

Forest Society and Colonialism

Forests play a major role in enhancing the quality of environment. Forests provide us natural resources of economic and medicinal values. We get woods, tendu leaf, gum, honey, coffee, tea, rubber, different types of herbs, etc from forests. Due to growing population and rapid industrialisation, world's forest areas are disappearing at fast rate.

Between 1700 to 1995, during the period of industrialisation, 13.9 million sq km of forests or 9.3% of the world's total area was cleared for industrial uses, cultivation, pastures and fuel wood.

Deforestation

The disappearance of forests is referred to as deforestation. The process of deforestation began many centuries ago in India. Under colonial rule, it became more systematic and extensive. *Causes of deforestation in India are given below*

Land for Cultivation

- One-sixth of India's landmass was under cultivation in 1960. As the population increased with time, the need for food increased. Thus, peasants increased the cultivation by clearing forests.
- In the process of commercialisation of agriculture during colonial period, peasants were forced to expand cultivation area to cultivate commercial crops like jute, sugar, wheat and cotton.
- As a result, forests disappeared to a great extent and cultivation area rose by 6.7 million hectares between 1880 and 1920.

Chapter Syllabus

- Why Deforestation?
- The Rise of Commercial Forestry
- Rebellion in the Forest
- Forest Transformations in Java

Timber Supply for Royal Navy

- In 17th century, there was need for strong and durable timber supply for the Royal Navy ships in England.
- To maintain the timber supply for Royal Navy, search parties were sent to explore the forest resources of India.
- Many trees in India were cut within a decade and large quantity of timber was exported to England.

Sleepers on the Tracks

- From 1860s, the railway network expanded rapidly.
- Wood was needed as a fuel to run rail engines. Government and wooden sleepers¹ were required to build the track together.
- To fulfil these needs, of railway forests were cut at large scale.

Plantations

- Large areas of natural forests were cleared to set up 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 planters enclosed these areas, cleared forests and planted it with tea and coffee.

The Rise of Commercial Forestry

When the forests were being destroyed rapidly, the British Government appointed a German expert, **Dietrich Brandis** as the first Inspector-General of Forests in India. Brandis realised that a proper system was needed for the conservation of forests. Rules had to be framed to prevent felling of trees and restriction for grazing so that forests could be preserved for timber production.

Scientific Forestry

The first forest research institution, **Imperial Forest Research Institute** (now Forest Research Institute) was set up at Dehradun in 1906. The institute taught the system of scientific forestry. In scientific forestry, natural forests which had lots of different types of trees were cut down and in their place, one type of new trees was planted in straight rows. This is known as plantation. For example, cultivation of teak trees which are good for timber, given in forestry. It is considered as the model of scientific forestry.

Indian Forest Act, 1865

- Dietrich Brandis set up the Indian Forest Service in 1864 and helped to formulate the Indian Forest Act of 1865.
- Under the Forest Act, forest officials surveyed the forests and planned how much of the plantation area was to be cut every year and replanted again.
- The Forest Act of 1865, was amended twice, once in 1879 and then in 1927.
- The Indian Forest Act, 1878², divided forest into three categories, viz. reserved, protected and village forests. The best forests were called **Reserved Forests**³.

Effect of Forest Act on Lives of People

After the implementation of the Forest Act, forest people and villagers experienced extreme hardships. The lives of people were affected in the following ways:

- Most of the traditional activities of forest communities like cutting wood for homes, collection of fuel wood, grazing the cattle, collecting fruits and roots, hunting and fishing, all were made illegal by the Act.
- People were forced to steal wood from forests. Forest guards started to take bribes from local people if they were caught while stealing wood from forest. They also harass people by demanding free food.

Use of Forest for People

- Villagers wanted forests to satisfy their different needs like fuel, fodder, leaves.
- Foresters wanted trees which were suitable for building ships or railways. Thus, particular species like teak and sal were planted and others were cut.
- People use roots, leaves, fruits, tubers, flowers of different trees and plants for foods.
- Woods and leaves are mainly used for fuels. Wood is also used for agricultural implements, like yokes and ploughs, bamboo is used for making fences, baskets and umbrellas.
- Dried scooped-out gourd is used as musical instrument and portable water bottle.
- Leaves can be stitched together to make disposable plates and cups.

- The silk creeper can be used to make ropes.
- The thorny bark of the semul (silkcotton) tree is used to grind vegetables.
- Oil for cooking and to light lamps can be extracted from the fruit of mahua (Madhuca indica) tree. Flowers of mahua can be eaten or used to make alcohol.

