Draft Geo-heritage Sites and Geo-relics Bill

Why in news?

The Ministry of Mines has come up with the draft Geo-heritage Sites and Geo-relics (Preservation and Maintenance) Bill.

What are the Geo-heritage Sites and Geo-relics?

> *Coming under the Ministry of Mines, the Geological Survey of India (GSI) was established in 1851 to investigate and assess coal and other mineral resources of the country through regional-level exploration.*

- **Geo-relic** - Any relic or material of a geological significance or interest like sediments, rocks, minerals, meteorite or fossils.
- **Geoheritage sites** - The draft bill defines Geoheritage sites as sites containing
  - Geo-relics and phenomena
  - Stratigraphic type sections
  - Geological structures
  - Geomorphic landforms including caves, natural rock-sculptures of national and international interest
- In India, there are **32 geo-heritage sites** spread across 13 states.
  - **Examples** – Akal Fossil Wood Park in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan
  - Volcanogenic bedded Barytes of Mangampeta, Andhra Pradesh
- **Role of GSI** - The Geological Survey of India (GSI) will have the power to acquire geo-relics for its preservation and maintenance.
- The GSI declares geo-heritage sites/ national geological monuments for protection and maintenance.
- The GSI or the respective state governments take necessary measures to protect these sites.

What does the Geo-heritage Sites and Geo-relics Bill say?

- **Aim -** Declaration, preservation, protection and maintenance of geo-heritage sites and geo-relics of national importance, for geological studies, education, research and awareness purposes.
- **Role of central government** - The Bill's provisions give the Director General of the Geological Survey of India (GSI), a subordinate body of the Ministry of Mines, the power to
  - declare sites as having 'geo-heritage' value

    - take possession of relics (fossils, rocks) that rest in private hands
    - prohibit construction 100 metres around such a site
- **Compensation** - Compensation would be provided to the occupier of land who incurs loss or damage due to the exercise of any power under the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 **(RFCTLARR Act).**
- **Preservation** - The Bill imposes a prohibition on construction, reconstruction, repair or renovation of any building within the geoheritage site area with certain exceptions.
- **Penalties** - Penalties have been mentioned for destruction, removal, defacement or contravention of any direction issued by the Director General, GSI in the geo-heritage site.
- The imprisonment may extend to 6 months or fine which may extend to Rs.5 lakh, or both and additional fine will be imposed for continuous contravention.

What are the criticisms?

- **Absolute vesting of powers** - There are concerns over the distribution of power as mentioned in the Bill.
- There is a fear that the absolute vesting of powers in the GSI alone may affect palaeontological research.
- Experts demand a more inclusive body, on the lines of a National Geoheritage Authority, that can, more democratically, decide on declaring sites as being of 'geohistorical' importance.
- **Land acquisition issues** - The issue of land acquisition for the purpose of safeguarding these sites could also lead to issues with local communities.

References

1. The Hindu | Draft Geo-heritage Sites and Geo-relics bill
2. The Indian Express | Draft Geo-heritage Sites and Geo-relics Bill
3. GSI | National Geological Monuments

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