‘Green Bonus’ Demand of Himalayan States

What is the issue?

- Recently, 11 Himalayan States of India met in Dehradun, Uttarakhand, demanding a “green bonus”, or a payment for environmental services they provide to the nation.
- This has brought to the surface the long-standing problem of integration of the mountain regions with the mainstream India.

What was the demand?

- The Himalayan states stretch from J&K (which was still a State during the meet) to Tripura.
- The ruling government had earlier committed a financial package to address the special developmental needs of the Himalayan States.
- The Himalayan States argued that they paid a developmental price for maintaining forests, rivers, and other environmental goods that help the rest of the country.
- The States, thus, asked for –

i. help to develop hydropower resources
ii. subsidies for their environmental protection measures which deny them normal ‘development models’
iii. recognition of their efforts to meet human development parameters

What is the larger issue in mountainous regions?

- Both the abrogation of special status to J&K, the following clampdown on civilian life, and the current demand of the Himalayan States highlight a key issue.
- It is the inability of the country to come to terms with the specificity of the Himalayan region, whether political, social, or ecological-economic.
- Various researches have shown how structurally different are Himalayan regions from the Indian mainstream in terms of their social and economic structure.
- Yet, this research has not found place in the political understanding, whether at the level of policy formulation or popular conceptions.

Is this specific to India?

- The problem of integrating the northern mountains to the national mainstream is not specific to India.
- It covers the entire stretch of mountains from Balochistan to Arunachal Pradesh.
- Each of the regions situated here has had problems when it comes to integrating the hilly regions with the nation states that are primarily anchored in the plains.
- Furthermore, this 'integration problem' is not just a South Asian phenomenon.
- China is struggling to integrate its mountain people and their homelands with its national mainstream.
- Myanmar and Thailand, besides others, are also facing similar issues.

Is this a legacy of the colonial era?

- The colonial force was anchored in the society and political-economy of the plains.
- The colonial times were perhaps the first time the nation state of the plains was able to reach so deep into the Himalayas.
- They controlled the people of the mountains in a way which was historically unprecedented.
- By the end of the 19th century, the mountains were far from the desires of keeping the mountains politically quiet and socially peaceful.
- The postcolonial nation states of Asia (be it India, Pakistan, China or Myanmar) have not been able to change this difficult relation with their mountain regions.
- This is because the independent nation states largely adopted the same approach in the high Himalayas as that of their colonial predecessors.

What are the consequences of this?

- The policies were framed on the social, political and economic specificities of the communities based in the riverine plains, different from that of the mountains.
- It is the village or town of the Ganga plains, or along the Narmada or Krishna and Cauvery rivers that defined what it means to be 'Indian'.
- The specificities of the mountain regions found no references in- -
    i. the norms of what an 'Indian village' is
    ii. how the society is structured
    iii. how the economy is designed
    iv. what ways does political life work

- In the mainstream thoughts, the mountain regions are at best imagined as calm ‘hill stations’ peopled by ‘noble savages’.
- Otherwise, they are seen as wild regions inhabited by irrational bloodthirsty tribesmen.
- This is not only a social-psychological feature but has direct practical consequences.
- Policies and programmes are devised with the ‘national norm’ in mind, which have unintended consequences on the hilly regions.

What is the present scenario in India in this regard?

- In India, there has been a massive expansion of the national economy over the past three decades.
- This, now, allows for commodification of mountain resources (forests, water, labour, tourism, horticulture, even agriculture) in unprecedented ways.
- It has led to changes in the class structure and the emergence of a new middle class.
- The national aspirations now find the geographical specificity of the Himalayas a hindrance and the main commodity of exchanges.
- Thus, the secessionist movements in J&K and Nagaland on the one hand and active integrationist movements in H.P., Arunachal Pardesh and Manipur on the other, expresses the same problem.

Source: The Hindu

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