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Japanese

Japanese History and Society

Fall of Tokugawa

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Japanese

Japanese History and Society

Fall of Tokugawa

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Objective

This module intends to help to understand the social, political and conditions that prevailed in Japan through Tokugawa era specially the few years. It also introduces you to internal crisis situation and external factors as well in hastening the process of regime decline. Finally you will be in a position to answer the questions listed at the end of the module.

Introduction

The decline of Tokugawa Shogunate has been a subject of academic debate in medieval history of Japan. It is also an important period marking the decline and transition from feudalism to primitive capitalism. The reasons attributed to the decline of the Tokugawa Shogunate are many but can be broadly classified into two categories namely internal crisis due to the inner contradictions of the feudal system and also reasons owing to external pressure. But before going directly to the decline of the Tokugawa Shogunate it is important to understand the Tokugawa society and economy briefly.

Socio-Political System in Japan

The Tokugawa Shogunate was established in 1603 AD when Tokugawa Ieyasu, its founder, established the hegemony of his family and its collaterals over a large part of Japan and exerted indirect control throughout the three great islands of Honshu, Kyushu and Shikoku. Nevertheless, end came with Meiji Restoration, more than two centuries later in 1868.

Tokugawa Shogunate had a system of 'Centralised feudalism', in words of John K. Fairbank. According to him there was a centralization of political power during this period that was achieved through a very feudal pattern that was decentralised. This uniqueness of its feudalism was the cause of its success as well as the recipe for its downfall.

The centralised feudalism in Japan can be better understood if briefly look at the structure of the society, economy and polity. If one imagines a pyramidal structure, at the top was Emperor

(*Mikado*). The Emperor was divine in status and an object of worship, had only assumed position in a symbolic or a mere ceremonial power. The empire was located in Kyoto where the court nobility or the *kuge* surrounded him. The real power in Japan rested in the hands of the Shogun or the *Bakufu* although theoretically he was second only to the emperor in hierarchy.

The Shogun's system of administration was called the *Bakuhun* or the tent government and the seat of authority was in Edo/modern Tokyo, separate from the emperor. The shogunate had been hereditarily with the Tokugawa family since 1603 and power was wielded from armed strength and monopoly over the office of shogun. His power was centered on his own territory which grew about a quarter of the agricultural produce of the whole of Japan. He directly exercised control over several emerging new cities including port cities also.

Next in hierarchy was the *daimyos* or the feudal lords who controlled the rest of the land in Japan and were called *han*. They varied greatly in strength ranging from those who produced rice ranging from 10,000 *kokus* of rice to 200,000 *kokus*. During this period, Japan had around 250 to 300 *daimyos*. In return for a pledge of *loyalty* to the Tokugawa house, the emperor bestowed upon the *daimyo* the power to rule his own domain. Hence the *daimyo's* domain was the system of effective local administration. The feudal system replicated itself in each *daimyo's* domain.

The feudal lords replicated what the shogun did in his domain in terms of administration, issuing legal codes and taxation. They had a group of loyal samurai under them in order to maintain their military superiority in their respective domains. The samurai came below the *daimyo* in terms of hierarchy and owed their loyalty to their respective feudal lords in return for fixed rice in payments. Below the samurais were three classes namely the peasants, the artisans and the merchants (*chonin*). These classes were accorded very scant respect and were not allowed to carry arms. While the peasants were considered the basis of the agrarian economy and hence shown some recognition, the *chonin* were considered non productive and hence seen as the lowest of the low.

Internal Crisis in Tokugawa Japan

Around the 19th century the Tokugawa system began to face serious problems. The very system that so well preserved the feudal loyalties intact, the checks and balances led to social tensions. Financial crisis also prevailed all through empire.

All the classes in Japan - the *daimyos*, the samurai, the peasants, and merchants - began to experience several profound changes. The regulatory measures used to keep them aloof though ensured the feudal order but were leading to certain socio-economic changes that were not in conformity with the spirit of feudalism. A money economy was had emerging as opposed to the rice economy, due to the long period of peace. The Tokugawa rule had in turn promoted manufacturing and industries too.

