Osbeckia ulotricha & Agasthyamala Biosphere Reserve

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Why in News?

Botanists from the Botanical Survey of India (BSI) identified a new woolly-haired flowering plant species, Osbeckia ulotricha, in the shola grasslands of the Agasthyamala Biosphere Reserve (ABR).

Osbeckia ulotricha

- **Family** – Melastomataceae.
- **Morphology-** The name *ulotricha* stems from the Greek words *oulos* (woolly/crisp) and *thrix* (hair).
- It refers to its distinct woolly-curly hair covering on the flower base (sub-globose hypanthium) and an ovary crowned with true bristles.
- **Habitat -** It grows exclusively along the damp margins of Tropical Montane Wet Temperate Forests (shola) and montane grasslands at high elevations between 1,200 and 1,500 meters.
- **Micro-Endemism -** The species is critically micro-endemic; botanists recorded only about 50 flowering individuals across three localized sites within an area of less than 1 km^2.

Agasthyamala Biosphere Reserve (ABR)

- **Location -** Located at the southernmost tip of the Western Ghats.
- **Established in** – 2001.

- **Inter-State Boundary -** Straddles two states, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.
- **Core Peak -** Named after **Agasthyarkoodam (Agasthyamalai Peak)**, a 1,868-meter-high mountain inside the reserve that holds cultural reverence associated with Sage Agastya.
- **Protected Areas-** ABR serves as a continuous ecological corridor comprising several wildlife sanctuaries and tiger reserves:
    - **Kerala Segment-** Neyyar Wildlife Sanctuary, Peppara Wildlife Sanctuary, Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary, and surrounding forest divisions (Achencoil, Thenmala, Konni, Punalur).
    - **Tamil Nadu Segment -** Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR) and adjoining forest divisions.
- **UNESCO Status -** Included in UNESCO's **World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR)** in March 2016.
    - Recognized as part of the Western Ghats UNESCO World Heritage Site cluster.
- **Medicinal Hub -** Home to over 2,000 species of medicinal plants used in Ayurveda and Siddha medicine, earning it a reputation as a natural genetic repository.
- **Diverse Vegetation-** Features tropical wet evergreen forests, South Western Ghats moist deciduous forests, montane rain forests, and high-altitude shola-grasslands.
- **Key Wildlife -** Provides critical habitat for the Bengal tiger, Asian elephant, Nilgiri tahr, Lion-tailed macaque, and endemic amphibians/reptiles.
- **Kani Tribe-** Inhabited by the **Kani (Kanikaran) tribe**, one of the oldest indigenous communities in South India.

Reference

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