Drying Tendu Leaves

The sale of tendu leaves is a major source of income for a large section of people living in forests. Each bundle contains approximately 50 leaves. If a person works hard, he can collect 100 bundles in a day. Poorly women, children and oldmen are involved in this collection.

Effect of Forest Rules on Cultivation

The major impact of forest laws was the ban on shifting cultivation or **jividen agriculture**.

The shifting cultivation has many local names, like

- *ladang* in South East Asia,
- *milpa* in Central America
- *chitemene* or *anyin* in Africa
- *cheat* in Sri Lanka.

In India also it has many local names like, *dhya*, *penula*, *behar*, *axual*, *jamun*, *podu*, *lhanadal*, *humeri*, etc.

In shifting cultivation, parts of the forest are cut and burnt in rotation. Seeds are sown in ashes after the first monsoon rain and the crops are harvested by October-November.

Such plots are cultivated for a couple of years and then left fallow for 12 to 18 years for the forest to grow back. A mixture of crops is grown on these plots.

European foresters regarded the practice of Shifting Cultivation as harmful for the forests. When a forest was burnt, there was a danger of spreading flames and burning valuable timbers.

Shifting cultivation made it more difficult for the government to calculate taxes. Therefore, British Government banned Shifting Cultivation.

As a result, some communities were forcibly displaced from their homes. Some of them had to change their occupations, while some revolted against the law.

Taungya Cultivation

This system was adopted by the farmers in Burma. In this method, men made holes in the soil using long bamboo poles with iron tips. The women sowed paddy in each hole.

- 1 Sleepers: Wooden planks laid across railway tracks.
- 2 Indian Forest Act, 1878: The British began extending their control over forests in India after passing the Forest Act of 1865 and 1878. This was driven by the increasing demand of timber for the railway track and hence the growing significance of forests as a source of revenue.
- 3 Reserved Forests: These were the forests which produced commercially valuable timber. No particular was allowed access to these forests.

Prohibition on Hunting after Forest Act

Before the forest laws, many people who lived in or near forests had survived by hunting small animals. This was prohibited by the new forest law.

The Forest law deprived the forest dwellers of their customary rights to hunt. Those who were caught hunting were punished. This illegal hunting was termed as **poaching**⁴ by colonisers.

The Britishers believed that by killing dangerous animals, they would civilise India. As a result under colonial rule, the scale of hunting increased largely and as a result many animals became almost extinct.

The Britishers gave rewards for the killings of tigers, wolves and other large animals so that there would be no threat to cultivators.

Initially, certain areas of forests were reserved for hunting. Later, environmentalists and conservators began to argue that all these species of animals needed to be protected and not killed.

New Trades, New Employments and New Services

Due to control of forest department on forests, some people suffered in many ways but some people benefited from the new opportunities that had opened up in trade. This happened not only in India but in the whole world.

For example, due to growing demand of rubber, Mundurucu people of Brazilian Amazon began to collect latex⁵ from wild rubber trees for supplying to traders.

In India, trade in forest product was a regular practice from medieval period. Adivasi communities traded elephants, hides (skin), horns, silk cocoons, ivory, bamboo, spices, fibres, grasses, gums and resins.

After the arrival of Britishers, the trade for forest products was completely regulated. British government gave sole right to large European trading firms to trade in forest products of particular areas.

In this process, many pastoralist and nomadic communities of Madras Presidency like the Komus, Kanacha and Yenikula lost their livelihoods. Some of them began to be called **Criminal Tribes** and were forced to work in factories, mines and plantations under government supervision.

New opportunities in trade of forest products did not improve the life of the forest people.

The effects were

- Forest communities like Santhals, Oraons (Barkhanda) and Gonds (Chhattargah) were recruited to work on tea plantations in Assam.
- Their wages were low and working conditions were very bad.
- They could not return easily to their home villages from where they had been recruited.

Check Point 01

1. Which decade witnessed rapid expansion of the railway network in India?
2. Which trees were promoted for building ships or railways by the colonial governments?
3. In which country *Tzangya* cultivation system was adopted by the farmers?
4. In Central America, shifting cultivation is known as _____.
5. Santhals, Oraons are forest communities from _____ and Gonds are forest community from _____.

Rebellion in the Forest

In many parts of India and the world, forest communities rebelled against the charges imposed on them.

In India, Siddhi and Kattu of Santal Parganas, Birsa Munda of Chhota Nagpur, Alluri Sitarama Raju of Andhra Pradesh revolted against the new forest policy.

