Recasting India's Environmental Policies

What is the issue?

The latest Environmental Performance Index (EPI) placing India last among all 180 assessed countries has been rejected by the Union Government.

What is the recent index about?

- The EPI is an international ranking system of countries based on their environmental health.
- It is a biennial index, first started in 2002 as the Environment Sustainability Index.
- The index is released by the World Economic Forum in collaboration with the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy and Columbia University Center for International Earth Information Network.
- India has fallen from rank 168 in 2020 to a rank of 180 as per the recent report.
- India does better in sub-metrics such as growth rates for black carbon, methane and fluorinated gases, and greenhouse gas emissions based on their intensity and per capita volumes.

To know more about the Environment Index, click here

> *The EPI report estimates that China, India, the United States, and Russia are expected to account for over 50% of global residual greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.*

What was India's response?

- The EPI ranking and scores have been rejected by the Union Government as based on unfounded assumptions and unscientific methods.
- India has faulted the EPI for introducing a new metric on climate with increased weight in the calculation compared to the 2020 assessment.
- It stands accused of ignoring the important tenet of equity in global climate policy within the United Nations framework that India has
    - low per capita GHG emissions
    - reduced intensity of GHG emissions in its economy
    - made big strides achieving 40% renewable power generation
    - supported electric vehicles
    - launched a major carbon sink initiative
    - done a lot for wetland conservation
- It has protested that the new India State of Forest Report (ISFR) 2021 was not factored in as part of the biodiversity metric.

What about the claims of India regarding the PARI score?

- India scored abysmally low on the Protected Areas Representativeness Index, or PARI (0.5).
- The Government has claimed that the EPI scores for biodiversity health are faulty due to weaknesses in collecting species and habitat data.
- The country has protested that the new India State of Forest Report (ISFR) 2021 was not factored in as part of the biodiversity metric.
- However, the ISFR ran into trouble for making spectacular claims, because of perceived methodological weaknesses.
- It is faulted for relying on a relaxed definition of forest and claiming expansion of forests when satellite imagery of the same areas showed a decline.
- It was said that palm trees in private plantations in Tamil Nadu, tea estates in several States and even urban tree agglomerations were found added as forest.

What does the report say on biome protection and air quality?

- **Biome protection-** The Index assigns a 'laggard' rank on tropical and subtropical dry broadleaf and coniferous forests, montane grasslands and shrublands
- It has assigned the "worst performance" rank on deserts and xeric shrublands.
- The Government's defence is that national and legal boundaries for protected areas may not match geographical boundaries of biomes, and international classifications may not be optimal to measure conservation.
- **Air quality**- The Government faults the dataset on pollutant concentration data because of higher uncertainty in regions with less extensive monitoring networks and emissions inventories.
- In 93% of India, the amount of pollution remains well above WHO [World Health Organization] guidelines.
- **Other ignored aspects**- The government has blamed the ranking agencies for not engaging with India on
    - the climate change mitigation programme
    - not providing a handicap under the United Nations principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC)

What is the need of the hour?

- India needs to adopt a dashboard approach to indicators, assigning high weight to the environment, modelled on the proposal made by Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz and Jean-Paul Fitoussi for development beyond GD.
- This can
    - generate good data
    - identify the real beneficiaries of policies
    - avoid serious environmental deficits
    - curb pollution
    - ensure inter-generational equity in the use of natural resources

References

1. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-epi-may-rankle-but-india-can-recast-policies/article65543217.ece

