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Environment vs Development Debate

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Why in News

Recently, the **National Highways Authority of India (NHAI)** in the Karnataka High Court claimed that the **Environment Protection Act, 1986** was passed by Parliament not only for protection of environment but also at the instance of foreign powers.

Key Points

- **Background:**

A **writ petition** filed by the NGO, **United Conservation Movement**, against a 2013 notification of the Union Environment Ministry doing away with environment impact assessment reports for **widening national highways of over 100 km by more than 40 metres**.

The United Conservation Movement is a conglomeration of environmental groups, and has over the last couple of years challenged NHAI projects in the **Western Ghats**, a tiger reserve as well as construction activity in a wildlife reserve.

- **NHAI's Claim:**

- NHAI also alleged that many **NGOs file petitions** for upholding the norms of the Act **at the instance of foreign powers.**

Foreign entities such as **Amnesty International** and **Peoples Union for Civil liberties** through its Indian counterparts have filed **Writ Petitions** under **Article 32** of the Constitution of India.

Article 32 of the Constitution (Right to Constitutional Remedies): It is a fundamental right, which states that individuals have the right to approach **the Supreme Court (SC)** seeking enforcement of other fundamental rights recognised by the Constitution.

- The submission alleges that **many organisations in India**, which function as environmental action and human rights, **are actively involved in attacking development projects, and challenging the government. policies & notifications and doing anti national activities.**
- The Environment Protection Act, 1986 is an Act that was **influenced by the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held at Stockholm in June, 1972 (Stockholm Conference)**

Hence, the Act has been passed by Parliament not only for protection of the environment but also at the instance of foreign powers.

- **Court's Ruling:**

- The High Court has **directed the NHAI chairman to nominate a very senior officer to look into and inquire into the manner** in which the statement of objections was filed.
- The High Court has also **asked the NGO, United Conservation Movement, to provide details of its constitution and activities carried out in environment and conservation.**

Development vs Environment

- **Importance of Environment:**

- The economic significance of the environment is evident with the range of **ecosystem services** that it offers. These include:
 - **Provisioning services** (food, irrigation, drinking water).
 - **Regulating services** (climate regulation, water quality regulation).
 - **Cultural services** (recreational and religious services).
 - **Supporting services** (nutrient recycling, soil formation).
- Millions of households and **developmental activities utilise these ecosystem services** for production and consumption.

- **Relation of Environment with Development:**

- Rapid **industrialisation and urbanisation** are **inevitable** to bring in desired levels of economic development.
- This is also believed to be **essential to substantially increase the per capita income.**
- However, these income-generating activities are sure to have **negative environmental consequences such as pollution.**
- Noticeably, **environmental quality is being compromised** for the goals of mass employment generation and poverty reduction.
- It is believed that **with gradual increase in income levels** along with growth in financial and technological capabilities, **environmental quality could be restored.**
- But the reality is that the continued **growth generating activities only increasingly deteriorates the environmental quality.**

- **Developmental Factors Affecting Environmental Sustainability:**
 - **Lack of Environmental Compliance:**
 - Neglect of environmental principles is a key reason why **natural hazards** end up causing a significant number of avoidable casualties.
 - Any exercise to scientifically ascertain the risk from natural hazards to a region are barely implemented in the right spirit.
 - **Unregulated quarrying and the unscientific cutting of slopes** into hills aggravates the risk of soil erosion and subsequently increases the risk of landslides.
 - **Ill-effects of Subsidies:**
 - In pursuit of providing welfare to vulnerable sections of society, the government has provided a **bulk of subsidies**.
 - However, **subsidised nature of services** like energy and electricity **leads to their overuse and undermines environmental sustainability**.
 - Further, subsidies also undermine the revenue base and limit the government's capacity to invest in new, cleaner technologies.
 - **No Cost to Environmental Resources:**

Access to natural resources is entirely open and no individual user bears the full cost of environmental degradation and **resources are consequently overused**.
 - **Complexity of Population Dynamics:**
 - Increasing population tends to **exacerbate the linkages between underdevelopment and environmental degradation**.
 - Further, **poverty generates significant incentives to raise large families** and stimulate migrations, which **makes urban areas environmentally unsustainable**.
 - Both outcomes increase pressure on resources and consequently worsen environmental quality, diminish productivity and reinforce poverty.

Way Forward

- Development remains the greatest pursuit as well as a challenge, faced by humanity. However, **despite the unprecedented economic and social progress that has been made over the last century, poverty, famine and environmental degradation still persist** on a global scale.
- Moreover, **environmental deterioration and climate change have started to show irrevocable damages to the developmental progress** made so far.
- Thus, development goals must be pursued without breaching environment regulations.

Source:IE