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THE CLIMATE CHANGE: CONCERNS OF THE INDIGENOUS POPULATION IN THE ARCTIC REGION

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ARTICLE HISTORY	Abstract
<p>Received : 27-06-2025 Revised : 18-07-2025 Accepted : 25-07-2025 Published : 30-07-2025</p> <p>Author Affiliation: India Corresponding Author: Ms. Saira Grace Saju</p> <p>Keywords Arctic Region Climate Change, Community Rights, Indigenous population, and Sustainable development.</p>	<p><i>The Arctic region is a homeland to numerous Indigenous populations with traditional practices, lifestyles, and distinct cultures, that have shaped their unique identity for millions of years. Lately, the Arctic is becoming a theatre of military and geopolitical competition. Besides, the concerns of climate change seriously threaten their existence, their well-being, and the resources that sustain them. As a global concern, Climate Change has been very well addressed by the United Nations, in its Sustainable development Goal (SDG) 13: Climate Action. It reverberates climate action and synergies requiring urgent action to prevent climate change and its effects. This research explores the impacts of climate change on the indigenous communities of the Arctic region and the interlinked aspects of their health, well-being, and livelihood sources, that affect in turn the global scenario. The paper also endeavours to delve into the advocacy rights of the indigenous population in the Arctic and the promotion of their cultural integrity.</i></p>

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Introduction

The Arctic region, or the Arctic, is a geographic region spread around the North Pole. It is defined as the area within the Arctic Circle, a line of latitude about 66.5° north of the Equator. The circle encompasses the Arctic Ocean basin and the northern parts of Scandinavia, Russia, Canada, Greenland and the U.S. State of Alaska. The region is known for its extremely cold temperatures, sea ice, glaciers, and tundra and has a unique eco-system which impacts global climate regulation. (AMSA,2009).

The Arctic Region is home to several groups of indigenous populations marked with their unique culture and traditional lifestyles, shaping their identity for thousands of years. They share a unique relationship with their land and nature, with the ties of their cultural ancestral beliefs and knowledge system. Historically, they have encountered several challenges and have faced numerous constraints to protect the resources and sustain their living.

In the Arctic, Indigenous peoples make up about 10% of the roughly four million residents. They include the Inuit, Saami, Aleut, Yupik, Chukchi, and other groups (Arctic Council, 2013). Each group has unique languages, traditions, and relationships with the land. The health, well-being, and livelihood of indigenous populations are closely interlinked to their environment and traditional practices.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) – 13 enumerates climate action and appeals “to take urgent action” to combat climate change and its impact. The five distinct targets of this SDG are to strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related disasters; integrate climate change measures into Policy and Planning, improve climate education and awareness; Mobilization of Climate finance and sufficient support to vulnerable regions. This paper attempts to study the impact of climate change on the existing indigenous communities by exploring the distribution of the indigenous population in the Arctic, and the interlinked aspects of health, well-being, and livelihood sources. This paper also endeavours to delve into the advocacy rights of the indigenous population in promoting their cultural integrity. The paper also takes into account the contribution of various organisations at the local and global level such as Saami Council and Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami in promoting the well-being and rights of indigenous communities in the Arctic region.

Demography of Indigenous Population in the Arctic

Indigenous populations are ethnic groups with deep historical ties to specific geographic regions, often preceding colonization and modern migration (United Nations, 2007).

