

Peasants and Farmers

The Time Of Open Fields And Common Land In England

The agricultural system of England changed dramatically over the late 18th and the early 19th century. Before this time, in large parts of England, the countryside was open. The lands were not enclosed or partitioned by the landlords. Peasants cultivated on strips of land around the village they live in. At the beginning of each year, people were allocated a number of strips to cultivate at the public meeting. These strips were located at different places and vary in quality.

Benefits of Common Land

Beyond enclosures lands lay the common land. Due to this, it was ensured that everybody gets a mix of good and bad land. Everybody had access to the common land.

On this land, villagers grazed their cattle and collected fuelwood for fire. They also gathered berries and fruits for food. They fished in the rivers and ponds and hunted rabbits in common forests. For the poor, the common land was essential for survival as it helped them to overcome bad times when crops failed.

Wool Production and Enclosures

In the 16th century, the price of wool went up in the world market. Rich farmers wanted to expand wool production, thus they began dividing and enclosing common lands to allow improved breeding of sheep. They prevented the poor from entering the enclosed lands. After the mid—18th century, the enclosure movement swept through the countryside to fulfill the increasing demand for food grains due to the industrialization. Between 1750 and 1850, 6 million acres of land was enclosed. The British Parliament passed 4000 Acts legalizing these enclosures.

Enclosure The fencing of once common land to bring it into private ownership, in England between 16th to the 18th century.

Common land A piece of land over which everyone had customary rights of collecting fruits, firewood, grazing, and even fishing.

New Enclosures for Grain Production

The new enclosures became a sign of a changing time. In the old enclosures of the 16th century promoted sheep farming but 1 new enclosure of the late 18th century was for grain production. From the mid-18th century, the English population expanded four times. This meant an increased demand for foodgrains to feed the population. During this period, Britain was industrializing. Thus, more and more people began to live and work in urban areas.

Impact of Migration and War on Enclosure Men from rural areas migrated to towns in search of jobs. To survive they had to buy foodgrains in the market. As the urban population grew, the market for foodgrains expanded. When demand increased rapidly, foodgrain prices rose.

By the end of the 18th century, France was at war with England. This broke trade and the import of foodgrains from Europe. Prices of foodgrains in England became very high, encouraging landowners to enclose lands and enlarge the area under grain cultivation. Landowners pressurized the Parliament to pass the Enclosure Acts.

The Age of Enclosures

In earlier times, rapid population growth was followed by a period of food shortages. Foodgrain production in the past had not expanded as rapidly as the population. From the mid-19th-century grain production grew as quickly as population. In 1868, England was producing almost 80% of the food it consumed and the rest was imported.

This increase in foodgrain production was made possible by innovations in agricultural technology and ' by bringing new lands under cultivation. Landlords divided pasturelands, and carved up open fields, cut up forest commons, took over marshes and turned larger areas into agricultural fields.

Innovation In Agriculture

In the late 17th century, farmers continued to use simple innovation in agriculture. In the 1660s, farmers in many parts of England began growing turnip and clover, instead of leaving the land fallow.

They started practicing crop rotation to increase soil fertility. They soon discovered that planting these crops improved the soil and made it more fertile. Turnip was moreover, a good fodder crop relished by cattle. So farmers began cultivating turnips and clover regularly. These crops became part of the cropping system. Later findings showed that these crops had the capacity to increase the nitrogen content of the soil. Now enclosures were seen as necessary to make long-term investments on land and plan crop rotations to improve the soil.

Effect of Enclosures on the Poor

Enclosures allowed only the landlords to make more profit. But for the poor, life became hard. They could no longer collect firewood, fruits, and berries or graze their cattle or hunt small animals for meat. It was due to fences which made enclosed land the exclusive property of the landowner. Enclosure happened on a big scale in the Midlands and the countries around from which the poor were displaced.

The poor found that their customary rights started gradually disappearing. From the midlands, they moved to the Southern counties of England in search of work. Earlier, the labourers lived with their landlords. They helped their masters and worked for them throughout the year. By 1800, this practice was disappearing. Landowners tried to increase their profit. Thus, they cut the amount they had to spend on their labourers. ' The labourers were employed only during the harvest time. For a large part of the year, the poor had no work.

The Introduction of Threshing Machines

During the Napoleonic Wars, prices of foodgrains were high and farmers expanded their

production largely. The landlords began buying the new threshing machines to reduce dependence on labourers. A single machine could do the work of more than 20 labourers.

