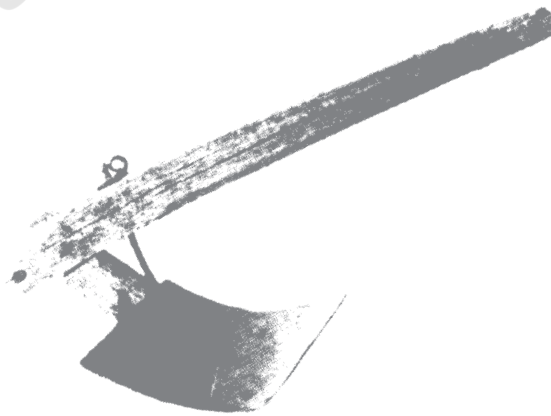


Peasants and Farmers

In the previous two chapters you read about pastures and forests, and about those who depended on these resources. You learnt about shifting cultivators, pastoral groups and tribals. You saw how access to forests and pastures was regulated by modern governments, and how these restrictions and controls affected the lives of those who used these resources.

In this chapter you will read about peasants and farmers, with a special focus on three different countries. You will find out about the small cottagers in England, the wheat farmers of the USA, and the opium producers of Bengal. You will see what happens to different rural groups with the coming of modern agriculture; what happens when different regions of the world are integrated with the capitalist world market. By comparing the histories of different places you will see how these histories are different, even though some of the processes are similar.

Let us begin our journey with England where the agricultural revolution first occurred.



1 The Coming of Modern Agriculture in England

On 1 June 1830, a farmer in the north-west of England found his barn and haystack reduced to ashes by a fire that started at night. In the months that followed, cases of such fire were reported from numerous districts. At times only the rick was burnt, at other times the entire farmhouse. Then on the night of 28 August 1830, a threshing machine of a farmer was destroyed by labourers in East Kent in England. In the subsequent two years, riots spread over southern England and about 387 threshing machines were broken. Through this period, farmers received threatening letters urging them to stop using machines that deprived workmen of their livelihood. Most of these letters were signed in the name of Captain Swing. Alarmed landlords feared attacks by armed bands at night, and many destroyed their own machines. Government action was severe. Those suspected of rioting were rounded up. 1, 976 prisoners were tried, nine men were hanged, 505 transported – over 450 of them to Australia – and 644 put behind bars.

Captain Swing was a mythic name used in these letters. But who were the Swing rioters? Why did they break threshing machines? What were they protesting against? To answer these questions, we need to trace the developments in English agriculture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

1.1 The Time of Open fields and Commons

Over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the English countryside changed dramatically. Before this time in large parts of England the countryside was open. It was not partitioned into enclosed lands privately owned by landlords. Peasants cultivated on strips of land around the village they lived in. At the beginning of each year, at a public meeting, each villager was allocated a number of strips to cultivate. Usually, these strips were of varying quality and often located in different places, not next to each other. The effort was to ensure that everyone had a mix of good and bad land. Beyond these strips of cultivation lay the common land. All villagers had access to the commons. Here they pastured their cows and grazed their sheep, collected fuelwood for fire and berries and fruit for food. They fished in the rivers and ponds, and hunted rabbit in common forests. For the poor, the common land was essential for survival. It

Source A

The threatening letters circulated widely. At times the threats were gentle, at others severe. Some of them were as brief as the following.

Sir

This is to acquaint you that if your threshing machines are not destroyed by you directly we shall commence our labours.

Signed on behalf of the whole

Swing

From E.J. Hobsbawm and George Rude, *Captain Swing*.

supplemented their meagre income, sustained their cattle, and helped them tide over bad times when crops failed.

In some parts of England, this economy of open fields and common lands had started changing from about the sixteenth century. When the price of wool went up in the world market in the sixteenth century, rich farmers wanted to expand wool production to earn good profits. They were eager to improve their sheep breeds and ensure good feed for them. They were keen on controlling large areas of land in compact blocks to allow improved breeding. So they began dividing and enclosing common land and building hedges around their holdings to separate their property from that of others. They drove out villagers who had small cottages on the commons, and they prevented the poor from entering the enclosed fields.

Till the middle of the eighteenth century the enclosure movement proceeded very slowly. The early enclosures were usually created by individual landlords. They were not supported by the state or the church. After the mid-eighteenth century, however, the enclosure movement swept through the countryside, changing the English landscape for ever. Between 1750 and 1850, 6 million acres of land was enclosed. The British Parliament no longer watched this process from a distance. It passed 4,000 Acts legalising these enclosures.

Source B

This Swing letter is an example of a sterner threat:

Sir,

Your name is down amongst the Black hearts in the Black Book and this is to advise you and the like of you, who are to make your wills.

Ye have been the Blackguard Enemies of the people on all occasions, ye have not yet done as ye ought.

