

Chapter 6 Peasant and Farmers

Question-1

Explain briefly what the open field system meant to rural people in eighteenth-century England.

Solution:

Look at the system from the point of view of :

A Rich Farmer

When the price of wool went up in the world market in the sixteenth century, rich farmers wanted to expand wool production to earn profits. They were eager to improve their sheep breeds and ensure good feed for them. They were keen on controlling large areas of land in compact blocks to allow improved breeding. So they began dividing and enclosing common land and building hedges around their holdings to separate their property from that of others. They drove out villagers who had small cottages on the commons, and they prevented the poor from entering the enclosed fields.

A Labourer

Deprived of their rights and driven off the land, the labourers tramped in search of work. From the Midlands, they moved to the southern counties of England. This was a region that was most intensively cultivated, and there was a great demand for agricultural labourers. But nowhere could the poor find secure jobs.

A Peasant Woman

Peasants cultivated on strips of land around the village they lived in. At the beginning of each year, at a public meeting, each villager was allocated a number of strips to cultivate. Usually, these strips were of varying quality and often located in different places, not next to each other. The effort was to ensure that everyone had a mix of good and bad land. Beyond these strips of cultivation lay the common land. All villagers had access to the commons.

Question-2

Explain briefly the factors, which led to the enclosures in England.

Solution:

The factors which led to the enclosures in England were:

- Increasing population and due to it increasing demand for food grains and other things led to the enclosure in England.*
- The rising prices of agricultural products such as wool, wheat, milk, fruits etc. also played a role in promoting enclosures in England.*
- Industrialisation and war needs made foodgrain prices soar, making it necessary to take steps to increase its production.*
- In the nineteenth-century, enclosures were seen necessary to make long-term investments on land and plan crop rotations to improve the soil.*

- *Enclosures also allowed the richer landowners to expand the land under their control and produce for the market.*

Question-3

Why were threshing machines opposed by the poor in England?

Solution:

During the Napoleonic Wars, prices of food grains were high and farmers expanded production vigorously. Fearing a shortage of labour, they began buying the new threshing machines that had come into the market. They complained of the insolence of laborers, their drinking habits, and the difficulty of making them work. The machines, they thought, would help them reduce their dependence on laborers. After the Napoleonic Wars had ended, thousands of soldiers returned to the villages.

They needed alternative jobs to survive. But this was a time when grain from Europe began flowing into England, prices declined, and an Agricultural Depression set in. Anxious, landowners began reducing the area they cultivated and demanded that the imports of crops be stopped. They tried to cut wages and the number of workmen they employed. The unemployed poor tramped from village to village, and those with uncertain jobs lived in fear of a loss of their livelihood. The Captain Swing riots spread in the countryside at this time. For the poor, the threshing machines had become a sign of bad times.

Question-4

Who was Captain Swing? What did the name symbolise or represent?

Solution:

Captain Swing was a mythic name used in the letters. Captain Swing was the name appended to some (but not many) of the threatening letters during the Swing Riots of 1830. These were popular protests by impoverished farmworkers across the agricultural south of England, and they had a number of structural causes. The main targets for protesting crowds were farmers, whose threshing machines they destroyed or dismantled, and who they petitioned for a rise in wages. They also demanded contributions of food, money or beer (or all three) from their victims. Where appropriate, they sought to enlist local parish officials (and occasionally magistrates) to raise levels of poor relief as well.

Question-5

What was the impact of the westward expansion of settlers in the USA?

Solution:

The following was the impact of the westward expansion of the settlers in the USA.

(a) The westward expansion of the settlers led to the displacement of local tribes. They were driven beyond river Mississippi and further west.

(b) The settlers began agriculture on an extensive scale. They slashed and burnt forests, pulled out the stumps, cleared the land for cultivation, and built log cabins in the forest clearings. Then they cleared larger areas and erected fences around the fields. They ploughed the land

and sowed corn and wheat. Thus, agriculture was undertaken at the expense of grasslands and forests.

(c) The settlers continued moving further west to explore new land and raise a new crop. After the 1860s, the settlers reached the Great Plains across the River Mississippi. They started growing wheat and soon turned this region into a major wheat-producing area of America.

Question-6

What were the advantages and disadvantages of the use of mechanical harvesting machines in the USA?

