The Baton of Forest Restoration in the Net Zero Race

Why in news?

India's pledge to set a net zero target by 2070, at the COP26 summit, Glasgow, has again highlighted the importance of forests as an undisputed mechanism to help mitigate the challenges of climate change.

What is the importance of forests?

- The importance of forests was highlighted during the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC) framework of **REDD+ for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation**.
- The sustainable management of forests for the conservation and enhancement of forest carbon stocks were also focussed.
- Land-based sinks (natural climate solutions which also include forests) can provide up to 37% of emission reduction and help in keeping the global temperature below 2° C.
- As per the **IPCC report**, natural regeneration model of restoration is favoured over the existing mode of tree planting as such forests are said to secure nearly 32% carbon storage.

What is the status of India's forest cover?

- As per the State of Forests Report (2019), the open forest has increased to 3,04,499 sq.km (9.26%) compared to 1989.
- Every year, on an average, nearly 1.57 lakh hectare of forests was degraded.
- This degradation highlights the presence of anthropogenic pressures including encroachment, grazing, fire, etc.
- Having diverted nearly 1.5 million hectares of forests since 1980 for developmental activities and losing nearly 1.48 million hectares of forests to encroachers, India is witnessing enormous degradation of forests and deforestation.

What efforts were taken by the government to promote forest conservation?

- **National Forest Policy, 1988**- The aim of the policy is to ensure environmental stability and maintenance of ecological balance including atmospheric equilibrium which is vital for sustenance of all life forms, human, animal and plant.
- It aims to
    - Conserve the natural heritage of the country by preserving the forests with the vast variety of flora and fauna
    - Increase the forest/tree cover in the country through massive afforestation and social forestry programmes.
    - Increase the productivity of forests to meet essential national needs.
    - Efficient utilisation of forest produce

    - Check soil erosion and denudation in the catchments areas
    - The extension of sand-dunes in the desert areas
    - Create a massive people's movement for achieving the objectives and to minimise pressure on existing forests.
- **Joint forest management**- In 1990, India made its attempt to engage local communities in a partnership mode while protecting and managing forests and restoring wastelands with the concept of care and share.
- The concept of forest development agencies was introduced which paved the way for fund flow from various other sources to joint forest management committees.
- The efforts to make this participatory approach operative resulted in the formation of nearly 1.18 lakh joint forest management committees managing over 25 million hectares of forest area.
- It meant not only for the protection and development of biodiversity but also for the reduction in man-animal conflicts and the protection of forests from fires and grazing.
- **Forest Conservation Act, 1980**- The Act prohibits the felling of forests for any "non-forestry" use without prior clearance by the central government.
- **National Mission for Green India**- The Green India Mission under the National Action Plan on Climate Change is a 7 billion dollar environmental intervention laid out in 2011.
- The mission aims at protecting, restoring and enhancing India's diminishing forest cover.
- It intends to respond to climate change by a combination of adaptation and mitigation measures.
- In 1999, the **Compensatory Afforestation** (CA) concept was proposed that states that the "area" of forest lost have to be compensated by afforesting an "equal area" on non-forest land.
- **CAMPA**- Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) are meant to promote afforestation and regeneration activities as a way of compensating for forest land diverted to non-forest uses.
- It was constituted as aNational Advisory Council under the chairmanship of the Union Minister of Environment & Forests for monitoring, technical assistance and evaluation of compensatory afforestation activities.

What is the role of local institutions of gram panchayat or joint forest management committees in forest conservation?

- Their role is now restricted to be a consultative institution instead of being partners in planning and implementation.
- The indifference and alienation from the participatory planning and implementation of various schemes affects the harmony between Forest Departments and communities, endangering the protection of forests.
- This is more relevant while taking up restoration activities including tree planting outside the designated forest areas where motivation and encouragement of stakeholders (especially panchayats and urban local bodies) are crucial.
- Except for Green India Mission, in all other centrally sponsored programmes such as Project Tiger, fire management, Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats (IDWH) including the CAMPA, there is a lack of priority and policy support to ensure the participation of local communities.

What is the way forward?

- **Carbon sinks**- As committed at Glasgow, India will have to 'focus much more on climate change and devise strategies and programmes to achieve the net zero target'.

- Besides reducing the quantum of emissions in a phased manner, the approaches for carbon storage and offsetting through natural sinks such as forests need to be given equal priority.
- **Policy changes**- There is a need to revisit our existing legal and policy mechanismst to
    - Incentivise the local communities appropriately
    - Ensure fund flow for restoration interventions
    - Provide for the adequate participation of local people in planning and implementation through local institutions
- **Telangana model-** Telangana has amended the panchayat and municipal acts for environmental concerns and created a provision for a Green Fund, or **Telangana Haritha Nidhi**, for tree planting and related activities.
- This need to be replicated in other states.
- **Support to local commuities**- Financial and institutional support mechanisms and negotiations with stakeholders has to be enabled to incentivise local communities to boost efforts to conserve and develop forest resources.
- **Inclusive approach**- Though India did not become a signatory of the **Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use**, the considerations of land tenure and the forest rights of participatory communities with accelerated finances will help aid steps in the race toward net zero.
- This inclusive approach with political prioritisation will not only help reduce emissions but also help to conserve and increase our forest cover to a third of our total area.
- It will also protect our once rich and precious biological diversity.

127 countries at the COP26 climate summit signed the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use to halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030.

References

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