The People of Bastar

Bastar is located in the Southernmost part of Chhattargah and borders of Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Maharashtra.

The central part of Bastar is on a plateau. Chhattargah plain is in its North and Godavari Plain is in its South. The river Indravati flows East to West across Bastar.

A number of different communities like Maria and Muria Gonds, Dhurwas, Bhauras and Halbas, live in Bastar. The people of Bastar speak different languages, but share common customs and beliefs.

The people believe that each village is given its land by the Earth and they make some offerings to the Earth at each agricultural festival. Further, they show respect to the spirit of river, forest and mountain.

Forest Village: A village that is allowed to stay in the reserved forest on the condition that its people will work free for the Forest Department in cutting and transporting trees and protecting the forest from fire.

The local people control all the natural resources within their boundary. If people from a particular village want to take some wood from another village, they pay a small fee called *devani*, *dandi* or *man* in exchange.

The Fears of the People

In 1905, the proposal of the Colonial Government to reserve two-third of the forest and stop shifting cultivation, hunting and collection of forest produce caused tension among the people of Bastar.

Some villages were allowed to stay in the reserved forest on the condition that their people worked free for the forest department in cutting and transporting trees and protecting the forest from fires. These villages came to be known as **forest villages**¹.

This caused large scale displacement and suffering of the people. Two famine, one in 1899-1900 and another in 1907-1908 further worsened the condition of people.

The initiative to discuss these issues was taken by the Dhurwas of the Kanger forest, from where reservation of the forest took place.

Gunda Dhur from village Nerhanar led the movement. In 1910, messages like mango boughs, a lump of earth, chillies and arrows were circulated to invite villagers to rebel against the British.

Revolt by People of Bastar

The people of Bastar organised themselves and revolted against the British. The events happened during and after the revolt were

- People of Bastar attacked and looted houses, traders, police stations, schools, etc which were associated with the colonial state and its oppressive laws. The grain was redistributed.
- The British sent troops to suppress the rebellion.
- The Adivasi leaders tried to negotiate but the British entered the villages and punished the villagers who took part in the rebellion. As a result, people fled into the forest.
- The British troops controlled the revolt after three months but not able to capture Gunda Dhur.
- After the revolt, work on reservation was temporarily suspended.
- The area to be reserved was reduced to roughly half of that planned before 1910.

After independence, the same practice of keeping people out of the forests and reserving them for industrial use continued.

In the 1970s, the World Bank proposed that 4600 hectares of natural sal forest should be replaced by tropical pine to provide pulp for the paper industry. But after the protests by local environmentalists the project was stopped.

Forest Transformations in Java

There were many similarities in the laws for forest control in India and Indonesia. Java is a famous rice producing island of Indonesia. In past years, it was mostly covered with teak forests.

The colonial power in Indonesia were the Dutch and they wanted timber from Java to build ships.²

There were many villages in fertile plain. Moreover, many communities lived in the mountains and practised Shifting Cultivation.

The Woodcutters of Java

The Kalangs of Java were a community of skilled forest cutters and shifting cultivators. Without their expertise, it would have been difficult to harvest teak and for the kings to build their palaces.

When the Dutch began to gain control over the forests in the 18th century, they tried to make the Kalangs work under them.

In 1770, the Kalangs resisted by attacking a Dutch fort at Joana, but their uprising was suppressed.

Dutch Scientific Forestry

In the 19th century, the Dutch enacted forest laws in Java, restricting villagers' access to forests. This law permitted use of forest wood only for specified purposes from specific forests under close supervision. Villagers were punished for grazing cattle, transporting wood without a permit or travelling on forest roads with horse carts or cattle.

In 1882, 280,000 sleepers were exported from Java. However, all this required labour to cut the trees, transport the logs and prepare the sleepers.

The Dutch imposed rents on land being cultivated in the forest.

Then it exempted some villages from these rents if the villages worked collectively to provide free labour and buffaloes for cutting and transporting timber. This was known as the **Blandongdiensten System**³.

Later, instead of rent exemption, forest villagers were given small wages, and their right to cultivate forest land was restricted.

Samin's Challenge

Around 1890, Surontiko Samin of Randublatung village (a teak forest village) started a movement against the state ownership of the forest.

He argued that state could not own forest as it had not created the wind, water, earth and wood. By 1907, 3000 families were following his ideas.

Some of the Saminis protested by lying down on their land when the Dutch came to survey it, while others refused to pay taxes, fines or perform labour.

War and Deforestation

The First and Second World War had a devastating effect on the forests of India and other colonies.

