

Revision Notes
CHAPTER – 6
PEASANTS AND FARMERS

OPEN FIELDS AND COMMON LAND

The first half of the 19th century in England witnessed riots. The main reason behind this was the fear of workmen working on the farms were afraid of losing their jobs to the machines.

Peasants cultivated open fields which were strips of land near their villages. These strips were of varying quality. This was a measure to ensure that everyone had a mix of good and bad land. Beyond these strips lay common land which was used by all to graze cattle, gather fruits and berries and firewood. The common land was essential for survival of the poor.

This began to change from the 16th century. Wool became important. Farmers began to enclose fields to improve sheep breeds and ensure good feed. With enclosed fields there was no concept of common land. This changed the entire landscape of England.

Thrust in Grain Cultivation: From the mid-18th century onwards enclosures became different. They were now for grain cultivation. English population was expanding and Britain was industrialising. People moved to urban areas. Fewer people had to produce more grains. The market for food grain expanded. Food grain prices rose. This encouraged landowners to enclose lands and enlarge the area under grain cultivation. As the English population was rising the enclosure helped the food production to rise simultaneously.

Enclosures: Food grain production increased as much as population. England was producing almost 80% of the food grain the population consumed. Crop production received a boost through various crop rotation techniques. Enclosures allowed landowners to expand the land under their control and produce more for the market. Between 1750 and 1850, 6 million acres of land was enclosed.

The Farmers — The Poor : The poor no longer had access to the commons. They were displaced from their lands and found their customary rights disappearing. Work became

uncertain, insecure and income unstable.

Dependency on Machines — The Thresher : During the Napoleonic wars the threshing machine was introduced to lessen dependency on labour and increase production. After the Napoleonic wars ended soldiers returned home but found no work. At the same time an agricultural depression set in. There was agricultural surplus and labourers without work.

BREAD BASKET AND DUST BOWL

America the Land of Promises : During the time of enclosed fields in England, in the USA, the white American settlers were confined to a small narrow strip in the east. Rest of America was inhabited by native Americans and covered with grasslands and forests. By early 20th century, these Americans moved westward. America was seen as a land of promises. The American Indians were forced to give up their land and move westward. The white Americans now moved westward, cleared land and cultivated wheat.

The expansion of whites towards west drove American Indians westward, first beyond the river Mississippi and the further west.

The Demand for Wheat : From the late 19th century onwards there was a population increase. Export market in wheat was also becoming bigger. Demand for wheat increased. Wheat supply from Russia was cut off. During the First World War the wheat market boomed.

from 1910 to 1919 the area under wheat cultivation expanded from 45 million acres to 74 million acres.

The Introduction of Inventions : New technology was introduced which aimed at increasing production. Tractors, disk ploughs, mechanical reapers, combine harvesters, etc., began to be used. Machines proved very beneficial to big farmers and wheat production increased manyfold.

The Poor : The machines spelt misery for the poor farmers. Many bought machines on loan which they could not pay later. Jobs were difficult to find. Production expanded and soon there was surplus. Wheat prices fell and export markets were adversely affected. The Great American Depression ruined the farmers in the 1930s.

Dust Bowl : In the 1930s, great dust storms were experienced. These killed cattle and destroyed land. Farmers had cleared land of grass which rendered large areas of land coverless and dry. The ecology of the area was threatened and Americans had to pay the price for that.

THE INDIAN FARMER AND OPIUM PRODUCTION

British In India were gradually establishing their rule after battle of Plassey in 1757. Colonial rule changed the Indian landscape for forever.

Trade with China : Opium production in India is directly linked to the British trade with China.

Chinese rulers did not allow the entry of foreign trader in China , hence trade had to be done in silver coins or bullions for the foreign traders. They thought that it would impoverish their nation and deplete its wealth. The western merchants wanted to balance their trade with China and hence searched for a commodity that could sell in China. The English bought tea from China and the Chinese bought opium from them.

The Opium — Its Source — India : The Indian peasants were forced to grow opium. The British government bought this opium from them at nominal rates.

Unwilling Cultivators : The cultivators were unwilling to produce opium for various reasons :

- opium required fertile land
- rates paid by the British were very low
- it required looking after

The British discovered that opium produced in British territories was declining whereas in territories not under British rule the production was increasing. Traders were selling opium directly to China. This forced the British to establish its monopoly over this trade.