

Chapter 4: Forest Society and Colonialism

Activity: 1

Question: Each mile of railway track required between 1,760 and 2,000 sleepers. If one averagesized tree yields 3 to 5 sleepers for a 3 metres wide broad gauge track, calculate approximately how many trees would have to be cut to lay one mile of track.

Answer: Average number of sleepers required per mile = $(1760 + 2000) / 2$

= 1880 sleepers Average number of sleepers obtained from one tree = 4

Therefore, approximate number of trees to be cut = $1880 / 4 = 470$ trees

Activity: 2

Question: If you were the Government of India in 1862 and responsible for supplying the railways with sleepers and fuel on such a large scale, what were the steps you would have taken?

Answer: The Government of India should have taken the following steps:

- i. In areas where trees are cut for making sleepers, plant similar nature of trees to those that are cut, so that the forest cover is maintained.
- ii. Try to increase coal mining and supply this to the railways as fuel instead of wood, for running the steam engines.
- iii. Limit the cutting of trees by the natives of the forest to only what they personally require and not allow them to trade in wood.
- iv. Prevent poachers from entering the forests to cut wood illegally.

Activity: 3

Question: Children living around forest areas can often identify hundreds of species of trees and plants. How many species of trees can you name?

Answer:

1. The causes of the revolutionary disturbances in Russia in 1905 were
 1. Bean tree
 2. Neem tree
 3. Mango here
 4. Cucumber tree
 5. Tamarind tree
 6. Sal tree
 7. Begonia tree
 8. Oak tree
 9. Banayan tree
 10. Boo tree
 11. Dates tree
 12. Miller tree
 13. Been tree
 14. Black pepper tree
 15. Kidney bean tree
 16. Mahula tree
 17. Chantal tree
 18. Bamboo tree
 19. Another is a vodka here which is going in khandamal district of odisha

Activity: 4

Question 1. Have there been changes in forest areas where you live? Find out what these changes are and why they have happened.

Answer: There have been a number of changes in forest areas in India since independence and some which have occurred in my district are as follows:

- i. Entry to forest area is restricted and the Forest Department has posted guards to check any illegal entry.
- ii. Although, the number of trees in the forest has increased, reduction of rainfall in recent years has stunted the growth of trees.
- iii. The Adivasi villagers living inside the forest areas are gradually leaving their traditional occupations and migrating to the towns for education and jobs.
- iv. A number of wild animals like tigers and elephants are sometimes seen on the edges of the forest, but they do not venture out for fear of being killed by human beings. Earlier the tigers used to come into the nearby villages and take away animals and small children at night.

Question 2. Write a dialogue between a colonial forester and an Adivasi discussing the issue of hunting in the forest.

Answer: A sample dialogue is given below:

Colonial Forester (CF): Who are you? What are you doing inside the forest at this time?

Adivasi (A): I am a villager living in XYZ village on the south edge of this forest. I have come to hunt some animals for feeding my family.

CF: Don't you know that we have banned the hunting of animals in the forest? Go away, you cannot be allowed to hunt animals. It is illegal.

Adivasi (A): I need the flesh of the animal so that my wife can cook the food. I regularly hunt for animals and nobody has stopped me before

CF: No, you will not be allowed to do this. Only Britishers are allowed to hunt animals. Go back to your village. Otherwise, you will be arrested

Adivasi (A): Okay, if you say so, I will go. But I will return.

Questions

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

Answer:

1. Shifting cultivators

The colonial government put a ban on shifting cultivation as it was regarded as harmful for forests. Because of this, tribal communities were forced to leave their homes. Many had to change their occupations. There were some who took to protest the policies of colonial masters.

2. Nomadic and Pastoralist Communities

In the process, many pastoralists and nomadic communities like the Korava, Karacha, and Yerukula of the Madras Presidency lost their livelihood. Some of them were dubbed as criminal tribes. They were forced to work in factories and plantations.

3. Firms trading in timber/forest produce

In India trade in forest products was not new. We have records that show that Adivasi communities trading in goods like hides, horns, silk cocoons, ivory, bamboo, spices fibres, grasses, gums, and rising through nomadic communities like the banjaras. After the coming of the British, trade was completely controlled by the government. The British government gave the European companies the sole right to trade in the forest products.

