

Ch 4 Forest Society and Colonialism

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Questions

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

- (i) Shifting cultivators
- (ii) Nomadic and pastoralist communities
- (iii) Firms trading in timber/forest produce
- (iv) Plantation owners
- (v) Kings/British officials engaged in hunting.

Answer

(i) Shifting cultivators practise slash and burn agriculture. In this practise, parts of the forest are cut and burnt in rotation. European foresters regarded this practice as harmful for the forests. They felt that such land could not be used for growing trees for railway timber and was dangerous while being burnt as it could start a forest fire. This type of cultivation also made difficult for the government to calculate taxes. Thus, Colonial government banned shifting cultivation. As a result, many communities were forcibly displaced from their homes in the forests. Some had to change occupations, while some resisted through large and small rebellions.

(ii) The reservation of forest areas by the British Government also sealed the fate of many nomadic and pastoral communities like the

Korava, Karacha and Yerukula of the Madras Presidency lost their means of livelihood. Earlier these people and their cattle depended totally on the forest from which they were deprived because of the new forest management. Some of these communities began to be called 'criminal tribes' and were forced to work in factories, mines, and plantations under government supervision. Thus, these people were forced to operate within new systems and reorganize their lives.

(iii) Firms trading in timber products were given the sole trading rights to trade in the forest products of particular areas. They made huge profits and became richer. The entire timber and forest trade passed on to them. They became powerful and began to cut down trees indiscriminately.

(iv) Plantation owners found that more and more forest land could be cleared for plantations. The British had made it very clear that their system of forestry would be scientific forestry, i.e., plantations. Plantation owners began to reap profits as the British government gave large areas of forest land to European planters.

(v) While the forest dwellers were deprived of their right to hunt deer, partridges and a variety of small animals, the Indian Kings and British officials were allowed to hunt freely in the reserved forests. Under the colonial rule, the hunting increased to such an extent that various species became extinct. A large number of tigers, leopards, wolves were killed as sporting trophy. Hunting or shikar became a

sport. Later the environmentalists and conservators realized many species of animals needed to be protected and not killed.

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

Answer

The similarities between colonial management of the forests in Bastar and Java were :

- Forest laws were enacted in Java and Bastar.
- These laws restricted villagers' access to forests.
- Timber could be cut from only specified forests and under close supervision.
- Villagers were punished for entering forests and collecting forest products without permit.
- Permits were issued to the villagers for entry into forests and collection of forest products.
- Both had a forest service.
- Both followed a system of forestry which was known as scientific forestry.
- In both places Forest Acts meant severe hardship for villagers. Their everyday practices — cutting wood for their houses, grazing their cattle, collecting fruits and roots, hunting and fishing became illegal.
- Constables and forests guards began to harass people.

3. Between 1880 and 1920, forest 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 :

(i) Railways

(ii) Shipbuilding

(iii) Agricultural expansion (iv) Commercial farming

(v) Tea/Coffee plantations

(vi) Adivasis and other peasant users.

Answer

(i) Railways played a vital role in the decline of the forest cover in India. For laying railway tracks forest land had to be cleared. Apart from clearing area for tracks, railway locomotives required timber for fuel and sleepers. For all these needs forests had to be cut down. The British government gave contracts to individuals to supply the required quantity of timber. These individuals cut down trees indiscriminately.

(ii) By the end of 19th century, oak forests in England had almost disappeared. This created a shortage of timber for the Royal Navy. If the imperial power was to be protected and maintained, the building of ships was the first priority. So, search parties were sent to explore the forest resources of India. A large number of sleepers began to be exported to England annually. This further led to the indiscriminate cutting of trees year after year which caused deforestation on a massive scale.

(iii) Population was on the rise and the demand for food increased. Peasants extended the boundaries of cultivation by clearing forests. This gave them more land available for cultivation. In addition, there was great demand for cash crops such as tea, cotton, jute, sugar, etc., which were needed to feed the industries of England.

(iv) The British directly encouraged the production of commercial crops like jute, sugar, wheat and cotton. The demand for these crops increased in the 19th century in Europe, where foodgrains were needed to feed the growing urban population and raw materials were required for industrial production. Hence, large tracts of forest land were cleared to make land available for commercial farming.

(v) The colonial state thought that forest land was unproductive. It did not yield agricultural produce nor revenue. Large areas of natural forests were hence cleared to make way for tea, coffee and rubber plantations to meet Europe's growing need for these commodities. The colonial government took over the forests and gave vast areas to European planters at cheap rates. The areas were enclosed and cleared of forests and planted with tea or coffee.

(vi) The Adivasis and other peasant users, gather forest products and graze their cattle. Their livelihood mainly came from forest produce. This does not destroy the forests except sometimes in shifting agriculture. In fact, now the new trends that promote forest conservation tend to involve local villagers in conservation and preservation. The adivasis and other peasant communities regard the

forests as their own and even engage watchmen to keep a vigil over their forests.

4. Why are forests affected by wars?

Answer

Forests are affected by wars and this often leads to deforestation. Forests during wars are freely cut to meet the needs of war. Forests are as important resource and hence during wars they are destroyed by their own country under the 'a scorched earth policy'. This prevents the enemy from using this resource. Many villagers used this opportunity to expand cultivation in the forest