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Aborigines and Climate Change



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This article is based on "**Adi Darshan': The only way to save the planet**" which was published in The Indian Express on 21/01/2020. It talks about the impact of climate change on aborigines and them being a solution to it.

Indigenous people/ Aborigines/ Tribals are on the frontline of climate change, as they live in parts of the world where its impacts are greatest, impacting livelihoods, culture and lives. However, indigenous peoples and their traditional knowledge can play as change agents, towards mitigating and adapting to climate change.

Impacts of Climate Change on Indigenous People

- Indigenous people are among the **poorest of the poor** and thus the most threatened segment of the world's population in terms of social, economic and environmental vulnerability.
Indigenous people are an estimated 5% of the world's population. 80% of these indigenous people are spread across **Asia and the Pacific**, a region particularly **vulnerable to the impacts of climate change**, thereby affecting indigenous people the hardest.
- Economic, social and cultural activities of this community depend on **renewable natural resources** that are most at risk to climate variability and extremes.
 - Aborigines protect 22% of the Earth's surface, which harbours 80% of the planet's biodiversity.
 - Consequently, their role is of particular importance in the sustainable management of resources as well as environmental and biodiversity conservation, which are essential for combating climate change.
- They live in **geographical regions and ecosystems** that are the most vulnerable to climate change. These include **polar regions, humid tropical forests, high mountains, small islands, coastal regions, and arid and semi-arid lands**, among others.

- High levels of vulnerability and exposure to climate change force **indigenous people to migrate**. This makes them more vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and environmental hazards in the area of destination.
- **Gender inequality**, which is a key factor in the deprivation suffered by indigenous women, is exacerbated by climate change.
- Indigenous peoples, their rights, and their institutions **often lack recognition**. Consequently, consultation with and participation of indigenous people in decision making is limited in the absence of dedicated public mechanisms.
The lack of consultation and participation is a root cause of social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities, as well as discrimination and exploitation.

India's Tribal Policy

Specific parts of the Indian Constitution, the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 or PESA, and the Panchsheel Principles of Jawaharlal Nehru, constitute the overall Tribal Policy of India.

Indian Constitution

- **Fifth and Sixth Schedules**- provide for alternate or special governance mechanism for certain schedule area.
- Most of the tribes in India are collectively identified as Scheduled Tribes under **Article 342 (1&2)**.
- **Article 244 under Part X** provides special provision for the administration in Scheduled Areas and Tribal Areas notified under Fifth Schedule.

The Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 or PESA

- It ensures self-governance through traditional Gram Sabhas for people living in the Scheduled Areas of India. Scheduled Areas are areas identified by the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution of India.
- It is implemented with respect to a number of issues such as customary resources, minor forest produce, minor minerals, minor water bodies, selection of beneficiaries, the sanction of projects, and control over local institutions.

The Tribal Panchsheel policy

- People should develop along the lines of their own genius, and the imposition of alien values should be avoided.
- Tribal rights in land and forest should be respected.
- Teams of tribals should be trained in the work of administration and development.
- Tribal areas should not be over administered or overwhelmed with a multiplicity of schemes.

- Results should be judged not by statistics or the amount of money spent, but by the human character that is evolved.

Other Legislations

- **Protection of Aboriginal Tribe (Regulation), 1956 and Regulations under Indian Forest Act, 1927** prohibit people other than the member of an aboriginal tribe from entering a reserved area in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
- **Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006** concerns the rights of forest-dwelling communities to land and other resources.

How indigenous people can act as change agents?

- An IPCC report 2018, states that a significant part of traditional indigenous identity is linked to the natural world. Due to their methods of managing forests and agro-ecological systems, as well as their traditions passed down through the generations.
- Indigenous peoples' economy primarily depends on natural resources and ecosystems, with which they also share a **complex cultural relationship**. As **natural capital is their core productive asset**.
Thereby, they act as the **vanguard of running a modern economic model** based on principles of a sustainable green economy.
- This is particularly important for climate change mitigation, especially regarding efforts directed at reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation and the adaptation of agricultural practices to climate change as well as green growth.
- Indigenous peoples' **traditional knowledge and cultural approach** to the issue is unique, and of high relevance and value for climate change adaptation.
 - For example, '**climate-smart agriculture**' (CSA) incorporates a combination of traditional and modern techniques, which is one of the most cited and promoted techniques aimed at mitigating, and adapting to, climate change.
 - Also, this traditional knowledge can help in **crop and livelihood diversification, the use of new materials, seasonal climate forecasting and community-based disaster risk reduction**.
 - For example, it is reported that **Aboriginal Australians** had important knowledge about preventing bushfires that have caused the gravest destruction recently. They deploy a **mosaic cool-fire burning technique** where small patches of low-intensity fires are lit during the cooler months to burn off the bush undergrowth, reducing the number of flammable materials.

Way Forward

- The **Sámi parliaments in the Nordic countries**, which address issues regarding the erosion of aborigines' local culture and suggest significant ways to resist 'mainstreaming' and 'assimilation', can be emulated all across the globe.
- ILO's **Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989** must be adopted by all the nations.
It provides for an important framework for strengthening dialogue among all stakeholders, including indigenous peoples' organizations, governments, trade unions and employers' organizations to ensure meaningful consultation with and participation of indigenous people in decision making.
- The **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples** states that, if you do have access to these communities' resources or knowledge, it should only be with their free, prior, and informed consent.
- Therefore, rather than treating aborigines as passive recipients of mainstream cultural practices (external influences on tribal philosophy), society must backtrack in search of a **universal philosophy** that not only captures our intimate oneness with nature but also restores dignity, humanity and collective conscience to the human race.
- In this context, **Adi Darshan or discussion on tribal philosophies**, organised by Jharkhand government is a step in the right direction.

Drishti Mains Question

Indigenous people are one of the most vulnerable sections facing climate change, however, they can act as change agents, towards mitigating and adapting to climate change. Discuss.
