

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

Answer: New forest laws banned shifting cultivation. For shifting cultivators, it was devastating because there was a problem for their survival. Many of them were forced to migrate to take up some other occupations. Many others were forced to work in the tea plantations.

(b) Nomadic and pastoralist communities

Answer: Grazing of animals was banned under the new forest laws. It made the life of pastoralist communities difficult. Herds of animals were their only source of livelihood. The nomadic communities were declared as criminal communities. This made their life miserable because they could no longer move freely.

(c) Firms trading in timber/forest produce

Answer: Because of huge demand of timber, it was boon for the timber merchants. They must have seen good growth in their incomes.

(d) Plantation owners

Answer: Land was given at cheaper rates to the plantation owners. Labour was also made available to them at very low wages. Moreover, new policies were made which prevented the workers from going back to their home villages. It was a win-win situation for the plantation owner.

(e) Kings/British officials engaged in shikar

Answer: Killing of ferocious animals; like tiger or wolves was monetarily rewarded. Moreover, hunting was viewed as a sign of bravely and valour. The Kings and British officials must have enjoyed the new found honour in the society.

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

Answer: There were certain similarities in the colonial management of forests in Bastar and Java. In both the cases, the traditional rights of forest dwellers were taken away and they were forced to work for their colonial masters. Large scale deforestation took place and felled trees were replaced with monocultural plantations.

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:

(a) Railways

Answer: There was huge demand of sleepers from the railways. In those days sleepers were made from wood. Expansion of the railway network resulted in large scale deforestation.

(b) Shipbuilding

Answer: Shipbuilding was an important industry because ships were integral part of the military power of the British. When the number of oak trees sharply reduced in Britain, Indian forests provided good source of supply. Thus, shipbuilding also contributed towards large scale deforestation in India.

(c) Agricultural expansion

Answer: The growing European population meant an increased demand for food grains. This resulted in expansion of cultivated land in India. More land was cleared of forests to make way for cultivation.

(d) Commercial farming

Answer: There was increased demand for various raw materials; like cotton, indigo for the expanding industries in Britain. This resulted in large scale commercial farming in India. This could also become possible by clearing forests

(e) Tea/coffee plantations

Answer: Demand for tea and coffee also increased in Britain. The climate of north-eastern India and the eastern coast was perfect for plantations. Large areas of forests were cleared for making way for plantations. The British plantation owners were given land on very cheap rates.

(f) Adivasis and other peasant users

Answer: Adivasis had always been the protectors of forests and hence they had no role in deforestation. However, some peasants may have utilised the opportunity to expand the cultivated land; as had happened in Java. Moreover, the significant increase in cultivated land also indicates towards clearing of forests for farming.

Question 4: Why are forests affected by wars?

Answer: The two World Wars had major impacts on forests. More trees were cut to meet the wartime needs of Britain.

In Java, the Dutch followed 'scorched earth' policy just before the Japanese occupation of the region. They destroyed sawmills and burnt huge piles of giant teak logs. The Japanese continued the exploitation of forests. They forced forest villagers to cut down forests. For many villagers, it was an opportunity to expand cultivated area.