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Q6(a)

Custodians of natural resources are the tribals, but they are the most deprived. Critically examine how climate change will impact their survival in future.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Anthropology GS 2 · 20 marks · Social change and contemporary tribal societies

7.2 Social change and contemporary tribal societies: Impact of modern democratic institutions, development programmes and welfare measures on tribals and weaker sections.

Core demand of the question

- **Open the paradox:** tribals as resource custodians who remain deprived
- Show how climate change will hit forest, water, coast, health and livelihood
- Be critical of green projects that evict; use FRA, PESA, Xaxa, Elwin
- Do not romanticise poverty as ecology

Revision summary

Tribals have managed forests and uplands but Forest Acts and industry stripped title, leaving deprivation beside custody.

Climate change will thin wild food, disturb jhum and wet-rice water, raise coastal and mountain risk, and worsen health.

Carbon and fortress conservation can evict as 1878 did.

FRA, PESA, PVTG habitat rights and Gram Sabha consent are the survival toolkit.

Custody must include livelihood, not a duty to remain poor.

Introduction

Tribal communities have long managed forests, hills, coasts and uplands that the rest of India now calls **natural resources**. They remain among the most land-poor, nutritionally insecure and politically thin groups. **Climate change** will widen that gap unless rights, not only relief, organise the response.

Body

Custodians who do not own

L. P. Vidyarthi's nature-man-spirit complex and **Elwin's** aboriginal ecology described care of grove, river and jhum cycle. **Roy Burman's** buffer zone tried to keep that care spatially intact. Yet **Forest Acts 1878 and 1927**, mines, dams and parks took title. The custodian became an **encroacher**. **FRA 2006** and **PESA** are attempts to realign law with that older custody. Deprivation is therefore **political**, not a failure of tribal intelligence.

How climate change will hit survival

Forests and jhum. Hotter, drier or more erratic monsoon years shorten fallow, raise fire, and collapse millet and sal-seed calendars. PVTGs who still forage (Birhor, some Andaman groups, hill Kharia) face thinner wild food - the same path already seen in stunting notes.

Water and mountains. Himalayan and North-Eastern tribes meet glacial and cloudburst risk, slope failure, and dying springs. Apatani channels and other wet-rice systems need stable stream timing. **Central Indian plateau** tribes meet drought and falling groundwater beside coal pits that already heat and dust the belt.

Coasts and islands. Nicobarese, coastal fishing Scheduled Tribes, and Sundarban-adjacent groups face sea-level rise and cyclone intensity. Andaman policy must treat climate as a **contact and food** problem, not a tourism opportunity.

Health. Malaria belts may shift; heat kills outdoor labour; nutrition fails when PDS rice meets a failed forest snack economy. COVID-19 already showed that distant PHCs and migrant return crush tribal households. Climate is another such shock, slower and then sudden.

Livelihood. Distress migration will increase. Women who gather MFP lose cash when phenology shifts. Carbon forestry and **fortress net-zero projects can repeat 1878: new reserved carbon, old eviction.** Xaxa warned against development without consent; climate projects need the same warning.

Critical examination

Tribals are not automatically "closest to nature" in a way that saves them. Landless labourers in a mined block are as exposed as anyone, with less savings. Some tribal elites capture compensation. The paradox is structural: **those who stored carbon in standing forest were not paid; those who emit are insured.** Survival in future depends on **community forest titles, habitat rights for PVTGs, Gram Sabha veto on diversion, public health in hamlets, and climate finance that pays keepers rather than contractors.** **ILO 169's** consultation standard, which India has not ratified, is the global name for that veto. Domestic FRA is the available tool.

Do not preach that tribals should stay poor to keep the forest. Custody with **secure livelihood** is the anthropological demand.

Flow diagram

Climate shock -> Forest water coast
 Forest water coast -> Food health migration
 No title -> Food health migration
 FRA PESA habitat -> Survival with custody

Conclusion

Climate change will strike tribal survival through forest food, water, coasts, heat and health, on top of an older dispossession. Custodianship without title is charity geography. Rights under FRA and PESA, and a refusal of green eviction, are the conditions of future survival.

Facts & figures

FRA 2006

Community forest and PVTG habitat rights are the main domestic legal basis for climate-era custody.

Xaxa Committee 2014

Documented that tribal deprivation is land, displacement and failed services, which climate will intensify.

ILO 169

Consultation standard India has not ratified; climate projects that skip Gram Sabha repeat that gap.

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