

CHAPTER - 6

PEASANTS & FARMERS

Question 1:

Explain briefly what the open field system meant to rural people in eighteenth-century England.

Look at the system from the point of view of:

- A rich farmer
- A labourer
- A peasant woman

Answer 1:

A rich farmer

The open field system was not beneficial for the rich farmer because he could not have exclusive control of the commons. He could not expand his area under cultivation beyond the strips which were allocated at the beginning of a year.

A labourer

This system was beneficial for a labourer because it provided additional sources of livelihood. The labourer could hunt rabbits and catch fish for getting some nutritious food. The commons provided some source of livelihood during off seasons when farm work was not available.

A peasant woman

For a peasant woman, the commons provided ample space for collecting firewood, fruits and berries.

Question 2:

Explain briefly the factors which led to the enclosures in England.

Answer 2:

The increased price of wool tempted the rich farmers to usurp the commons. They wanted to improve their sheep breeds to earn more profits. They began making enclosures on the commons land. After the late eighteenth century, the population of England increased significantly. This was also the time of industrialization. Many people migrated to towns in search of new opportunities. All of this increased the demand for food-grains. These developments hastened the enclosure movement in England.

Question 3:

Why were threshing machines opposed by the poor in England?

Answer 3:

Threshing machines reduced the need for manual labour. After the end of Napoleonic Wars, many soldiers who came back to villages could not find jobs because of threshing machines. For them, the threshing machine was a symbol of joblessness and hence they opposed the threshing machines.

Question 4:

Who was Captain Swing? What did the name symbolise or represent?

Answer 4:

Captain Swing was a mythical person. During the riots to destroy threshing machines and farmhouses, the letters left by the rioters carried the signature of Captain Swing. The name symbolized the protest of poor against the rich farmers and against the new technology.

Question 5:

What was the impact of the westward expansion of settlers in the USA?

Answer 5:

After the late eighteenth century, white Americans began to move westward. The displaced local tribes and changed the entire landscape into agricultural belts. Finally, they established control up to the west coast. By the early twentieth century, the landscape of the USA had transformed radically. The USA began to dominate the world market in agricultural produce.

Question 6:

What were the advantages and disadvantages of the use of mechanical harvesting machines in the USA?

Answer 6:

Combined harvester saved time and manual labour for the farmers. It helped in managing huge farms with minimum number of workers. It improved productivity and profitability of big farmers. Many poor farmers fell in debt trap because they could not utilize the combined harvester to its full potential. Many of them deserted their farmland and turned into labourers.

Question 7:

What lessons can we draw from the conversion of the countryside in the USA from a bread basket to a dust bowl?

Answer 7:

The conversion of USA countryside from a bread basket to a dust bowl teaches the importance of conservation of the ecosystem. Human development cannot take place at the cost of natural environment.

Question 8:

Write a paragraph on why the British insisted on farmers growing opium in India.

Answer 8:

The British were heavily dependent on China for tea imports. Since the Chinese authority did not allow foreign goods, so the British had to pay for tea in silver and bullions. This had the potential danger of siphoning off the treasure of Britain. Opium could be easily smuggled into China because of a large number of opium addicts. Profit from opium trade could be utilised to finance the tea imports. Hence, the British insisted on farmers to grow opium in India.

Question 9:

Why were Indian farmers reluctant to grow opium?

Answer 9:

Opium production required the use of the best lands which meant diversion of land from cereal and pulses production. Opium cultivation was time consuming which left little time to care for other crops. Most of the farmers did not own land and they had to lease a land for growing opium. The British offered very low price of opium to the peasants. These are the various reasons for Indian farmers' reluctance to grow opium.