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Semester: Autumn 2026

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ALLAMA IQBAL OPEN UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD

(Department of Agricultural Science)

Course: Soil Conservation & Watershed Management (2511)

Level: MA/MSc/ M.Ed

Semester: Autumn 2026

Assignment No. 1 (Units 1-4)

Total Marks: 100 • Pass Marks: 50

SOLVED ASSIGNMENT GUIDE — For Study & Reference

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Question 1: Watershed — Definition and Components (20 Marks)

Q. 1 Define watershed and explain its components. (20)

Introduction

Every drop of rain that falls on land goes somewhere. It may soak into the soil, evaporate back into the air, be taken up by plants, or run off over the surface until it joins a rill, a stream and eventually a river. The land area that collects rainwater and delivers it to a common point is the basic natural unit in which soil, water and land use are connected, and that unit is called a watershed. The idea is fundamental to this whole course: soil erosion cannot be understood field by field alone, because sediment detached on a hilltop travels down through other

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people's fields before it chokes a stream or silts a reservoir, and water that is wasted or polluted in the upper part of a drainage area is felt by everyone below. This answer defines the watershed carefully, explains the several meanings and scales of the term, and then describes its components — the physical, hydrological, biological and human components — in detail, showing how each component interacts with the others

Definition of a Watershed

A watershed is an area of land, bounded by a topographic divide, from which all surface runoff — and, in the wider sense, the subsurface drainage — flows to a single common outlet, such as a point on a stream, a river, a lake or a reservoir. The same concept is expressed by several near-synonyms: in British and Commonwealth usage it is often called a catchment or catchment area, and in North American usage a drainage basin when the area is large. Strictly, some writers reserve 'watershed' for the boundary line itself — the ridge or divide separating one drainage area from the next — and use 'catchment' for the area inside it, but in soil conservation and watershed management literature, including this course, watershed normally means the area itself. Three elements are essential in every definition: a boundary fixed by topography, a process of drainage by gravity, and a single outlet at which the water of the whole area can be measured and managed. A useful working definition is therefore: a watershed is a hydrologic unit, delineated by its drainage divide, in which rainfall, runoff, soil, vegetation and human activity are linked through the movement of water to a common outlet.

Watersheds exist at every scale and they nest inside one another like boxes within boxes. A few hectares draining to a field channel form a micro-watershed; several micro-watersheds join to

form a sub-watershed draining to a tributary; sub-watersheds combine into the watershed of a stream, and stream watersheds into the basin of a great river such as the Indus. Managers commonly work at the small to medium scale — often a few hundred to a few thousand hectares — because at that scale the landholders can be identified, the problems can be surveyed in the field, and the effects of treatment can actually be seen at the outlet. The nesting property matters practically: treatment planned in a lower unit must respect the water and sediment arriving from the units above it, and success in many small units adds up to improvement in the river basin as a whole.

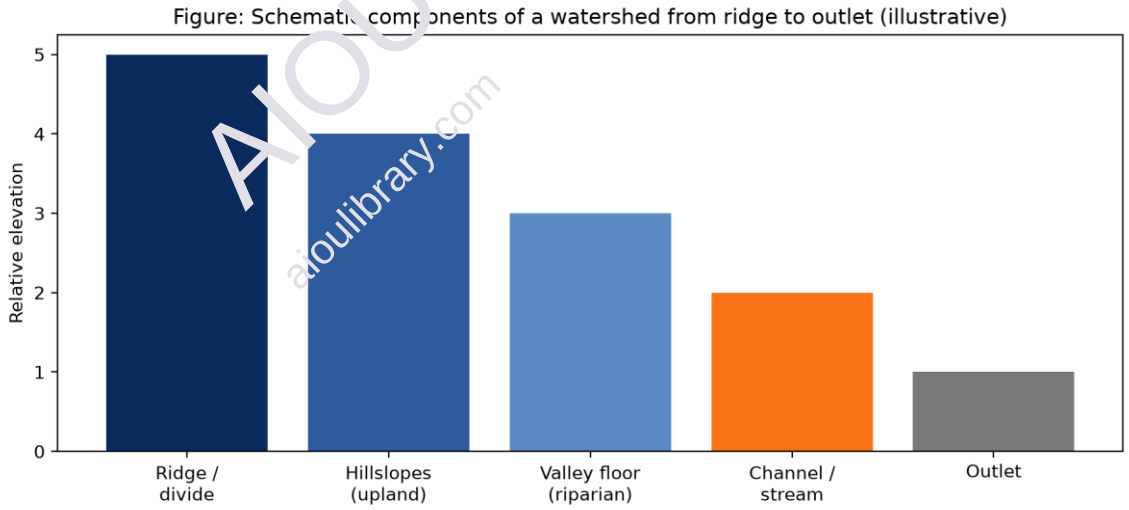

Figure 1: Schematic components of a watershed, from the ridge or divide through the hillslopes and valley floor to the channel and its outlet (illustrative diagram).

Component 1: The Physical or Land Component — Topography, Soils and Geology

The first component is the land surface itself, which gives the watershed its shape and decides where water goes. Its elements include the drainage divide, the high ground of ridges and hilltops that forms the boundary; the slopes, whose steepness, length, shape and aspect

determine how fast runoff moves and how much energy it has to detach and carry soil; the valley bottoms and flood plains, where water slows, sediment is deposited and the best agricultural land usually lies; and the drainage network of rills, gullies, streams and rivers carved into the surface. Beneath the surface lie the soils, varying in depth, texture, structure, organic matter and infiltration capacity from place to place within the watershed, and beneath the soils the geology — the parent rocks and their fractures — which controls groundwater storage, spring lines and the supply of weathered material that becomes soil. A watershed survey therefore begins with maps and field study of exactly these features, because a treatment that suits the flat valley floor, such as intensive cropping, would be destructive on a steep, shallow-soiled hillside, which may be fit only for grass or trees. In short, the physical component supplies the stage on which all the other components act, and the slope and soil map is the first working document of watershed management.