The loss of livelihood forced the poor to oppose the introduction of threshing machine. The Captain Swing riots spread in the countryside at this time. The threshing machines had become a sign of bad times for the poor. After the Napoleonic Wars, thousands of soldiers returned, who needed alternative work to survive.

At that time, grain started flowing into England from Europe and the prices declined, so the landowners began reducing the area under grain cultivation. Thus, an Agricultural Depression set in. They tried to cut the wages and number of labourers they needed.

Protest and Government Actions

In England during 1830s, farmers received threatening letters of not using threshing machines that remove workmen of their livelihood. Some farmers found their barn and haystack reduced to ashes by fire at night. Most of the letters were signed in the name of Captain Swing. It was a mythic name used in these letters. Landlords feared attacks by armed groups at night and many destroyed their own machines. The government took severe actions on these riots. The suspects of the riots were arrested.

Conclusion on Modern Agriculture in England Many changes was introduced with the coming of modern agriculture in England. The open fields disappeared and the customary rights of peasants were removed.

The poor left their villages in large numbers while the richer farmers expanded grain production and made profits. They became powerful. The income of labourers became unstable, their jobs insecure and their livelihood dependent on others.

Bread Basket Of The World

Modern agriculture developed in the USA and it became the breadbasket of the world. At the time, when common fields were being enclosed in England at the end of the 18th century, settled agriculture had not developed on any extensive scale in the USA. At that time, forests covered over 800 million acres and grasslands (prairies) 600 million acres. Most of the landscape was not under the control of white Americans. Till the 1780s, white American settlements were confined to a small narrow strip of coastal land in the East.

At that time there were various Native American groups. Several of them were nomadic, some were settled. Still, others were expert trappers through whom European traders had secured their supplies of beaver fur since the 16th century.

By the early 20th century, this landscape had transformed radically. White Americans had moved Westward and controlled up to the West coast by displacing local tribes and transformed the whole landscape into agricultural fields.

The Westward Move of White Americans and Wheat Cultivation

Many native Americans lived by hunting, gathering, and fishing, others cultivated corn, beans, tobacco and pumpkin. After the American War of Independence (1775 to 1783) and the formation of the United States of America, the white Americans began to move Westward.

In 1800, over 700,000 white Americans had moved on to the Appalachian plateau through the passes. They had the idea that wilderness of forests could be turned into cultivation fields. Forest timber could be cut for export, animals hunted for skin, mountains mined for gold and minerals. For this, the American Indians had to be cleared from the land. After 1800, the US government took a policy of driving the American Indians Westward, first beyond the river Mississippi and then further West.

Displacement of Local Tribes and Settlement

To displace local tribes was not an easy task. Many wars were waged in which Indians were massacred and many of their villages burnt. They were forced to sign treaties, give up their lands and move Westward. The settlers poured in as the Indians retreated. The white Americans settled on the Appalachian plateau by the first decade of the 18th-century and then moved into the Mississippi valley between 1820 and 1850.

Wherever the White American settlers went, they slashed and burnt the forests and cleared the land for cultivation. They ploughed the land and sowed corn and wheat. After the 1860s, the Great Plains across the River Mississippi became a major wheat-producing area of America. Timber for houses was not available in this area. Settlers in the area began clearing the grasslands and made sod houses to live in.

The Wheat Farmers of USA

From the late 19th century, there was a great expansion of wheat production in the USA. The urban population was growing and the export market was becoming bigger. With the increasing demand for grain, prices also increased and encouraged the farmers to produce more. The spread of railways also made it easier for exporting the grain. By the early 20th century, the demand became even higher.

The demand of wheat further increased during the First World War, when Russian supply of wheat was cut off. The US President Wilson called upon the farmers to plant more wheat. He said 'Plant more wheat, i.e. wheat will win the war'.

In 1910, about 45 million acres of land in the USA was under wheat production. After 9 years, the area had expanded to 74 million acres, an increase of about 65%. In the USA, a new class was emerged - The Wheat Barons who controlled as much as 2000 to 3000 acres of land individually.

The Coming of New Technology

The expansion of wheat production was made possible by new technology. In the 19th century, as the settlers moved into new habitats and new lands, they modified their implements to meet their requirements.

When they entered prairie grasslands, their traditional tools became ineffective as prairie was covered with a thick mat of grass with tough roots. To break the sod and turn the soil, a variety of new ploughs were devised. Some of them were about 12 feet long.