Swing

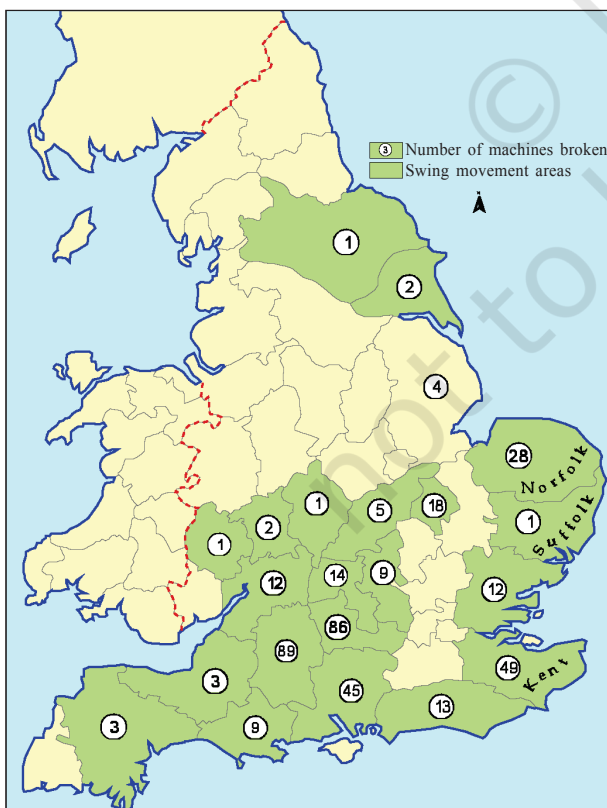


Fig. 1 – Threshing machines broken in different counties of England during the Captain Swing movement. (1830-32)
Based on E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rude, *Captain Swing*.

1.2 New Demands for Grain

Why was there such a frantic effort to enclose lands? What did the enclosures imply? The new enclosures were different from the old. Unlike the sixteenth-century enclosures that promoted sheep farming, the land being enclosed in the late eighteenth century was for grain production. The new enclosures were happening in a different context; they became a sign of a changing time. From the mid-eighteenth century, the English population expanded rapidly. Between 1750 and 1900, it multiplied over four times, mounting from 7 million in 1750 to 21 million in 1850 and 30 million in 1900. This meant an increased demand for foodgrains to feed the population. Moreover, Britain at this time was industrialising. More and more people began to live and work in urban areas. 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, and when demand increased rapidly, foodgrain prices rose.

By the end of the eighteenth century, France was at war with England. This disrupted trade and the import of foodgrains from Europe. Prices of foodgrains in England sky rocketed, encouraging landowners to enclose lands and enlarge the area under grain cultivation. Profits flowed in and landowners pressurised the Parliament to pass the Enclosure Acts.

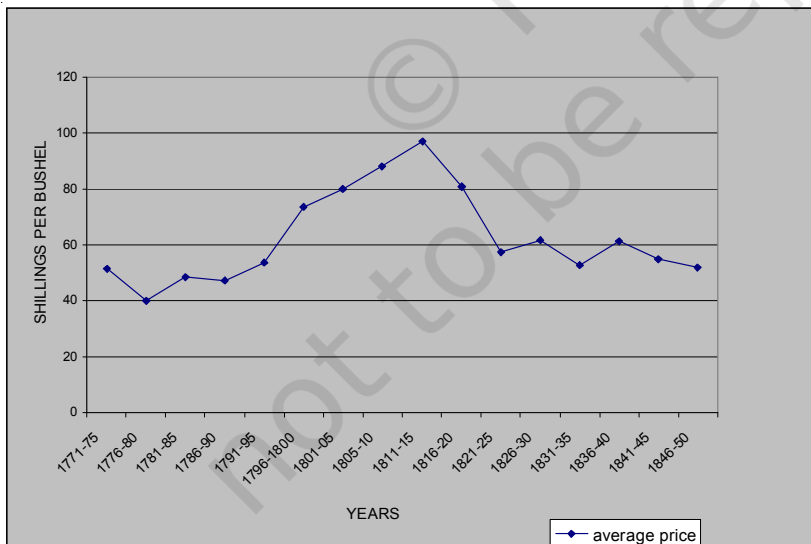


Fig.2 – Annual average wheat prices in England and Wales: 1771-1850.

New words

Bushel – A measure of capacity.

Shillings – An English currency. 20 shillings = £1

Activity

Look at the graph carefully. See how the price line moves up sharply in the 1790s and slumps dramatically after 1815. Can you explain why the line of the graph shows this pattern?



Fig.3 – Suffolk countryside in the early nineteenth century.

This is a painting by the English painter John Constable (1776 -1837). Son of a wealthy corn merchant, he grew up in the Suffolk countryside in east England, a region that had been enclosed much before the nineteenth century. At a time when the idyllic countryside was disappearing, the open fields were being enclosed, Constable painted sentimental images of open countryside. In this particular painting we do see some fences and the separation of fields, but we get no idea of what was happening in the landscape. Constable's paintings usually did not have working people. If you look at Fig.1, you will see that Suffolk was surrounded by regions where threshing machines were broken in large numbers during the Swing riots.

1.3 The Age of Enclosures

There is one dramatic fact that makes the period after the 1780s different from any earlier period in English history. In earlier times, rapid population growth was most often followed by a period of food shortages. Food-grain production in the past had not expanded as rapidly as the population. In the nineteenth century this did not happen in England. Grain production grew as quickly as population. Even though the population increased rapidly, in 1868 England was producing about 80 per cent of the food it consumed. The rest was imported.

This increase in food-grain production was made possible not by any radical innovations in agricultural technology, but by bringing new lands under cultivation. Landlords sliced up pasturelands, carved up open fields, cut up forest commons, took over marshes, and turned larger and larger areas into agricultural fields.

Farmers at this time continued to use the simple innovations in agriculture that had become common by the early eighteenth

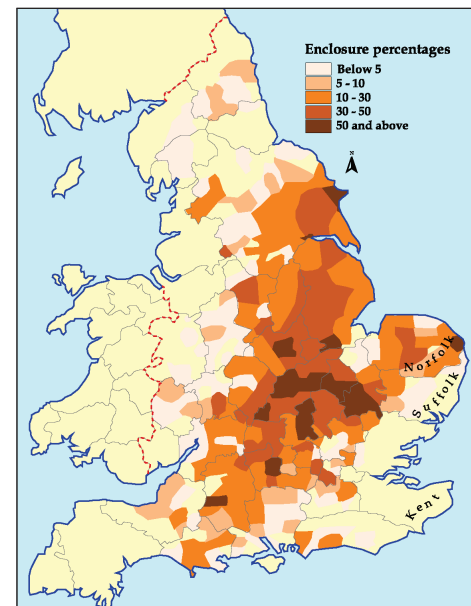


Fig.4 – Enclosures of common field by Parliamentary Acts: eighteenth-nineteenth centuries.

