Forest Conservation

Mains Syllabus: GS I – Changes in in flora and fauna; GS III- Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment.

Why in the News?

Recently, Supreme Court came down heavily on Telangana government for the large-scale felling of trees across 100 acres of land felling of trees in the Kancha Gachibowli area abutting the University of Hyderabad.

What is the status of forest cover in India?

- **Total Tree and Forest Cover** - 25.17 % (8.27 Lakh Sq. Km.) of the geographical area of the country is covered by trees and forest.
    - Forest Cover - 21.76%
    - Tree Cover - 3.41%

Forest and Tree Cover of India

in km^2

Class	Area	Percentage of GA
Forest Cover	7,15,342.61	21.76
Tree Cover	1,12,014.34	3.41
Total Forest and Tree Cover	**8,27,356.95**	**25.17**
Scrub	43,622.64	1.33
Non Forest	24,16,489.29	73.50
Geographical Area of the country	**32,87,468.88**	**100.00**

- **Increase in forest and tree cover** - There is an increase of 1445 sq km from 2021.
- **Changes in last decade(2013-2023)**
    - Increase in forest cover - 16,630.25 km^2
    - Increase in tree cover - 20,747.34 km^2.
    - Increase in mangrove cover - 296.33 km^2
    - Increase in agroforestry tree green cover - 21,286.57 km^2
- To know more about India State of Forest Report 2023, Click here.

What are the challenges in forest conservation?

- **Development pressure** - Industrialisation and urbanisation are the primary reasons behind forest degradation.

- India lost around 1,73,300 hectares of forest areas due to development projects between 2014-15 to 2023-24, according to the Union Environment Ministry.
- **Mining** - In mineral-rich states like Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha, extensive mining has been the leading cause of substantial forest loss, with over 1 lakh hectares of forestland diverted for around 500 mining projects until 2018.
- **Unsustainable agri practices** - In hilly areas of the northeast, shifting cultivation (Jhum), agriculture expansion, and extensive logging are the primary factors behind the loss of green cover.
- This made Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland, etc., states with the largest loss of forest cover between 2021-2023.
- **Monoculture plantations** - Natural forests are increasingly being replaced by monoculture plantations, raising concerns about weakened ecological resilience and biodiversity loss.
- Plantations are not as effective in bio diversity and soil conservation as natural forest of a region.
- **Invasive species** – Species like Lantana camara and Prosopis juliflora are one of major threats to native forests.
- **Forest cover definition** - ISFR considers as "forest cover" all land over one hectare with a canopy density above 10%, regardless of legal status or ecological value.
- This means it counts plantations, orchards, bamboo, and palm as forests.
- **Natural disasters** - From 2021 to 2023, 94% of tree loss happened in natural forests.
- **Climate Change** - Increasing forest fire triggered by climate change and human activity and prolonged dry spells, leads to further forest degradation.
- Climate change intensifies this risk by creating warmer and drier conditions.

  Between November 2023 and June 2024, the Forest Survey of India recorded 2,03,544 forest fire incidents.

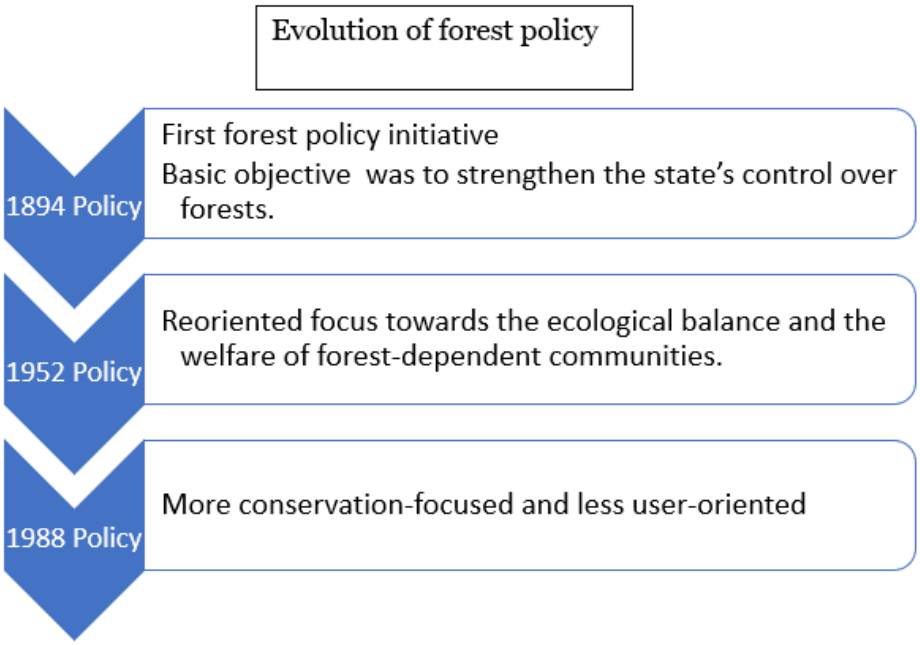
- **Deficiencies in conservation laws** - Restricting the rights of tribal communities and ignoring the conservation aspect of forest governance.
  - **Forest conservation act 2023 amendment** – It excludes land recorded as forest before October 25, 1980 but not notified as a forest, and land which changed from forest-use to non-forest-use before December 12, 1996.
  - This provision may go against a 1996 Supreme Court judgement on preventing deforestation.
  - The amendment also provide blanket exemption for projects like zoos, eco-tourism facilities, and reconnaissance surveys may adversely affect forest land and wildlife.
- **Inadequate community participation** - Despite being the cornerstone of forest conservation policies, community participation remains limited.

