

Study Material for History Honours SEM 4 CC-8

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Do you think that the 17th Century in Europe was a period of crisis?

Several historians describe the 17th century in Europe as a period of crisis. But there is no unanimity of opinion among them on questions like when did the crisis start, was it all pervasive or confined only to a few states, causes and nature of the crisis.

As early as in 1649, a French scholar Robert Mentet de Salmonet wrote that the century would become famous for the great and strange revolutions that took place in this period. Supporters of the crisis theory presented a long list of destructive wars, political and social revolts such as the Eighty Years war (1582-1662), the Thirty Years war (1618-1648), the English Civil war (1642-1662), peasant revolts such as the Fronde rebellion in France which almost developed into a civil war, the peasant revolts in Spain (1640), Italy (1647) etc against heavy taxation, to prove that there were some major political and socio-economic problems in Europe during this period.

The concept of a crisis can be first located in the writings of the famous French philosopher Voltaire (1756) who believed that this was not confined to Europe alone as rebellions and uprisings could be seen in many parts of the world such as Turkey, India and China. However the idea of crisis surfaced in the historical writings only from the middle of the 20th century in the works of Roland Mousnier, Eric Hobsbawm, H.R. Trevor Roper etc. According to R. Mousnier, the crisis was manifested in demography, economy but more so in the intellectual sphere. For Eric Hobsbawm, it was a major crisis of European economy that marked a decisive shift from a feudal to a capitalist order. He also subscribes to the view that it was a "general crisis". Another supporter of the crisis theory R.B. Merriman observes that all the political disturbances could be seen as social and political manifestations of a general crisis that had been affecting the entire Europe in the 17th century. Josef Polisensky suggests that the Thirty Years war was an integral part of the crisis and reflected the internal contradictions in the structure of the society.

As regards the beginning of the period of crisis, some historians notably E.J. Hamilton argue in favour of 1620, when the import of American silver declined, thereby creating a chronic shortage of currency. While some others consider the middle years of the 17th century, the 1640s and 1650s as marking the real beginning of the crisis. True the date and intensity of this crisis varies from one region to another and differs with each historian as for instance Peter Clark places the beginning of the crisis in the economic depression of England, peasant uprisings of Austria and agrarian crisis of Spain in the 1590s.

Historians have sought to locate the political origin of the crisis in the rise of absolutist states in early modern Europe. These states were military institutions and almost half of their income every year was spent on wars. As almost every country was engaged in wars for most part of the century, the government tried new sources of revenue collection, an aspect that has been emphasized by historians like N. Steensgaard, I. Schoffer, which triggered popular resistance against taxation policy of the state. It exposed the deep political crisis existing between the society and the state. This has prompted an important proponent of the theory of general crisis H.R. Trevor Roper to argue that the

crisis of the 17th century was not merely a constitutional crisis or a crisis of production, rather it was a "crisis in the relation between the state and society or a crisis that developed through the tension between the court and the country". He therefore explains the political crisis from the core-periphery perspective.

Neil Steensgaard however rejects Trevor Roper's court-country concept as having no European validity and considers the crisis as the outcome of absolutism which posed a threat with its taxation policy to the traditional social balance. Some of the other opponents of crisis theory such as J.H. Elliott argue that the social and political disorders remained specific to local conditions and these did not coalesce into broader movements. He also points out that if few rebellions were all that

could be shown as a crisis of the 17th century than it was a mere "continuity" as there were as many revolts in the 1540s as there were in the 1640s.

Scholars present several explanations for the economic crisis during the 17th century. Marxist historians such as Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm viewed the crisis as the crisis of production and subsistence crisis. But historians such as

J.H. Elliott, J.I. Israel, F. Braudel emphasise that this period was not one of complete economic regression as the intensity of the crisis varied according to regions and economic setbacks did not assume uniform patterns. True, it was a period of

industrial crisis that also affected trade and commerce as for instance decline of the 16th century Mediterranean trade that was described by Fernand Braudel as "world economy". But then just as there were distinct signs of decline in certain regions of Europe, many parts of northern Europe witnessed industrial growth and economic progress such as England and Holland.

E.J. Hamilton thinks monetary factors related to bullion imports to be the main cause of European economic crisis in the 17th century. He argues that silver imports from America reached its peak in the 1620 and thereafter it started declining, thereby creating a chronic shortage of currency. But Jan de Vries and Morineau does not subscribe to the view that the economy of Europe rose and fell with the flow of precious metals from the New World as the silver coming from America did not stay in Europe for long and it was taken away to India and China for trade. Thus the impact of silver influx was not so great. These historians believe that Hamilton presents a very simple explanation of a very complex economic system. R. Romano has stated that the money in circulation was considerably reduced in the early 17th century due to stagnation in minting and perennial problems of land related property that made sale of landed property very difficult, thereby creating monetary crisis.

Inspired by the scientists such as John Eddy of America, Cassini of France and Hevelius of Poland, who described the period as the "Little Ice Age", scholars of the French Annales School of historiography emphasise the role of climatic fluctuations, to be responsible for the agrarian and demographic crisis of the 17th century Europe. As nearly 80 to 90 per cent of the European population depended on agriculture, climatic changes such as decline in solar energy affected all living organisms thereby worsening the agricultural situation and causing depopulation. In this way, war, epidemics such as plague, crop failure, climatic factors all contributed to the demographic crisis and the consequent societal crisis.

According to Eric Hobsbawm, 'the English bourgeois revolution of the 1640s was the most decisive product of the seventeenth century crisis' as it marked the triumph of capitalism in England. Here he viewed the crisis as a form of class conflict. But according to Perez Zagorin the connection between the English revolution and the crisis in Europe is unconvincing. In fact Perez Zagorin rejects the very notion of a seventeenth century crisis. John Elliott and A.D. Lublinskaya also completely reject the notion of "general crisis" as provided by Eric Hobsbawm and Trevor Roper.

Be that as it may, from the above analysis it may be concluded that the political and economic crisis were wide-spread in the countries of south-west and central Europe. But the intensity of the crisis differed in different countries and the reaction was also different. As Pierre Goubert suggests that an examination of the localities of France undermines the assumption that any one period was a time of specific economic crisis and that it varied from one region to another. Thus despite disagreements and debates, most scholars seem to suggest that there was a major crisis in Europe during the seventeenth century with many political and socio-economic ramifications.