Based on E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rude, Captain Swing.

century. It was in about the 1660s that farmers in many parts of England began growing turnip and clover. 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. Nitrogen was important for crop growth. Cultivation of the same soil over a few years depleted the nitrogen in the soil and reduced its fertility. By restoring nitrogen, turnip and clover made the soil fertile once again. We find that farmers in the early nineteenth century used much the same method to improve agriculture on a more regular basis.

Enclosures were now seen as necessary to make long-term investments on land and plan crop rotations to improve the soil. Enclosures also allowed the richer landowners to expand the land under their control and produce more for the market.

1.4 What Happened To the Poor?

Enclosures filled the pockets of landlords. But what happened to those who depended on the commons for their survival? When fences came up, the enclosed land became the exclusive property of one landowner. The poor could no longer collect their firewood from the forests, or graze their cattle on the commons. They could no longer collect apples and berries, or hunt small animals for meat. Nor could they gather the stalks that lay on the fields after the crops were cut. Everything belonged to the landlords, everything had a price which the poor could not afford to pay.

In places where enclosures happened on an extensive scale – particularly the Midlands and the counties around – the poor were displaced from the land. They found their customary rights gradually disappearing. Deprived of their rights and driven off the land, they tramped in search of work. From the Midlands, they moved to the southern counties of England. This was a region that was most intensively cultivated, and there was a great demand for agricultural labourers. But nowhere could the poor find secure jobs.

Earlier, it was common for labourers to live with landowners. They ate at the master's table, and helped their master through the year, doing a variety of odd jobs. By 1800 this practice was disappearing. Labourers were being paid wages and employed only during harvest time. As landowners tried to increase their profits, they cut the

Activity

What happened to the women and children?

Cow keeping, collection of firewood, gleaning, gathering of fruits and berries from the common lands was earlier mostly done by women and children.

Can you suggest how enclosures must have affected the lives of women and children?

Can you imagine how the disappearance of common lands might have changed the relationship between men, women and children within the family?

amount they had to spend on their workmen. Work became insecure, employment uncertain, income unstable. For a very large part of the year the poor had no work.

1.5 The Introduction of Threshing Machines

During the Napoleonic Wars, prices of foodgrains were high and farmers expanded production vigorously. Fearing a shortage of labour, they began buying the new threshing machines that had come into the market. They complained of the insolence of labourers, their drinking habits, and the difficulty of making them work. The machines, they thought, would help them reduce their dependence on labourers.

After the Napoleonic Wars had ended, thousands of soldiers returned to the villages. They needed alternative jobs to survive. But this was a time when grain from Europe began flowing into England, prices declined, and an Agricultural Depression set in (see prices in Fig.2). Anxious, landowners began reducing the area they cultivated and demanded that the imports of crops be stopped. They tried to cut wages and the number of workmen they employed. The unemployed poor tramped from village to village, and those with uncertain jobs lived in fear of a loss of their livelihood.

The Captain Swing riots spread in the countryside at this time. For the poor the threshing machines had become a sign of bad times.

Conclusion

The coming of modern agriculture in England thus meant many different changes. The open fields disappeared, and the customary rights of peasants were undermined. The richer farmers expanded grain production, sold this grain in the world market, made profits, and became powerful. The poor left their villages in large numbers. Some went from the Midlands to the Southern counties where jobs were available, others to the cities. The income of labourers became unstable, their jobs insecure, their livelihood precarious.

Source C

One peasant who lost his rights to common land after the enclosures wrote to the local lord:

'Should a poor man take one of your sheep from the common, his life would be forfeited by law. But should You take the common from a hundred poor men's sheep, the law gives no redress. The poor man is liable to be hung for taking from You what would not supply you with a meal; & You would do nothing illegal by depriving him of his subsistence; ...What should be the inference of the poor...when the laws are not accessible to the injured poor and the government gives them no redress?'

Source: J.M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Rights, Enclosures and Social Change, 1700-1820* (1993).

Source D

In contrast many writers emphasised the advantages of enclosures.

'There can be no question of the superior profit to the farmer of enclosures rather than open fields. In one case he is in chains; he can make no changes in soil or prices, he is like a horse in team, he must jog along with the rest.'

John Middleton, an 18th century writer.

