

Chapter 4 Forest Society and Colonialism

Question-1

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

- (a) Shifting cultivators*
- (b) Nomadic and pastoralist communities*
- (c) Firms trading in timber/forest produce*
- (d) Plantation owners*
- (e) Kings/British officials engaged in a shikar.*

Solution:

(a) Shifting Cultivators

Shifting cultivation was a traditional agricultural practice in many parts of Asia, Africa, and South America. Parts of the forest are cut and burnt in rotation. After the first monsoon rains, seeds are sown in the ashes, and crops are cultivated. Cultivation is continued for a couple of years. Then the forest is allowed to grow in the area for 12 to 18 years. Then they are cut and burnt once more. This rotation is called Shifting cultivation.

The Colonial government banned Shifting cultivation, as European foresters felt that this would harm the forests and valuable timber would be lost. The Government also found it difficult to calculate taxes when Shifting cultivation was practiced.

The ban displaced many Shifting cultivators. Many of them had to change their occupation. A few Shifting cultivators agitated against the ban.

(b) Nomadic and Pastoralist Communities

Nomadic and pastoralist communities moved about in the mountains and deserts and in the plains and plateaus of India and Africa. The pastoralist communities formed an important part of the population in both countries during the Colonial era. When the Colonial government established control over the forests it affected the pastoralist communities in a big way.

The pastoralist communities always moved from place to place with their cattle. When forests were destroyed by the government to expand agriculture, the Nomads lost grazing fields for their cattle. This brought a lot of hardship to the pastoralist communities.

(c) Firms Trading in Timber/Forest Produce

Large expanses of forests were cut for timber and forest produce. The Colonial Government was worried about this reckless felling of trees. It passed the Indian Forest Act in 1865. This Act was amended in the year 1878. Under this amendment the forests were divided into 3 categories, – reserved, protected and village forests. Villagers and local firms trading in timber and forest produce could not take anything from the reserved or protected forests which had the best trees. This affected the traders immensely.

(d) Plantation Owners

Vast areas of forests were given to European Planters, at a very cheap rate by the Colonial government. Natural forests were cleared to cultivate tea coffee and rubber trees. There was a

great demand for these commodities in Europe. These plantations were fenced off and others were not allowed inside.

(e) Kings/British Officials engaged in Shikar

Forest laws banned hunting of deer, partridges, and small animals. People who lived near the forests were deprived of their livelihood and food because of this ban. Contrary to this ban hunting of big animals like the tiger, leopard and wolves became a sport for the kings and the British. The British felt that by killing dangerous animals they could civilize India. The indiscriminate hunting by the British and the Kings almost made certain species of animals extinct.

Question-2

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

Solution:

The similarities between the colonial management of forests in Bastar and in Java are as follows.

Colonial management in Bastar:

1. In 1905, the colonial government proposed to reserve 2/3 of the forests, stop shifting cultivation, hunting and collection of forest produce.
2. The villagers were suffering from increased rents and demand for free labour and goods by colonial officials.
3. In the reserved forests, the villagers could stay in the forests and had to work free for the forest department and help them in cutting and transporting trees and protecting them from forest fires. They were called forest villages.

Colonial management in Java:

1. In Java, villagers were punished for grazing cattle, transporting goods without permit or travelling on forest roads.
2. The Dutch needed labour to cut trees, transport logs and prepare sleepers. They introduced the *blcmdongdienst* system. According to this system, they first introduced rents on land being cultivated in the forest and then some villages were exempted from paying rent, if they worked collectively to provide free labour and buffaloes for cutting and transporting timber. It was similar to 'forest villages'.

Question-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:

Railways

Shipbuilding

Agricultural expansion

Commercial farming

Tea/Coffee plantations

Adivasis and other peasant users.

Solution:

Railways

The expansion of the railways became a necessity as trade and transportation increased. Wood was needed as fuel to run the steam locomotives. Wood was also needed to lay railway line sleepers, which held the tracks together. So, forests were destroyed to provide the wood needed for the expansion of the railways.

Shipbuilding

The British Government needed huge ships for its Royal Navy. Ships are built of strong, durable timber. When the oak forests in England began to disappear the British attacked the forest resources in India. Vast quantities of timber was exported to England from India, for shipbuilding, thus depleting forests in India.

Agricultural expansion

As the population increased over the centuries, demand for food also increased. To meet the increased demand for food more land had to be cultivated. If more land had to be cultivated, forests had to be destroyed and brought under the plough. So, forests were cleared to meet agricultural expansion.

Commercial farming

During the Colonial period the demand for commercial crops like jute , sugar, wheat and cotton increased. Europe needed more food grain for its growing population and more raw material for its growing industrial production. So, forests were destroyed to enable commercial farming.

Tea/Coffee plantations

Vast areas of forests were given to European Planters, at a very cheap rate by the Colonial government. Natural forests were cleared to cultivate tea and coffee as there was a great demand for these commodities in Europe. Adivasis and other peasant users Only one-sixth of India's landmass was under cultivation in the 1600s. Now, more than half the landmass is under cultivation as the population has increased rapidly. As the demand for food went up, peasants extended the boundaries of cultivation, clearing forests and cultivating new land.

The Adivasis were hired by the forest department, during the colonial period to cut trees and make sleepers for the railways. But the Adivasis were not allowed to cut trees to build their own houses.

Question-4

Why are forests affected by wars?

Solution:

The wars affected the forests. The First World War and Second World War left a deep impact on the forests. The working plans were given up and trees cut to fulfil the war needs. In Java, just before the Japanese attacked the Island, the Dutch followed 'a scorched earth' policy

destroyed sawmills and burnt huge piles of teak wood. When the Japanese, came to Java, they exploited the forests for their own needs.