

# Forest Society and Colonialism

- Changes in Forest Societies under Colonialism
- Location of Bastar people
- Bastar Rebellion
- Forest Rebellion in Java
- World Wars and Deforestation.

## **Relationship Between Forest and Livelihoods**

Forests give us a mixture of things to satisfy our different needs — fuel, fodder, leaves, trees suitable for building ships or railways, trees that can provide hardwood.

Forest products like roots, fruits, tubers, herbs are used for medicinal purposes, wood for agricultural implements like yokes, ploughs, etc.

Forests provide shelter to animals and birds. They also add moisture to the atmosphere.

Rainfall is trapped in forest lands.

Foresters and villagers had very different ideas of what a good forest should look like.

The forest department wanted trees which were suitable for building ships or railways.

They needed trees that could provide hardwood and were tall and straight. So particular species, like teak and sal, were promoted and others were cut.

The new forest laws meant severe hardship for villagers across the country. After the Act (Forest Act), all their everyday practices, cutting wood for their houses, grazing their cattle, collecting fruits and roots, hunting and fishing became illegal.

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.

Women who collected fuelwood were especially worried. It was also common for police constables and forest guards to harass people by demanding free food from them.

**Deforestation:** Deforestation is cutting down of trees indiscriminately in a forest area. Under colonial rule, it became very systematic and extensive.

### **Why Deforestation?**

As the population increased over the centuries and the demand for food went up, peasants extended the boundaries of cultivation by clearing forests.

The British encouraged the production of commercial crops like jute, sugar, wheat, and cotton for their industries as raw material.

The British thought that forests were unproductive land as they yielded no revenue nor agricultural produce. Cultivation was viewed as a sign of progress.

Oak forests in England were disappearing. There was no timber supply for the shipbuilding industry. Forest resources of India were used to make ships for the Royal Navy.

The spread of railways required two things: land to be cleared to lay railway tracks, wood as fuel for locomotives and for railway line sleepers.

Large areas of natural forests were cleared for tea, coffee, and rubber plantations. Thus, the land was given to planters at cheap rates.

### **Changes in Forest Societies Under Colonialism**

**Shifting Cultivators:** Forest management had a great impact on shifting cultivators. In shifting cultivation parts of the forest are cut and burnt in rotation. European foresters regarded this practice as harmful for the forests. They felt that such land could not be used for growing trees for railway timber and was dangerous while being burnt as it could start a forest fire. This type of cultivation also made difficult for the government to calculate taxes.

**Nomadic and Pastoralist Communities:** Nomadic and pastoralist communities were also affected by changes in forest management. Their traditional customary grazing rights were taken away and their entry into the forests was restricted. Passes were issued to them which had details of their entry and exit into and out of the forests. The days and hours they could spend in the forest were also restricted. This was in contrast to the earlier system that allowed them unrestricted entry into forests.

Pastoralists had to lessen the number of cattle in their herds which reduced their income. Now they were deprived of this additional income. Some pastoralists even had to change their lifestyle, leave pastoralism and work in mines, plantations, factories. Some were branded as the 'criminal tribes'.

**Firms Trading in Timber/Forest Products:** Firms trading in timber products were given the sole trading rights to trade in the forest products of particular areas. They made huge profits and became richer. The entire timber and forest trade passed on to them. They became powerful and began to cut down trees indiscriminately.

**Plantation Owners:** Plantation owners found that more and more forest land could be cleared for plantations. The British had made it very clear that their system of forestry would be scientific forestry, i.e., plantations. Plantation owners began to reap profits as the British government gave large areas of forest land to European planters.

**Kings/British Officials Engaged in Shikar:** The Kings/British officials engaged in shikar found that now the villagers were prohibited from entering the forests. They had the forest and wild animals to themselves. Hunting animals became a big sport for them. Thus, hunting increased to such an extent that various species became almost extinct.