Activity

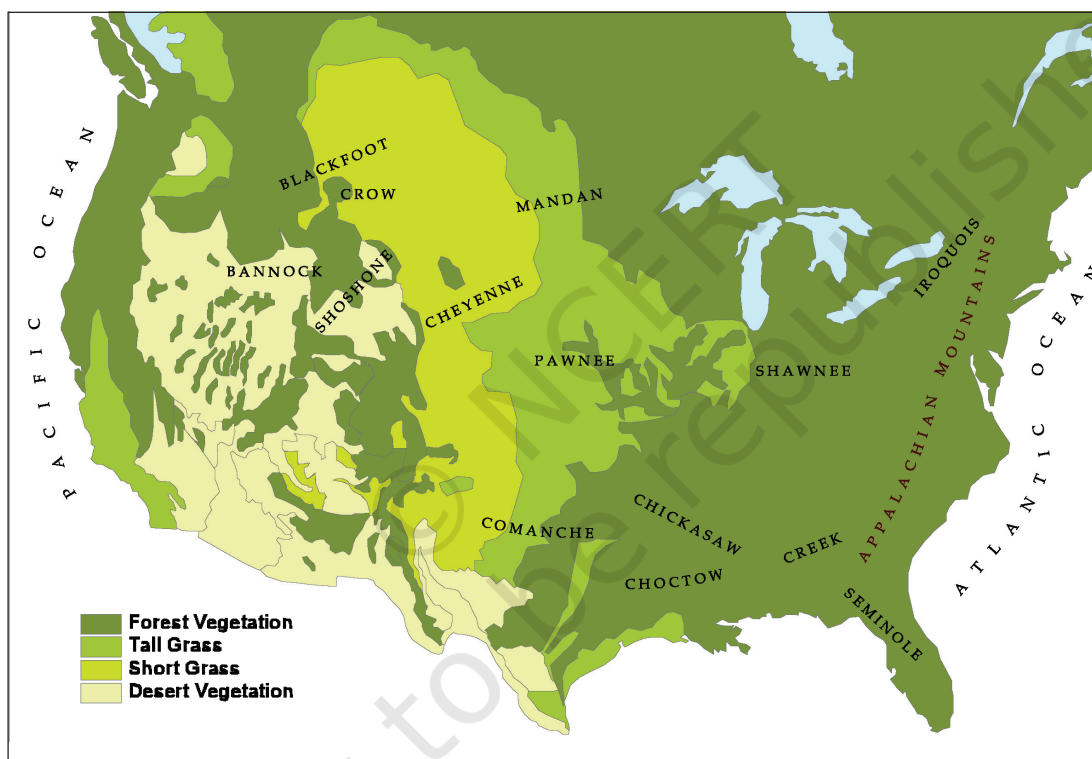
Read Sources C and D and answer the following.

- What is the peasant trying to say in Source C?
- What is John Middleton arguing?
- Re-read from Section 1.1 to 1.4 and summarize the two sides of the argument for and against open fields. Which argument do you sympathise with?

2 Bread Basket and Dust Bowl

Now let us travel across the Atlantic to the USA. Let us see how modern agriculture developed there, how the USA became the bread basket of the world, and what this meant to the rural people of America.

At the time that common fields were being enclosed in England at the end of the eighteenth century, settled agriculture had not developed on any extensive scale in the USA. Forests covered over 800 million acres and grasslands 600 million acres. Fig.5 will give you some idea of what the natural vegetation was like at the time.



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. If you travelled through the country at that time you would have met various Native American groups. Several of them were nomadic, some were settled. Many of them lived only by hunting, gathering and fishing; others cultivated corn, beans, tobacco and pumpkin. Still others were expert trappers through whom European traders had secured their supplies of beaver fur since the sixteenth century. In Fig.5 you can see the location of the different tribes in the early eighteenth century.

Fig.5 – Forests and grasslands in the USA before the westward expansion of white settlers.

Adapted from Baker, 'Agricultural Regions of North America', Economic Geography, Vol.2, 1926. About half the forest cover and one third of the grasslands were cleared for agricultural settlement. In the map you can also see the location of the various native American communities in the early nineteenth century.



Fig.6 – The agricultural belts in the USA in 1920.
 Adapted from several essays by Baker published in *Economic Geography in the 1920s*.

By the early twentieth century, this landscape had transformed radically. White Americans had moved westward and established control up to the west coast, displacing local tribes and carving out the entire landscape into different agricultural belts. The USA had come to dominate the world market in agricultural produce. How did this change come about? Who were the new settlers? How did the spread of cultivation shape the lives of the Indian groups who had once lived there?

2.1 The Westward Move and Wheat Cultivation

The story of agrarian expansion is closely connected to the westward movement of the white settlers who took over the land. After the American War of Independence from 1775 to 1783 and the formation of the United States of America, the white Americans began to move westward. By the time Thomas Jefferson became President of the USA in 1800, over 700,000 white settlers had moved on to the Appalachian plateau through the passes. Seen from the east coast, America seemed to be a land of promise. Its wilderness could be turned into cultivated fields. Forest timber could be cut for export, animals hunted for skin, mountains mined for gold and minerals. But this meant that the American Indians had to be cleared from

