

9th – Peasants and Farmers I



This chapter deals with peasants and farmers of three different countries i.e. the small cottagers in England, the wheat farmers of the USA and the opium producers of Bengal (India). The comparison between the histories of different places shows how these histories are different even though some processes are similar.

The Time of Open Fields and Common Land In England: The agricultural system of England changed dramatically over the late 18th and 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.

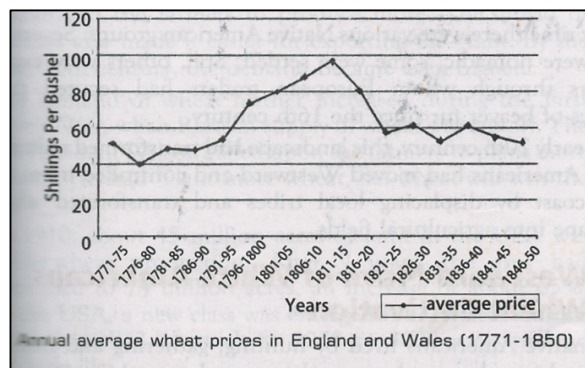
Benefits of Common Land: Beyond enclosures lands lay the common land. Due to this, it was ensured that everybody gets a mix of good and bad land. Everybody had access to the common land on this land, villagers grazed their cattle and collected fuelwood for fire. They also gather berries and fruits for food. They fished in the rivers and ponds and hunted rabbits in common forests. For the poor, the common land was essential for survival 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 fulfil the increasing demand for food grains due to the industrialisation. Between 1750 and 1850, 6 million acres of land was enclosed. The British Parliament passed 4000 Acts legalizing these enclosures.

New Enclosures for Grain Production: The new enclosures became a sign of a changing time. In the old enclosures of 16th century promoted sheep farming but new enclosures of late 18th century was for grain production. From the mid-18th century, the English population expanded four times. This meant an increased demand for food grains 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 War on Enclosure: men from rural areas migrated to towns in search of jobs. To survive they had to buy food grains in the market. As the urban population grew, the market for food grains expanded. When demand increased rapidly, grain prices rose. By end of the 18th century, France was at war with England. This broke trade and the import of food grains from Europe. Prices of food grains in England became very high, encouraging landowners to enclose lands and enlarge the under-grain cultivation. Landowners pressurized the government to pass the Enclosure Acts.

The age of Enclosures: In earlier times, rapid population growth was followed by a period of food shortages. Food grain production in



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the past 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 food grain 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 late 17th century, farmers continued to use the simple innovation in agriculture. In 1660s, farmers in many parts of England began growing turnip and clover, instead of leaving the land. 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 landowner. Enclosure happened on 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 food grains 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

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night and many destroyed their own machines. Government took severe actions on these riots, the suspects of the riots were arrested.

Conclusion on the Modern Agriculture in England: Many changes were 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 USA and it became the bread basket 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 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 700000 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 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.