

‘Green Bonus’ Demand of Himalayan States

What is the issue?

- Recently, 11 Himalayan States of India met in Dehradun, Uttarakhand, demanding a “green bonus”, or a payment for environmental services they provide to the nation.
- This has brought to the surface the long-standing problem of integration of the mountain regions with the mainstream India.

What was the demand?

- The Himalayan states stretch from J&K (which was still a State during the meet) to Tripura.
- The ruling government had earlier committed a financial package to address the special developmental needs of the Himalayan States.
- The Himalayan States argued that they paid a developmental price for maintaining forests, rivers, and other environmental goods that help the rest of the country.
- The States, thus, asked for –
 - i. help to develop hydropower resources
 - ii. subsidies for their environmental protection measures which deny them normal ‘development models’
 - iii. recognition of their efforts to meet human development parameters

What is the larger issue in mountainous regions?

- Both the abrogation of special status to J&K, the following clampdown on civilian life, and the current demand of the Himalayan States highlight a key issue.
- It is the inability of the country to come to terms with the specificity of the Himalayan region, whether political, social, or ecological-economic.
- Various researches have shown how structurally different are Himalayan regions from the Indian mainstream in terms of their social and economic structure.
- Yet, this research has not found place in the political understanding, whether at the level of policy formulation or popular conceptions.

Is this specific to India?

- The problem of integrating the northern mountains to the national mainstream is not specific to India.
- It covers the entire stretch of mountains from Balochistan to Arunachal Pradesh.
- Each of the regions situated here has had problems when it comes to integrating the hilly regions with the nation states that are primarily anchored in the plains.
- Furthermore, this 'integration problem' is not just a South Asian phenomenon.
- China is struggling to integrate its mountain people and their homelands with its national mainstream.
- Myanmar and Thailand, besides others, are also facing similar issues.

Is this a legacy of the colonial era?

- The colonial force was anchored in the society and political-economy of the plains.
- The colonial times were perhaps the first time the nation state of the plains was able to reach so deep into the Himalayas.
- They controlled the people of the mountains in a way which was historically unprecedented.
- By the end of the 19th century, the mountains were far from the desires of keeping the mountains politically quiet and socially peaceful.
- The postcolonial nation states of Asia (be it India, Pakistan, China or Myanmar) have not been able to change this difficult relation with their mountain regions.
- This is because the independent nation states largely adopted the same approach in the high Himalayas as that of their colonial predecessors.

What are the consequences of this?

- The policies were framed on the social, political and economic specificities of the communities based in the riverine plains, different from that of the mountains.
- It is the village or town of the Ganga plains, or along the Narmada or Krishna and Cauvery rivers that defined what it means to be 'Indian'.
- The specificities of the mountain regions found no references in- -
 - i. the norms of what an 'Indian village' is
 - ii. how the society is structured
 - iii. how the economy is designed
 - iv. what ways does political life work

- In the mainstream thoughts, the mountain regions are at best imagined as calm 'hill stations' peopled by 'noble savages'.
- Otherwise, they are seen as wild regions inhabited by irrational bloodthirsty tribesmen.
- This is not only a social-psychological feature but has direct practical consequences.
- Policies and programmes are devised with the 'national norm' in mind, which have unintended consequences on the hilly regions.

What is the present scenario in India in this regard?

- In India, there has been a massive expansion of the national economy over the past three decades.
- This, now, allows for commodification of mountain resources (forests, water, labour, tourism, horticulture, even agriculture) in unprecedented ways.
- It has led to changes in the class structure and the emergence of a new middle class.
- The national aspirations now find the geographical specificity of the Himalayas a hindrance and the main commodity of exchanges.
- Thus, the secessionist movements in J&K and Nagaland on the one hand and active integrationist movements in H.P., Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur on the other, expresses the same problem.

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