The four million inhabitants are spread out unevenly across indigenous and non-indigenous groups. The Arctic's Indigenous populations are concentrated in specific areas. Inuit communities are mainly found in Greenland (Kalaallit), Canada (Inuvialuit, Nunavummiut, and so on), Alaska (Inupiat), and Russia (Siberian Yupik). Other communities involve the Sami population, which is mainly concentrated around the Northern Scandinavian nations such as Finland, Sweden, and Norway and North-west Russia. Apart from Inuit and Sami, the indigenous population also consists of Nenets, Khanty, and Evenki communities. They are mainly centred on Siberian Russia (Yamal, Khanty–Mansi and Far East). In terms of occupation, Nenets are nomadic reindeer herders, migrating across the Tundra, whereas the Khanty communities are engaged in river-based fishing and Taiga hunting. The Evenki population deals with forest-based hunting and reindeer herding. Since these communities are migrating across the Tundra and Taiga regions for hunting and reindeer herding, they are challenged by oil and gas extractions, which disrupt their migration routes. Other fraction within the indigenous population comprises Aleut and Yupik communities, who are concentrated around Alaska (Aleutian Islands) and the Russian Far East (Chukotka) regions. Aleuts are mainly maritime hunters who hunt sea otters, seals, and whales. Yupik are mainly associated with seasonal hunting of walruses, whales, and ice–fishing. Culturally, these communities are distinguished by rich oral traditions and ceremonial masks (Fienup-Riordan, 2000). The indigenous population also comprises Athabasca and Gwich'in peoples who are centred around Alaska and Northwest Canada. Gwich'in people are also known as 'Caribou people' for their reliance on the 'Porcupine Caribou herd' (Van Tuyn, 2013). Other occupations by these communities involve freshwater fishing and Caribou hunting. They are advocates and conduct lead campaigns against Arctic drilling to protect the Caribou calving grounds (Roburn, 2015).

Among the above-discussed, Greenland has the highest proportion of Indigenous people, with about 88% identifying as Inuit (Nordregio, 2018). In Canada, Indigenous communities are prominent in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, while Alaska has a significant native population, including Inupiat, Yupik, and Athabaskan peoples (Statistics Canada, 2017). In Russia, Indigenous groups like the Saami and Nenets inhabit regions such as the Sakha Republic, Chukotka, and Yamal–Nenets (Russian Census, 2010). Notably, Iceland has no recognised Indigenous populations and is diverse, highlighting the unique blend (Norgregio, 2018). The key differences between all these indigenous communities are based on their traditions and cultural practices, political representations, livelihood, and their relationship with the land.

The population dynamics in the eight Arctic nations are characterised and influenced by five main factors: geographic variability, fertility and migration trends, gender dynamics, historical legacies, and transnational connections. (Dodds and Nutall, 2019). Arctic settlements are spread out in cities, towns, villages, and small hamlets within the region. The cultural and political landscape of Arctic regions is prominently shaped by the symbolic representation and active involvement of women in leadership roles.

Climate Change: the Concerns of Indigenous Population

The Arctic region, characterised by its vast frozen wilderness, has long been a locus of global interest due to its rich natural resources, strategic geographical location, and sensitive ecosystems. Traditionally, the inhospitable climatic conditions and technological limitations restrained large-scale exploitation of the region's resources. However, the scenario is changing rapidly, as global warming triggers a retreat of the Arctic Ice, unveiling a trove of untapped energy resources, including oil, natural gas, and minerals.

The Arctic is a critical region for the planet, acting as a global climate regulator and housing unique ecosystems and resources. It supports rich biodiversity and provides livelihoods for millions, including Indigenous populations. However, rapid warming almost four times the global average has triggered profound environmental and societal impacts (AMAP, 2021). Thawing permafrost and melting ice in the Arctic have caused grave anxiety among the indigenous population about the future. Shifting boundaries in the Arctic due to diminishing glaciers, thin layers of sea ice, and coastal erosion have posed a threat to the Arctic population as well as the global order. Indigenous populations across the circumpolar region are always put to the test due to the immediate variation in weather patterns and their ability to harvest wildlife. Simultaneously, food security and nutrition cause poverty and imbalance in the region.

Marine animal hunting seems very common in Arctic regions, especially for whales and seals by Canada, Greenland, Iceland, and Norway, generally for indigenous and commercial purposes. Fisheries are an important resource as well as a livelihood, with the melting of ice caps in these regions. Generally, Indigenous Arctic communities rely on hunting, fishing, and gathering for sustenance. However, climate change disrupts these food sources. Melting sea ice affects the migration patterns of animals like caribou, seals, and whales, limiting access to traditional foods (Ford, 2012). The declining availability of these foods forces communities to turn to costly, imported alternatives, which can impact nutrition and food security (Luring & Garlic, 2009).

Food security and nutrition are also significant economic concerns. Fresh meat and fish

as components of the traditional Arctic peoples' diets are important from nutritional and cultural points of view. However, through climate change, the lives of wildlife have changed, and many Indigenous people now depend on buying foodstuffs. These foods are expensive and less nutritious compared to traditional foods. This transformation has been attributed to increased obesity, diabetes, and other related diseases among the Indigenous peoples (Kuhnlein & Receveur, 2007).