To appreciate the centralised feudalism in Japan one has to understand the different classes of social organisation. At the helm was the emperor or the *Mikado*. The emperor was considered direct descendent of the Sun Goddess and was worshipped. The office of the emperor had been reduced to a mere ceremonial status and his powers were only nominal. His seat of power and court was in Kyoto. The real power rested with the shogun and was theoretically placed just below the emperor. The Shogun was the de facto ruler of Japan. Below the shogun were *Daimyos* or the provincial chiefs.

The causes of *Daimyo* discontent

The *sankin kotai* system which was a powerful system of check on *daimyos* further fuelled the money economy. Under this system the *daimyos* had to undertake substantial expenditure to maintain his annual journey to and from Edo and maintain his life both in Edo and his own domain. The *daimyo* had to finance his whole retinue that travelled with him to the capital and this slowly started becoming an area of competitive display among the *daimyos*. The *daimyo* was to also entertain the shogun. He was to keep his castles in good condition and pay for irrigation and other land projects back in his own domain.

In order to maintain these expenses the *daimyo* began to sell the rice which was collected as tax into money by selling rice in the markets such as Osaka which were known for its rice warehouses. The *daimyo* were mostly at a disadvantage where they had to depend on the rice merchants and the volatile rice market fluctuations. This further contributed to the growth of the money economy and this in turn led to the social mobility of the merchant classes or the *chonin*.

Prior to this they were considered the lowest in the hierarchy and now even the *daimyo* fell into debts. This was further complicated by the standardization of weights and measures, adoption of a national currency and the development of transport and communication network. All these led to a kind of unnatural social formation which took the form of *daimyo-chonin* alliance. This became possible because the *chonin* were accepted into *daimyo* families though marriage or adoption. Thus, there was a mutual exchange of economic power and social status.

Figure 1: Model of a *Daimyo* Mansion in Tokugawa Japan



Source: Edo Tokyo Museum Website

<http://www.lucianomorpurgo.com/foto/Tokyo/EdoTokyoMuseum/slides/06.Daimyo.Residence.html>

The Samurai Discontent

The *samurai* who were the warrior class completely lost their utility due to the long periods of peace and lack of warfare. They lost their traditional ties with their lands and were reduced to a

tax collecting bureaucratic elite who was heavily dependent on the fixed rice stipends provided by the *daimyos*. They began residing in the castle towns. This in turn led to the growth of a demand economy in towns which was fully exploited by the merchants. The growth of the market system around the castle towns also led to a fundamental transformation in the socio-economic order that previously centered on the countryside.

The samurais soon turned disgruntled as they the rise of the *daimyos* and the merchant class in the new system was a reality. The lack of money also kept many consumer goods beyond their reach. The cut in the samurai stipends by the *daimyos* further escalated their grievances. All this led to some samurais severing ties with *daimyos* and becoming the *ronin* or the master less wandering samurai. Many of them who had settled in the towns took to the study of western sciences and literature and thus became the harbingers of the intellectual change that would eventually open Japan to the world. They became the most ardent supporters of the restoration of the emperor as they hated the shogunate which had led to their near ruin.

Another reason for the *samurai* discontent was the appointment of the officials in the bureaucracy based on rank and not meritocracy. The higher level *samurais* occupied the most important offices leading to frustration among the lower ranking warriors. These lower ranking *samurai* became one of the most ardent supporters of the imperial cause. Because of their scheming, temperament and violence these men were called *shishi* or men of spirit. These frustrations unleashed with the arrival of Perry in 1853 and the unequal treaties raised all the uncomfortable issues and led to more open and wider political discussions.

Slowly there emerged a *daimyo-ronin-chonin* alliance against Tokugawa Shogunate for their unjust treatment by the shogunate and to protect their interests and advance in a rapidly changing situation. This was symbolic of an upheaval of Tokugawa system of rigid social hierarchies and separations. But this cannot be called a conscious struggle to uproot feudalism, it is most appropriate to see it as a political struggle against the Tokugawa regime.

