

CHAPTER- 4 _FOREST SOCIETY AND COLONIALISM

* **Benefits from Forests:-**

When we take a look around us , we see so many things that come from forests ;

the paper in the book we are reading , doors and windows, tables and chairs , spices in our food , gum , honey , coffee , tea , medicines from herbs and roots , wood for fuel , fruits , flowers , animals , birds and many other things . In the Amazon forests or in the Western Ghats , it is possible to find as many as 500 different species in one forest patch.

* **Deforestation:-**

- The disappearance of forests or destruction of forest by humans for various reasons is referred to as deforestation.
- A lot of diversity from forests is rapidly disappearing between 1700 & 1995. A vast area has been cleared for industrial uses, cultivation, pastures and fuel wood.

* **Causes of large scale deforestation during colonial rule:-**

- Expansion of cultivation for food grains
- Make way for tea, coffee and rubber plantations
- To enhance the state revenue by converting forest land into agricultural land
- The spread of railways
- For Imperial shipbuilding

* **Why Deforestation?**

The disappearance of forests is referred to as deforestation. The process of cutting trees on a large scale began many centuries ago. Under the rule of the British i.e. colonial rule it became more systematic. Let us see some of the causes of deforestation in India under colonial rule.

LAND FOR CULTIVATION:-

The British encouraged the production of commercial crops like jute, sugar, wheat and cotton as demands for these crops increased in Europe where raw materials were required for industrial production. Secondly, the colonial state thought that forests were unproductive and more and more forest area under cultivation.

WOOD TO MAKE ENGLISH SHIPS :-

By the early 19th century, oak forests in England were disappearing and timber was needed by the Royal Navy to make ships. Search parties were sent to India and trees were being cut on a large scale and vast quantities of timber were exported from India to England.

SLEEPERS ON THE TRACKS :-

The spread of railways from the 1850s created a new demand. To run locomotives, wood was needed as fuel, and to lay railway lines sleepers were essential to hold the tracks together. (Sleepers Wooden Planks lay across railway tracks; they hold the tracks in position) The contractors appointed by the British Government began cutting trees indiscriminately.

PLANTATIONS :-

Large areas of natural forests were also cleared to make way for tea, coffee and rubber plantations to meet Europe's growing need for these commodities. The British government gave vast areas to European planter at cheap rates to clear forests and plant tea or coffee.

* **Forest Management:-**

A system of cutting trees controlled by the forest department, in which old trees are cut and new ones planted in straight lines for British railway and Navy.

FIRST INSPECTOR GENERAL OF FORESTS IN INDIA:-

The British were worried that the use of forests by local people and the reckless felling of trees by traders would destroy forests. So, they decided to invite a German expert, **DIETRICH BRANDIS**, for advice , and made him the **first Inspector General of Forests in India**.

SCIENTIFIC FORESTRY:-

Brandis set up **the Indian Forest Service in 1864**. **The Imperial Forest Research Institute** was set up at **Dehradun in 1906**. The system they taught there was called **SCIENTIFIC FORESTRY**. Many people now, including ecologists, feel that this system is not scientific at all.

In scientific forestry, natural forests which had lots of different types of trees were cut down. In their place, one tree was planted in straight rows.

* **THE FOREST ACT [1865]:-**

The Indian Forest Act was enacted to safeguard and preserve the forests generally in India. The Act makes various provisions for the conservation of forests. The scheme provides a State Government to constitute any wastelands or forest lands, which are property of the Government over which the Government has proprietary rights.

After the Forest Act was enacted in 1865, it was amended twice in 1878 and 1927.

The British Administration acquired the sovereignty of all wastelands by the forest Act of 1878, which by definition included forests. This Act also enabled the administration to demarcate protected and reserved forests. The local rights were refused in the case of protected forests. But, some privileges given to the local people by the government can be taken away anytime.

This Act classified the forests into three –protected forests, reserved forests, and village forests.

The best forests were called 'reserved forests'. Villagers are not allowed to take anything from these forests, even for their own use. For fuel or house building, they could take wood from village forests or protected forests. It attempted to regulate the collection of forest produce by forest dwellers and some activities declared as offenses and fines and imprisonment were imposed in this policy to establish the state control over forests.

Types of Forests:

- **Reserved Forests:** The most restricted forests are the reserved forests and are constituted by the State Government on any wasteland or forest land which is the property of the Government. In reserved forests, local people are prohibited, unless they are specifically allowed by a Forest Officer in the course of the settlement.
- **Protected Forests:** The State Governments are empowered to constitute any land other than reserved forests are considered as protected forests. The Government has proprietary rights over these forests and the power to issue rules regarding the use of these forests. This power gave the States control over trees, whose timber, non-wood products, or fruit had revenue-raising potential.
- **Village forest:** Village forests are those in which the State Government may assign to any particular village community the rights of Government over or to any land which has been constituted a reserved forest.

By the Indian Forest Act of 1865, **the Imperial Forest Department, set up in 1864**, tried to establish British control over forests in India, by various legislations. It empowered the British government to declare any land covered with trees as a government forest and make rules to manage it.

The Indian Forest Act of 1927 aimed to regulate the movement of forest produce, and duty leviable forest produces. It also explains the procedure that has to be followed for declaring an area as Protected Forest, Reserved Forest, or a Village Forest.

