

Socio- economic position of Landlords and Tenants prior to the Renaissance

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- The world of peasantry had gone under ample changes during the long termed span of Renaissance. **The expansion of industrial capitalism, widening of trading activities , expansion of the organized money market affected this spectrum profoundly.**
- Basically, 'medieval' method of the agricultural production started to become ostracized right from the beginning of industrial proliferation.

- As the usage of money became a basic medium of exchange economy, manorial lords desired to buy more commodities from merchants and craftsmen than in the past. **In order to increase their cash income still more , money of the contemporary landlords gave up direct exploitation of the demesne and started to lease it. As the demesne based farming declined , serfdom lost its economic importance. Hereditary binding of serfs with that of demesne started to become obsolete day by day.**
- In lieu of this lease , former manorial lords became willing to free serfs from the never ending bondage of manorial contracts which offered them personal protection and a subsistence living at the cost of personal dependence.

- **The Black Death of 1348- 1349 C.E. , the Hundred Years' War (France) transformed the everyday activity of peasantry in many ways.**
 - (1) Above mentioned severe Black Death cut the rural population of western Europe to a half, in some regions to a third of its former level. On the other hand, Hundred Years' War ravaged the French countryside like never before. These two events indirectly helped peasants to become vocal for more wages than earlier as the demand of the agricultural labor rose much higher than their availability.**
 - (2) On the other hand, those peasants who were unable to get equipped with the new technology of commercialized agricultural production, started to lose their jobs during this scenario. In areas where crops like grain or wool could be raised on a large scale and immediately sold for cash to the international market, landlords started to evict their tenants without hesitation and farm the whole estate commercially with hired labor.**

- **Between 1460- 1560 C.E., agricultural occupation thrived mainly for two reasons. Firstly, for the expansion of trade during this above mentioned span and secondly, because of the improvement of the communication network.**
- It can be assumed that, opportunities for the profit of commercialized agriculture multiplied as communications improved and an intrinsic network of trade in agricultural production covered the continent.
- **Grain started to move from Sicily to Naples, Rome and Venice ; from Eastern Germany and Poland to Scandinavia , Netherlands and the Rhineland; from northern Europe to the Mediterranean.**
- In short, it can be said that, the subsistence agriculture of the past became transformed into production for near or distant markets.

- The new system of commercialized agriculture helped to elevate the economic status of landlords and peasants in two very different ways.
- **During 14th century, many French landlords introduced a short-termed contractual lease called *metayage*, similar to the *mezzadria* system initiated in Italy.** In this system, instead of paying an annual rent, peasants paid a fixed proportion of their yearly cultivated crop, usually half. This system increased the landlord's proprietary right in the land and gave him the significant opportunity to rise agricultural prices than earlier.
- On the other hand, **Elizabeth Lamond** observes in her book, **A Discourse of the Common Weal of This Realm of England** that long term leases benefitted tenants rather than landlords. **The tenant had the freedom to farm his holding any way he liked, as well as sell it, divide it among his heirs. Even, he could sell his surplus produce freely on the market.**

- The very relation between agrarian nobility and their tenants transformed drastically during sixteenth century. **Many smaller landlords were envisaging rising prices and falling real rents. In order to recoup their losses , they became keen to take refuge behind royal and princely wars abroad and started to depend their livelihood upon ransoms, booty and confiscated land in conquered territory.**
- It had been manifested that the French nobility was a major force behind the aggressive attacks on Italy that began in 1494.
- The Spanish nobility had lived for centuries on the reconquest of the peninsula from the Moors.
- The arrogant *hidalgos* or lesser nobles with small property then turned to lead and exploit colonial expansion in the New World.

The economic condition of the peasantry was the mirror image of the economic condition of the land-owning nobility. Where landlords prospered in Spain and Portugal, in southern Italy and Sicily, in parts of England and east of the Elbe – peasants more or less suffered. Although there was exception. From Elbe to the English Channel, from the Apennines to the North Sea, peasants were more prosperous in the 16th century than there had been in the 13th.

- At first, as by evicting remaining tenants and by farming their whole estate commercially with hired labor, noble landlords started to become financially thrived, they supported the act of peasant emancipation.
- **But during the 16th century, under the pressure of rising prices and the increasing cost of living “nobly”, landlords became keen to claim their right in their assigned land and intruded into the rights of peasant rights whenever circumstances allowed them to.**
- **In France, *banalites*(fees the peasants were forced to pay for the use of the mill, oven and wine press)re-established.**
- Lords invaded the old wastelands , forest, stream and meadow which were formerly open to the use of peasants.
- **“our lords have appropriated all the woods to themselves alone, and when the poor man needs any wood, he must buy it at double price”**- this lamenting statement of an unknown farmer of the late 16th century Germany clearly depicts the scenario.

Apart from this intrusion, sometimes landlords successfully introduced more favorable leases, like *metayage*, peasants actually lost their ground.

Finally, all peasants felt the oppressive nature of torment from the end of their political rulers.

In **Germany**, especially in the southwest, many large landlords were becoming the alter image of local prices of their territories.

In the contemporary **France**, tenures had generally been hereditary and rents had been fixed.

In short, **the new landlord- princes restored the economic balance to their own favor by charging new taxes, squeezing their tenants not as landlords but as tax collectors.**

As a result of this whole newly emerged situation, the Sixteenth century became an age of permanent agrarian crisis. Newly set up serfdom seemed a purely arbitrary bondage in a world where lack of personal freedom was no longer mingled to any economic advantage. Free tenants resented all kinds of obligations and tried to escape the dues and services that landlords tried to enforce.

- **Tension between landlord and peasant became endemic and it sometimes resulted in a kind of ‘open violence’.** There were minor movements occurred in **England**, sporadic risings in France. In **Germany**, there were eleven major peasant uprising between the early fifteenth century and the **great peasant revolt of 1525-1526.**
- The peasants demanded a return to the **‘good old days ‘** and the **‘good old law’.**
- In short, **their mentality was conservative, highly religious and Utopian. They dreamed of a free and harmonious social life regulated by the discipline of the Gospel.**

- The above mentioned conservative- religious- Utopian mentality was widely reflected in a revolt of 1476 led by *Hans Baron*, the bagpiper of *Niklashausen*, known as the “*holy youngstar*”. He preached to young crowds that he was going to make them glad with restoration of a **pure world of God**. In addition, **he proclaimed that as the desired kingdom comes, there will be neither pope nor emperor , all class distinctions will be ended, all men will be free and equal, in dependence only to the law of brotherly love. Forest, water, meadows and wastelands must be free for the use of all. If it would come in a very successful way , princes and lords would have to work for daily wages.**

- So, it can easily be assumed that, the **multifarious dynamism and prosperity of the European economy in the late Fifteenth century and in the Sixteenth century were intrinsically related to the breach between landlord and tenant as well as between employer and worker.**
- The salient cause of tension was **structural changes in production and the organization of labor associated with the development of the capitalist mode of production in industry, and also in the field of agriculture.**
- Basically, these noble landed gentries served the contemporary civilization in two ways. **Firstly, they succeeded partially to form a sovereign territorial state and secondly, they laid the foundation stone of a revived enthusiasm for classical literature.**

- The price revolution aggravated the scenario. **Merchant- bankers** were enjoying a large share of wealth and economic power than earlier times. **Laborers, journeymen** and **artisans** also grabbed the opportunity of capitalist mode of production.
- **Land** remained the best and safest form of investment in the long run.
- **But to retain their noble livelihood, aristocrats paid a price.** They obtained the privilege of tax exemptions and honorific privileges at the cost of their political and military independence.