Health issues related to environmental changes further compound economic challenges. Rising temperatures and changing landscapes of habitats raise new pathogen challenges and alter vectors for communicable diseases. For example, many bacteria can grow more on the surface of melting sea ice, and any increase in the general threshold in specific areas leads to waterborne diseases (Parkinson & Evengård, 2009). In addition, the deficiencies in the nutritional value of such foods affect both physical and mental health and well-being. Displacement, food scarcity, loss of traditional ways and culture, and consequent psychological effects are all indicators of Climate change's impact on Indigenous Arctic people. Stress and a general feeling of loss associated with environmental change are well documented among Arctic Indigenous peoples (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). Many of these stressors contribute to higher statistics for depression, substance abuse, and general mental health problems.

The chain of Interconnected social losses in disrupted health, food security, and livelihoods results in climate change-related economic losses among Indigenous Arctic societies. Such changes confront not only their ability to sustain themselves physically or culturally existence but also their economic interests in the contemporary Arctic realm

Redefining the Identities and Reclaiming Rights

Indigenous cultural practices are often tied to the land and environment. As traditional hunting grounds and fishing areas become inaccessible, there is a risk of losing cultural knowledge and practices that have been passed down through generations. This not only affects Indigenous identity but can lead to a loss of linguistic and spiritual heritage tied to these activities (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018).

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)-10 focuses on the need for formal equality, where all people are considered equal before the law. It aims to reduce inequalities with a focus on empowering marginalized roots and emphasising existential threats and impacts with respect to climate change. It addresses the colonial experiences embedded in historical justice and systemic disparities at the social, economic and cultural levels, followed by racial discrimination. The Indigenous communities have been put to such

colonial experiences of injustice and have undergone the effects of structural inequalities. Though they own and control a considerable part of the territories, they lack legal and social recognition regarding their lands. Economic exclusion and deprivation are growing in the Arctic region due to climate change, as they have no alternative way of living, other than depending on traditional occupations like fishing, hunting and herding as a source of their livelihood. The ensuing disruption in their food resources is leading to poverty, hunger and lack of food security. Moreover, these communities are excluded from the decision-making process in international bodies, despite the initiatives in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and hence remain, by and large, politically marginalised. Added to this, the natural disasters and climate change constantly puts the indigenous communities into forced displacement and rehabilitation. Finally, these indigenous populations encounter institutional and interpersonal racism, which has denied their basic rights to civic amenities, putting them into a challenging and tougher situation.

Arctic Indigenous populations' struggle for land rights is intertwined with their cultural identity, as well as the basics of their survival. The Arctic is geopolitically important and hosts vast natural resource wealth. But the changing climate situation and the impact of global warming are prompting a rapid change, causing a conflict between Indigenous ways of life and the needs of the Arctic region. Besides, the history of colonial expansion has determined the land rights in the Arctic and has put them under the caprices of land-grabbing agents and foreign governments who exert unusual control over Indigenous lands without their consent. For instance, the Inuit and other Indigenous groups relocated forcibly in Canada, as Canada desired to prove Canadian sovereignty over the Arctic and thereby disrupt the traditional territories and way of life of this community. (Tester & Kulchyski, 1994). The Soviet Union collectivised land used by the Nenets and Chukchi to herd reindeer, resulting in each becoming a part of state farms and threatening their traditional nomadic lifestyle (Fondahl, 1998). Nonetheless, the memories of these historical injustices are very predominant and are yet to be erased from affecting them. A few of these Indigenous communities have been fighting for the return of their traditional lands and compensation for losses. (Nosov et al., 2019)

Indigenous land rights in the Arctic are usually thought of as collective or solidarity rights. Hence, rights to land are appropriated and exercised collectively, aligning with the traditional land management practices. Moreover, the Arctic Indigenous land tenure systems generally differ from Western individual property rights since the former focuses more on public communal use of land, for seasonal hunting, fishing,

and herding. Further, the UNDRIP emphasises on the Collective rights of Indigenous peoples to land, territories, and resources. However, the countries, such as Canada, the U.S., and Russia have not yet incorporated these collective rights in their legal frameworks. For example, Alaska's Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) was established to compensate the lands taken from Indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, instead of promoting the indigenous communal land ownership, and protecting the traditional sovereignty it augmented the profit corporations, creating a sense of loss among the indigenous community. (Berger, 1985). Similarly, Russia's legal framework also does not adequately protect the communal land rights of Arctic Indigenous groups vis-à-vis the industrial activity, whether mining, oil extraction, or hydrocarbon extraction, in traditional territories.

