The word 'monastery' is derived from the Greek word 'monos', meaning someone who lives alone.

**Doon de mayence:** A thirteenth century French poem to be sung recounting adventures of Knights.

**The Canterbury Tales:** A poem written by Geoffrey Chaucer

**Piers Plowman:** A poem written by Langland

**The Black death:** Black death or bubonic plague caused the large scale deaths in Europe. It was brought by the rats that come to Europe, along with the trading ships.

**Fourth Order** : The bigger towns had population of around 30,000. They could be said to have formed a fourth order.

### Passage Based Reference

#### Rules followed by Monks

The monks had to follow many rules. A manuscript with 73 chapters have been found in the Benedictine monasteries. Some of the important rules were:

<b>Chapter 6 said</b>	The consent to speak should be granted to monks only on rare occasions
<b>Chapter 7 said</b>	Humanity means obedience
<b>Chapter 33 said</b>	A monk should never own private property
<b>Chapter 47 said</b>	Idleness is the enemy of the soul, so friars and sisters should be occupied at certain times in manual labour and at fixed hours in readings.
<b>Chapter 48 said</b>	The monasteries should be settled out in the way that all necessities (water, mill, garden, workshops etc.) are found within its premises.

*Prepared by Sujith. K, HSSST History, Govt. Vocational Higher Secondary School, Kayyoor, Kasargod Dist.*