Learning from Forest-Dwellers to fight Forest Fires

Why in news?

There is much to learn from how forest-dwelling and tribal communities relationship with natural resources is regulated by natural rhythms and cycles.

What is the status of forest fires in India?

- In 2021, large blazes in Simlipal Tiger Reserve in Odisha and Uttarakhand destroyed ecosystems of species releasing thousands of tonnes of carbon.
- A new UN report describes a global wildfire crisis primarily because of climate change.
- Inaction on forest fires would have grave consequences for the country.

What is India's commitment on conservation of forests?

- On the livelihoods front, 300 million Indians depend on forests for their subsistence and jobs, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation.
- India's ecosystems are closely intertwined with several state and societal goals.
- As a part of the Paris Climate Accord, the Indian government committed to adding forests and tree cover as "carbon sinks" to absorb 2.5-3 billion tonnes of CO2 equivalents by 2030.

What is the role of forest dwellers in managing forest fires?

- An emerging understanding from ecologists and grassroots organisations indicates how communities can be allies in arresting and preventing fires.
- Forest-dependent communities across the world have fine-tuned a balance between their needs and the natural world's regeneration.
- Their thoughtful practices are the principal reasons for the health of large parts of our planet's ecosystems, research has found.
- In India, longstanding mindsets from a colonial forestry model have transitioned into a fortress-style conservation model that keeps communities out.
- Energy poverty leaves many tribal communities dependent on firewood for basic needs like cooking in the 21st century.
- **Role of fire**- Fire is central to communities' culture and socio-economic

cycles as Baiga and Gond communities light fires under mahua trees to keep potential rivals like bears away from the mahua harvest.

- **Neglecting traditional knowledge**- After ignoring Native Americans' knowledge about periodic controlled burns, the US is experiencing the consequences of allowing a massive build-up of flammable stock in mega blazes like in California in 2021.
- Good fire of low to moderate intensity may reduce the fuel for larger blazes and aid germination of plants whose seeds need fire to crack open.
- **Examples-** Researchers at the Indian Institute of Technology Mandi have tested an intervention that makes the alpine forests of the Himalayan foothills less susceptible to forest fires and provides local livelihoods.
- Based on this, communities have set up businesses that process highly flammable dry chir pine needles into bio-pellets that can be fired with or instead of coal in industrial processes.
- In Simlipal, tribal people were on the frontline of battling fires last year and women's self-help groups have been clearing the brush and creating fire lines.

What is the way forward to combat forest fires?

- **Coordination**- India will need to improve coordination between ministries and agencies at the union and state levels to ensure contextually appropriate interventions that can be delivered by the forest department and local administrations.
- **Decentralisation**- Technical knowledge should also be decentralised so that people on the ground have access to information that helps them respond to disasters and build resilience in the long term.
- **Traditional knowledge**- A fundamental shift in making India's forests less vulnerable will also require being clear-eyed about problematic community practices.
- Tackling the challenges should move past blaming communities to addressing root causes of issues like incentives for unsuitable farming.
- There is much to learn from how their relationship with natural resources is regulated by natural rhythms and cycles.

Reference

1. https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/learning-from-forest-dwelling-tribal-communities-to-fight-forest-fires-7804113/



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