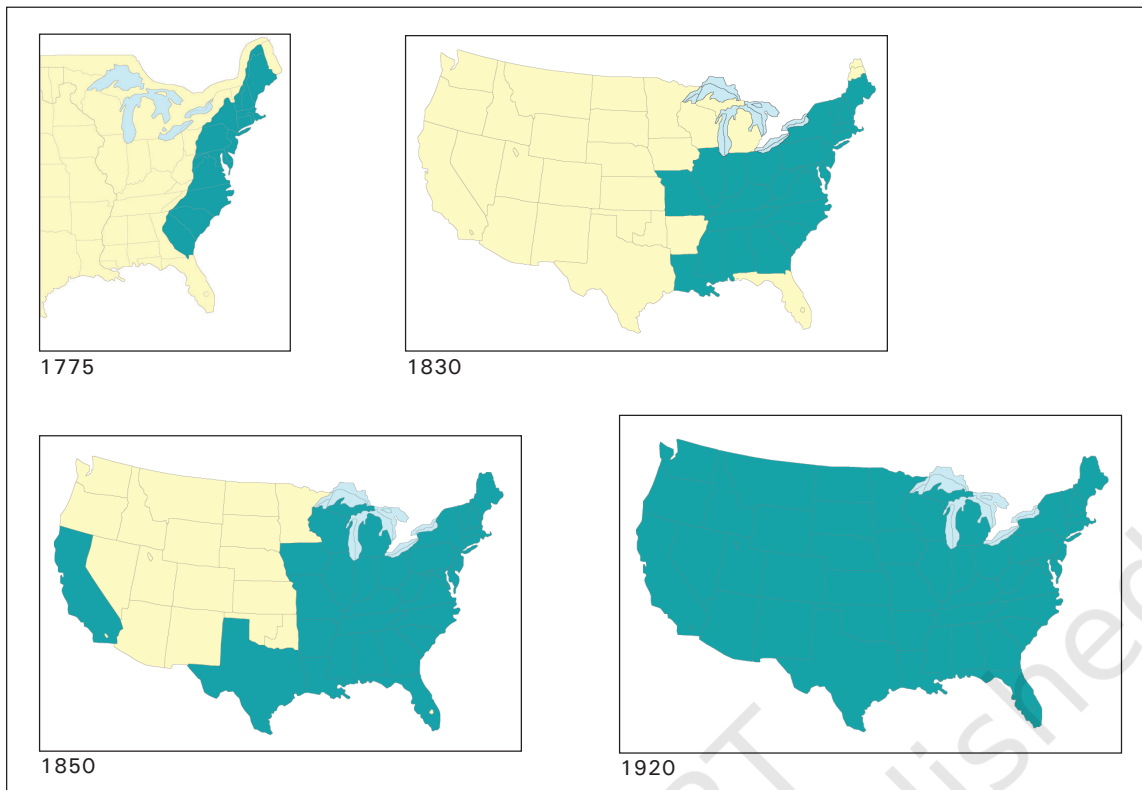


Fig.7 – The westward expansion of white settlement between 1775 and 1920.

the land. In the decades after 1800 the US government committed itself to a policy of driving the American Indians westward, first beyond the river Mississippi, and then further west. Numerous wars were waged in which Indians were massacred and many of their villages burnt. The Indians resisted, won many victories in wars, but were ultimately forced to sign treaties, give up their land and move westward.

As the Indians retreated, the settlers poured in. They came in successive waves. They settled on the Appalachian plateau by the first decade of the eighteenth century, and then moved into the Mississippi valley between 1820 and 1850. They slashed and burnt forests, pulled out the stumps, cleared the land for cultivation, and built log cabins in the forest clearings. Then they cleared larger areas, and erected fences around the fields. They ploughed the land and sowed corn and wheat.

In the early years, the fertile soil produced good crops. When the soil became impoverished and exhausted in one place, the migrants would move further west, to explore new lands and raise a new crop. It was, however, only after the 1860s that settlers swept into the Great Plains across the River Mississippi. In subsequent decades this region became a major wheat-producing area of America.



Fig.8 – Sod houses in the Frontier. (Courtesy: Fred Hultstrand History in Pictures Collection, NDIRS-NDSU, Fargo.)
A typical sod house that settlers lived in when they began clearing the grasslands. Timber for houses was not available in this area.

New words

Sod – Pieces of earth with grass

Let us follow the story of the wheat farmers in some detail. Let us see how they turned the grasslands into the bread basket of America, what problems they faced, and what consequences followed.

2.2 The Wheat Farmers

From the late nineteenth century, there was a dramatic expansion of wheat production in the USA. The urban population in the USA was growing and the export market was becoming ever bigger. As the demand increased, wheat prices rose, encouraging farmers to produce wheat. The spread of the railways made it easy to transport the grain from the wheat-growing regions to the eastern coast for export. By the early twentieth century the demand became even higher, and during the First World War the world market boomed. Russian supplies of wheat were cut off and the USA had to feed Europe. US President Wilson called upon farmers to respond to the need of the time. 'Plant more wheat, wheat will win the war,' he said.

In 1910, about 45 million acres of land in the USA was under wheat. Nine years later, the area had expanded to 74 million acres, an increase of about 65 per cent. Most of the increase was in the Great Plains where new areas were being ploughed to extend cultivation. In many cases, big farmers – the wheat barons – controlled as much as 2,000 to 3,000 acres of land individually.

2.3 The Coming of New Technology

This dramatic expansion was made possible by new technology. Through the nineteenth century, as the settlers moved into new habitats and new lands, they modified their implements to meet their requirements. When they entered the mid-western prairie, the simple ploughs the farmers had used in the eastern coastal areas of the USA proved ineffective. The prairie was covered with a thick mat of grass with tough roots. To break the sod and turn the soil over, a variety of new ploughs were devised locally, some of them 12 feet long. Their front rested on small wheels and they were hitched on to six yokes of oxen or horses. By the early twentieth century, farmers in the Great Plains were breaking the ground with tractors and disk ploughs, clearing vast stretches for wheat cultivation.

Once the crop had ripened it had to be harvested. Before the 1830s, the grain used to be harvested with a cradle or sickle. At harvest time, hundreds of men and women could be seen in the fields



Fig.9 – A typical farming family on a Sunday afternoon. Picture taken in the Great Plains of Dakota in the first decade of the twentieth century. (Courtesy: Fred Hultstrand History in Pictures Collection, NDIRS-NDSU, Fargo.)