### **Important Dates**

1600: Approximately one-sixth of India's landmass was under cultivation. The population of Java was 3.4 million.

1700-1995: 9.3% of the world's total area was cleared for industrial uses, cultivation pastures and fuel wood.

1770: Kalanga uprising which was suppressed.

1850: The spread of Indian Railways.

1864: The Indian Forest Service was set up.

1865: The Indian Forest Act was formulated.

1878: The Indian Forest Act was amended and divided forests into Reserved, Protected and Village forests.

1890: Surontiko Samin started a movement against the state ownership of forests.

1899-1908: Terrible famines.

1910: Rebellion in the kingdom of Bastar.

1880-1920: India's cultivated area rose by 6.7 million hectares. Terrible famines.

1946: The length of railway tracks laid by now was over 765,000 km.

1980: Introduction of scientific forestry and restriction imposed on the forest communities resulted in many conflicts.

### **Location of Bastar and Believe of the People of Bastar**

Bastar is located in the southernmost part of Chhattisgarh and borders Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, and Maharashtra. The central part of Bastar is on a plateau.

A number of different communities live in Bastar such as Maria and Muria Gonds, Dhurwas, Bhatras and Halbas. They speak different languages but share common customs and beliefs.

The people of Bastar believed that each village was given its land by the Earth, and in return, they had to look after the earth by making some offerings at each agricultural festival. They show respect to the spirits of the river, the forest and the mountain.

Since each village knows where its boundaries lie, the local people look after all the natural resources within that boundary. If people from a village want to take some wood from the forests of another village, they pay a small fee called devsari, Land or man in exchange.

Some villages also protect their forests by engaging watchmen and each household contributes some grain to pay them. Every year there is one big hunt where the headmen of villages meet and discuss issues of concern, including forests.

### **Causes for Bastar Rebellion**

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 very worried.

Some villages were allowed to stay on in the reserved forests on the condition that they worked free for the forest department in cutting and transporting

trees, and protecting the forest from fire. So, these came to be known as Forest Villages.

People of other villages were displaced without any notice or compensation. Villagers had been suffering from increased land rents and frequent demands for free labour and goods by colonial officials.

Then the terrible famines came in 1899-1900 and again in 1907-1908. Rebellion became inevitable.

### **Results of the Bastar Rebellion**

In a major victory for the rebels, work on the reservation was temporarily suspended.

The area to be reserved was reduced to roughly half of that planned before 1910.

### **Causes for Forest Rebellion in Java**

The Dutch wanted timber from Java to build ships. They banned the practice of shifting cultivation. The Dutch enacted forest laws in Java, restricting villagers' access to forests.

Now wood could only be cut for specified purposes like making riverboats or constructing houses, and only from specific forests under close supervision.

Villagers were punished for grazing their cattle in young stands, transporting wood without a permit, or traveling on forest roads with horse carts or cattle.

As in India, the need to manage forests for shipbuilding and railways led to the introduction of a forest service by the Dutch in Java.

The Dutch first imposed rents on land being cultivated in the forest and then exempted some villages from these rents if they worked collectively to provide free labour and buffaloes for cutting and transporting timber. This was known as the blandongdiensten system.

### **Forest Rebellion in Java or Saminist Movement in Java**

In the 1890s, Surontiko Samin a teak forest villager began questioning state ownership of the forest. He argued that the state had not created the wind, water, earth, and wood, so it could not own it.

Soon a widespread movement developed. Amongst those who helped to organize it was Samin's sons-in-law.

By 1907, 3,000 families were following his ideas. Some of the Saminists protested by lying down on their land when the Dutch came to survey it, while others refused to pay taxes or fines or perform labour.

### **World Wars and Deforestation**

The First World War 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 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 then exploited the forests recklessly for their own war industries, forcing forest villagers to cut down forests.

After the war, it was difficult for the Indonesian forest service to get this land back. As in India, people's need for agricultural land had brought them into conflict with the forest department's desire to control the land and exclude people from it.