* **Impact of Forest laws:-**

- After the implementation of act, almost all everyday practices of native became illegal like-Cutting wood for their houses, Hunting and Fishing, Grazing their cattle, collecting honey, Collecting fruits and roots, Collection of Mahua and other forest products.
- They were forced to work instead in factories, mines and plantations, under government supervision.
- Many pastoralist and nomadic communities like the Korava, Karacha and Yerukula of the Madras Presidency lost their livelihoods; some of them began to be called 'criminal tribes.'
- People were now forced to steal wood from the forests, and if they were caught, they were at the mercy of the forest guards who would take bribes from them.
- It was also common for police constables and forest guards to harass people by demanding free food from them.
- Women who collected fuel wood were especially worried for their safety.

* **HOW WERE THE LIVES OF PEOPLE AFFECTED?**

- Villagers wanted forests with a mixture of species to satisfy different need– fuel, fodder (food for animals) leaves. The Forest Department wanted trees which were suitable for building ships or railways. The Forest Act meant severe hardship for villagers across the country.
- After the Act, all their everyday practices- cutting wood for their houses, grazing their cattle, collecting fruits and roots, hunting fishing – became illegal. People were now forced to steal wood from the forests, and if they were caught, they were at the mercy of forest guards who would take bribes from them.

* **SHIFTING CULTIVATION:-**

- One of the major impacts of European colonialism was on the practice of shifting cultivation or swidden agriculture. In shifting cultivation, parts of the forest are cut and burnt in rotation.
- Seeds are sown in the ashes after the first monsoon rains, and the crop is 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.
- European foresters regarded this practice as harmful for the forests and decided to ban shifting cultivation.

* **WHO COULD HUNT?**

- While the forest laws deprived people of their customary rights to hunt, hunting of big animals became a sport.
- The British saw large animals as signs of a wild, primitive and savage society. They believed that by killing dangerous animals the British would civilize India.
- Over 80,000 tigers, 150,000 leopards and 200,000 wolves were killed for reward in the period 1875-1925.
- A British administrator, George Yule, killed 400 tigers. Initially certain areas of forests were reserved for hunting.

* **REBELLION IN THE FOREST:-**

In many parts of India, and across the world, forest communities rebelled against the changes that were being imposed on them. We will now discuss in detail one such rebellion which took place in the kingdom of Bastar in 1910.

THE PEOPLE OF BASTAR :-

- Bastar is located in the southernmost part of Chhattisgarh and borders Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Maharashtra.
- A number of different communities live in Bastar such as Maria and Muria Gonds, Dhurvas, Bhatras and Halbas.
- The people of Bastar believed that each village was given its land by the Earth and in return they look after the Earth.
- Each village knew its boundary and looked after the natural resources and also protect their forests by engaging watchmen.

THE FEARS OF THE PEOPLE:-

- When the colonial government proposed to reserve two- thirds of the forest in 1905, and stop shifting cultivation, hunting and collection of forest produce, the people of Bastar were worried.
- People began to gather and discuss these issues. The initiative was taken by the Dhurwas of the Kanger Forest.
- Although there was no single leader, many people speak of Gunda Dhur, as an important figure in the movement.
- People of other villages were also invited to join the rebellion. The rebellion was crushed by the British.

* **FOREST TRANSFORMATIONS IN JAVA:-**

- Let us now go to another part of Asia, Indonesia, and see what was happening there over the same period. JAVA in INDONESIA is where the Dutch (the Dutch are the people who live in the Netherlands) started forest management.
- Like the British, they wanted timber from Java to build ships and sleepers. There were many communities in Java living in the mountains and practicing shifting cultivation.

* **THE WOODCUTTERS OF JAVA :-**

- The KALANGS of Java were a community of skilled forest cutters and shifting cultivators. They were so trained that in 1755 when the Mataram kingdom divided Java, the 6000 Kalang families were equally divided between the two kingdoms. When the Dutch began to gain control over the forests in the 18th century, they tried to make the Kalangs work under them.

* **DUTCH SCIENTIFIC FORESTRY :-**

- The Dutch made forest laws in Java, just like the British had made in India. They did not allow the villagers to enter the forest. Now wood could only be cut for specified purposes like making river boats or constructing houses. Villagers were punished for grazing cattle taking wood from the forests.

* **SAMIN'S CHALLENGE :-**

- Around 1890, Surontiko Samin of Randublatung village, began questioning state ownership of the forest. He argued that the state had not created the wind, water, earth and wood, and so it could not own it. Soon a widespread movement developed. By 1907, 3000 families were following his ideas.

* **WAR AND DEFORESTATION:-**

- The First World War and the Second World War had a major impact on forests. The forest department in India cut trees freely to meet British war needs.
- In Java, just before the Japanese occupied the region, the Dutch followed "a scorched earth" policy, destroying sawmills, and burning huge piles of giant teak logs so that they would not fall into Japanese hands.
- The Japanese forced the forest villagers to cut down forests and used the products for their own war industries. Many villagers used this opportunity to expand cultivation in the forest.

* **NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN FORESTRY:-**

- Since the 1980s, governments across Asia and Africa realised that scientific forestry and keeping the forest people away from the forests has led to destruction of forests.
- The government recognised that in order to protect forests involvement of the forest people is very essential.
- In many cases, across India, from Mizoram to Kerala, dense forests have survived only because of the protection given by the villages.
- Some villages have been keeping a watch over their own forests, with each household taking it in turns, instead of leaving it to the forest guards.