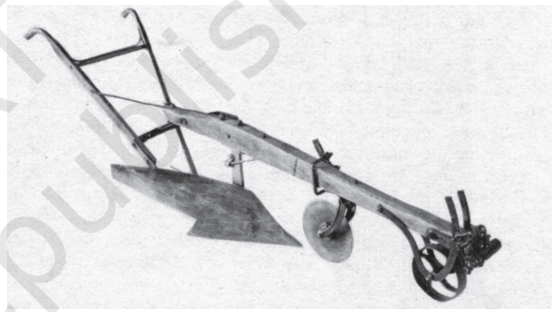


Fig.10 – A walking plough. Note the front resting on a small wheel. At the rear is the handle with which the ploughman guided the plough. The plough was hitched to a team of oxen or horses. (See Fig.13)

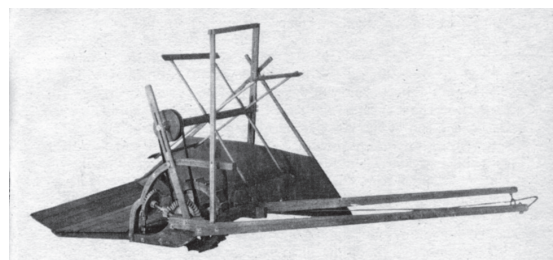


Fig.11 – Cyrus McCormick invented the reaper in 1831.



Fig. 12 – The scythe was used for mowing grass before the mid-nineteenth century.



Fig. 13 – Breaking ploughs before the age of mechanisation.

(Courtesy: Fred Hultstrand History in Pictures Collection, NDIRS-NDSU, Fargo.)

You can see the twelve ploughs hitched to a team of horses.



Fig. 14 – Seeding with drills and tractors. A highland farm in North Dakota, 1910.

(Courtesy: F.A. Pazandak Photography Collection, NDIRS-NDSU, Fargo)

Here you can see three drills and packers unhitched from the tractor. The drills were about 10 to 12 feet long, each with about 20 disks drilling the soil for seeding. Packers followed behind the disks covering the seeds with soil. You can see the vast seeded field extending into the horizon.



Fig. 15 – Breaking the ground on the Great Plains in North Dakota, 1910. (Courtesy: Fred Hultstrand History in Pictures Collection, NDIRS-NDSU, Fargo.)

You can see a Minneapolis steam tractor pulling a John Deere plough with metal shares that cut into the ground. The plough could break the soil quickly and cut even strong grassroots effectively. Notice the deep furrows behind the machine and the unploughed land with grass on the left. Only big wheat farmers could afford these machines.

cutting the crop. In 1831, Cyrus McCormick invented the first mechanical reaper which could cut in one day as much as five men could cut with cradles and 16 men with sickles. By the early twentieth century, most farmers were using combined harvesters to cut grain. With one of these machines, 500 acres of wheat could be harvested in two weeks.

For the big farmers of the Great Plains these machines had many attractions. The prices of wheat were high and the demand seemed limitless. The new machines allowed these big farmers to rapidly clear large tracts, break up the soil, remove the grass and prepare the ground for cultivation. The work could be done quickly and with a minimal number of hands. With power-driven machinery, four men could plough, seed and harvest 2,000 to 4,000 acres of wheat in a season.

2.4 What Happened to the Poor?

For the poorer farmers, machines brought misery. Many of them bought these machines, imagining that wheat prices would remain high and profits would flow in. If they had no money, the banks offered loans. Those who borrowed found it difficult to pay back their debts. Many of them deserted their farms and looked for jobs elsewhere.

But jobs were difficult to find. Mechanisation had reduced the need for labour. And the boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seemed to have come to an end by the mid-1920s. After that, most farmers faced trouble. Production had expanded so rapidly during the war and post-war years that there was a large surplus. Unsold stocks piled up, storehouses overflowed with grain, and vast amounts of corn and wheat were turned into animal feed. Wheat prices fell and export markets collapsed. This created the grounds for the Great Agrarian Depression of the 1930s that ruined wheat farmers everywhere.

2.5 Dust Bowl

The expansion of wheat agriculture in the Great Plains created other problems. In the 1930s, terrifying duststorms began to blow over the southern plains. Black blizzards rolled in, very often 7,000 to 8,000 feet high, rising like monstrous waves of muddy water. They came day after day, year after year, through the 1930s. As



Fig. 16 – Black blizzard in Western Kansas, 14 April 1935.



Fig. 17 – Drought Survivors. Painted by Alexander Hogue, (1936). Hogue dramatised the tragic scenes of death and destruction that he saw, in a series of paintings. Life Magazine referred to Hogue as the artist of the dust bowl.

the skies darkened, and the dust swept in, people were blinded and choked. Cattle were suffocated to death, their lungs caked with dust and mud. Sand buried fences, covered fields, and coated the surfaces of rivers till the fish died. Dead bodies of birds and animals were strewn all over the landscape. Tractors and machines that had ploughed the earth and harvested the wheat in the 1920s were now clogged with dust, damaged beyond repair.

What had gone wrong? Why these duststorms? In part they came because the early 1930s were years of persistent drought. The rains failed year after year, and temperatures soared. The wind blew with ferocious speed. But ordinary duststorms became black blizzards only because the entire landscape had been ploughed over, stripped of all grass that held it together. When wheat cultivation had expanded dramatically in the early twentieth century, zealous farmers had recklessly uprooted all vegetation, and tractors had turned the soil over, and broken the sod into dust. The whole region had become a dust bowl. The American dream of a land of plenty had turned into a nightmare. The settlers had thought that they could conquer the entire landscape, turn all land over to growing crops that could yield profits. After the 1930s, they realized that they had to respect the ecological conditions of each region.