Component 2: The Hydrological or Water Component

Water is the connecting and driving component of the watershed — the agent that moves soil, nutrients and pollutants, and the resource that management most wants to conserve and regulate. The water component is best understood through the hydrological cycle as it operates inside the boundary. Precipitation arrives as rain or, in high mountains, snow, and is partitioned at the surface: part is intercepted by vegetation and evaporates, part infiltrates into the soil and replenishes soil moisture and groundwater, part is stored temporarily in depressions, ponds and reservoirs, and the remainder becomes surface runoff that travels through the drainage network to the outlet as streamflow. Streamflow itself has two parts — the quick storm flow that rises and falls with each rain, and the base flow of groundwater that keeps a stream

running in dry weather. The balance among these pathways decides the watershed's character: a well-vegetated watershed with deep, open soils converts most rain into infiltration and steady base flow, whereas a degraded, bare and compacted watershed converts it into violent, muddy storm flow, flooding below and running dry a few weeks later. Management measures — contour bunds, terraces, check dams, farm ponds — are essentially devices for re-partitioning rainfall in favour of infiltration and storage and against destructive runoff, which is why the water component is measured at the outlet with gauges that record both quantity and sediment load.

Component 3: The Biological Component — Vegetation and Animal Life

The third component is the living cover of the watershed: natural vegetation such as forest, scrub and grassland, cultivated crops and orchards, and the animal life, wild and domestic, that depends on them. Vegetation is not a passive decoration on the land; it is an active working part of the system. Canopies intercept raindrops and break their erosive force, litter protects the soil surface, roots bind the soil and keep its pores open, and transpiration returns water to the air and dries the profile between storms so that it can absorb the next rain. The type, density and condition of the cover therefore have a direct and often dominant effect on runoff and erosion from the watershed. Animal life belongs in the same component: livestock convert grass and crop residues into milk, meat and draught power and return manure to the soil, but uncontrolled grazing and browsing can strip the cover, compact the surface and undo in a few seasons what planting took years to build, while soil organisms, earthworms and termites quietly maintain the pore structure on which infiltration depends. A watershed plan must

consequently treat vegetation and livestock together, providing fodder, fuel and grazing arrangements that make protective cover economically possible for the people who live there.

Component 4: The Human or Socio-Economic Component

Unlike a purely natural system, a managed watershed contains people, and they form its fourth and decisive component. The human component includes the farming families and other landholders whose plots make up most of the area, their land tenure, farm size, cropping patterns, livestock numbers, fuel and fodder needs, labour, skills and income; the villages, roads, markets and institutions — panchayats or local bodies, cooperatives, line departments and user groups — that organise collective action; and the rules, customs and laws that govern common land, grazing and water sharing. This component is decisive because almost every physical treatment depends on human behaviour for its survival: a contour bund is useless if the farmer below ploughs it flat, a protected hillside recovers only if grazing is actually restrained, and a check dam must be maintained by somebody year after year. Experience in Pakistan and elsewhere has repeatedly shown that watershed projects fail not mainly for technical reasons but because the human component was ignored — plans were drawn in offices for people who were never consulted. The components must therefore be studied together: land capability tells what the physical component can bear, hydrology tells what the water will do, vegetation is the main protective tool, and the socio-economic survey tells what the people can and will actually carry out.

Table 1: The components of a watershed and their management significance

Component	Main Elements	Why It Matters for

		Management
Physical / land	Divide, slopes, valley floor, drainage network, soils, geology	Fixes the boundary; slope and soil decide land capability and where each treatment belongs
Hydrological / water	Rainfall, interception, infiltration, soil moisture, groundwater, runoff, streamflow	The connecting agent; management re-partitions rainfall toward infiltration, storage and safe disposal
Biological	Forest, grass, crops, orchards, livestock, soil organisms	Cover protects soil, regulates water and supplies fodder, fuel and income; overgrazing destroys it
Human / socio-economic	Farmers, tenure, farm size, needs, institutions, customs, markets	People build, use and maintain every treatment; participation decides whether works survive

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How the Components Interact

The real meaning of the watershed idea appears when the components are seen interacting. A change in any one component moves all the others: clearing forest on the slopes (biological change) increases storm runoff and sediment (hydrological change), which fills the channel and raises flood levels in the valley (physical change), which damages the crops and homes of downstream families (human effect). Conversely, treating a watershed works through the same chain in reverse: protecting and planting the upper slopes, bunding the cultivated land and stabilising the gullies reduce runoff and sediment at the outlet, recharge wells, extend the grazing and cropping season and raise incomes, which in turn give the community a reason to protect the works. This interdependence is precisely why the watershed, and not the isolated field or village boundary, is chosen as the unit of planning: it is the smallest area within which cause and effect for water and soil can be followed completely from the ridge to the outlet.

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Conclusion

To conclude, a watershed is the land area bounded by a topographic divide that drains all its water to a common outlet, nested within larger drainage basins and divisible into smaller sub-units. Its components are the physical component of topography, soils, geology and drainage network; the hydrological component of rainfall, infiltration, storage and streamflow; the biological component of vegetation and animal life; and the human component of people, their livelihoods and institutions. None of these components can be managed in isolation, because water links them all. Understanding the watershed as one interacting system — ridge to outlet,

soil to society — is the foundation on which every later topic in this course, from erosion control to community participation, is built.

Question 2: Factors Affecting Soil Erosion (20 Marks)

Q. 2 Discuss factors affecting soil erosion. (20)

Introduction

Soil erosion is the detachment and transport of soil particles by water, wind or other agents, and its rate varies enormously from place to place and season to season: a forested hillside may lose almost no soil in a year, while a bare, steep field in the same district may lose the equivalent of a cart-load of soil from every kanal in a single storm. That variation is not accidental. Erosion is the outcome of a set of identifiable factors — the erosive power of the rain and wind, the readiness of the soil to be detached, the slope of the land, the cover that protects the surface, and the way people manage the land. Soil scientists have summarised these factors in models such as the Universal Soil Loss Equation, which expresses soil loss as the product of rainfall erosivity, soil erodibility, slope length and steepness, cover and management, and support practice. This answer discusses each factor in turn, including the climatic, soil, topographic, biological and human factors, and shows how their combination decides whether erosion remains a slow natural process or becomes the accelerated destruction that concerns this course.

