

Peasants and 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:

(i) A rich farmer

Answer (i): As the prices of wool increased, rich farmers wanted to increase its production. Therefore, they began to privatise the best parts of the common land and open fields for themselves. This was done to ensure that their sheep would get good fodder. They also began to drive out poorer farmers, disallowing them from using common land for grazing.

(ii) A labourer

Answer: (ii) For the poor labourers, the common lands were essential for survival. They used to live with landowners, doing a number of odd jobs for them in return for board and lodging and a small pay. However, when the open field system began to disappear, labourers were paid wages and employed only at harvest time. This left them at the mercy of rich landowners and farmers.

(iii) A peasant woman

Answer: (iii) For peasant women, the open field system was a good way of community living wherein everything was shared between the rich and the poor. They would use the common lands for grazing their cattle, gathering fruits and collecting firewood. However, all these activities were negatively affected because of the disappearance of open fields.

Question 2: Explain briefly the factors which led to the enclosures in England.

Answer: The factors which led to the enclosures in England were:

- Increasing population and due to it increasing demand of food grains and other things led to the enclosure in England.
- The rising prices of agricultural products such as wool, wheat, milk, fruits etc. also played role as a factor in promoting enclosures in England.
- Industrialisation and war needs made food grain prices soar, making it necessary to take steps to increase its production.
- In the nineteenth century enclosure were seen necessary to make long term investment 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 for the market

Question 3: Why were threshing machines opposed by the poor in England?

Answer: Threshing machines were opposed by the poor in England because they thought that these machines would deprive workmen of their livelihood. They believed that with the help of machines the richer farmers and big landlords would encourage enclosure movement. The commons would be distributed among rich farmers, and poor farmers, labourers, peasants women would have to- struggle for their jobs and they would be jobless.

Question 4: Who was Captain Swing? What did the name symbolise or represent?

Answer: Captain Swing was a mythic name used in threatening letters, written by the workmen against the use of threshing machines by rich farmers. The name symbolised anger or unhappiness of the labourers against the use of threshing machines by rich farmers or big land owners.

Question 5: What was the impact of the westward expansion of settlers in the USA?

Answer: The westward expansion of settlers in the USA led to a complete annihilation of American Indians who were pushed westwards, down the Mississippi river, and then further west beyond that. They fought back, but were defeated; their villages were burnt and cattle destroyed. Also, with the cultivation of land for agricultural purposes, all grass and trees were razed. This led to terrible dust storms and blizzards in the 1930s, causing much death and destruction.

Question 6: What were the advantages and disadvantages of the use of mechanical harvesting machines in the USA?

Answer: The advantages of the use of mechanical harvesting machines in the USA were:

- The price of wheat was high and demand limitless. These new machines allowed farmers to quickly clear tracts, break up the soil, remove the grass and prepare the ground for cultivation.
- The work could be done within a shorter time period and with a lesser number of labourers.
- With power-driven machinery, four men could plough, seed and harvest 2,000 to 4,000 acres of wheat in a season.

However there were some disadvantages for the poorer farmers too:

- They were thrown out of their jobs and they lost their means of livelihood.
- Many of them bought this machine too but it adversely affect them as the machines were expensive and once the demand crossed its limit there was enough surplus grain in the market. Thus, farmers needed to pay back the loan they had taken from banks to buy these machines, and the farmers had no money.

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: The expansion of wheat agriculture in the Great Plains created the Dust Bowl. The American dream of a land of plenty had turned into a nightmare.

We need to learn a lesson from this. Use of land is good but overuse of land is bad. We need to realise that land is a precious natural resource which needs to be preserved and conserved. It serves as warning sign against the exploitative use of land for commercial purposes only leads to degradation and depletion. This gives rise to serious consequences. We must realise that we need to respect the ecological conditions of each region and work towards sustainable development and look after our earth.

Question 8: Write a paragraph on why the British insisted on farmers growing opium in India.

Answer: The British insisted on farmers growing opium in India to balance their trade with China. Tea became extremely popular in England, and by 1830, over 30 million pounds of tea was being imported from China. The British could buy tea from China only by paying in bullion. Hence, there was nothing that England could offer to the Chinese in exchange for tea, except money. Opium was used in Chinese medicine, but was banned for use due to its addictive qualities. The British started an illegal opium trade, and by 1839, there were an estimated 12 million opium smokers in China. All the supplied opium came from India and it formed an easy, cheap way to pay for the tea imported from China.

Question 9: Why were Indian farmers reluctant to grow opium?

Answer: The Indian farmers were reluctant to grow opium due to:

- The crop had to be grown on the best land, on fields that lay near the villages and were well manured.
- This land was usually used for growing pulses. If opium was grown on fertile and well manured land then pulses would have to be grown on less fertile land and yield would not be good in quality as well as quantity.
- The cultivation of opium was difficult and time-consuming as the plants required looking after. As a consequence, the cultivators would not have time to look after their other produce.
- The farmers had to pay the rent for their land to the landlords. This rent was very high. The cultivators owned no land.
- Finally, the price the government paid for the opium produce was very low and would provide the farmers with no profits.