However, there have also been efforts to create land claims processes and treaties to return Indigenous rights to land and resources. For example, in Canada, the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement created Nunavut a territory that, in many respects, grants self-rule to Inuit Communities (ITK, 2005). Similarly, in Scandinavia, Sámi land rights have been partly recognised through legal frameworks that protect areas used for reindeer herding. Besides, this community is also gaining attention in Sámi parliaments through political representation. (Josefsen, 2010). Although these agreements represent progress, they are often limited in scope and face challenges related to enforcement and conflicts looming in industrial interests.

Arctic Region: Opportunities for Future Prospects

Despite the challenging concerns of the arctic region, the region also has greater future potentials and therefore offers abundant opportunities. The economic resources of the Arctic are attracting nations for better greener pastures. The potential for large energy reserves kindles greater possibilities for global trade routes. The recently anticipated railway link from Rovaniemi in Finland to the Norwegian town of Kirkenes could be an alternative transport corridor expecting huge profiteering commercial activities. Currently, most of the travel between central Lapland and the industrial areas and ports of Arctic Norway and Russia relies on roadways. Initiating Arctic rail connectivity would create new pathways from Asia to the Baltic region and the Barents Sea, accelerating the movement of goods and passengers as well as generating business opportunities to draw in both domestic and international investment.

In fact the Passenger trains had stopped running on the Haparanda line in Sweden, adjacent to Torino in Finland, as early as in 1992. The original line via Morjärv-Karungi was permanently abandoned in 2012 due to steep gradients, sharp curves, and

high maintenance costs. However, the revitalisation of the Haparanda Line in April 2021, connecting Boden in Sweden to Haparanda, has significantly enhanced Arctic rail connectivity. Trains now run on a modern, electrified route between Finland and Sweden, using Kalix as the main hub. There are three daily passenger trains between Kalix and Haparanda, taking only 23 minutes. This provides vital local transport and easier cross-border travel. This line links Kalix to the wider region, including Luleå's ports and the important Iron Ore Line (Malmbanan) for heavy freight. The initiative to have a new €37 million electrified section near the border paves the way for passenger trains to Tornio, Finland, possibly by late 2025 or 2027. This upgraded rail connection is part of major EU transport plans, geared to strengthen the local economy, reducing truck traffic, supporting sustainable transportation. Additionally, railways across the European Arctic have the potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles and truck transport, given the long distances and the emission of high carbon footprint.

The migration of people, including the indigenous communities, from rural to urban areas, has affected road infrastructure considerably. This has resulted in a decrease in road usage and lower municipal tax income in Finland, leading to plans to convert paved roads to unpaved gravel roads to reduce maintenance costs. Road maintenance in the Arctic Region is also impacted by frost damage, rendering ice roads over frozen bodies of water obsolete, due to a lack of sufficient freezing. This has a huge impact on the connectivity of remote Arctic regions. In the northern parts of Europe, however, small rivers remain important for local traffic during the winter, particularly with snowmobiles.

Air connectivity is becoming a dire need for Arctic communities. The melting of ice caps leading to a loss of regional road networks and infrastructure, has become quite common in Canada and Russia. The air connectivity can accelerate the growth of tourism industry and may harness economic benefits thereby propelling economic growth. Before the pandemic, the continental European Arctic was relatively accessible. However, the decline in air connections due to the COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on the Arctic's connectivity, negatively affecting both tourist visitors and locals. Notably, travel within the Arctic often requires multiple layovers due to remote locations and lack of intra-Arctic air connections. As such people encounter numerous difficulties in terms of connectivity and network. Hence, the technological development, dependence upon electric aircraft for short to medium distances, powered by renewable energy sources, could greatly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, contributing to green and just transitions, and fulfil the transportation requirements of local communities.

