

## General Studies - 3; Topic - Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment

### Cross-border Environmentalism

#### 1) Introduction

- Ecological ruin is at fastest pace across South Asia, affecting the life and livelihood of nearly a quarter of the world's population.
- The distress is paramount in the northern half of the subcontinent.
- The emerging environmental concerns make cross-border environmentalism crucial for South Asia.

#### 2) Threats

- On water, the subcontinent is running out of the resource due to the demands of industrialisation and urbanisation.
- Continuation of the colonial-era irrigation model based on flooding the fields.
- Ganga in Uttarakhand and the Teesta of Sikkim has been converted into dry boulder tracts by 'cascades' of run-of-river hydroelectric schemes.
- The natural drainage is destroyed by highways and railway tracks.
- Urban/industrial effluents have converted our great rivers into sewers.
- Rivers carry hundreds of tonnes of plastics daily into the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea.
- The underground aquifers are exploited to exhaustion.
- The retreat of the Himalayan glaciers is threatening the perennial nature of our rivers.
- Cloud of 'black carbon' containing soot and smog by stubble burning, wood fires, smokestacks and fossil fuel exhaust settles on Himalayan snow and ice, which absorb heat and melt much faster.
- The icefalls of the Himalaya could transform into waterfalls.
- The ground level fog engulfs the subcontinent's northern plains for extended periods in winter.

#### 3) Need for Cross-border Environmentalism

- To save our common ground across borders.
- Because wildlife, disease vectors, aerosols and river flows across national boundaries.
- One country's pollution can quickly become another country's environmental and economic crisis.
- Therefore the environmental trends must be discussed at the inter-country level.
- As the largest nation-state of our region, India needs to be alert to the dangerous drift.

#### 4) Climate Change

- Climate change is introducing massive disturbances to South Asia, most notably from the rise of sea levels.
- The entire Indian Ocean coastline will be affected.
- The hardest hit will be the densely populated deltas where the Indus, the Irrawaddy and the Ganga-Brahmaputra meet the sea.

#### 5) Shortfalls

- The task of preserving the forests and landscapes are mostly taken up by the indigenous communities.
- The Adivasi communities organising to save ancestral forests, and the Lepcha fighting to protect the upper reaches of the Teesta.

- The urban middle class is not visible in environmentalism, other than in 'beautification projects'.

### 6) **Concerns / Challenges**

- India does not take the lead on cross-border environmentalism.
- The destruction of Siwalik range of Nepal for the construction industry's demand for boulders and conglomerate, leads to greater floods, desertification and aquifer depletion.
- Air pollution is high in Lahore, New Delhi, Kathmandu and Dhaka, but there is no collaboration.
- Wildlife corridors across States, provinces and countries are narrowing day by day.
- The environment ministry is invariably the least empowered in the major countries of South Asia and unable to coordinate the ecological response.
- De-silting a deep reservoir when it fills up with sand and mud.
- The climate change discourse has not evolved enough to address the 'climate refugees' who move to national boundaries in the search for survival.
- Eg: Farakka Barrage affected the livelihoods in downstream Bangladesh, causing the flood of 'undocumented aliens' in India.
- Rising consumerism.

### 7) **Way Forward**

- India being the host country for 2018 World Environment Day, it is time for New Delhi to rise to connect the dots between representative democracy and ecological sanity
- India is the largest nation-state of the region, and the biggest polluter. India should take the lead role in cross border environmentalism.
- Governments must consider environmental protection as synonymous with wildlife protection.
- Need for civic participation for sustainability.
- The activists must work to quantify the economic losses of environmental destruction and get local institutions to act on their ownership of natural resources.
- The activists must harness information technology so as to engage with the public.
- Empowerment of local government all over.
- Elected representatives in cities and districts must emerge as the bulwark of environmentalism.