In the early 20th century, farmers were breaking the ground with tractors and disk ploughs, clearing vast stretches for wheat production. Before the 1830s, the grain used to be

harvested with a cradle or sickle.

The new machines allowed big farmers to rapidly clear large tracts, break up the soil by removing the grass and prepare the ground for cultivation. With power-driven machinery, 4 men could plough effect seed and harvest 2000 to 4000 acres of wheat in a season.

Effect of New Technology on the Poor

Machines brought misery for the poor. Many poor farmers bought machines by taking loans from the banks. They hoped the wheat prices would bring high profits and they would pay their debts back. But it did not happen due to the war. Production expanded during the war and unsold stock piled up. Wheat prices fell and the export market collapsed. The vast amount of wheat and corn turned into animal feed. This created great Agrarian Depression of the 1930s.

Those poor farmers who borrowed money found it difficult to pay back their loan. Many of them left their farms and looked for a job elsewhere.

USA Became Dust Bowl

The expansion of wheat production in the USA created other problems.

Farmers slashed and burnt forests indiscriminately, uprooted all vegetation, which had deep roots in the Earth. As trees and grasses were cut, there was no rains year after year and the temperature increased. The tractors had broken the soil into dust. The whole region had become a dust bowl.

In the 1930s, terrifying duststorm began to blow over the Southern plains. The wind blew with great speed. Black blizzards rolled in, sometimes 7000 to 8000 feet high. It looked like monstrous waves of muddy water.

Through the 1930s, these duststorms came day after day and year after year. People were blinded and choked, cattle were suffocated to death, sand covered fields and coated the surfaces of the rivers till fishes died. Dead bodies of birds and animals were all over the landscape.

The Trade With China

The story of British trade with China and the history of opium production in India are interlinked. In the late 18th century, the English East India Company was buying tea and silk from China for sale in England.

As tea became a popular English drink, the tea trade became more and more important. In 1785, about 15 million pounds of tea were being imported into England.

By 1830, the figure had jumped to over 30 million pounds. In fact, the profits of the East India Company came to depend on the tea trade.

The problem of English Hembants with Chin, England at this time produced nothing that could be easily sold in China. The Confucian rulers of China, the Manchus, were suspicious of all foreign merchants.

The Manchus were unwilling to allow the entry of foreign goods. In such a situation, Western merchants found difficulty in financing the tea trade.

They could buy tea only by paying in silver coins or bullion. This meant an outflow of treasure from England, a prospect that created widespread anxiety. It was believed that a loss of treasure would make the nation poor and deplete its wealth. Merchants, therefore, looked for ways to stop this loss of silver.

They searched for a commodity they could sell in China, something they could persuade the Chinese to buy. Opium was such a commodity.

Opium as a Medium of Exchange

The Portuguese had introduced opium into China in the early 16th century. Opium was, however, known primarily for its medical properties and used in very small quantities for certain types of medicines.

The Chinese were aware of the dangers of opium addiction and the Emperor had forbidden its production and sale except for medicinal purposes. But Western merchants in the mid—18th century began an illegal trade in opium. It was unloaded in a number of sea ports of South-Eastern China and carried by local agents to the interiors.

While the English cultivated a taste for Chinese tea, the Chinese became addicted to opium. People of all classes took to the drug. As China became a country of opium addicts, British trade in tea flourished. The returns from opium sale financed the tea purchases in China.

Opium Cultivation in India

When the Britisher conquered Bengal, they made a determined effort to produce opium in the lands under their control.

As the market for opium expanded in China, larger volumes of opium flowed out of Bengal ports. Before 1767, no more than 500 chests (of two maunds each) were being exported from India. Supplies had to be increased to feed this booming export trade. By 1870, the government was exporting about 50000 chests annually from Bengal to China.

Unwilling Cultivators Made to Produce Opium

Indian farmers were not willing to grow opium in their lands for the following reasons

- First, opium had to be grown on the best land, on fields that lay near villages and well manured.
- Second, many cultivators owned no land, so they had to pay rent and lease land from the landlords.
- Third, the cultivation of opium is a long and difficult process.
- Finally, the price the government paid to the cultivators for the opium they produced was very low. It was unprofitable for cultivators to grow opium at that price.

Unwilling cultivators were made to produce opium through a system of advances. In Bengal and Bihar, there were a large number of poor peasants, who found it difficult to survive. When the village headman (mahato) offered loans to produce opium, they took it hoping to repay it later. The government opium agents gave the money to the headman, who gave it as loan to the peasants.