The Arctic is undergoing a digital transformation, with the EU's Northernmost areas being among Europe's leading mobile digital communicators. Mobile internet services in these regions are quite good; however, in other parts of the Arctic, they are not as reliable. As a result, satellite-based telecommunications will still be necessary in the more remote areas of the Arctic. However, limited connectivity can still be an issue in higher altitude areas. The Arctic region is particularly affected by this lack of proper telecommunications networks due to its remoteness, which is recognised by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU).

Global Efforts and Concerns of Arctic Region

The intergovernmental organisations like the European Union and United Nations, with the support of the Arctic Council and Federal-State National policies, ensure steps to hold regular conversations with youth representatives from the Arctic region. Attempts are made to see that they are fully aware of the educational and empowerment opportunities and are incorporated into educational projects like Erasmus Scholarships. Iceland and Norway are completely a part of this programme, which has utilised these resources. Intergovernmental organisations like the European Union are actively collaborating with the World Health Organisation and the governing bodies of the hardest-hit Arctic locations. This initiative supports the spread of information and good practices concerning disease outbreaks, disasters, and other dangers to wildlife, flora, and fauna. It also addresses the concerns of people affected by shifts in the climate and environmental ruin. The EU backs 'One Arctic, One Health' project taken on by the Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Working Group. The Arctic Council is particularly attentive to the state of indigenous Peoples. While mentioning the Rights of Arctic Community people, the Concept of "Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)" -which is part of public international law- does not give Indigenous people a veto right and requires good faith consultations. To better handle this situation, it would be beneficial to create a clear institutional structure (Hughes, 2018).

A range of laws, acts, and international agreements addresses the rights of Arctic Indigenous peoples, focusing on land, cultural preservation, and self-determination. Global and regional organisations, such as the Arctic Council, play a pivotal role in implementing these frameworks and ensuring the inclusion of Indigenous voices in decision-making processes. The efforts by UNDRIP codified the principle of Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination, the preservation of their cultural identity, and informed consent over the use of their lands and natural resources. UNDRIP is particularly important for Arctic Indigenous communities, whose territories are under pressure from resource extraction and climate change, and who require a strong voice

in decisions that affect them. The Arctic Council, with its Permanent Participants representing Indigenous peoples, actively incorporates these principles in its policy frameworks.

Threats from industrial development and climate impacts, as well as natural resource development and exploitation, continued to prompt the 2014 World Conference to reaffirm commitments to UNDRIP and stress the importance of including Arctic Indigenous perspectives in international policy related to the Arctic (United Nations, 2014). The conference further emphasised collaboration with regional bodies, including the Arctic Council, to ensure sustainable development in the region. The 2030 Agenda makes a point of “leaving no one behind.” The Arctic Indigenous populations are faced with challenges that set them apart from others. Recognising their contributions, the agenda underscores their vital role in sustainable resource management, biodiversity conservation, and climate resilience (United Nations, 2015). Regional and global organisations work to align these goals with Arctic-specific policies, ensuring the sustainability of these communities.

Conclusion

The United Nations declared 2022–2032 as the Decade of Indigenous Languages to save Arctic Indigenous languages that serve as a key identity for cultural heritage and traditional knowledge (UNESCO, 2021). Indigenous media initiatives supported by UN General Assembly resolutions further enhance this effort, allowing Arctic communities to document environmental changes and advocate for their rights through storytelling and cultural expression (United Nations, 2023).

The development of Arctic Indigenous communities must occur for people by people and not by imposition of outside forces, thereby embracing principles such as self-determination and sustainability with economic, social, and cultural resilience. These communities include the Inuit, Sámi, and the Chukchi people who inhabit cold regions of Canada, Greenland, Scandinavia, and Russia, whose environment is under drastic change due to climate change, and are forced to adapt another way of sustaining their livelihood through fishing, hunting, or reindeer herding. Their autonomy and their high involvement in the decision-making processes are underscored by theories such as post-colonialism, sustainable development, and participatory development. Land rights are key to Arctic Indigenous identity, and they are constantly under siege from colonial legacies. In this regard, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is expected to give legal protection to this community, but lacks consistent enforcement. Arctic Indigenous communities' models of development should

integrate Indigenous knowledge, prioritise cultural preservation, and be resilient to environmental challenges. Sustainable health and well-being, while promoting their traditional ways of life, is the only mode of survival of this unique population in the phase of rapid global change.

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