The tragedy of conservation - Indigenous People and Protected Sites

What is the issue?

Isolating the indigenous people from their natural habitats in the Western Ghats to protect biodiversity is unproductive.

What are the conservation efforts?

- In 2012, 39 areas covering national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and reserved forests in the Western Ghats were declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.
    - Out of these, ten sites are in Karnataka.
- These sites are crucial for their biodiversity value.
- Earlier measures include the Forest Rights Act of 2006 in India and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in 2007 by the United Nations.

Who falls under these?

- The indigenous people of the Western Ghats, including the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, constitute 44.2% of the tribal population of 6.95% of Karnataka.
- The Western Ghats are also home to a sizeable population of communities like Gowlis, Kunbis, Halakki Vakkala, Kare Vakkala, Kunbi, and Kulvadi Marathi.
    - In the context of the Forest Rights Act, they are treated as ‘other traditional forest dwellers.’
    - This is because they have been living there for at least three generations prior to December 13, 2005 [as specified in FRA].

Why are indigenous people concerned?

- Indigenous people depend on the forest or forest land for their livelihood needs.
- Ever since the Ministry of Environment and Forests began identifying the potential heritage sites, there has been unrest among the indigenous people.
- When the exercise began, they feared for their existence in lands that they

had inhabited for decades.
- The restrictions on movement following the declaration of these territories as ecologically sensitive areas aggrieved them further.

How is forest rights implementation in Karnataka?

- Karnataka has a dismal record in implementing the Forest Rights Act compared to other States.
- According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, as of April 30, 2018, the State had recognised only 5.7% of the total claims made.
- Notably, 70% of the claims were disposed off.
- There was clear inconsistency in the government's approach in settling the claims made by the tribals versus the claims made by other traditional forest dwellers.
- Tribal applications constituted 17.5% of the claims and nearly all of them were settled.
- Other claims were rejected as they were not backed by valid evidence.
- This means that claims made by other traditional forest dwellers were treated as inconsequential.

What is the overall scenario?

- The Forest Rights Act is not about the indiscriminate distribution of forest land to anyone applying for it.
- As per the law, only those lands are recognised where people prove their occupation not later than December 13, 2005.
- Moreover, the combined stretch of land claimed by them is less.
    - It is comparatively smaller by any account than what has been taken away for building dams, mining, laying railway lines and roads, power plants, etc.
- The government records also reveal that 43 lakh hectares of forestland were encroached both legally and illegally until 1980 when the Forest Conservation Act came into force.
- Sadly, there is no significant conservation even after this landmark law.

Why is the approach flawed?

- The conservationists think that resources have to be controlled and managed.
- However, this theory is fast proving unproductive.
- Assuming that denying tribals or other traditional forest dwellers their forest rights would serve the purpose of conservation is wrong.
- The Global Environment Outlook Report 5 mentions that there is decreased

biodiversity across the globe even as ‘protected areas’ have been expanding.

What is the way forward?

- Significantly, people living in nature’s surroundings are integral to conservation.
- They relate with the environment in a more integrated and spiritual way.
- Preserving biodiversity thus requires the legal empowerment of the people living in those areas.
- Recognition of the rights of the people who depend on the forests is important.
- The Forest Rights Act is an ideal instrument to push forward this objective.
- To realise it on the ground, the government must make an effort to build trust between its agencies in the area and the people who depend on these forests.

Source: The Hindu

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