Saving the Scavengers

Why in news?

The Tamil Nadu government has recently formed a committee to set up an institutional framework for the effective conservation of vultures.

What is the basis for this committee?

- Vultures almost went extinct in the country at the beginning of the 21st century.
- There was a decline of 96% of India's vulture population between 1993 and 2003.
- To deal with this, the Central government has put into place two action plans to protect the species at the national level.
- The first in 2006 and the second, ongoing plan for 2020-2025.
- One of the important action points in this nationwide plan is the formation of State-level committees to save vultures.
- According to this plan, the Tamil Nadu Government formed a State-level Committee to set up an institutional framework for the effective conservation of vultures.

What is the status of vulture in India?

- Nine species of vultures are recorded from India and out of these, five belong to the genus Gyps and the rest four are monotypic.

Gyps

- The Oriental White-backed Vulture (OWBV) Gyps bengalensis,
- The Long-billed Vulture (LBV) G.indicus,
- Slender-billed Vulture (SBV) G. tenuirostris,
- The Himalayan Vulture (HV) Gyps himalayensis and
- The Eurasian Griffon (EG) Gyps fulvus.

Monotypic

- The Red-headed Vulture (RHV) Sarcogyps calvus,
- Egyptian Vulture (EV) Neophron percnopterus,
- Bearded Vulture (BV) Gypaetus barbatus and
- Cinereous Vulture (CV) Aegypius calvus

What role do vultures play in the local ecosystem?

- Vultures feed on carrion, the remains of dead animals, and act as the 'rubbish collectors' of the natural world offering a valuable socioeconomic service to local communities.

- Feeding on animal remains, vultures likely help eliminating potentially harmful bacteria from the environment, potentially limiting the spread of diseases such as anthrax and rabies.
- Vultures are also having considerable cultural and religious significance in India where humans have laid out their dead to be consumed by scavengers.
- Of these, the best known and documented are the Parsees.

What are the threats for vultures in India?

- **Diclofenac** – Vulture's tolerance for harmful substances does not extend to man-made drugs.
- The use of some Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs) to treat cattle, such as diclofenac, nimesulide, ketoprofen among others, has led to the crash in vulture populations across India.
- Diclofenac was banned for veterinary use in India and Nepal in 2006 and in Bangladesh in 2010.
- **Slow breeding** - Vultures are slow breeding birds, laying only one egg a year and having a longer immaturity duration after fledging.
- **Europe's usage** – Diclofenac is permitted to use in veterinary treatment in Europe and it could jeopardise the efforts taken in South Asia to conserve these species.
- Continued usage of diclofenac in other parts of the world pose a threat to species found there and the future conservation of vultures in the Indian Subcontinent.

What is the way ahead?

- With more robust policies and enforcement of rules that are immediate, we can safeguard the remnant vulture populations in the country.
- With better practices, collective motive to change human behaviour and the usage of safe drugs for cattle treatment, we can save vultures from extinction.

References

1. The Hindu | Saving the vultures of Tamil Nadu
2. Down to Earth | Endangered vulture population still under threat
3. Vulture Conservation Foundation | Get to know about vulture species

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