

Chapter 4

Forest Society and Colonialism

❖ Reasons for Deforestation

- In the colonial period, cultivation expanded rapidly for a variety of reasons.
 - The British demanded the production of commercial crops like jute, sugar, etc. for the rapidly growing European population.
 - In the early 19th century, the colonial state thought that forests were unproductive and must be cleared.
- Vast quantities of timber were exported from India for building the British ships.
- Railways also increased the demand for woods.
- Large areas of natural forests were cleared for tea and coffee plantations for meeting the European demand.

❖ The Rise of Commercial Forestry

- Dietrich Brandis was made the first Inspector General of Forests in India.
- **1864:** Brandis set up the **Indian Forest Service** and also helped in formulating the **Indian Forest Act of 1865**.
- **1906:** The **Imperial Forest Research Institute** was set up at Dehradun. The system they taught here was called 'scientific forestry'.
- **Scientific Forestry:** Natural forests which had a variety of trees were cut down and one type of tree was planted in straight rows.
- The Indian Forest Act was amended twice, once in 1878 and then in 1927.
- The 1878 act divided forests into three categories: **reserved, protected and village forests**. Reserved forests were inaccessible to the common people.

❖ Affects of Deforestation

- Unlike the forest department that wanted specific species of trees, the villagers wanted forests with a mixture of species for their different needs.

- The Forest Act made everyday pastoral activities of the villagers illegal and restricted their entry in the forests.
- **Shifting/ Swidden agriculture**
 - Parts of the forests are cut and burnt in rotation.
 - Seeds are sown in the ashes after the first monsoon rains.
 - Plots are left fallow for 12 to 18 years for the forest to grow back.
- European foresters regarded this practice as harmful for the forests because—
 - Land which was used for cultivation every few years could not grow trees for railway timber.
 - When a forest was burnt, there was a danger of the fire spreading and burning valuable timber.
 - It made it harder for the government to calculate taxes.
- The government banned shifting cultivation that resulted in the displacement of many communities from their homes in the forests. People who were caught hunting were punished for poaching.

❖ **New Trades, New Employments and New Services**

- Many communities left their traditional occupations and started trading in forest products.
- The British government gave exclusive forest rights to many large European firms.
- Grazing of cattle and hunting by local people were restricted and they were made to work in factories, mines and plantations owned by the British.
- Communities such as the *Santhals* of Jharkhand were recruited for working on tea plantations for very low wages and poor working conditions.

❖ **Rebellion in the Forest**

- **Bastar Revolt**
 - Bastar is located in the southernmost part of Chhattisgarh.
 - The tribals of Bastar show respect to the spirits of the river, the forest, the mountains and the earth.
 - The local people look after all their natural resources within their boundary.
 - Every year the headmen of villages in a *pargana* (cluster of villages) meet and discuss issues of concern, including forests.

- The colonial government's proposal of reserving two-thirds of the forest in 1905, and banning shifting cultivation, hunting and collection of forest produce, made the people of Bastar suffer.
- Some villages, called the forest villages, were allowed to stay in the reserved forests if they worked free for the forest department in cutting and transporting trees and protecting the forests from fires.
- In 1910 people revolted against the unjust forest laws.
- Bazaars and houses of the officials and traders were looted, schools and police stations were burnt and robbed and grain was redistributed.
- The British used force for suppressing the rebellion.
- Work on reservation was temporarily suspended and the area to be reserved was reduced roughly half of that planned before 1910.
- **Forest Transformation in Java**
 - The *Kalangs* of Java were skilled forest cutters and shifting cultivators.
 - The Dutch tried to make the Kalangs work under them.
 - In 1770, the Kalangs resisted by attacking the fort at Joana.
- **Dutch Scientific Forestry**
 - The Dutch enacted forest laws in Java which said that wood could only be cut for specified purposes and only from specific forests under close supervision.
 - Villagers were punished for grazing cattle in young stands, transporting wood without permit, or travelling on forests roads with horse carts or cattle.
 - ***Blandongdiensten* system:** The exemption of rents imposed on cultivation of land in the forest, in return for free labour and buffaloes for cutting and transporting timber.
- **Samin's Challenge**
 - Around 1890, Surontiko Samin of Randublatung village opposed the state ownership of the forest.
 - Soon it became a widespread movement with people refusing to pay taxes or fines or perform labour.

❖ War and Deforestation

- In India, the forest department cut trees freely for meeting the British war needs.
- In Java, 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 too exploited the forests for their war needs.

- Many villagers expanded cultivation in the forest.

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