By taking the loan, the peasants were forced to grow opium and hand over the product to the agents once the crop had been harvested. The prices given to the cultivators were very low. The British Government was not ready to increase the price of opium. They wanted to produce it at a cheap rate and sell it at a high price. The difference between the buying and selling price was the government's opium revenue. But the peasants began agitating for higher prices and refused to take advances. They even sold their crop to traveling traders (pykars), who offered higher prices.

Monopoly and Conflict Over Opium Trade

By 1773, the British Government had established a monopoly to trade in opium. By the 1820s, the British found that opium production in their territories was rapidly declining, but its production outside the British territories was increasing. It was being produced in Central India and Rajasthan, within the Princely States that were not under British rule. In these areas, local traders were offering much higher prices and were controlling the opium trade to China.

The British Government considered this trade illegal and instructed its agents posted in the Princely States to seize all opium and destroy the crops. The conflict between the British Government, peasants and local traders continued as long as opium production lasted.

Conclusion

All sections of rural people were not affected in the same way. Some gained and others lost. The history of modernization was not only a glorious story of growth and development. It was also a story of displacements and poverty, ecological crises and social rebellion, colonization, and repression. We need to look at these variations and strands to understand the diverse ways in which peasants and farmers confronted the modern world.

The coming of modern agriculture in England created many problem for small farmers and labourers.

In protest to the modern agriculture, they started setting fire on haystack and barn, destroying threshing machine.

Before advent of modern agriculture, land were not enclosed and peasants cultivated on stripes of land allocated to them in public meeting.

Beyond enclosures land, lied the common land where villagers grazed their cattle and collected fuel wood for fire.

Wool production gained importance in 16th century. So, rich farmer enclosed the land preventing entry of poor farmers to expand wool production.

Though the enclosure movement was slow in the early of 18th century later on there was a fanatic effort to enclose land.

The new enclosure was for grain production whereas old enclosures were for sheep farming.

Migration to urban areas, due to industrialisation raised the demand of foodgrain and thus its prices. Foodgrains prices further increased when trade was disrupted due to England-French war.

There was rapid increase in foodgrain production from mid-19th century, which was the result of radical innovation in agricultural technology and bringing of new lands under cultivation.

Farmers also used certain innovative methods like growing turnip and clover, practice of crop rotation etc.

During the Napoleonic wars, prices of foodgrains were high and farmers expanded their production and bought threshing machine.

After the Napoleonic wars, thousands of soldiers returned who needed work, there was grain inflow into England from Europe, food prices declined, landlords reduced the area of cultivation which all led to the Agricultural Depression.

Development of Modern agriculture in USA made it the bread basket of the world.

With formation of the United States of America white Americans moved westward and drove away American – Indians (native settlers). This displacement led to many wars.

In 19th century there was dramatic expansion in wheat production in USA. The export market grew bigger and rising prices encouraged farmers to produce more.

New technology the ploughs to break the sod and turn the soil, tractors, diskplough and the reaper invented by Cyrus McCormick helped improving wheat cultivation.

Machine brought misery for the poor, many took loans to buy machines and found it difficult to pay back.

After the First World War, demand of wheat reduced, stocks piled up and all this led to the great Agrarian depression of 1930s.

Indiscriminate cutting of trees, practice of slashing and burning of forest resulted in drought and soaring temperature in USA.

Soil turned into dust and the whole region became a dust bowl. Terrifying duststorm blew over the Southern plains year after year.

The American dream of land of plenty turned into a nightmare and the American realised that they had to maintain the ecological balance of each region.

After the Battle of Plassey (1757), to establish their rule in India, the British wanted to impose regular system of land revenue thus expanded area of cultivation.

Indigo and opium were two major commercial crops in 19th century and later on sugarcane, cotton, jute, wheat and several crops were also included to meet the growing demand in Europe.

The East India Company was buying tea and silk from China for sale in England, paying in silver coins. But it was drying out the treasury of England, hence they started illegal trade in opium.

The opium in China came from farmlands of Bengal, where poor farmers were lured to grow opium by giving them advance loans through village headman (Mahato).

By 1773, the British Government had established a monopoly to trade in opium. But its production was also increasing outside British territory within the Princely States in Central India and Rajasthan. The local traders controlled the trade.

The British considered this trade illegal. The conflict between the British and local traders peasants continued as long as opium production lasted.

The history of modernization of agriculture was not beneficial for all. Some rural people gained and some lost.