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Factor 1: Climate — Rainfall Erosivity and Wind

Climate is the active, attacking factor, supplying the energy that detaches and transports soil. For water erosion the critical property of rainfall is its erosivity — the combined effect of the amount, intensity, drop size and kinetic energy of rain. A gentle rain of the same total depth as a violent storm may cause almost no erosion, because small drops falling slowly are absorbed as they arrive, whereas intense rain delivers large drops at high speed that shatter soil aggregates in the splash effect, seal the surface and generate runoff faster than the soil can absorb it. This is why erosion is concentrated in a few heavy storms: in monsoon climates such as much of Pakistan, a large share of the year's soil loss commonly occurs in a handful of intense events, and why the season when intense rain coincides with bare soil — for example at seedbed preparation — is the season of greatest danger. Temperature and the seasonal pattern of rain also matter indirectly, through their effect on vegetation growth. For wind erosion the climatic factors are wind speed, direction and duration, together with the dryness of the surface: strong, turbulent winds over a dry, bare and loose surface in arid and semi-arid tracts lift and carry the fine, fertile fraction of the soil, while a moist or crusted surface resists. Climate also sets the background through drought, which thins the protective vegetation before the erosive season arrives. Climate cannot be changed by the farmer, but knowing its erosive pattern decides the timing and urgency of every protective measure.

Factor 2: Soil Properties — Erodibility

Soils differ greatly in how easily they erode, a property called erodibility. Texture is central: silty and very fine sandy soils are usually the most erodible, because their particles are large enough

to be detached easily yet small enough to be transported, and they form weak aggregates; heavy clays resist detachment, though once detached they travel far in suspension, while coarse sands resist transport but may infiltrate so freely that plants — and therefore cover — grow poorly. Soil structure and aggregation matter greatly: stable crumbs built by organic matter and calcium resist raindrop impact and keep pores open for infiltration, whereas dispersed, structureless or sodium-affected soils slake and seal under rain, so runoff starts quickly even on modest slopes. Organic matter is the great improver, increasing aggregate stability, infiltration and water storage together, which is why exhausted, low-organic-matter soils erode faster in a vicious circle — erosion removes the organic-rich topsoil, leaving a still more erodible surface behind. Depth and the permeability of the subsoil also count: a deep, permeable profile absorbs and stores a storm, but a shallow soil over a dense clay pan or rock saturates quickly and sheds the rest as runoff. Finally, surface condition — roughness, crusting, stoniness and moisture at the time of the storm — modifies the soil's response, so erodibility is a property not just of the soil type but of the soil as managed.

Factor 3: Topography — Slope Steepness, Length and Shape

Topography governs the energy of runoff once it forms. Slope steepness is the dominant element: as gradient increases, runoff flows faster, its capacity to detach and transport sediment grows rapidly, infiltration opportunity shrinks, and the same storm that causes negligible loss on gentle land cuts rills and gullies on steep land — which is why erosion control becomes progressively more structural and more expensive as slopes steepen, and why very steep land is classed as fit only for permanent cover. Slope length matters because runoff gathers volume and speed as it travels downslope: a long unbroken slope develops

concentrated flow with far greater erosive power than the same area broken into short sections by bunds, terraces or grass strips, a fact that is the working principle behind terracing and contour barriers. Slope shape — convex, straight or concave — decides where erosion and deposition occur: convex upper slopes shed water and lose soil, concave footslopes slow the flow and gain deposited material. Aspect also plays a part, since slopes facing the prevailing rain-bearing winds receive more driving rain, and in high country sunny and shaded aspects differ in moisture and vegetation. Understanding topography tells the conservationist where to expect trouble: field inspection after a storm will find the rills exactly where steepness, length and converging shape have combined to concentrate the water.

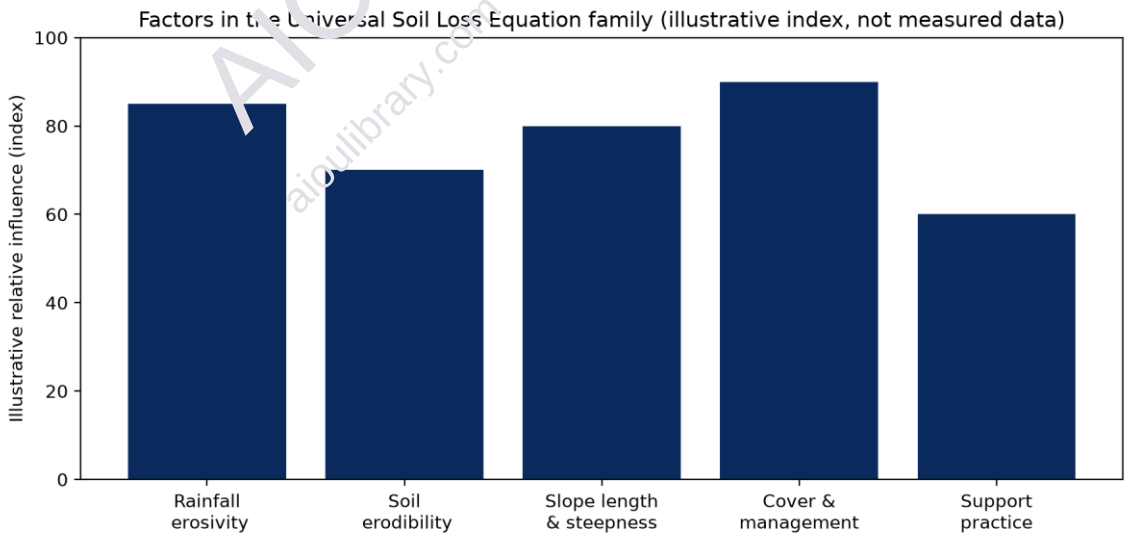

Figure 2: The main factors governing soil loss, following the Universal Soil Loss Equation family (illustrative relative index — a teaching diagram, not measured data).