In India, at this time, the Forest Department was cutting trees freely to meet British war needs.

Before Japanese dominance, in Java, the Dutch followed a **Scorched Earth Policy**. By following this policy, Dutch destroyed sawmills and burned huge piles of giant teak logs, so that the Japanese could not utilise them.

Due to this, the Japanese exploited the forests recklessly for their own interests. Many villagers used this opportunity to expand cultivation in the forest.

After the war, it became difficult for the Indonesian Forest Service to get this land back. This situation was same as that of India, where people's need for agricultural land conflicted with the forest department's desire to control the land, and exclude people from it.

New Developments in Forestry

Since the 1950s, governments across Asia and Africa found that scientific forestry and the policy of keeping forest communities away from forests has resulted in many conflicts.

¹ Blandongdiensten System: This system was introduced by the Dutch in Java under which some villages were exempted from the taxes in terms of free labour and animals for cutting and transporting timber from forests.

The new developments in forestry were

- Conservation of forests became more important than collecting timber.
- The government recognised that to conserve forest, the people who live near the forests must be involved.
- In India, villagers protected the dense forests as they considered these as **sacred groves**⁸, known as *sarnas*, *devarakudu*, *kan*, *rai*, etc.
- Some villagers started guarding their own forests, instead of depending on the forest guards.
- Local forest communities and environmentalists started thinking of different forms of forest management.

Check Point 02

- 1 Name the forest which the Dhurwas were associated with.
- 2 is a famous rice producing island of Indonesia.
- 3 Who headed the Saminist Movement?
- 4 In which year the Kalangs resisted by attacking a Dutch fort at Joana?
- 5 Surontiko Samin started a movement against the

SUMMARY

- In India, deforestation started many centuries ago, but it became more systematic and extensive during the British period.
- In the colonial period, cultivation increased for the production of commercial crops and also to feed the increased population.
- To maintain the timber supply for Royal Navy, lots of trees in India were cut and exported to England. Woods were also needed for the expansion of railways.
- The colonial government took over the forests and gave vast areas to European planters at cheap rates.
- British Government appointed German expert **Dietrich Brandis** as the first inspector general of forest to manage forest resources. In 1864, Indian Forest Service was set up by Dietrich Brandis and Indian Forest Act was passed in 1865.
- **The Indian Forest Act, 1878**, divided forest into three categories viz, reserved, protected and village forests.
- Due to Forest Act enacted by British Government, people were deprived of their customary practices like cutting wood, grazing, hunting, shifting cultivation.
- The Britishers rewarded for the killing of tiger, wolves, etc. The scale of hunting increased and many animals became extinct at that time.
- In India, Adivasi Communities like the Banjaras were trading the different forest products and animals. But, the Britishers started to control the trade completely. Due to this many nomadic communities lost their livelihoods.
- The British Government even recognised some tribes as **criminal tribes**.
- In many parts of India forest communities rebelled against the changes imposed on them.
- In Bastar under the leadership of Gunda Dhur started revolt against the British.
- The British controlled the revolt but forced to reduce the area to be reserved to roughly half of that planned before 1910.
- Java is a famous rice producing island of Indonesia.
- In the 19th century, the Dutch colonisers introduced forest laws in Java and restricted villagers' access to forests.
- The Dutch introduced **Blandongdiensten System**, where they first imposed rents on land and later exempted some villages from rents if they provided free labour and buffaloes.
- In Java, the Dutch followed a **Scorched Earth Policy** and destroyed saw mills and huge pile of giant teak logs so that Japanese could not utilise them.
- Scientific forestry is widely followed by governments across Asia and Africa since 1980s. They have also realised the importance of involving forest communities in conservation efforts.

Timeline

Year/Period Important Events

1755	The Mataram kingdom of Java split into two kingdoms.
1770	The Kalangas rose in rebellion against the Dutch but were suppressed.
Early 19th century	Colonial powers started exploiting forest as they considered it to be unproductive.
1860s	Rapid expansion of railway network.
1864	British appointed Inspector-General Dietrich Brandis set up Indian Forest Service.
1865	Enactment of Indian Forest Act.
1878	Indian Forest Act divided forest into three categories, reserved, protected and village forest.
1890	Surontiko Samin of Randublatung village questioned state ownership of forest.
1899-1900	First terrible famine
1906	Imperial Forest Research Institute was set up.
1907-1908	Second terrible famine.
1980s	Government across Asia and Africa recognised importance of scientific forestry and conservation through participation of communities.

8 Sacred Groves Sacred groves are a small group of trees that have some religious importance to a particular culture.