Figure 2: : Model of a *Chonin* area north of the Nihonbashi bridge during early Edo period.



(Source: Edo Tokyo Museum Website)

<http://www.lucianomorpurgo.com/foto/Tokyo/EdoTokyoMuseum/slides/08.Chonin.Area.html>

The Peasant Discontent

The peasants were accorded a high position in the Tokugawa system as it was based on a rice economy. But the peasants too contributed indirectly to the fall of the shogunate. The fast penetrating money economy led the *daimyos* to force the peasants to pay taxes partly in cash. This increased the burden on the peasantry and they began to turn to the money lenders by mortgaging their lands. The money lenders thus turned cultivators though theoretically they belonged to the *daimyo*. While this led to increased concentration of lands in a few hands it also led to emerging hierarchies within the peasants. Some peasants became very rich and resented the Tokugawa system for not allowing their further rise. These led to an increase in the number of landless peasants who revolted and even migrated to towns. While the revolts were largely directed against the *daimyos* and money lenders, it also weakened the Tokugawa system at a time when it was already best with tough resistance.

The *Kuge* were another force that stood for change. They had lost their political and cultural status that was accorded before the Tokugawa rule. The Tokugawa shogunate had reduced them to penury. They actively built an alliance against the shogun. They allied with the dissident

daimyo most importantly the Choshu clan. This alliance became even more powerful after the relaxation of the *Sankin Kotai* practice in 1862 when the *daimyos* could visit Kyoto more conveniently. This alliance was called the Court-Military Alliance or *the Kobbu-Gattai*.

The Financial Crisis and Natural Calamities

The financial crisis that the Tokugawa Japan faced further led to the fall. The tax system was extremely obsolete. It still had not taken into account the increasing wealth of merchant activities and thus these activities were not taxed uniformly. The increasing wealth in the agricultural sector was also not being assessed and taxed accordingly or uniformly. There were several efforts at reform but none of them fructified as the leaders failed to address the causes and only dealt with the symptoms. Also there were two divergent voices when it came to reforms. Some wanted a return the old ways whereby agriculture would be re-emphasised again suppressing the growing clout of the merchants. The others voiced to accept the changing system towards commercialisation and act accordingly.

The natural calamities especially the ones in the 1830s did not help the cause of the Tokugawa shogunate either. This was further exacerbated by the peasant uprisings and riots of the same period. Special mention must be made of the Osaka rice uprising of 1837 under the leadership of Oshio Heihachiro. Most riots were being led by *ronin* or other petty officials.

The External Pressure

While the internal crisis had made the situation ripe the final strike came in the form of the external aggression. Some historians like Barrington Moore Jr. are of the opinion that the feudal state of Japan came to an end because of the western influences leading to modernisation. Whereas others like E.H Norman do not agree with the extent of impact that the west could have unleashed and offered several reasons to show that the feudal society itself had several perfect recipes for its self decline. Japan had been completely closed to the world for a long period and many western countries were unsuccessful in forcing open Japan.

Russia was one of the first to be followed by the British. All the foreign powers wanted definite treaty rights to guarantee shipping interests in Japan. The crisis came to a head when Commodore Perry of the US navy arrived in Japan in 1853. The shogun was uncertain how to deal with this crisis and gain consensus hence asked for the opinion of the *daimyos* on the matter. This was a political debacle leading to exposure of the weakness of the shogun by the *daimyos*. Perry returned in February 1854 and a treaty was signed on March 31st 1854 called the Kanagawa Treaty of Friendship. The Most Favoured clause was inserted. The treaty allowed for the two ports - Shimoda and Hakodate - to be opened to American ships and also allowed a limited trade with America. It also provided for an American consular agent to reside in Shimoda. Similar treaties were signed subsequently with Britain, Russia and Holland as well.

