Forest Rights and Forest Conservation

What is the issue?

- Recently, at the UN High-Level Dialogue on Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought, Indian PM reiterated India's target of land degradation neutrality by 2030, citing the Banni grassland in Gujarat.
- In this context, here is a look at the various aspects of land restoration in India.

Why is the Banni grassland notable?

- One of Asia's largest tropical grasslands, Banni is home to great biological diversity.
- It is the lifeline of its pastoralist communities.
- However, climate change and the invasion by Prosopis juliflora have severely impacted its unique ecology.
- It was found that unless action was taken, Banni grassland was headed for severe fodder scarcity.
- The region's highly degraded lands were being restored.
- The livelihoods of pastoralists were supported using a "novel approach."
- The Banni's pastoralist communities (Maldharis) uproot Prosopis in the pre-monsoon period.
- When it rains, the native grass species regenerate from their rootstock.
- This is precisely what the pastoralist communities have been doing for the past few years.
- Their endeavour needs to be supported.

What is the significance?

- Local communities applying their deep knowledge of the local ecology to become "decision-makers" in restoring their commons is indeed novel in India.
- However, the mandate for them to do so is not new. The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 provides for this.
- Adivasis and other traditional forest-dwelling communities, including pastoralists, are legally empowered.
- They can decide on the management and restoration of their community forest resources (CFR).

- They can stop any activity that adversely impacts biodiversity or the local ecology.

What is the larger picture?

- Similar to the Banni grasslands, India's forests are grappling with degradation, an important contributor to GHG emissions.
- More than 40% of the forest cover is open, often degraded.
- India has committed to restore 26 million hectares of degraded forests and lands by 2030 under the Bonn pledge.
- It has also targeted creating an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes by 2030 through additional forest and tree cover.
- This is committed as part of its Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement.

What are the forest restoration efforts so far?

- Initiatives to restore degraded landscapes include:

i. social forestry in the 1970s
ii. tree growers' cooperative societies in the 1980s
iii. Joint Forest Management in the 1990s
iv. National Afforestation Programme and Green India Mission in the last two decades

- Studies have found these to have limited restoration benefits.
- These initiatives have drawn criticism for paying little attention to the land and forest tenure of local communities.
- They fail to incorporate traditional ecological knowledge.
- The CFR rights under FRA tackle these issues.
- It assigns rights to protect, manage and restore around 40 million hectare of forests to village-level democratic institutions.
- The recognition of these rights, however, has happened at an extremely slow pace.
- Less than 5 % of the total potential area has been brought under CFR.
- In Banni too, title deeds formally recognising the CFR rights of the pastoralists are yet to be issued.
- Institutional support for CFR remains minimal.

What is the way forward?

- India's potential to remove carbon through forest restoration is among the highest in the Global South.
- At 123.3 million, India also has the greatest number of people living near

areas with forest restoration opportunities (within 8km).

- Forest restoration is an important climate mitigation strategy.
- Beyond carbon sequestration, its benefits include biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.
- There are thus compelling reasons for India to recognise and support CFR rights.

Source: The Indian Express

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