4. Plantation owners

In Assam, both men and women from forest communities like Santhals and Oraons from Jharkhand and Gonds from Chhattisgarh were recruited to work on tea plantations. Their wages were low and the condition of work was not good. They could not return easily to their home villages, from where they were recruited.

5. Kings/British officials engaged in shikar(hunting)

While the forest laws deprived people of their rights to hunt, hunting of big game became a sport. In India, it was the court's culture to hunt tigers and other animals. However, under colonial rule, hunting increased to such an extent that many species became extinct. The British saw big animals as a sign of primitive society.

They believed that by killing big animals, the British would civilize India. Tigers, wolves, and leopards were killed because they posed a threat to cultivators. A British administrator George Yule killed 400 tigers. Only after a long time, environmentalists and conservators began to argue that these animals had to be protected.

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

Answer: Colonial management of the forests in Bastar and Java ran along the same lines. Bastar is located in India, while Java is an island in Indonesia. The people of Bastar had great respect for mother Earth. The people of Bastar lived in harmony within their own limited boundaries. When the Colonial Government introduced the 'reservation of forests' the people of Bastar were worried about their future.

Most villagers were displaced while a few were allowed to stay and work for free for the forest department. The villagers of Bastar were deeply upset by this. The famine in the early 1900s sparked a rebellion against forest reservations. But the rebellion was crushed by the British. The only victory for the villagers was that the colonial government reduced the 'reserved forests' by half. The plight of the forest-villagers in Java was very much the same as the people of Bastar. The Dutch were in control of Indonesia.

The skilled forest – cutters of Java were in great demand. In the 18th century, the Dutch slowly began to gain control over the forests in Java. The villagers rose in rebellion, but soon the uprising was suppressed. The Dutch enforced forest laws as in Bastar. The villagers were restricted from entering the forests and those who opposed the ban were severely punished.

Question 3. Between 1880 and 1920, the 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:

Answer:

i. Railways:

They were essential for colonial trade and movement of troops. To run locomotives, wood was needed as fuel, and to lay the railway lines sleepers were essential to hold the track together. By 1890, about 25,500 km of tracks were laid and more and more trees were cut. In Madras Presidency alone 35,000 trees were being cut annually for sleepers.

ii. Shipbuilding:

In England, from the early 19th century, oak forests were disappearing. It created a shortage of timber for the Royal Navy. Ships could not be built without a regular supply of strong and durable timber. Ships were necessary for the protection of overseas colonies and trade. Within a decade trees were cut on a large scale and timber was exported from India.

iii. Agricultural expansion:

The colonial government believed that forests were unproductive. They had to be brought under cultivation so that they could yield agricultural products and generate revenue. So between 1880 and 1920, the cultivation increased by 6.7 million hectares.

iv. Commercial farming:

The British encouraged the production of commercial crops like jute, sugar, wheat and cotton. The demand for these crops increased in the 19th century Europe, where food grains were needed for growing population and raw material for industries.

v. Tea/Coffee plantations:

To meet the growing needs for tea, coffee and rubber, large areas of forests were cleared for their plantation. The colonial government took over the forests and gave vast areas to European planters at cheap rates. These areas were planted with tea, coffee and rubber.

vi. **Adivasis and other peasant users:**

From early times, Adivasis communities traded in goods like hides, horns, silk cocoons, ivory, bamboo, spices, fibres, grasses, gums and resins through nomadic communities like the banjaras. This further declined forest cover.

Question 4. Why are forests affected by wars?

Answer: The impact of the First and Second World War on forests was tremendous. In India, the forest department cut trees freely to meet British war needs. The British needed to strengthen their Navy and timber was needed to build warships.

In Java, the Dutch enforced 'a scorched earth' policy. They destroyed sawmills and burnt huge piles of giant teak logs so that the Japanese could not get it, during the war.

The Japanese, who invaded Indonesia, exploited the forests for their own war needs. They made forest villagers cut down forests. Many villagers used this opportunity to destroy forests and expand cultivation. When the war was over the Indonesian forest service was unable to get the forest land back from the villagers.

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