Figure 3: Commodore Perry Meeting the Imperial Commissioner at Yokohama



(Source: Penobscot Marine Museum Website)

(<http://penobscotmarinemuseum.org/pbho-1/collection/commodore-perry-meeting-imperial-commissioner-yokohama>)

The external aggression at the time of internal discontent and resistance completely exposed the Tokugawa weakness. The opposition became more vocal and the two slogans of *Son-no Jo-i* (revere the emperor and expel the barbarians) began to echo throughout Japan. Expelling the barbarian almost acted as a licence to openly engage in anti-shogun movements.

Figure 4: Shogunal Troops of 1864



(Source: Illustrated London News)

The Treaties led to chaotic situation in Japan. The consequences were many and far reaching. The introduction of the foreign currency led to a distortion of monetary system in Japan. The gold to silver ratio was 5:1 in Japan while in the rest of the world it was 15:1. The value of the currency was fixed by the shogun arbitrarily and was not based on the intrinsic metal content. This was coupled with the increasing demand for consumer goods by the foreigners and also by an effort to increase armaments. These factors together led to excessive inflation in Japan.

The Satsuma-Choshu Alliance

The Treaties had infuriated the aristocracy. It was the last nail on the Tokugawa coffin. The *Tozama daimyos* took the lead in the movement to replace the Tokugawa rule. The first crucial step in this direction was by the Toza clan demanding the resignation of the Tokugawa shogun in 1867. The Satsuma-Choshu alliance of 1866 was an important political development of the period. In 1867 armed contingents from Satsuma and Choshu moved towards Kyoto. They stormed the imperial premises on 3rd January, 1868 and on the same day a new emperor Matsuhito ascended the throne and took the title of “Meiji” or the enlightened one.

Figure 5: Map of Tokugawa Japan showing the Tozama domains



Source: <http://bhoffert.faculty.noctrl.edu/HST263/15.TokugawaDecline.html>

Figure 6: Meiji Emperor Moving from Kyoto to Tokyo



Source: Le Monde Illustré, February 20, 1869

The Satsuma-Choshu alliance was crucial for several reasons. They were among the largest of the Tozama clans in terms of agricultural production capacity. They also had a very large number of samurais. The commercialisation had not reached these peripheries and were still only close to the central urban locations. This led to a relative peace in these areas thus strengthening revolt leaders. The resistance continued for some more time even after the new emperor assumed power, till May of 1869 when the Tokugawa navy surrendered.

Figure 7: Samurais of the Choshu Clan huddle together during the Boshin War period of 1860s



(Source: Photograph by Felice Beato)

(<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/felice-beato-breathtaking-19th-century-photos-japan-gallery-1.1772951?pmSlide=1.1772937>)

The Impact of the Decline of Tokugawa Shogunate

The biggest impact of the collapse of the Tokugawa house was that social stratification considerably declined. The seeds of this change had been laid during the period. There was a breakdown of the traditional social order whereby the social line of difference between the samurai and commoners disappeared to a great extent. The merchant class rose to prominence and was not ignored as the lowest class as during the feudal period. The decline also paved the

way for the opening of Japan to the rest of the world. Japan ended more than two hundred years of isolation. This led to the introduction of modern western ideas and knowledge apart from the increased commercial activities with the world. The decline of the Tokugawa shogunate also led to the restoration of monarchy with its past glory marked by the Meiji Restoration of 1968.

Conclusion

Thus we can observe that situations enjoined to create the perfect condition for the fall of the great Tokugawa Shogunate. The anti-Tokugawa alliance disguised their intentions in the cloak of restoring tradition and the emperor in order to bring about the fall of the Shogunate. This was only rendered possible by the worsening internal situations in Japan, some of course caused by the negligence of the Shogun while others caused by the natural consequence of any feudal system that had survived for too long. Together these factors led to the creeping influence of commercial economy.

Such a transition from feudalism to primitive capitalism has been a period of social unrest in many parts of the world and has also caused political repercussions. While this was not a conscious effort to uproot feudalism but can conveniently be seen as a political revolt against an entrenched system. The external aggression only provided the spark to the pressure that had accumulated in a Japan waiting to explode. Perhaps it is said that the doomsday of the Tokugawa shogunate would not have been that far even without the external aggression.
