

Europe – prior to the Renaissance

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Introduction:-

The **national monarchies** of modern Europe developed between the 16th and the 18th century. The **church** and the **feudal nobility** , which were the power center of socio- economic activities of **'medieval' Europe** became appropriated by the **royal authority** or perished by the **crown**.

On the other hand, the **city state** and its principality lost its unequivocal significance as the concept of **nation state** was becoming stronger.

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The **central government** was expanding in various countries at the cost of the **local jurisdiction** and **Absolutism** was established in some.

In short, the growth of Absolutist states became an important phenomenon from the 16th century onwards. Basically, **it emerged as a new ism which got its impetus from existing nobility.**

Contemporary leading European monarchies were Spain, France and England.

16th Century in a nutshell:-

- By 1500, **Portugal** became politically independent of Spain and attained its present boundaries.
- **Spain** (Castile and Aragon), was formally consolidated by the marriage of Ferdinand of Spain and Isabella of Castile, though it was not united and homogenous in true sense because of conflicting racial, religious and linguistic groups.
- In **England**, a strong national monarchy was established under the Tudors, Henry VII, after a long Civil War, the War of the Roses.
- **France** was more or less unified and its central government strengthened under Louis XI.

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- The **Holy Roman Empire** theoretically claimed a general supremacy over all Christian princes of Europe and comprised of a loose **association of 300 German feudal states**.
- The **City Stats of Italy- Milan, Genoa, Venice and Florence**, were independent and thrived in industry and commerce.
- The **City States of Netherlands** were **Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent, Liege, Rotterdam and Utrecht**. They also were leaders in industry and commerce but were not fully independent being under the Habsburgs.
- The **Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Norway and Sweden** were loosely joined together by the **Union of Calmar (1397)**. **Sweden** became independent in 1533.
- **Hungary** was under the control of a strong feudal class which barred the monarchy from becoming strong.

Features of Contemporary Spain:-

- After gaining independence from that of Portugal, Spain started to re-organize itself by highlighting two provinces , i.e. **Aragon** and **Castile**.
- Although newly sovereign country; Spain inclined to unify under the aegis of Aragon and Castile, they were distinctly different from each other. **By the late 15th and early 16th century, Contemporary Aragon was cosmopolitan in outlook and mercantile in its nature. On the other hand, Castile, of that time, was more motivated towards war than trade.** It possessed a pastoral and nomadic society which was more or less shaped by the unquenchable thirst of warfare. The ***Reconquista*** (aggressive inclination towards war) gave the Castilian society a militant character whose pre dominant elements was aristocracy.

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- Talking about aristocracy, which was pre dominant character of late 15th century Castile, one can assumed that, it did not develop symmetrically. Since the nobility and the clergy enjoyed fiscal immunity, only **the masses had to bear the burden of taxes voted by the Cortes.**
- Aristocratic corporations found separate manifestations in the rich and formidable military orders – **Calatrava, Alcantara** and **Santiago**. But they did not enjoy the collective authority of a proper noble estate in the **Cortes.**

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- **By the 15th century, Castile became a vibrant and expanding society.** The port of Seville grew as an important trade center and specially its Cantabrian fleet upheld Castille's position in the realm of international trade. Moreover, the kingdom of Castile included most of Spain and more than five- sixths of its population.
- **Due to several internal crises like civil wars of 1460's, emigration to America after 1493, inquisition against converted Jews in 1492, the Moorish exodus after the conquest of Granada in 1492 led to a loss of population of about half a million. Spain initiated to combat with this political crisis by developing her sheep industry.**

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- Due to a rapid decline in population during the crisis of the late middle ages , the demand for agricultural products diminished and the prices fell. By taking advantage of this fall, Spain gained a considerable share of the reduced market. **According to Braudel, without the eco-political crisis of the 14th and 15th centuries , without the attractiveness of the probably low prices of Castilian wool and without the active cloth industry of the Italian towns, the rise of sheep industry in Castile would have been impossible.**
- But as Castile remained basically an exporter of primary materials i.e. wool and not cloth , it could not become England of that time. Contemporary England began to follow a policy of parallel industrial transformation of the primary materials and this the reason why England , not Spain , first moved along the road of the industrial growth.

Features of contemporary France:-

- The end of famine and eclipse of the Black Death in the second half of the 15th century and the early 16th century led to demographic recovery which brought into agrarian expansion.
- **In France, by this time, the peasants had been freed from hereditary servitude and about forty to fifty percent became landholders. In short, the peasants started to possess hereditary rights to their land and enjoyed greater security than the simple tenants who formed the majority of the rural population.**

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- In most parts of France, small holdings formed the majority and about 80 per cent to 90 per cent of the personal holdings were smaller than five hectares. Although agricultural occupation expanded in that time span, the peasants occupied merely 28 per cent of the cultivated land. Ecclesiastical institutions, nobles and townsmen controlled the remaining seventy two per cent.
- In the beginning of the 16th century, the socio- economic position of the bulk of French peasants worsened than earlier. On the comparatively brighter side, **rural woolen and linen industries expanded in the mid of the 15th century , as the need of supplementary income amongst the farmer class arose.**
- In the backdrop of the thriving market economy, state craft of the existing monarchy started to claim its monopoly .

