

Forest Society and Colonialism

Q.1 Discuss how the changes in forest management in the colonial period affected the following groups of people:

- 1. Shifting cultivators**
- 2. Nomadic and pastoralist communities**
- 3. Firms trading in timber/forest produce**
- 4. Plantation owners**
- 5. Kings/British officials engaged in shikar (hunting)**

Answer:

Shifting cultivators: European colonists considered farming to be harmful to the survival of forests. In addition, it stood in its own way of commercial timber forestry. There was always a chance for the fire to spread and ignite and burn all the precious wood. Thus, taking these factors into consideration, the colonial government banned shifting cultivation. Many of these tenants lost their livelihoods in the process and most were displaced from their homes in the forest.

Nomadic and Pastoralist Communities: The grazing of animals was banned under the new forest laws. This made the life of pastoral communities difficult. Herds of animals were their only source of livelihood. Itinerant communities were declared criminal communities. This made their life miserable because they could no longer move freely.

Firms trading in timber/forest produces: Due to the huge demand for timber, it was a boon for timber traders. They must have seen a good increase in their income.

Plantation owners: The planters were given land at cheaper rates. They were also provided labour at very low wages. In addition, new policies were enacted, which prevent workers from returning to their home villages. It was a win-win situation for the planter.

Kings/ British officials engaged in hunting: Killing of cruel animals like tigers or wolves was rewarded. Furthermore, hunting was seen as a sign of bravery and heroism. Kings and British officials would have enjoyed new honours in society.

Q.2 What are the similarities between colonial management of the forests in Bastar and in Java?

Answer: In India, the forest management of Bastar was under British control, while in Java, it was under Dutch management. Like the British, the Dutch required wood to make sleepers for railway tracks. The British and Dutch colonial authorities implemented their own version of forest laws which gave them total control over forests and deprived them of the customary rights of forest dwellers. Both the Dutch and the British banned farming on the grounds that they were dangerous for the survival of forests. Villagers of Bastar were allowed to live in the forests on the condition that they provide free labour to the forest department. While in Java, the Dutch exempted those villages from paying taxes when they provided free labour to the forest department.

Q.3 Between 1880 and 1920 forests cover in the Indian subcontinent declined by 9.7 million hectares, from 108.6 million hectares to 98.9 million hectares. Discuss the role of the following factors in this decline:

- (a) Railways**
- (b) Shipbuilding**
- (c) Agricultural expansion**
- (d) Commercial farming**
- (e) Tea/Coffee plantations**
- (f) Adivasis and other peasants users**

Answer:

(a) Railways:

There was a huge demand for sleepers from the railways. In those days sleepers were made of wood. The expansion of the railway network led to large-scale deforestation. Sleepers are those that prevent tracks from breaking. Between 1760 and 2000 sleepers required a kilometer of railway track. Thus vast tracts of forest were cut to provide material for railways.

(b) Ship Building

Shipbuilding was an important industry as ships were an integral part of the British military power. When the number of oak trees in Britain decreased rapidly, Indian forests provided a good source of supply. Thus, shipbuilding also contributed towards large scale deforestation in India.

(c) Agricultural Expansion

The increasing European population meant a growing demand for food grains. This resulted in the expansion of cultivable land in India. More land was cleared of forests to make way for farming. Between 1880 and 1920 agricultural land grew by 6.7 million hectares. It can be safely said that agricultural expansion contributed the most towards deforestation.

(d) Commercial Farming of Trees

The demand for various raw materials such as cotton, indigo was increased for expansion industries in Britain. This resulted in large scale commercial farming in India. This can also be possible by cleaning the forests.

(e) Tea/Coffee Plantation

Tea and coffee demand also increased in Britain. The climate of north-eastern India and the east coast was perfect for plantation. Large areas of forests were cleared to make way for plantations. The British planters were given land at very cheap rates.

(f) Adivasis and Other Peasant Users: The tribal have always been the protectors of the forests and hence they had no role in deforestation. However, some farmers may have used the opportunity to expand cultivable land, as it happened in Java. In addition, a significant increase in cultivable land also points to clearing of forests for cultivation.

Q.4 Why are forests affected by wars?

Answer: The two world wars had a major impact on the forests. More trees were cut to meet Britain's wartime needs. In Java, the Dutch followed the Earth's policy just before the Japanese occupation of the region. They destroyed the saws and burned a huge pile of giant teak logs. The Japanese continue to exploit the forests. He forced the forest villagers to cut down the forests. For many villagers, this was an opportunity to expand cultivated areas.