**“The collapse of feudalism was due to the internal contradictions**

**within its own system” – A debate**

The debate on ‘transition’ was initiated after the publication of Maurice Dobb’s Studies in the Development of Capitalism, 1949 after the Second World War and the revised edition appeared in 1963. Maurice Dobb based his approach to the transition from feudalism to capitalism on Marx’s notion of the mode of production. While he recognized that one mode of production dominated a given age/epoch, he accepted that the elements of other modes of production could coexist along with the dominant mode. He laid emphasis on three keys:

1. The crisis of feudalism in the 14th century
2. The beginning of capitalism in the late 16th and 17th centuries
3. The Industrial Revolution of the 18th and early 19th centuries.

The decline of feudalism and beginning of capitalism were separated atleast by two centuries. It was from the latter half of the 16th century and early 17th century that capital began to penetrate production to a considerable degree. Dobb argued that the decline of feudalism was the result of ‘inner contradiction’ within the feudal mode of production where feudal lords ruled over peasants and their lands. The ‘serfs’ or kind of bonded cultivators utilized their small lands with their labour work while being required to allocate a part of their labour to the feudal lords. This labour was governed by law or customary right where peasants had no freedom which caused inner contradictions. This explanation is generally described as the ‘inner contradiction model’.

Dobb also argued that trade and merchant capital did not directly change feudal economic system. According to him, capitalist development was brought about by the emergence of an urban setting. In his view, ‘lord-peasant’ class relations and the outcome of ‘lord-peasant class conflict’ was an important factor to understand the growth of towns in the feudal society that led to the rise of commercial –industrial capital. According to him, towns play some role in the decline of feudalism because they provided shelter to runaway serfs and served as the oasis of freedom in the late medieval peasant revolts. But the ‘antagonism’ and ‘confrontation’ between the peasants and landlords in the countryside was the main arena of class-struggle. Urban craftsmen and well-to-do and middle class peasants became free from feudalism, became petty producers. This mode of production, according to Maurice Dobb, predominated economically in the two hundred or so years between the beginning of the feudal crisis and the advent of capitalist mode of production in the mid=sixteenth century.

The intensification of market exchange and the growing role of money were thought to bring about the decline of feudalism, but this was rejected by Dobb. *Over-exploitation and stagnant productivity resulted in a decline of population after 1300. Subsequent labour shortage, peasant resistance or threat of flight led to widespread commutation of labour to rent. The manorial system was further weakened by the thinning of ranks of of the nobility through the incessant wars, the growing practice of leasing demesne, emergence of rich middle peasant class who were differentiated from the poor peasant class and the growing use of wage labour.* By the end of the 15th century, the economic basis of feudal system disintegrated. The late medieval social differentiation of the peasantry was a key theme of Dobb’s work which prepared the way for the later dispossession of the mass of peasants. The emergence of this drifting population heralded the coming of capitalism, setting the stage for the emergence of capitalist wage labour. The role of towns was in attracting serfs from fleeing the countryside. *Dobb’s explanation that the collapse of feudalism was the result of its own internal contradictions stemming from the over-exploitation of the peasant producers was acceptable while his explanation of the role of towns in attracting peasants was strongly contested.*

In Dobb’s own words, “*it was the inefficiency of feudalism as a system of production coupled with the growing needs of the ruling class for revenue, that was primarily responsible for its decline, since this need for additional revenue prompted an increase in pressure on the producer to a point where this pressure became literally unendurable*”

On the other hand, Paul Sweezy, a Marxixt economist was the first to contradict Dobb’s theory of “internal contradiction” for the decline of feudalism. *To him, feudalism was a closed and self-sufficient system organized around the manor. It was a mode of production for use. He felt that there was a need for an external force like the growth of trade and increase in production for exchange which undermined the system*.

Another Japanese historian Kohachiro Takahashi again rejected Sweezy’s conception of feudalism as a self-sufficient and closed economic system which produced only for use rather than exchange. He strongly supported Dobb’s concept that feudalism declined due to internal factors like class struggle rather than and external factor like trade. However, he was not fully satisfied with Dobb’s definition of feudalism as he immediately started from the abstractions of feudal landed property and serfdom. Actually, the analysis of feudalism has to begin from the fundamental social units of Western feudalism: the virgate (cottage, small plot, collective rights), the village community and the manor (seigneurie) which Dobb avoids. This reason made Takahashi disagree with Sweezy’s concept.

Another historian, Rodney Howard Hilton also questioned Sweezy’s concept of external forces while he agreed with Dobb’s internal class struggle. It was the main cause for the decline which was dependent on the growth of the forces of production. The class struggle between lords and peasants once led to the flourishing of feudalism and the same class struggle led to its decline. The nobility and princes competed with one another to maximize their rental income. This quest for increased rent stimulated technological innovation, development of towns and commerce and increase in productivity and growing production for the market. The interaction of these factors led to increased social and class differentiations among the richer peasants and the poorer class. The struggle for rent intensified and reached its peak in the 14th century. Hilton opines that the role of towns and trade as seen by Sweezy as the main reason for the decline of feudalism was also the outcome of class struggle.

Hilton was highly influenced by an article of John Merrington which appeared in the *New Left Review* which was re-published and became the final contribution to the debate over *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism,* which Hilton himself edited in 1976. Merrington argued that towns and trade were natural, built-in components of feudalism and were not external capitalist forces working to undermine the functioning of feudalism as a system. So, they played no significant role in the emergence of capitalism because merchant capital did not create surplus value but only re-distributed it. Although it played the key-role in primitive accumulation of capital, it could not be a source of permanent self-reproducing accumulation.

Merrington’s argument was a powerful reinforcement of the role of class struggle and the internal logic of feudalism’s decline. But he overlooked three aspects of their role in its decline. First, the towns served as a potential or actual refuge for rural population as Dobb points out. Secondly, urban markets strengthened social and political links between rural producers. Finally, as Merrington himself noted, merchant capital played a role in primitive accumulation which was a necessary if not sufficient condition for the development of the capitalist mode of production.

Eric Hobsbawm helped to free Marxist understandings from the problems associated with the notions of Asiatic and communal modes of production and reconnected them with ideas about “uneven and combined development”. Hobsbawm insisted that the accomplishment of capitalism in Europe was unique and very special. He argued that there is no getting round the fact that the transition from feudalism is, on a world scale, a case of high ‘uneven development where unevenness represents the condition for a transition from one declining mode of production to another expanding and more progressive mode. Moreover, uneven development is a fundamental feature of the capitalist form of development. According to him, the crisis of feudalism in Europe involved the most advanced sectors of capitalist development within Western Europe as well.

The remarkable thing about the 14th century crisis according to Hobsbawm was not only the collapse of large-scale feudal demesne agriculture, but also the demise/death of the Italian and Flemish textile industries. England advanced industrially but the greater Italy and Flanders industries could not recover. Unevenness characterized not only the crisis of feudalism but also the emergence of capitalism itself. The emergence of capitalism in Europe has to be understood from in terms of an ongoing worldwide process of appropriation based on uneven development both within and without Europe. Hobsbawm concluded that “the net effect of European capitalism was to divide the world ever more sharply into two sectors: the “developed” and the “under-developed” countries, in other words, the “exploiting” and the “exploited”. In Hobsbawm’s concept of transition, unevenness plays a vital role. Profit in one place is invariably at the cost of other places, even those that were initially more developed.

Hobsbawm’s sense of dialectical quality and the unevenness of the process of transition was an impressive insight representing a significant contribution to the transition debate.