Factor 4: Vegetation and Surface Cover

Vegetation is the factor that most powerfully moderates all the others, and the one most directly under human control. A good plant cover protects the soil in at least five ways: the

canopy intercepts rainfall and reduces the impact energy reaching the ground; stems and litter slow runoff, giving water time to infiltrate and trapping sediment already in motion; roots bind aggregates and maintain the macropores through which water enters; litter feeds the soil organisms that build stable structure and organic matter; and the roughness of a covered surface reduces wind speed at ground level, preventing wind erosion as well. The protection depends on the amount, type and timing of cover: a close-growing, dense crop such as a good pasture or a lucerne stand protects almost completely, a row crop with wide bare inter-rows protects only partly, and a harvested, burned or overgrazed field protects hardly at all. The most dangerous land-use states are therefore bare fallow, freshly ploughed land awaiting rain, degraded rangeland and recently cleared forest. Residue management belongs with this factor: leaving crop stubble and mulch on the surface, instead of burning or removing it, preserves much of vegetation's protection even between crops. In the soil-loss equation this is the cover-and-management factor, and in practice it is the cheapest and most effective lever available, since improving cover often reduces erosion more than any engineering work at a fraction of the cost.

Factor 5: Human Activity and Land Management

Natural or geological erosion proceeds slowly wherever vegetation is undisturbed, and soils form about as fast as they are lost. The destructive, accelerated erosion that is the subject of this course is overwhelmingly the result of human decisions, and human activity must therefore be listed among the factors in its own right. Cultivation up and down the slope channels runoff into furrows that become rills; over-cultivation of steep and marginal land exposes soil that should never have been ploughed; overgrazing removes the cover and compacts the surface

with hooves; deforestation and the cutting of trees for fuel without replanting strip slopes of their protection; burning of residues and rangeland destroys litter at the start of the erosive season; and construction, mining, road cutting and badly drained road and canal alignments concentrate water and release it onto unprotected land. Population pressure, insecure tenure, fragmented holdings and poverty work behind these decisions, because a farmer who may lose his plot next year will not invest in its protection, and a herder with no other fodder cannot rest an overgrazed hillside. The positive side of the same factor is the support practice — contouring, terracing, bunding, strip cropping and safe water disposal — which appears as a separate reducing factor in erosion models: management can raise the erosion rate a hundredfold or bring it back toward the geological rate, which is the whole hope and purpose of soil conservation.

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Table 2. Factors affecting soil erosion — summary

Factor	Key Elements	Effect on Erosion
Climate	Rainfall amount, intensity and drop size; wind speed; drought	Supplies the erosive energy; a few intense storms cause most loss
Soil erodibility	Texture, structure, organic matter, depth, subsoil permeability	Silty, structureless, low-organic-matter soils detach and seal most readily
Topography	Slope steepness, length,	Steeper and longer slopes give faster, more powerful

	shape and aspect	runoff
Vegetation / cover	Canopy, litter, roots, residues, grazing condition	Good cover can reduce loss to near the natural rate; bare land maximises it
Human management	Tillage direction, marginal cultivation, deforestation, burning, contouring, terracing, bunding	Decides accelerated erosion — or its control; the factor society can change

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How the Factors Combine

No factor acts alone, and practical diagnosis always reads them in combination. A highly erodible silt soil may sit safely for decades under grass on a steep slope, yet erode disastrously within two seasons if it is ploughed for a row crop in a district of intense monsoon rain; conversely, deep, well-aggregated soil under a good cover crop on gentle land may lose very little even under heavy rain. This multiplicative character — recognised in the structure of the Universal Soil Loss Equation, where the factors multiply rather than add — means erosion risk assessment must score each factor for the field in question, and control planning must attack the factor that is cheapest and most effective to change in that place: cover and practice first, then topography through bunds and terraces, while climate and inherent soil properties are accommodated rather than fought. Reading the landscape with these five factors in mind is the essential field skill of the soil conservationist.

Conclusion

In conclusion, soil erosion is governed by the erosivity of the climate, the erodibility of the soil, the steepness, length and shape of the slope, the protection given by vegetation and residues, and the land management applied by people — the five factor groups formalised in erosion-prediction models. Climate, soil and topography set the natural hazard; vegetation and management decide how much of that hazard becomes actual loss. Because the human and cover factors are the ones that can be changed quickly and cheaply, they are the first targets of conservation planning, with structural modification of slope reserved for land where hazard remains high. Understanding these factors, and how they multiply together, allows the student to explain every erosion pattern in the field — and to design control that fits the cause, not merely the symptom.

Question 3: Methods Used for the Control of Water Erosion (20 Marks)

Q. 3 Explain the methods used for the control of water erosion. (20)

Introduction

Water erosion proceeds in stages — splash, sheet, rill, gully and stream-bank erosion — and control succeeds by interrupting the process as early as possible: keep the raindrop from striking bare soil, keep the rainfall where it falls so that runoff does not form, slow any runoff that does form so that it drops its load, and dispose of the unavoidable surplus water safely so that it cannot concentrate and cut. All the recognised methods of controlling water erosion are

applications of these four principles, and they are conventionally grouped into agronomic or cultural methods, which work through vegetation and soil management; mechanical or structural methods, which reshape or protect the land surface with earthworks; and supporting land-use and management methods, which put each piece of land to a use its slope and soil can sustain. This answer explains the main methods under these heads, indicating where each is appropriate, and stresses that in practice the methods are combined in a planned sequence from ridge to valley rather than used singly

Agronomic and Cultural Methods

The first and cheapest line of defence is to manage crops and soil so that the surface is covered and receptive to rain. Maintaining vegetative cover — through close-growing crops, cover crops in orchards and fallows, grass leys in rotation and the retention of crop residues as mulch — protects the soil from raindrop impact, slows runoff and keeps infiltration high. Contour cultivation, the subject of the next question, performs every operation on the level across the slope so that each furrow acts as a small storage dam instead of a drainage channel. Strip cropping alternates contour strips of erosion-resisting close crops such as grasses and legumes with strips of erosion-permitting row crops, so that soil washed from a cultivated strip is trapped by the protective strip below. Crop rotation with a legume or grass phase rebuilds the organic matter and aggregate stability that make soil resist detachment, while conservation tillage — minimum or zero tillage with residues left on the surface — avoids the pulverised, bare seedbed in which sheet erosion flourishes. Correct timing is part of the method: avoiding a bare, freshly tilled surface during the season of most intense rain, and getting a quick cover established before it, can be worth as much as any structure. These cultural methods have the

great advantage that farmers can adopt them with ordinary equipment and that they improve fertility and yield at the same time as they control erosion; their limit is that on steep slopes or under very intense rain, culture alone cannot hold the water, and mechanical support becomes necessary.

