

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

