

# Forest Society and Colonialism

**Discuss how the changes in forest management in the colonial period affected the following people:**

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

***Shifting cultivators:*** The forest management in the colonial period considered the practice of shifting cultivation harmful for the forests. They felt that land which was used for cultivation every few years could grow more trees for railway timber. When a forest burnt, there was the added danger of the flames spreading and burning valuable timber. Shifting cultivation also made it difficult for the Govt. to calculate taxes. So, the Govt. decided to ban it.

As a result, shifting cultivators were forcibly displaced from their homes in the forests. Some had to change occupations, while some resisted through large and small rebellions.

***Nomadic and pastoralist communities:*** Nomadic and pastoral communities do not maintain a permanent place of residence. They own a herd of cattle and keep moving from one place to another in search of food and shelter for themselves and for their cattle wealth.

Under the colonial rule, the life of these communities changed dramatically;

- Their grazing grounds shrank.
- Their movements were regulated.
- The revenue they had to pay increased.
- Their agricultural stock declined.
- Their trades and crafts were adversely affected.

***Firms trading in timber/forest produce:*** These trades were in great gain. They were having support of the government. With the increasing demand of timber (due to ships and railways) their total profit increased. They engaged the local people to collect different forest produce and earned money.

***Plantation owners:*** The new forest laws protected the rights of owners of plantations like tea. They experienced prosperity and accumulated huge wealth. But the workers on these plantations were paid very low wages; they had to live in bad conditions.

***Kings/British officials engaged in shikar:*** Hunting of tigers and other animals had been a part of the culture of the court and nobility for centuries. The British saw large animals as a sign of a wild, primitive and savage society. Therefore, they

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provided strong incentives to encourage people to take guns and kill these dangerous animals. Thus, hunting as a game for pleasure flourished under the new forest laws.

## What are the similarities between colonial management of the forests in Bastar and Java?

There were many similarities in the laws for forest control in Java (Indonesia) and Bastar (India). In Bastar(India) the British started forest management. Java in Indonesia is where the Dutch (People of Holland) started forest management. The British wanted timber from Bastar. Like the British, the Dutch wanted timber from Java to build ships. From British many communities were forced to leave their old region and forest areas. In Java also many villages were in the fertile forests. They were also left forests to move in the mountains and gave up practicing shifting cultivation.

In some forests and areas the people of several communities raised the banner of rebellion as the same was done by different people of Bastar in India. But colonial governments in Java as well as in Bastar were successful in crushing the rebellions.

## Between 1880 and 1920, Forest cover in the Indian subcontinent declined by 9.7 million hectares, from 108.6 million hectares. Discuss the role of the following:

- Railways
- Shipbuilding
- Agriculture expansion
- Commercial farming
- Tea/Coffee plantations
- Adivasis and other peasant users

**Railways:** The development of railways had a devastating effect on forests. Railways required wooden sleepers for its tracks. In addition, wood was required as fuel. Wood was also used in a great measure in wagons.

**Shipbuilding:** Shipbuilding had a devastating effect on railways. It led to reckless cutting down of trees.

**Agriculture expansion:** The British thought that forest land represented a non-productive use of land. Land could be used more productively if put to cultivation. Hence, large tracks of forest land were cut down.

**Commercial farming:** The colonial rulers were in need of commercial crops for

- i. Coping with the expanding needs of urban population, and
- ii. Fast expanding industries. These needs could be met only by diverting land under forests to cultivation of commercial crops.

**Tea/Coffee plantations:** Tea/coffee plantations were another productive source of income and revenue. Here again, a large number of villages communities were

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deprived of their traditional rights; forests were cut down. Plantations were raised on it.

**Adivasis and other peasant users:** Adivasis and peasant usually fought tooth and nail for their traditional rights. If they had their way, they would not have let even a single inch of forest land to suffer the fate it did.

## Why are forests affected by wars?

Forests are affected by wars. For example the First World War (1914-1918) and the Second World War had a major impact on forests. In India, working plans were abandoned at this time, and the forest department cut forests freely to meet British war needs.

Many Adivasis, peasants and other users use wars and battles opportunities to expand cultivation in the forest.

## How did industrialization effect forest?

With the establishment of Industries on a large scale, the demand for raw material increased. The brunt of this demand was felt by the forests. The Industrialized nation encouraged the production of commercial crops, like jute, sugar, wheat and cotton. Thus, forests had to be cleared for cultivation of these crops. Timber was also required to build ships. The spread of railways from the 1850's created a new demand for timber. Forest round the railway tracks started disappearing rapidly.

## State the reason for extension in cultivation?

Cultivation rapidly due to the following reasons:

- The British directly encouraged the production of commercial crops like jute, sugar, wheat and cotton. A large output of these crops was required in Great Britain due to two factors:
  - With the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, more and more population was shifting to the urban area; this shift resulted in a large increase in demand for food grains.
  - Again, with the coming up of new industries, the demand for raw materials like cotton was expanding phenomenally.
- Forests were considered to be unproductive assets, which occupied large tracks of land, and did not produce any goods of value. Therefore, the British government encouraged a change in the land-use patterns. Forests were cut down, and the land was brought under cultivation. Increased area under cultivation brought into two direct benefits to the British government.
  - More land under cultivation resulted in increased agricultural output.
  - Increased agriculture output, in turn, also brought increased land revenue for the British government.

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## **Explain the uses of forests for people and government in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries?**

The people of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were largely dependent on the forests for their livelihood. Most of their items of daily use came from the forests. People used forest products like roots, fruits, leaves and tubers. Bamboo was used to make houses and fences oil for cooking and to light lamps came from forests. Wood was used for cooking food.

The Govt. needed wood to run the industries. The shipping industry was totally dependent on timber. With the setting up of railway lines the demand on forest timber increased many folds. The need to manage forests for shipbuilding and railways led to the introduction of forest service. The 20<sup>th</sup> century Govt. needed forests for the supply of pulp for paper industry. Thus, many new policies were introduced to check regulate the cutting down and growing of trees.

## **What was the reaction of the tribal people to the British forest policy?**

The tribal people opposed the British Forest policy tooth and nail. They saw it as a grave threat to their traditional rights. They rebelled against the changes that were being imposed on them. Persons associated with the colonial state and its oppressive laws were attacked and harmed.