Features of Contemporary England:-

- **The growth of the cloth industry in the late 14th century benefited the great merchant- mercers, drapers, grocers and others associated to cloth. Even the cloth industry , growing in the countryside, harmed the urban clothing crafts.**
- **But king Edward III's economic policy affected commerce as well as contemporary agriculture. His exhausting warfare spawned some financial obligations at the cost of export policy of that time. By the 15th century, England had been transformed from an exporter of raw materials (wools) into an exporter of manufactured products.**

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- Since middle of the 15th century, **Industry was moving from corporate towns to the countryside** because of the **availability of water-power** and also **to gain the advantage of paying lower wages to village workers.**
- The newly found peace encouraged trade and increased the power of the merchants. **The affluent traders started to tighten their control over town guilds by the end of the 15th century.**
- **The old aristocracy had become socially and financially weak, and was gradually being excluded from the inner councils of the government.**

Features of contemporary Netherlands:-

- Owing to its physical and institutional endowments, the **Northern Netherlands escaped the full flared influence of manor based feudalism** which encompassed most of contemporary western Europe.
- Till the end of the 16th century, the economy of Northern Netherlands (**Holland**) was ancillary to that of southern Netherlands (**Belgium**) , which had prepared itself to be a great center of European trade and industry with an advanced agricultural segment.
- Dutch productive efficiency first got its widened acknowledgement in 1400, when it discovered a new technology for curing, gutting and salting Herring fish. In addition to this, it invented a larger fishing boat, named **Buss/Harig Buis** , with the help of which it elevated to a revered position of fishing industry.

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- **By the early 16th century, noble holdings started to lose their unquestioned supremacy which they gained earlier times in natural basis.** They possessed neither a kind of lucrative material base, nor industrial or political base from which they could control the rural society.
- Apart from this **contemporary religious enterprises ceased to play an important role in the rural society of northern Netherlands** as neither nobility nor the church were strong land- holding powers.
- **The new economic activities of the contemporary rural sector quite indirectly paved the way to a kind of broader economic development.**

Salient characteristics of the late 15th –early 16th Century Industry:-

- Improvements in the spinning wheel and the spreading use of gig mills for cloth finishing, influenced woolen industry.
- The arduous need of Dutch polder system for mechanical pumps, of mines for ventilation and drainage and of furnaces for powerful bellows were met by improvements in wind and watermills and the extension of their use.
- Canon founding, pumping machinery and techniques of pumping the blast furnace emerged in the latter part of the 15th century and became important in the long run.

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- The productiveness of industry was increased by the late 15th century- early 16th century through some organizational changes with the control of the merchant capitalists over the production of goods they usually sold.
- **The rural industries were finally freed from regulations imposed by towns.** As they recruited women from rural families and seasonally unemployed men on land, lost cost goods of reasonable standard started to become produced. **But the more skilled processes of dyeing and finishing remained under the monopoly of the town craftsmen.**
- **Many weavers abandoned agriculture and took up weaving as their full time occupation which, needless to say, helped the newly – grown weaving industry to achieve its desired expansion.**

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- During this time, a path-breaking change took place in the economic realm of western Europe as the producer was separated from the final consumer by the intermediary, merchant capitalist. **The merchants were specialized in trading just as craftsmen were specialized in producing.**
- **The capital and profits belonged to the merchants. By that time, it had become a norm that, a merchant would make the crucial decision about the style, markets and volume of production.** This change was found in all the great textile industries of Western Europe.

Position of Netherlands in the changed scenario of early 16th Century industry:-

- It is important to notify that, in this gradually transformed economic scenario, Netherlands became the *entrepot* of western Europe. They enjoyed this position till the 17th century by gaining a monopoly of European transport and international commerce. This very domination continued till the first quarter of the 18th century was due to their strategic location , superior commercial techniques , the expansion of an efficient capital market, assuring government policy and also due to the comparatively backwardness of their neighbors.

Antwerp- a new hope for newly emerged merchant based International Industry:-

- **The Dutch country , which formed Northern Netherlands (Holland) also developed into an efficient economic organization by which the Dutch achieved an economic and political importance quite disproportionate to the small size of their country.** They became the greatest ship-owners of Europe in the late 15th century. The foundation for the future role of the Dutch and Amsterdam in extra-European expansion during the 17th century was laid during this time.
- **Lastly, it has to be mentioned that, since 1440 C.E. , Antwerp started to act a link between Cologne and London and by the 16th century Antwerp served as a *entrepot* and as a colony for foreign merchants rather than a refuge for local traders.**