Mechanical Methods: Contour Bunds, Terraces and Trenches

Mechanical methods modify the slope itself so that runoff is intercepted, stored or safely conducted away. Contour bunds are small earthen ridges built exactly on the level across cultivated slopes of gentle to moderate gradient in lower-rainfall areas; they divide a long slope into short sections, pond the runoff behind them until it soaks in, and gradually level the field between them. On steeper cultivated land, or in higher rainfall, bench terraces are constructed — the slope is cut into a series of level steps separated by protected risers — which almost eliminate runoff erosion on the treated land and convert precarious hillsides into stable, intensively workable plots, at the price of considerable labour and careful maintenance of the risers and outlets. Where rainfall is heavier and surplus water cannot all be absorbed, graded bunds and graded terraces carry the excess at a safe, non-erosive gradient to a protected outlet instead of ponding it. Diversion drains and cutoff drains above cultivated land or around gully heads intercept runoff arriving from upslope and lead it to a safe disposal point before it can do damage, while contour trenches and staggered pits on non-arable slopes trap runoff, store moisture for tree and grass establishment, and starve the gullies below of the water that was cutting them. The common logic of all these works is slope-length reduction and runoff control; their common requirements are accurate levelling on the contour or the designed grade, safe outlets designed before the works themselves, and maintenance after every season, because a

single breach in a bund or terrace concentrates the stored water of a whole slope into one destructive stream.

Safe Disposal: Grassed Waterways and Drainage-Line Treatment

Even the best field system must dispose of surplus storm water, and if that water is allowed to find its own way it will cut gullies. Grassed waterways are therefore an essential method in their own right: shallow, wide channels, shaped in natural drainage lines, kept under a dense sod of grass and given adequate capacity, which conduct runoff at speeds the grass can withstand and deliver it safely to the stream. Within the drainage lines themselves, gully control combines temporary and permanent structures with vegetation. Small check dams of brushwood, loose rock, gabion or masonry built across the gully bed reduce its gradient in steps, trap sediment and create the moist, silted conditions in which grass and trees can establish; the gully banks are sloped back where necessary, its head is protected by a diversion or a drop structure so that water no longer plunges over it, and the reclaimed bed is planted and fenced against grazing until cover is secure. Ravine and stream-bank erosion are treated with spurs, revetments, retaining structures and dense bank vegetation that deflect or withstand the current. The governing principle is to treat the drainage line as part of the farm's water system, engineered from the gully head to the main stream, not as waste land to be ignored until it has eaten the fields.

Land-Use Methods: Putting Each Slope to a Sustainable Use

Some land should not be in arable use at all, and for such land the correct erosion-control method is a change of use decided by land capability. Steep, shallow or highly erodible slopes

are retired from cultivation to permanent grass or tree cover — pasture, woodlot, orchard on terraces where suitable, or protective forest — managed under controlled grazing and cutting so that cover is never destroyed. Agroforestry combinations, treated fully in Question 5, place trees and shrubs in contour rows, on bunds, boundaries and degraded patches within farms, uniting production with protection. Afforestation and grassland development of catchments above reservoirs, farm ponds and other storages protect those investments from siltation. Land-use control also includes the protection of existing good cover by law, custom and community agreement: preventing cultivation of stream banks and gully margins, controlling burning, and reserving vegetation strips along waterways. These methods recognise that erosion control is finally a matter of matching the intensity of use to the capacity of the land — the principle formalised in land capability classification — and that engineering applied to land that is fundamentally misused will always be an expensive losing battle.

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Table 3: Main methods of water-erosion control and where each applies

Method Group	Examples	Best Suited To
Agronomic / cultural	Cover crops, mulch, residue retention, rotations, conservation tillage, strip cropping, contour cultivation	All cultivated land; the first and cheapest defence, especially on gentle to moderate slopes
Mechanical / structural	Contour bunds, bench terraces, graded terraces, diversion drains, contour	Sloping cultivated land where culture alone cannot hold storm runoff

	trenches	
Safe disposal	Grassed waterways, check dams, gully plugging, drop structures, bank protection	Drainage lines, gullies and stream banks; everywhere surplus water must be conducted safely
Land-use change	Retiring steep land to grass/trees, agroforestry, catchment protection, bank reserves	Land whose capability does not permit arable use; catchments of reservoirs and ponds

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Planning the Combination: Ridge to Valley

In real watersheds the methods are never applied singly, and their planned combination follows the natural order of the land: ridge-to-valley treatment. Work starts at the top, protecting the divide and upper slopes with trees, contour trenches and controlled grazing, so that less water and sediment arrive below; proceeds through the cultivated slopes with contour farming, bunds, terraces and strip cropping; stabilises the drainage lines with waterways and check dams; and finishes by protecting the valley floor and stream banks. Treatment is also sequenced in time — drainage and safe outlets are designed first, upstream works precede downstream ones where a structure's safety depends on reduced inflow, and vegetation is established together with, not after, the earthworks that need its protection. Finally, the plan includes organisation and maintenance: local labour and community labour-sharing for

construction, clear responsibility for each structure, and post-monsoon inspection and repair as a fixed routine. A technically perfect terrace abandoned after two seasons is a worse investment than a simpler bund that the village maintains every year.

Conclusion

To conclude, water erosion is controlled by preventing detachment with vegetative cover, absorbing rainfall through good soil structure and infiltration, breaking slope length and storing runoff with contour bunds, terraces and trenches, disposing of surplus water safely through grassed waterways and treated drainage lines with check dams, and matching land use to land capability by retiring land that cannot bear cultivation. Cultural methods come first because they are cheap and fertility-building; mechanical methods support them where slope and rainfall demand it; and the whole combination is planned ridge to valley within the watershed, with maintenance built into the programme. Control is thus not a single device but a system — which is why erosion, itself a system of interacting factors, can only be defeated by one.

