Forest Cover Targets

Why in News?

A recent study in the Nature Geoscience journal showed that with increased tree plantations, there was a decline of almost 38% in water availability in some river basins globally.

What is Forest Cover?

- **Definitions**
  - **Forest Cover** – FSI defines it as 'all lands of ***a hectare or more*** with tree patches with ***canopy density of more than 10%***' and it covers all lands, irrespective of legal ownership and land use.
  - **Recorded forest area** – It includes only those areas recorded as ***forests in government records*** and includes pristine forests.
  - **Tree cover** – MoEF&CC defines it as 'tree patches *outside recorded forest areas* exclusive of forest cover and ***less than the minimum mappable area of 1 hectare'***.
- **Assessment** – The ***Forest Survey of India (FSI)*** has been mapping India's forest cover since the early 1980s, even though it only started publishing its biennial State of Forest reports (ISFR) in 1987.
- Based on internationally adopted norms of classification, forests are broadly classified into different classes.

- **India's Target** – According to the National Forest Policy of India, the ideal percentage of total geographical area under forest should be ***at least 33%*** to maintain ecological stability.

*According to 17th ISFR (2021), India currently covers **just 24.62%** of the country's land with forest cover and is shrinking rapidly.*

Tropical dry forest biome in India

• **Spread** - *Over three-fifths of India* falls under this category.
• **Geography**- From the south of the Shivaliks in north India to the Aravali range in the northwest, and down till the Eastern Ghats of Tamil Nadu.
• **Tree cover**-It is generally sparse (10-40% canopy cover and more of open forest, scrub and grasslands).
• **Water Conditions** -Receives less than 1,000 millimetres of annual rainfall and is drought-prone.
• **Significance**-A large rural population depends on these landscapes for cattle grazing.
• It is also an important habitat for endangered fauna like wolves, striped hyena and blackbuck.

According to FSI, between 2006 and 2015, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana collectively added over 346,400 hectares to their forest cover. Telangana has schemes like Haritha Haram.

Why forest cover targets needs to be revised?

- **No scientific basis** – The 33% forest cover target was 1st proposed in the National Forest Policy 1952 and it has not been revised.
- There is also no basis for the 26 million hectares target under the ***2011 Bonn Challenge*** that India has set to achieve by 2030.
- **Issues with methodology** – Sufficient tree cover is needed on the ground to detect a forest in a 30 by 30-pixel satellite image thus it necessitates more trees to be planted in a dense manner, compared to the natural 10-40% canopy cover.
- Only fast-growing trees like teak, eucalyptus and vegetation like bamboo can grow quickly enough to be picked up in satellite images.

Tree Planting

• It has become a primary activity of most state forest departments.
• **Factors driving tree planting**
  -
    ■ India's National Forest Policy
    ■ National forest cover targets
    ■ International restoration commitments
    ■ Central government schemes like the Green India Mission
    ■ The importance given to forest cover in devolution of funds to states by the Finance Commission.
• **Negative effects**
  -
    ■ Loss of grassland and scrub ecosystems rich in biodiversity
    ■ Loss of grazing land available for pastoral communities
    ■ Affects the water security of rural communities in the dry forest region

What lies ahead?

The 15th Finance Commission recognised that forest canopy cover across India varies and weightage given for devolution of funds to the States should be according to different canopy density classes.

- **Restoration** – Restoring degraded land to its original state of grasslands or scrub vegetation with native trees will be more rewarding than creating monoculture plantations.
- **Revising the targets** – It is important to revise the target forest cover under the National Forest Policy.
- **Promote conservation** – Provide incentives for conserving grasslands and other open ecosystems with low tree cover, which are of high importance and often misclassified as 'wasteland'.
- **Expand indicators** - The restoration programmes and monitoring should not entirely depend on satellite imagery, as tree cover is not the only good indicator of health of an ecosystem.
- **Bottom-up approach** – A top-down policy approach will dissuade the States from taking up ill-advised tree planting schemes that could be detrimental in the long term.
- **Tree plantation in appropriate areas** – Ecological balance cannot be achieved by compensating for forest loss elsewhere by tree plantations in these dry forest regions.

References

1. Down To Earth| Need for revising Forest Cover Targets
2. FSI| Forest Cover Classification in India
3. The Indian Express| Forest and Tree Cover

SHANKAR IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering