

9th – Peasants and Farmers II



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 ways 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.

Invention of Reaper: In 1831, Cyrus McCormick invented the first reaper which could cut in 1 day as much as men could cut with cradles and 16 men with sickles. With one of these machines, 500 acres of wheat could be harvested in 2 weeks.

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 export market collapsed. Vast amount of wheat and corn turned into animal feed. This created great Agrarian Depression of 1930s. Those poor farmers who borrowed money found it difficult to pay back their loan. Many of them left their farms and looked for 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 were 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 dust storm 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 dust storms 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. Tractors and machines that had ploughed the earth and harvested the wheat in the 1920s were now clogged with dust and damaged beyond repair. The whole region became a dust bowl. The American dream of a land of plenty had turned into a nightmare. In their greed for more profit, the white Americans completely destroyed the ecological balance of the land. After 1930, they realise that they had to maintain the ecological conditions of each region.

The Indian Farmers and Opium Production: British rule was gradually established in India after the Battle of Plassey (1757). The British believed land revenue as a major source of government income. To make a regular system of land revenue they expanded the area under cultivation and increased the revenue rate. With this expansion, the area under forests and pastures declined which created many problems for peasants and pastoralists. In the British period India started to produce a range of crops for the world market. By the end of the century, peasants were producing sugarcane, cotton, jute, wheat and several other crops for export, to feed the population of urban Europe and to supply the mills of Lancashire and Manchester in England. In the early 19th century, indigo and opium were two of the major commercial crops.

A Taste for Tea: 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 was 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.

Problem of English Merchants with the Tea Trade from China: 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 purchase in China.

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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 mounds each). There 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 jades 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 (matatu) offered loans to produce opium, they took it hoping to pay 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 produce to the agents once the top had been harvested. The prices given to the litigators were very low. The British Government was not ready to increase the price of opium. They wanted to reduce it at 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 travelling traders (pykers), 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 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 stands to understand the diverse ways in which peasants and farmers confronted the modern world.