Question 4: Importance of Contour Farming (20 Marks)

Q. 4 Describe the importance of contour farming. (20)

Introduction

Of all the practices in soil and water conservation, contour farming is the simplest to understand, the cheapest to apply and the most widely recommended first step on sloping cultivated land. Contour farming means performing every field operation — ploughing, sowing, planting, hoeing and harvesting — along lines of equal elevation, that is, across the slope rather

than up and down it. A contour line joins points of the same height, so a furrow ploughed along it cannot drain: instead of acting as a small channel that gathers water and hurries it downhill, each ridge and furrow becomes a tiny level dam that holds the rain where it falls. Although the idea is old — traditional farmers in many hill regions discovered it independently — it became the foundation practice of modern soil conservation in the twentieth century, and its importance extends far beyond erosion control to water conservation, yield stability, fuel and labour saving, and the effectiveness of every other conservation work. This answer explains the principle, then discusses the importance of contour farming under several heads, its limitations and the conditions it requires.

The Principle: Turning Channels into Storage

The importance of contour farming rests on a single physical contrast. When operations run up and down the slope, every furrow is a ready-made miniature channel aligned with the steepest gradient; runoff collects in it, accelerates, attains erosive velocity within a short distance and carries detached soil out of the field, joining with neighbouring furrows to cut rills that deepen season by season. When the same operations run on the contour, the geometry reverses: the furrows lie level, transverse to the flow, so moving water is repeatedly checked, ponded in the furrow storage and given time to infiltrate. Velocity, the chief determinant of erosive power, collapses; sediment in suspension settles in the furrow instead of leaving the field; and slope length, a major erosion factor, is in effect broken at every row. Contour farming therefore attacks three erosion factors at once — runoff velocity, effective slope length and detachment opportunity — without any material, any structure or any land taken out of production. That combination of effectiveness and zero structural cost is what makes the practice so important,

and why extension workers are taught to secure contour cultivation before recommending anything more expensive.

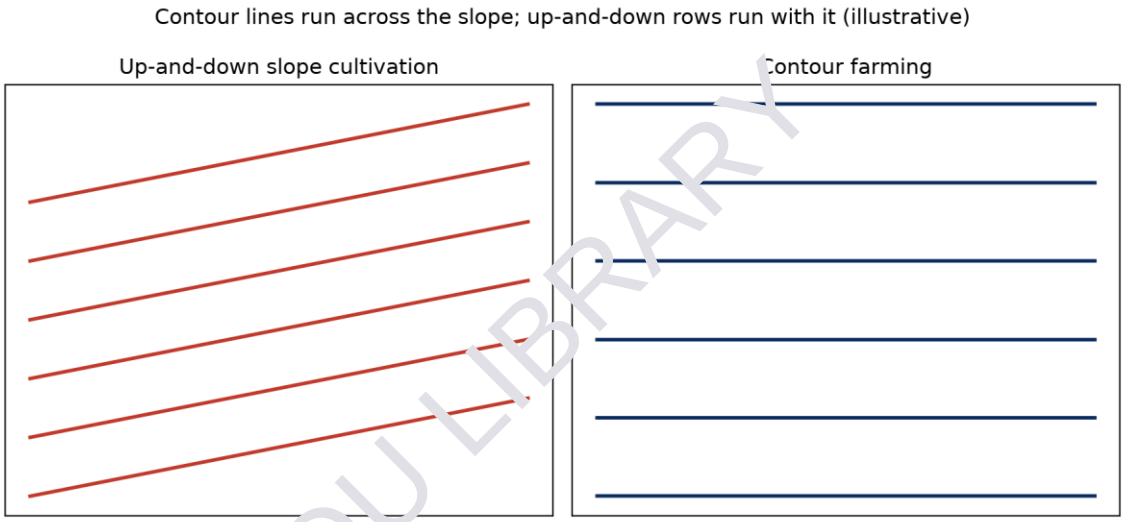

Figure 3: Up-and-down cultivation (left) channels runoff downhill, while contour farming (right) lays every row level across the slope so that furrows store water (illustrative diagram).

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Importance for Soil Conservation

The most direct importance of contour farming is the reduction of soil loss. By ponding runoff and trapping sediment in the furrows, contour cultivation on gentle and moderate slopes commonly reduces erosion to a small fraction of the loss under up-and-down cultivation, other things being equal, and it prevents the initiation of rills, which are the gateway to gully erosion and much harder to cure than sheet erosion is to prevent. It protects fertility together with soil, because the material retained is the fine, organic-rich surface fraction that carries most of the field's nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and biological activity; a farmer practising contour farming keeps the benefit of manure and fertiliser he has applied instead of watching the first heavy storm deliver it to the stream. Contour working also preserves the field itself as an asset:

levels remain more uniform, gully heads are not started within the plot, and the land does not develop the scalloped, dissected surface that makes mechanised operations impossible. In the language of the soil-loss factors, contouring is the classic support practice — the factor that multiplies down the losses predicted from climate, soil, slope and cropping — and it does so from the very first season, with no waiting period for structures to settle or trees to grow.

Importance for Water Conservation and Crop Yields

In dryland and rainfed agriculture — which covers most of Pakistan's cultivated area outside the canal commands — water, not soil alone, is the limiting resource, and contour farming is as much a water-harvesting practice as an erosion practice. Rain that would have run off within minutes is held in the furrows and in the loosened surface until it enters the soil, increasing the moisture stored in the profile for the crop's later use, deepening percolation toward groundwater, and evening out the crop's water supply through dry spells between storms. The results appear as more uniform germination, less moisture stress at critical growth stages, reduced risk of complete crop failure in a poor year, and more stable yields across seasons; they also appear downslope and downstream, because a landscape of contour-worked fields generates less flash runoff, fewer and smaller floods in local streams, and less sediment reaching tanks, ponds and canals. For irrigated land the practice has a parallel value: irrigation water applied on the contour is distributed evenly instead of racing to the bottom of the field, improving application efficiency and preventing the irrigation-induced erosion that furrow water causes on slopes. Contour farming thus converts an erosive liability — storm energy — into the farm's scarcest asset, stored soil moisture.

