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‘Any exploitation of Sentinel Island will wipe out tribals’

Any exploitation of the North Sentinel Island of the Andamans for commercial and strategic gain would spell the death knell for its occupants, the Sentinelese, a most secluded, particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) who reside in complete isolation on the island, the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) has said in research document reiterating that “right of the people to the island is non-negotiable”.

Highlights:

1. The Sentinelese have a population of about 50 to 100 on the North Sentinel Island. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands have 5 tribal groups: the Great Andamanese, the Onge, the Jarawa, the Shompens and the Sentinelese.
2. Along with maintaining the territorial integrity of the North Sentinel Island, the AnSI also calls for building a knowledge bank on the Sentinelese. Since ‘on-the-spot study’ is not possible for the tribal community, anthropologists suggest the ‘study of a culture from distance’.
3. The AnSI has published the policy inputs in a paper titled ‘Draft of the Policies for Great Andamanese and Sentinelese’ in their journal recently.

Are NRIs likely to get postal voting rights soon?

The story so far:

1. On November 27, the Election Commission of India (ECI) wrote to the Law Ministry, proposing to extend the facility of postal ballots to (eligible) overseas, non-resident Indians (NRIs) for the Assembly elections in Assam, Kerala, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal in 2021.
2. The ECI proposed amending the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, in order to allow this facility. The postal ballots will be sent to NRIs electronically and they will send these ballots after choosing their candidate via post.
3. This partially electronic facility is now available for service voters and is being sought to be extended to overseas NRI voters. The Law Ministry is yet to respond to the proposal.



Overseas voters

1. The bulk of these 1 lakh voters (nearly 90%) belonged to just one State — Kerala. Of the 25,606 such voters who actually turned up in the 2019 election, 25,534 were from Kerala (mostly from Kozhikode and Malappuram districts).
2. Clearly, a very low proportion of eligible overseas residents actually registered or turned up to vote.

Electronically transmitted Postal Ballot System (ETPBS)

The Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 was amended in 2016 to allow service voters to use the ETPBS. Under this system, postal ballots are sent electronically to registered service voters. The service voter can then download the ETPB (along with a declaration form and covers), register their mandate on the ballot and send it to the returning officer of the constituency via ordinary mail. The post will include an attested declaration form (after being signed by the voter in the presence of an appointed senior officer who will attest it). The postal ballot must reach the returning officer by 8 a.m. on the day of the counting of results.

Are postal ballots a viable means of voting?

1. The ETPBS method allowed for greater turnout among service voters in the 2019 Lok Sabha election.
2. Postal ballots were proven to be a secure and easy way of registering the mandate in the presidential elections in the United States recently with many voters preferring to use this method due to the COVID-19 social distancing norms.
3. With the increasing mobility of citizens across countries for reasons related to work, the postal ballot method has been recognised by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance as a means to allow overseas voters to exercise their right, subject to certain conditions normally related to the time spent abroad or the work carried out abroad.
4. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance is an intergovernmental organisation that works to support democratic processes and institutions.

Service Voter:

A member of the Armed Forces of the Union; or a member of a force to which provisions of the Army Act, 1950 is applicable; a member of an Armed Police Force of a State, and serving outside that State; or a person who is employed under the Government of India, in a post outside India.



Why elephants and tigers did not go extinct in India

Context: Over the last 100,000 years, several land-dwelling mammals including big carnivores have gone extinct across the globe. North America lost its sabre-toothed cat, North American lion, scimitar-tooth cat, American cheetah, and the only big cats left now are the Puma and the Jaguar. But most of the megafauna of South Asia and Africa were resilient to the arrival of modern humans and the region still has large land mammals such as elephants, tigers, and rhinos. A team led by Advait Jukar from Yale University set out to investigate why these big mammals are still seen in India when they disappeared from the Americas.

Highlights:

1. A paper published last month notes that co-evolution - the fact that native animals learn to adapt to a new predator played an important role.
2. If humans were hunting, these animals evolved techniques to avoid people. For example, if we like to hunt on the plains, maybe these animals lived in the forests. It's basically an evolutionary rat race where one species has to keep up with the other in order to survive.
3. All the extinct species in India were large, slow reproducing species, and they go extinct when the climate is fluctuating.
4. India was also home to ostriches (*Struthio camelus*) and humans may have been the reason for their local extinction. However for extinction several factors work simultaneously so it can't be attributed to just one reason.
5. Today, Humans may be driving the extinction of the mammals that fought and survived. Most of the animals which survived had a fairly large geographic range. But today, these animals are being restricted to small pockets and in fragmented populations, a lot of interbreeding happens making the populations weaker.



Overexploitation, long life cycle have endangered a common Himalayan herb

The Himalayan trillium (*Trillium govonianum*), a common herb of the Himalayas was declared 'endangered' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) last week.

Highlights:

1. In recent years, the plant has become one of the most traded commercial plants of the Himalayan region, due to its high medicinal quality. It has been used in traditional medicine to cure diseases like dysentery, wounds, skin boils, inflammation, sepsis, as well as menstrual and sexual disorders.
2. Recent experiments have shown that the rhizome of the herb is a source of steroidal saponins and can be used as an anti-cancer and anti-aging agent. This increased its market value and has now become an easy target for poachers.
3. Found in temperate and sub-alpine zones of the Himalayas, at an altitude from 2,400-4,000 metres above sea level, the existence of the plant has been traced across India, Bhutan, Nepal, China, Afghanistan and Pakistan.
4. In India, it is found in four states only- Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Sikkim, and Uttarakhand. Often called Nagchatri, in local areas this herb grows to a height of 15-20 cm.
5. There are several factors threatening the survival of the plant such as over-exploitation, long life cycle - slow to reach reproductive maturity - and poor capacity for seed dispersal. The highly specific habitat requirement, high trade value, and increasing market demand are all causing its decline.