What are the legal frameworks of forest conservation?

- **Fundamental Rights** – Right to a healthy environment which also includes Forest, is a fundamental right under Article 21.
- **Directive Principles for State Policy** - Article 48A of the constitution directs the

state to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wild life of the country".

- **Fundamental duty** - Article 51A (g) states that it shall be theduty of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wild life .
- **Indian Forest Act of 1927** – It is the foundational legislation that classifies and regulates the use of forests without defining it. It enables/allows the government to prepare the record of forest land.
- **Forest Conservation Act (FCA) of 1980** - Renamed in 2023 as Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980), It regulates the divertion of forest land for non-forestry purposes.
- **National Forest Policy of 1988** - It advocates for increasing forest cover to one-third of the country's geographical area.
- It also emphasises community participation through the ***Joint Forest Management Programme***.



- **Wildlife Protection Act of 1972** – It provides for the protection and conservation of wild life flora and fauna managing wildlife habitats.
- The Act also establishes protected areas like sanctuaries and national parks.
- **Environment Protection Act of 1986** – It provides for protecting and improving the quality of the environment including forests.
- Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs) around national parks and wildlife sanctuaries are declared under the Environmental (Protection) Act, 1986.
- **Biological Diversity Act of 2002** - It aims to conserve biological diversity, promote its sustainable use.
- **Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006** - The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, recognizes and vests forest rights and occupation in forest land of Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers.

- **Compensatory Afforestation Act of 2006** - To address the issue of forest land diversion for non-forest purposes by establishing a mechanism for managing and utilizing funds to compensate for the loss of forest land.
- **Forest Fire Prevention and Management Scheme (FPM)-** It is a centrally sponsored program that supports state and union territories in preventing and managing forest fires.
- **National Agro Forest Policy, 2014** – It focuses on integrating trees, crops, and livestock on the same land to improve agricultural productivity, livelihoods, and environmental sustainability.

What are the judicial interventions in forest conservation?

- The Supreme Court of India has also played a crucial role in developing the jurisprudence of forest governance in India.
- **T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India (1996)** – In this Forest Conservation case, apex court has expanded the scope of definition of by holding that the word 'forest' must be understood according to its dictionary meaning.
- This expansive definition includes all statutorily recognised forests – whether classified as reserved, protected or otherwise.
- **Doon Valley case (1988)** – In this case, The Supreme Court emphasized the need to balance economic development with environmental conservation and imposed strict guidelines on running quarries in forest areas.
- **Agasthyamalai Landscape Case** - The court emphasized the importance of forests as the "lungs of the ecosystem" and called for a scientific survey to identify encroachments and restore forest areas.
- **Narmada Bachao Andolan (2000)** – It is the Sardar Sarovar Dam case in which SC imposed strict compliance with environmental and forest laws.
- **Orans Judgment (2025)** - The Supreme Court recognized Rajasthan's sacred groves, known as "Orans," as forests.
- This judgment highlighted the cultural and ecological significance of diverse ecosystems, including mangroves, wetlands, and scrublands.
- It reinforced the importance of community stewardship in forest conservation.

What lies ahead?

- The forests in India are vital to its ecological balance, climate resilience and socio-economic sustenance of millions of people.
- It is significant to improve the quality and quantity of green cover in India.
- It is essential to provide a clear and inclusive definition of forest.
- Efforts towards enhancing community participation and promoting native species of plants for afforestation purposes might be helpful.
- Centrality of forest conservation in India's sustainable development could help ensure both ecological balance and human well-being.

Reference

The Indian Express | Rapid development, shrinking green cover



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