Economic and Practical Importance

Contour farming's importance is also economic and practical, and these qualities explain its central place in extension programmes. It requires no purchased material, no masonry and no land sacrifice: the same field, the same implements and the same labour accomplish it — in fact less labour in the long run, because draught animals and tractors work across a moderate slope at a steadier load than when struggling directly up it, saving fuel and time and reducing implement wear and the risk of overturning on steeper ground. It is immediately reversible and adjustable, carries no maintenance liability comparable to a breached bund, and can be adopted field by field by a single farmer without waiting for a whole-village programme, although its benefits grow when whole slopes are treated. It is also the necessary foundation for other works: bunds, terraces, strip cropping and grass strips are all laid out on the contour, and their performance assumes contour working between them; conservation structures inserted into a farm still cultivated up and down will be undermined by the concentrated furrow flow delivered to them. Finally, contour farming has teaching value: laying out a contour line with a simple A-frame or hose level is often a village's first practical lesson in reading slope and water, from which more advanced conservation understanding naturally grows.

Limitations and Conditions for Success

Honest description requires the limits to be stated. Contour farming alone is adequate chiefly on gentle to moderate slopes and in low to moderate rainfall; on steep land, or where storms are intense, furrow storage is overtopped, and a single low point can breach so that the stored water of a whole slope escapes through one spill, causing worse local damage than uniform

flow would have done — such land needs contour bunds, terraces or a change of use, with contour cultivation as a supporting practice only. Lines must be laid out accurately on the true contour with simple levelling instruments; merely 'roughly across the slope' working creates graded furrows that drain to a low end and concentrate water there, repeating the up-and-down problem at one point. Very short, irregular slopes and highly fragmented holdings complicate layout and may force compromises such as key-line adjustments and adjusted rows between guide lines. Point rows and short rows inevitably appear where contours converge, wasting a little working convenience. None of these limitations diminishes the practice's importance; they define its place — the universal first measure on cultivated slopes, sufficient alone under mild conditions, and the indispensable partner of structural measures under severe ones.

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Table 4: Importance of contour farming at a glance

Aspect	Contribution of Contour Farming
Soil	Ponds runoff, traps sediment, retains topsoil, manure and fertiliser; prevents rill initiation
Water	Increases infiltration and soil-moisture storage; recharges groundwater; reduces flash floods and siltation below
Yield	More uniform germination and moisture supply; more stable yields in dry years; better

	irrigation distribution
Economics	No material or land cost; steadier draught, lower fuel and wear; adoptable by one farmer at once
System role	Foundation and support practice for bunds, terraces, strips and waterways, all of which are laid on the contour
Limits	Insufficient alone on steep slopes or in intense rainfall; needs accurate layout and supporting structures there

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Conclusion

In conclusion, contour farming is important because it reverses the hydrology of a sloping field at zero structural cost: furrows that would otherwise be channels for erosive runoff become level storage that holds rain for infiltration, traps the fertile surface soil, steadies yields in dry years, reduces floods and siltation below, and lowers the energy and cost of field work. It is the first practice to teach, the first to adopt, and the foundation under every other conservation structure, though on steep land and under intense rain it must be supported by bunds, terraces or a change of land use. A cultivated landscape worked on the contour is a landscape that keeps its soil and its water — and that is the central object of this course.

Question 5: Role of Afforestation in Watershed Protection (20 Marks)

Q. 5 Explain the role of afforestation in watershed protection. (20)

Introduction

Afforestation is the establishment of forest on land that was not recently forest — the planting and raising of trees on bare, degraded or treeless areas — together, in watershed practice, with the protection and regeneration of existing natural vegetation. Watershed protection is the safeguarding of a drainage area so that it yields clean water in a regulated flow, keeps its soil in place and supports the people who live in it, and in this work trees occupy a special position. The upper parts of watersheds — steep slopes, ridge tops and stream headwaters — are exactly the places where farming is least suitable and where erosion, once started, is most damaging to everything below, and they are exactly the places where forest performs best. This answer explains the roles afforestation plays in protecting a watershed: intercepting rain and protecting soil, regulating runoff and streamflow, stabilising slopes, gullies and stream banks, sheltering and improving the land below, supplying the products that make protection economically possible, and supporting the wider environment — together with the cautions that species choice and management decide whether these benefits are actually obtained.

Role 1: Protecting the Soil from Erosion

The first role of afforestation is direct physical protection of the soil in the most vulnerable parts of the watershed. A tree canopy intercepts rainfall high above the ground; much water reaches the soil gently, by dripping from leaves at low energy or running down stems, instead of striking as high-velocity drops, so splash detachment is greatly reduced. The litter layer that

accumulates under trees works as a permanent mulch, absorbing the impact of what drops do fall through, keeping the surface open and protecting soil aggregates. Roots bind the profile in a reinforcing network, raising its resistance to both surface wash and shallow slipping, and root channels, together with the rich soil fauna that forest litter feeds, maintain high infiltration so that little runoff forms at all. The combined effect, confirmed by plot and catchment studies in many countries, is that well-stocked forest loses soil at rates far below those of cultivated or degraded land on comparable slopes — near the slow geological rate — which is why soil conservation strategy always begins by ensuring that the steepest and most erodible ground in the watershed carries permanent tree cover. Protecting these source areas matters out of all proportion to their size, because sediment is generated disproportionately on them and then travels through the whole system below.

