

Chapter 4 Forest Society and Colonialism

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

- Shifting cultivators
- Nomadic and pastoralist communities
- Firms trading in timber/forest produce
- Plantation owners
- Kings/British officials engaged in shikar (hunting)

Solution:

(I) **Shifting cultivators:** European colonists regarded shifting cultivation harmful to the existence of forests. Also, it stood in their way of commercial timber forestry. There was always the chance of fires spreading out of control and burning down all the precious timber. Thus keeping these factors in mind the colonial government banned shifting cultivation. Many of these cultivators lost their livelihood in the process and most were also displaced from their homes in the forest.

(II) **Nomadic and Pastoralist Communities:** Nomadic and pastoralist communities like the Korava, Karacha and Yerukula from the Madras Presidency lost their livelihoods. They were designated as 'criminal tribes' by the British authorities and were forced to work in factories, mines and plantations under government supervision.

(III) **Firms trading in timber/forest produces:** The British gave European timber trading firms the sole right to trade in forest products in particular areas. Grazing and hunting by the local population were restricted by law.

(IV) **Plantation owners:** Vast tracts of natural forests were cleared to make way for tea, coffee and rubber plantations in order to fulfil the demand for these commodities in Europe. Plantation owners, who were overwhelmingly European, were given land at a cheap rate. They were enclosed and cleared of forests, and planted with tea or coffee.

(V) **Kings/ British officials engaged in hunting:** The forest laws deprived forest dwellers their means of livelihood. Before the enactment of these laws, the forest dwellers practised hunting as a means to sustain themselves. After their enactment, they were forbidden from hunting. Hunting instead became a sport where kings and British officials equally hunted big game in huge numbers, bringing some of them to the very brink of extinction.

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

Solution: Forest management of Bastar in India was under the control of the British, while in Java, it was under Dutch management

(I) Just like the British, the Dutch required timber to make sleepers for railway tracks.

(II) The British and Dutch colonial authorities enacted their own version of the forest laws that gave them total control over the forests and depriving the customary rights of the forest dwellers.

(III) Both the Dutch and the British put a ban on shifting cultivation on the grounds that they were dangerous to the existence of forests

(IV) The villagers of Bastar were allowed to stay 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:

- Railways
- Shipbuilding
- Agricultural expansion
- Commercial farming
- Tea/Coffee plantations
- Adivasis and other peasants users

Solution:

a) Railways:

Railways were an important asset that was essential in maintaining trade through the transport of goods and the domination of the colonies through the transport of troops. Wood was needed to lay the sleepers for railway tracks. The sleepers are what held the tracks from breaking apart. For one kilometre of railway track anywhere between 1760 and 2000 sleepers were required. Thus vast tracts of forest were cut down to provide the materials for the railways

(b) Ship Building

Before the coming of the industrial revolution, the ships of the early 19th century were made of wood. Britain maintained its colonial possessions through the Royal Navy with its huge number of naval fleets. But in order to maintain them vast tracts of oak forests in England were cut down.

This caused a logistical problem for the Royal Navy as a regular supply of timber was required to build new ships and maintain the old ones. It was easily remedied by cutting down forests of its colonies. Huge acres of forests disappeared as a result with some areas seeing almost complete deforestation as a result

(c) Agricultural Expansion

As the population rose, so did the demand for food. Forestlands were cleared in order to make way for new agricultural tracts. The colonial authorities believed that they can produce more food if they clear the forests. In addition, forests were considered unproductive, to begin with, so they had little qualms in cutting them down in huge numbers. Agricultural land rose by 6.7 million hectares between 1880 and 1920. It can be safely said that agricultural expansions contributed the most towards deforestation.

(d) Commercial Farming of Trees

(i) Forest are diverse not just in fauna, but also flora. So when they were cleared to make way for commercial farming, many species of trees were lost in the process as commercial farming only uses one specific type of trees in commercial farming, depending on the type of plantation it was.

(e) Tea/Coffee Plantation

In order to meet the growing demand for tea and coffee colonial authorities sold huge hectares of forest land to mostly European plantation firms. These firms then cut down the forests to make way for tea and coffee plantations. As a result, many acres of forest were lost.

(f) Adivasis and Other Peasant Users: Adivasis and other peasant communities practised shifting cultivation. It involved cutting down parts of forest area and burning the tree roots. Seeds were then sown into the burnt patch and come the monsoon season they were harvested. When fertility declined in that particular area, the same practice was repeated in a different location. So along with losing some of the forest tracts, there were fewer chances of the trees growing back due to loss in soil fertility.

Q.4 Why are forests affected by wars?

Solution: Forest are affected by wars as they are valuable strategic resources. Battlefield assets like towers, guard posts, army camps are made of wood as they can be easily maintained and can be easily pulled down should the need to shift these assets arise. More so the scorched earth policy are enacted should it become apparent that forests will fall under enemy hands.

This is done with regards to area and resource denial. Such was the case with the Dutch when the Japanese invaded their colony in Indonesia during World War II. The Dutch burned huge acres of forests in order to prevent them from falling into Japanese hands.

When they did, however, the Japanese set about recklessly exploiting the timber forests to fulfil their own war demands. This practice would severely impact the local ecology in a negative way for decades to come.