Failure of First Inter-State Tiger Relocation Project

Why in news?

Sundari, a tigress shifted as part of India's first inter-state translocation project in 2018 from Madhya Pradesh (MP) to Odisha, was relocated back to MP.

What was the Tiger Relocation Project?

- The tiger relocation project was initiated in 2018.
- As part of this, two big cats were relocated to Satkosia Tiger Reserve in Odisha, to shore up the tiger population in the state.
    - a male (Mahavir) from Kanha Tiger Reserve and a female (Sundari) from Bandhavgarh from Madhya Pradesh
- Both were selected for the translocation project as per the NTCA (National Tiger Conservation Authority) guidelines and in collaboration with the Wildlife Institute of India and the Government of India.
- The relocation was meant to serve two purposes:
    i. reducing tiger population in areas with excess tigers to majorly reduce territorial disputes
    ii. reintroduce tigers in areas where the population has considerably reduced due to various reasons
- The project was estimated with a budget of Rs 19 crore.
- It was started under the project of "augmentation and recovery of tiger population in Satkosia tiger reserve".
- Six tigers (three pairs) from different reserves of Madhya Pradesh were to be sent to Odisha under the project.

Why was Satkosia Tiger Reserve chosen?

- Encompassing an area of around 960 sq km, the Satkosia Tiger Reserve spreads across four districts and has as its core area 523 sq km.
- According to NTCA, Satkosia falls under reserves where "there is a potential for increasing tiger populations".
- Declared as a Tiger Reserve in 2007, Satkosia had a population of 12 tigers then.
- The numbers reduced to two in 2018.
- The purpose of the relocation was thus to repopulate tigers in the reserve areas.

What was the outcome of the project?

- The project ran into trouble within weeks of initiation.
- The arrival of the tigers was followed by severe protests by villagers living on the fringes of the reserve.
- Forest department officials were attacked and their offices burnt down by the villagers.
- This reaction was the outcome of displacing tribals from Raigoda in the core area to Saruali on the outskirts of the reserve.
- The villagers feared the big cats would endanger their livelihoods, lives and livestocks.
- They also alleged that they were not consulted or informed prior to the translocation.
- Within months of the translocation, Mahavir was found dead.
- A field inspection report by the NTCA stated that Mahavir's death took place due to poaching.
- Earlier, a woman was allegedly mauled to death by Sundari and another person was also killed.
- Soon, Sundari was tranquilised and shifted to an enclosure at Raigoda.
- Subsequently, the project was suspended by NTCA.

What led to the likely failure of the project?

- A major reason for the failure was the lack of confidence and trust building between the forest department and the villagers.
- Notably, the translocation was done in haste.
- The field staff and tiger reserve management were not prepared.
- Capacity for tiger monitoring was poor.
- The local communities were not taken into confidence nor conveyed the benefits from tourism that tigers could bring them.
- While Mahavir had settled down after initial exploration of the forest area, Sundari was venturing into human habitation.
- Protection was not up to the mark and the only undisturbed, prey rich habitat was already occupied by the old resident tigress.
- The already existing female tigress in the core area did not allow the presence of another tigress and chased her away.
- This caused Sundari to occupy human dominated, disturbed areas.
- Sundari's proximity to human habitations which are in abundance even close to the core area in Satkosia could have led to the human-animal conflict.
- Addressing these issues and relocating villages should be prioritised before tiger reintroduction is continued.

Source: The Indian Express