Solution:

The advantages of the use of mechanical harvesting machines in the USA were:

- The price of wheat was high and demand limitless. These new machines allowed farmers to quickly clear tracts, break up the soil, remove the grass and prepare the ground for cultivation.*
- The work could be done within a shorter time period and with a lesser number of labourers.*
- With power-driven machinery, four men could plough, seed and harvest 2,000 to 4,000 acres of wheat in a season.*

However, there were some disadvantages for the poorer farmers too.

- They were thrown out of their jobs and they lost their means of livelihood.*
- Many of them bought this machine too but it adversely affected them as the machines were expensive and once the demand crossed its limit there was enough surplus grain in the market.*
- Thus, farmers needed to pay back the loan they had taken from banks to buy these machines, and the farmers had no money.*

Question-7

What lessons can we draw from the conversion of the countryside in the USA from a bread basket to a dust bowl?

Solution:

At the time that common fields were being enclosed in England at the end of the eighteenth century, settled agriculture had not developed on an extensive scale in the USA. Forests covered over 800 million acres and grasslands 600 million acres. Most of the landscape was not under the control of white Americans. Till the 1780s, white American settlements were confined to a small narrow strip of coastal land in the east. Several of them were nomadic and some were settled. By the early twentieth century, this landscape had transformed radically. White Americans had moved westward and established control up to the west coast, displacing local tribes and carving out the entire landscape into different agricultural belts. The USA had come to dominate the world market in agricultural produce.

The expansion of wheat agriculture in the Great Plains created other problems. In the 1930s, terrifying dust storms began to blow over the southern plains. Black blizzards rolled in, very often 7,000 to 8,000 feet high, rising like monstrous waves of muddy water. They came day after day, year after year, through the 1930s. As the skies darkened, and the dust swept in, people were blinded and choked. Cattle were suffocated to death; their lungs caked with dust and mud. Sand buried fences, covered fields, and coated the surfaces of rivers till the fish died.

Dead bodies of birds and animals were strewn all over the landscape. Tractors and machines that had ploughed the earth and harvested the wheat in the 1920s were now clogged with dust, damaged beyond repair. They had to undergo persistent drought. The rains failed year after year, and temperatures soared. The wind blew with ferocious speed. But ordinary dust storms became black blizzards only because the entire landscape had been ploughed over, stripped of all grass that held it together.

When wheat cultivation had expanded dramatically in the early nineteenth century, zealous farmers had recklessly uprooted all vegetation, and tractors had turned the soil over, and broken the sod into dust. The whole region had become a dust bowl. The American dream of a land of plenty had turned into a nightmare. The settlers had thought that they could conquer the entire landscape, turn all land over to growing crops that could yield profits. After the 1930s, they realized that they had to respect the ecological conditions of each region.

Question-8

Write a paragraph on why the British insisted on farmers growing opium in India.

Solution:

When the British conquered Bengal, they made a determined effort to produce opium in the lands under their control. As the market for opium expanded in China, larger volumes of opium flowed out of Bengal ports. Before 1767, no more than 500 chests were being exported from India. Within four years, the quantity trebled. A hundred years later, in 1870, the government was exporting about 50,000 chests annually. Supplies had to be increased to feed this booming export trade. But this was not easy.

For a variety of reasons, they were unwilling to turn their fields over to poppy. First, the crop had to be grown on the best land, on fields that lay near villages and were well manured. On this land peasants usually produced pulses. If they planted opium on this land, then pulses could not be grown there, or they would have to be grown on inferior land where harvests were poorer and uncertain. Second, many cultivators owned no land. To cultivate, they had to pay rent and lease land from landlords. And the rent charged on good lands near villages was very high.

Third, the cultivation of opium was a difficult process. The plant was delicate, and cultivators had to spend long hours nurturing it. This meant that they did not have enough time to care for other crops. Finally, the price the government paid to the cultivators for the opium they produced was very low. It was unprofitable for cultivators to grow opium at that price.

Question-9

Why were Indian farmers reluctant to grow opium?

Solution:

The Indian farmers were reluctant to grow opium due to the following reasons.

- 1. The crop had to be grown on the best land, on fields that lay near the villages and were well manured.*
- 2. This land was usually used for growing pulses. If opium was grown on fertile and well-manured land then pulses would have to be grown on less fertile land and yield would not be good in quality as well as quantity.*
- 3. The cultivation of opium was difficult and time-consuming as the plants required looking after. As a consequence, the cultivators would not have time to look after their other produce.*
- 4. The farmers had to pay the rent for their land to the landlords. This rent was very high. The cultivators owned no land.*
- 5. Finally, the price the government paid for the opium produce was very low and would leave the farmers with no profits.*