Stepping back from an Ecological Abyss

What is the issue?

There is a need to balance India's developmental needs with the sustenance of its ecological foundations.

How is the prospects of earth today?

- **Air pollution**- 480 million Indians face the world's most extreme air pollution levels.
- **Water stress**- According to NITI Aayog, "600 million people in India face high to extreme water stress with nearly 70% of water being contaminated
- **Water quality**- India is placed at 120th amongst 122 countries in the water quality index.
- **Land degradation**- According to the ISRO, land degradation and desertification are taking place over 30% of our land.
- **Land productivity**- Average levels of land productivity are one-fourth or one-fifth of what they could be.
- **Pesticide residues**- Food items in most cities have pesticide residues well above human safety levels.
- **Environmental damage**- The latest global environmental ranking by Yale and Columbia Universities (Environmental Performance Index) puts India at the bottom among 180 countries.

What are the pressing concerns?

- **Focus on GDP**- The obsession with economic growth despite growing evidence of GDP being a very poor indicator of human well-being treats the natural environment as fodder for exploitation.
- **Ignoring natural elements**- Despite public posturing about the Sustainable Development Goals, the natural elements such as land, water, biodiversity and air continue to be ignored.
- **Favouring corporate access**- The Government is dismantling environmental and social security policies to favour corporate access to land and natural resources.
- It can be seen from the latest proposals to amend forest and environment laws, and the Environment Impact Assessment notification.
- **Poor budgetary allocation**- The 2022-23 Budget has an allocation for highways that alone is 40 times greater than the Budget of the Ministry for Environment, Forests and Climate Change.
- The Climate Action Plan got a meagre Rs.30 crore in the 2022-23 Budget.
- **Role of MNCs**- With greater integration into the global economy, the entry of multinational corporations into every sector, and increasing exports of natural materials and imports of toxic waste, the issue of environmental sustainability was

downgraded.

- **Mining**- Mining projects crept into wildlife protected areas and Adivasi territories and the oceans became a target for major commercial extraction (Deep Ocean Mission).
- **Poor displacement**- Over 60 million people have been physically displaced by development projects in the last few decades with very poor rehabilitation.
- **Climate crisis**- The climate crisis severely compounds all this with events of extreme temperatures, erratic rainfall, cloudbursts and cyclones.

A Lancet Planetary Health journal article says that extreme temperatures in India are responsible for 7,40,000 excess deaths annually.

Can ecological sustainability be ensured while generating livelihood security?

- **Vikalp Sangam process-** 5000 Dalit women farmers of the Deccan Development Society have demonstrated how organic, rainfed farming with traditional seed diversity can provide full food security.
- **Organic Kala cotton-** Several handloom weavers in Kachchh (Gujarat) have shown how dignified livelihoods can be revived based on organic Kala cotton and a mix of traditional and new skills.
- **Community-led ecotourism-** Community-led ecotourism, such as homestays in Uttarakhand and Ladakh and Sikkim, has combined increased earnings with ecologically sensitive visitation.
- **Community conservation-** Community conserved areas have shown a democratic approach to wildlife protection very different from the top-down 'protected area' model.
- **UNEP suggestion**- The United Nations Environment Programme has advocated public transportation, organic farming, land and water regeneration, renewable energy, community health, eco-friendly construction, ecotourism, and small-scale manufacturing to enhance job creation.
- Linking programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act with such activities, has huge potential.
- **Collective mobilization**- There is a need for collective mobilisation of industrial workers, farmers, fishers, craftspersons, pastoralists, urban and rural youth, women in all sectors, the 'disabled' and LGBTQ, and those speaking on behalf of wildlife.

References

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