

## **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**