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Role 2: Regulating Runoff, Streamflow and Floods

Afforestation's second role is hydrological regulation: a forested watershed behaves like a sponge with a slow release, while a deforested one behaves like a sloping roof. Interception, high infiltration and deep storage in forest soils convert storm rainfall into soil moisture and groundwater rather than immediate surface runoff, so peak flows after storms are lowered and delayed, flood damage in the valley is reduced, and the stored water reappears as sustained base flow that keeps springs and streams running further into the dry season. Reduced sediment is itself a water benefit: streams run clearer, irrigation channels and farm ponds silt more slowly, and storage reservoirs — whose dead storage is designed against an assumed sediment rate that deforestation routinely exceeds — keep their useful life. The role must be stated accurately: forests regulate and moderate flow rather than creating water, and a large

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plantation of fast-growing, high-water-use species can in dry catchments reduce total yield even while improving its timing; the protective gain is in the distribution and cleanliness of flow and in soil stability, and species and density must be chosen with the local water balance in mind. For the typical degraded uplands with which watershed programmes in Pakistan deal — overgrazed, shrub-stripped hills that flash-flood in the monsoon and run dry by winter — restoring tree and grass cover restores precisely this sponge function, and its recovery can be watched at the watershed outlet gauge.

Role 3: Stabilising Slopes, Gullies and Stream Banks

Trees are also living engineering structures. On unstable slopes, deep and spreading root systems increase the shear strength of the soil mass and can prevent or arrest shallow landslides and slope slips, while canopy and litter remove the surface erosion that undercuts slope toes. In gully systems, planting is the permanent half of control: check dams and diversion drains stop the active cutting, but it is the trees, shrubs and grasses planted on gully beds, banks and heads that consolidate the trapped sediment, shade out erosion-prone bare surfaces and convert a growing scar into a stable, productive strip. Along stream banks, riparian tree belts cushion the current, bind bank material against undercutting, trap sediment from both the stream and the adjoining fields, and shade the water. Road and canal embankments, spoil heaps and other disturbed ground in the watershed are similarly stabilised by planted cover far more cheaply than by masonry over large areas. The engineering comparison favours vegetation wherever forces are moderate and time is available: structures resist water by strength, plants resist it by flexibility, self-repair and growth — a tree protection system, unlike a wall, becomes stronger every year it survives.

Role 4: Supporting Production and Livelihoods in the Watershed

Protection that produces nothing will rarely survive, and afforestation's fourth role is to make watershed protection pay the people who must maintain it. Watershed plantations yield fuelwood, small timber, poles, fodder from loppings and leaf litter, fruit, honey and other products, according to the species planted — supplies whose scarcity in the village is itself a main cause of watershed degradation, because families who can obtain no fuel elsewhere will cut the protective cover, and herders with no fodder bank will graze the regenerating slope. Properly designed, the plantation therefore relieves the pressure it suffers from: fodder trees and woodlots on the less critical sites supply the village, while the strictly protective belts on the steepest ground are left undisturbed. Trees planted in and around farms — on boundaries, bunds, waterways and in agroforestry mixtures — shelter crops and livestock from wind, moderate temperature extremes, recycle nutrients from deep soil layers through litter, and diversify farm income, spreading risk across products that ripen in different seasons and years. Afforestation also creates employment in nursery raising, planting, tending and protection, frequently the largest single wage component of a watershed programme's benefit to the poorest households.

Role 5: Environmental Services — Climate, Biodiversity and Water Quality

Beyond the watershed boundary, afforestation contributes environmental services that justify public investment in it. Growing forests store carbon in biomass and soil, moderating climate change, and they moderate local climate directly through shade, humidity and wind reduction. Native mixed plantings restore habitat and corridors for birds, pollinators and other wildlife

that a bare catchment cannot support, and they do so in the landscape positions — headwaters and riparian strips — where habitat value is highest. Tree and litter cover filters nutrients and agrochemical residues from runoff before it reaches streams, protecting drinking-water quality, and clear, cool, shaded streams support aquatic life that turbid floodwater destroys. These services are increasingly recognised in policy — in payments for watershed services from downstream users such as cities, hydropower and irrigation systems to upstream communities who keep the cover — which can give upland villages a continuing income reason to maintain protection long after the planting project ends.

Table 5: Roles of afforestation in watershed protection

Role	Mechanism	Main Benefit
Soil protection	Canopy interception, litter mulch, root binding, high infiltration	Soil loss on steep source areas falls toward the natural rate
Flow regulation	Storage in canopy, litter and soil; slow release as base flow	Lower flood peaks, longer dry-season flow, less siltation of tanks and reservoirs
Stabilisation	Root reinforcement; planting of gullies, banks and embankments	Slopes, gully systems and stream banks become self-repairing and stable
Livelihood support	Fuel, fodder, timber, fruit	Removes the fuel/fodder

	and employment from plantations	pressure that destroys cover; protection pays its protectors
Environmental services	Carbon storage, habitat, filtration, shade	Climate moderation, biodiversity and cleaner water beyond the watershed

Conditions and Cautions: Making Afforestation Succeed

These roles are potential, not automatic, and watershed history is full of plantations that existed on paper registers while the hills stayed bare. Success requires the right species in the right place — matched to altitude, rainfall, soil and the protection objective, favouring deep-rooted, soil-binding, preferably multipurpose and locally adapted species, and avoiding thirsty monocultures where water yield matters or invasive species that displace the ground cover on which infiltration depends. It requires protection after planting more than planting itself: grazing control, fire protection and community agreement, arranged before the first pit is dug, with benefit-sharing clear enough that villagers guard the plantation as their own asset. It requires treating afforestation as one component of the watershed plan alongside grass development, structural works and land-use agreement — trees on the ridge, trenches and grass on the slopes, bunds on the fields, check dams in the gullies — rather than as a substitute for all the rest. And it requires patience and honest measurement: survival counts in the third year, not seedlings distributed in the first, are the figure that decides whether protection exists.

Conclusion

In conclusion, afforestation protects a watershed by armouring its most vulnerable soil with canopy, litter and roots; by restoring the sponge function that turns violent, muddy storm flow into regulated, clearer and longer-lasting streamflow; by stabilising slopes, gullies and banks as living, self-strengthening engineering; by supplying the fuel, fodder, timber and income that remove the causes of degradation; and by providing carbon, habitat and water-quality services beyond the watershed itself. Provided the species are suited to the site and the planting is genuinely protected by the community that benefits from it, no other single measure does so much for the long-term security of the watershed — which is why every sound watershed plan reserves its headwaters and steep lands, first of all, for trees.

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