



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:

Individual landlords usually created the early enclosures. The state or the church did not support them. After the mid-eighteenth century, however, the enclosure movement swept through the countryside, changing the English landscape forever. Between 1750 and 1850, 6 million acres of land was enclosed. The British Parliament no longer watched this process from a distance. It passed 4,000 acts legalising these enclosures. The new enclosures were different from the old. Unlike the sixteenth-century enclosures that promoted sheep farming, the land being enclosed in the late eighteenth century was for grain production. The new enclosures were happening in a different context; they became a sign of a changing time.

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 labourers, their drinking habits, and the difficulty of making them work. The machines, they thought, would help them reduce their dependence on labourers. 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 farm workers 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:

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 story of agrarian expansion is closely connected to the westward movement of the white settlers who took over the land. After the American War of Independence from 1775 to 1783 and the formation of the United States of America, the white Americans began to move westward. By the time Thomas Jefferson became President of the USA in 1800, over 700,000 white settlers had moved on to the Appalachian plateau through the passes. Seen from the east coast, America seemed to be a land of promise. Its wilderness could be turned into cultivated fields.

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