3 The Indian Farmer and Opium Production

Let us now move to India and see what was happening in the Indian countryside in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

As you know, British rule was gradually established in India after the Battle of Plassey (1757). Over the period of colonial rule, the rural landscape was radically transformed. The British saw land revenue as a major source of government income. To build the resources of the state, efforts were made to impose a regular system of land revenue, increase revenue rates, and expand the area under cultivation. As cultivation expanded, the area under forests and pastures declined. All this created many problems for peasants and pastoralists. They found their access to forests and grazing lands increasingly restricted by rules and regulations. And they struggled to meet the pressures of government revenue demand.

In the colonial period, rural India also came to produce a range of crops for the world market. In the early nineteenth century, indigo and opium were two of the major commercial crops. 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.

How did Indian cultivators respond to their entry into the modern world of international commerce and trade? Let us look at the history of one crop – opium – to get an idea of what colonial rule meant to peasants, and how the market operated in the colonies.

3.1 A Taste for Tea: The Trade with China

The history of opium production in India was linked up with the story of British trade with China. In the late eighteenth 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.

This created a problem. 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. They feared that the merchants would meddle in local politics and disrupt their

authority. So the Manchus were unwilling to allow the entry of foreign goods.

In such a situation, how could Western merchants finance the tea trade? How could they balance their 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 impoverish the nation 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. The Portuguese had introduced opium into China in the early sixteenth century. Opium was however, known primarily for its medical properties and used in minuscule 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-eighteenth 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. By the early 1820s, about 10,000 crates were being annually smuggled into China. Fifteen years later, over 35,000 crates were being unloaded every year.

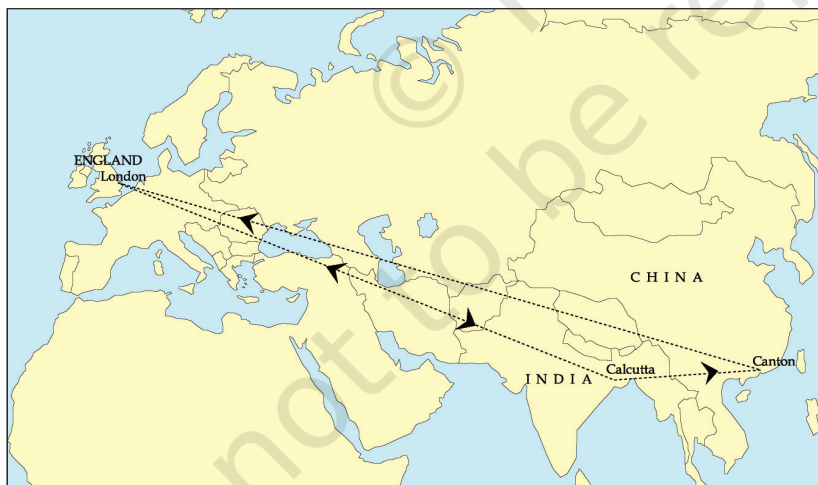


Fig. 18 – The triangular trade.

The British traders took opium from India to China and tea from China to England. Between India and England trade flowed both ways. By the early 19th century, exports of handlooms from India declined while the export of raw materials (silk and cotton) and foodgrains increased. From England, manufactured goods flowed into India leading to a decline of Indian artisanal production.

While the English cultivated a taste for Chinese tea, the Chinese became addicted to opium. People of all classes took to the drug – shopkeepers and peddlers, officials and army men, aristocrats and paupers. Lin Ze-xu, Special Commissioner at Canton in 1839, estimated that there were over 4 million opium smokers in China.

Activity

On the arrows in the map indicate the commodities that flowed from one country to another.



Fig. 19 – A ship arrives from China.

This is a painting by Thomas Daniell, an English artist who came to India with his nephew William Daniell in 1786. The Daniells went first to China, stayed there for while, and then sailed from Canton (in south China) to India. The ship in which they came was registered in an Indian port and was engaged in trade in Eastern waters. The illegal trade in opium with China was carried on, in such ships.

Source E

In 1839, the Chinese Emperor sent Lin Ze-xu to Canton as a Special Commissioner with instructions to stop the opium trade. After he arrived in Canton in the spring of 1839, Lin arrested 1, 600 men involved in the trade, and confiscated 11,000 pounds of opium. Then he forced the foreign factories to hand over their stocks of opium, burnt 20, 000 crates of opium and blew the ashes to the wind. When he announced that Canton was closed to foreign trade, Britain declared war. Defeated in the Opium War (1837-42) , the Chinese were forced to accept the humiliating terms of the subsequent treaties, legalizing opium trade and opening up China to foreign merchants.

Before the war, Lin wrote a strong letter to Queen Victoria criticizing the trade in opium. Here is an extract from Lin's "Letter of Advice to Queen Victoria"

'All those people in China who sell opium or smoke opium should receive the death penalty. We trace the crime of those barbarians who through the years have been selling opium, then the deep harm they have wrought and the great profit they have usurped should fundamentally justify their execution according to law. ...

We find your country is sixty or seventy thousand li [three li make one mile, ordinarily] from China. Yet there are barbarian ships that strive to come here for trade for the purpose of making a great profit. The wealth of China is used to profit the barbarians. That is to say, the great profit made by barbarians is all taken from the rightful share of China. By what right do they then in return us the poisonous drug to injure the Chinese people?...Let us ask, where is your conscience? I have heard that the smoking of opium is very strictly forbidden by your country; that is because the harm caused by opium is clearly understood. Since it is not permitted to do harm to your own country, then even less should you let it be passed on to the harm of other countries — how much less to China!'

Source: From Ssuyu Teng and John Fairbank, *China's Response to the West* (1954).

Source

A British doctor in Canton put the figure at 12 million. As China became a country of opium addicts, British trade in tea flourished. The returns from opium sale financed the tea purchases in China.

