



EDITORIAL: THE HINDU

GENERAL STUDIES 3: ENVIRONMENT
TOPIC: ENVIRONMENT POLLUTION

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Who will apologise to the 'Himalayans'?

- **Norway's Apology for Indigenous Assimilation Policies**

- Norway's Parliament has formally apologized for its past policies aimed at assimilating indigenous groups, including the Sami, Kven, and Forest Finn peoples, through a process known as Norwegianisation.
- These assimilation policies were enforced between the 1850s and 1960s and focused on suppressing native languages, cultures, and traditions to integrate indigenous peoples into mainstream Norwegian society.
- The government's apology comes with proposed corrective measures, which include efforts to protect indigenous languages and monitor inclusion initiatives starting in 2027.
- Despite these initiatives, challenges persist, such as the endangered status of the Sami languages and continued inequalities in areas like healthcare, education, and land rights, requiring ongoing attention and action.

- **Parallels Between Nordic and Himalayan Communities**

- The challenges faced by indigenous communities in the Nordic region share striking similarities with those in the Himalayan region, particularly regarding resource exploitation and cultural erosion.
- The Himalayan region spans a vast 2,500 km from Afghanistan to northeast India and is home to approximately 52 million people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including communities in Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.
- Indigenous Himalayan communities have faced pressures to assimilate through both colonial rule and post-independence policies, similar to the assimilation efforts experienced by Nordic indigenous groups.
- The region also faces environmental challenges, with exploitation of natural resources disrupting traditional ways of life and contributing to cultural erosion.

- **Impact of Colonial Rule on Himalayan Communities**

- British colonial policies had a significant negative impact on the local economies and trade networks in the Himalayan region, disrupting traditional industries.



- In northeastern regions, trade blockades and forced agreements by the British severely impacted local trade of goods such as tea, gold, silk, and opium, affecting indigenous communities' livelihoods.
- In Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, extensive deforestation occurred as the British exploited forests for timber needed for railway tracks. Over 80,000 km of railway tracks were laid between 1853 and 1910, destroying vast swathes of forest in regions like Garhwal and Kumaon.
- **Post-Independence Policies and Economic Changes**
 - Following India's independence, there were initial efforts to respect and protect the tribal ways of life in the Himalayan states.
 - However, by the time of the 5th and 6th Five-Year Plans, the focus shifted to resource exploitation for economic development. This led to intensified environmental damage and disruption of local cultures, especially through large-scale infrastructure projects.
 - The 1990s saw an increase in economic reforms, where Himalayan states were encouraged to generate revenue. This led to an over-reliance on tourism and hydropower, creating further challenges for local communities whose traditional livelihoods were impacted.
- **Challenges of Hydropower Projects**
 - Hydropower projects were promoted as a means for Himalayan states to generate state revenue and reduce dependence on external financial sources.
 - Arunachal Pradesh, in particular, was expected to meet a significant portion (40%) of India's power demand through these projects, which required the construction of large hydropower plants.
 - However, many of these projects were implemented without considering the customary land ownership practices and laws of local communities. As a result, indigenous people were displaced from their ancestral lands, leading to the erosion of their cultural heritage.
 - The involvement of politicians, bureaucrats, and corporations in large-scale land acquisitions for these projects often disregarded local needs, resulting in environmental degradation and loss of traditional practices and knowledge.
- **Need for Recognition and Justice**
 - Norway's apology for its past assimilation policies highlights the importance of recognizing historical injustices and committing to reconciliation as part of healing and progress for affected communities.



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- The Himalayan region, similarly, has experienced extensive resource exploitation and cultural erosion, but, unlike Norway, there has been no formal recognition of these issues or an official apology.
- To ensure the protection of indigenous cultures and the environment in the Himalayas, sustainable and inclusive development policies are essential. These policies must involve the local communities and respect their traditional rights and practices.
- The ongoing question remains whether the affected communities in the Himalayas will receive similar acknowledgment, justice, and reconciliation as the indigenous peoples of Norway, or if these injustices will continue to be overlooked.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/who-will-apologise-to-the-himalayans/article69294137.ece>