3.2 Where did Opium come from?

This is where the Indian peasants come into the story.

When the British 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. Within four years, the quantity trebled. A hundred years later, in 1870, the government was exporting about 50,000 chests annually.

Supplies had to be increased to feed this booming export trade. But this was not easy. How could the cultivators be persuaded to grow opium? For a variety of reasons, they were unwilling to turn their fields over to poppy. First, the crop had to be grown on the best land, on fields that lay near villages and were well manured. On this land peasants usually produced pulses. If they planted opium on this land, then pulses could not be grown there, or they would have to be grown on inferior land where harvests were poorer and uncertain. Second, many cultivators owned no land. To cultivate, they had to pay rent and lease land from landlords. And the rent charged on good lands near villages was very high. Third, the cultivation of opium was a difficult process. The plant was delicate, and cultivators had to spend long hours nurturing it. This meant that they did not have enough time to care for other crops. 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.

3.3 How Were Unwilling Cultivators Made to Produce Opium?

Unwilling cultivators were made to produce opium through a system of advances. In the rural areas of Bengal and Bihar, there were large numbers of poor peasants. They never had enough to survive. It was difficult for them to pay rent to the landlord or to buy food and clothing. From the 1780s, such peasants found their village headmen (*mahato*) giving them money advances to produce opium. When offered a loan, the cultivators were tempted to accept, hoping to

Activity

Imagine that you were asked by the Emperor of China to prepare a leaflet for young people about the harmful effects of opium. Find out about the effect of opium on the human body. Design your leaflet and give it an eye-catching title

New words

Maund – A measure of weight.
1 maund = 40 seers. 1 seer is a little under a kg.

Activity

Imagine that you are the leader of a group of farmers protesting against having to grow opium. You have been granted a meeting with the local official of the East India Company. How would the conversation proceed? Divide the class into the two groups and act out the conversation you would have.

meet their immediate needs and pay back the loan at a later stage. But the loan tied the peasant to the headman and through him to the government. It was the government opium agents who were advancing the money to the headmen, who in turn gave it to the cultivators. By taking the loan, the cultivator was forced to grow opium on a specified area of land and hand over the produce to the agents once the crop had been harvested. He had no option of planting the field with a crop of his choice or of selling his produce to anyone but the government agent. And he had to accept the low price offered for the produce.

The problem could have been partly solved by increasing the price of opium. But the government was reluctant to do so. It wanted to produce opium at a cheap rate and sell it at a high price to opium agents in Calcutta, who then shipped it to China. This difference between the buying and selling price was the government's opium revenue. The prices given to the peasants were so low that by the early eighteenth century angry peasants began agitating for higher prices and refused to take advances. In regions around Benaras, cultivators began giving up opium cultivation. They produced sugarcane and potatoes instead. Many cultivators sold off their crop to travelling traders (*pykars*) who offered higher prices.

By 1773, the British government in Bengal had established a monopoly to trade in opium. No one else was legally permitted to trade in the product. By the 1820s, the British found to their horror 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 control. In these regions, local traders were offering much higher prices to peasants and exporting opium to China. In fact, armed bands of traders were found carrying on the trade in the 1820s. To the British this trade was illegal: it was smuggling and it had to be stopped. Government monopoly had to be retained. It therefore instructed its agents posted in the princely states to confiscate all opium and destroy the crops.

This conflict between the British government, peasants and local traders continued as long as opium production lasted.

We should not however, think that the experiences of all peasants in colonial India were like those of the opium cultivators. We will read about other experiences of peasants in colonial India in a later chapter.

Source F

The Deputy Opium Agent of Allahabad wrote in 1833:

'The Board appears to think that the cultivators are not unwilling to cultivate. For two years past I have had constant communications with the cultivators in some of the districts south of the Jumna and state positively the people are discontented and dissatisfied almost to a man. I have made many enquires on the subject and the impression left on my mind is that cultivation of the poppy is considered a curse by the people and that only by undue authority is it upheld ... The cultivation was introduced at the request, nay I may say, at the command of the Collector; ... The people tell me, they are ill used and abused and even beaten by the chuprassies ... The people almost uniformly told, they suffered loss from poppy ...'

From Benoy Chowdhury, *Growth of Commercial Agriculture in Bengal*.

Conclusion

In this chapter you saw how rural areas in different parts of the world changed in the modern period. While looking at these changes we must remember that their pattern was not the same everywhere. All sections of rural people were not affected in the same way. Some gained, others lost. Nor was the history of modernisation simply a glorious story of growth and development. It was also a story of displacements and impoverishment, ecological crises and social rebellion, colonisation 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.



Fig. 20 – Packed chests of opium being taken to Ghazipur railway station in the nineteenth century.

Activities

Activities

1. Draw a timeline from 1650 to 1930 showing the significant agricultural changes which you have read about in this chapter.
2. Fill in the following table with the events outlined in this chapter. Remember, there could be more than one change in a country.

COUNTRY	CHANGE WHICH OCCURRED	WHO LOST	WHO WON

Questions

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
2. Explain briefly the factors which led to the enclosures in England.
3. Why were threshing machines opposed by the poor in England?
4. Who was Captain Swing? What did the name symbolise or represent?
5. What was the impact of the westward expansion of settlers in the USA?
6. What were the advantages and disadvantages of the use of mechanical harvesting machines in the USA?
7. What lessons can we draw from the conversion of the countryside in the USA from a bread basket to a dust bowl?
8. Write a paragraph on why the British insisted on farmers growing opium in India.
9. Why were Indian farmers reluctant to grow opium?



