



Forest restoration

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(Mains GS 3 : Conservation, Environmental Pollution and Degradation, Environmental Impact Assessment.)

Context:

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

Natural forest cover:

- The importance of forests was already highlighted during the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) framework (2013) of REDD+ for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, along with the 'sustainable management of forests for the conservation and enhancement of forest carbon stocks'.
- In a study by Griscom (2017), 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 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change a natural regeneration model of forest restoration is much better than the existing much-hyped mode of tree planting as such forests are said to secure nearly 32% carbon storage.

Participation of people:

- Though India is said to have increased its forest cover by 15,000 square kilometres in the last six years, the degradation of existing forests continues.

- As per the State of Forests Report (1989), the country had 2,57,409 sq.km (7.83% of its geographical area) under the open forest category, having a density of 10% to less than 40%; however, in 30 years (2019) this has been increased to 3,04,499 sq.km (9.26%).
- This means every year on average, nearly 1.57 lakh hectare of forests was degraded and this degradation highlights the presence of anthropogenic pressures including encroachment, grazing, fire, which our forests are subjected to.
- 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 coupled with an intricate link between poverty and unemployment, India is witnessing enormous degradation of forests and deforestation.
- This warrants the participation of people as an essential and effective route to achieve the desired target of carbon sequestration through the restoration of forests.

Joint forest management:

- In a historic departure from pursuing commercial objectives to supporting the needs of people in a participatory manner (as envisaged in National Forest Policy, 1988), India made its attempt, in 1990, to engage local communities in a partnership mode while protecting and managing forests and restoring wastelands with the concept of care and share.
- This concept of joint forest management spelt much hope for States and forest-fringe communities.
- Later, the concept of forest development agencies was introduced to consolidate the efforts in an autonomous model, which paved the way for fund flow from various other sources to joint forest management committees.

Participatory approach:

- 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.
- Most of these became active and operative while implementing various projects financed by external agencies such as the World Bank, the Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund (OECF) Japan, the Department for International Development (DFID) United Kingdom and the European Union (EU).
- The similar system of joint management in the case of national parks, sanctuaries and tiger reserves which existed in the name of eco-development committees proved effective.

Gradual decline:

- The effectiveness of eco-development committees is because they could garner the support of participating communities not only for the protection and development of biodiversity but also in the considerable reduction in man-animal conflicts and the protection of forests from fires and grazing.
- However, the completion of the project period and lack of subsequent funding affected their functionality and also the protection of forests due to a lack of support from participating local communities including associated non-governmental organisations.
- Except for the National Mission for Green India, in all other centrally sponsored programmes such as Project Tiger, fire management, Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats (IDWH) including the Compensatory Afforestation Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA), the lack of priority and policy support to ensure the participation of local communities via the institutions of joint forest management committees slowly made their participation customary.

Becomes consultative institution:

- The role of local institutions of gram panchayat or joint forest management committees is now restricted to be a consultative institution instead of being partners in planning and implementation.
- This indifference and alienation from the participatory planning and implementation of various schemes further 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.

The Telangana model:

- To achieve net zero targets there is a need to revisit our existing legal and policy mechanisms, incentivise the local communities appropriately and ensure fund flow for restoration interventions, duly providing for the adequate participation of local people in planning and implementation through local institutions.
- Political priority and appropriate policy interventions (as done recently in Telangana by amending the panchayat and municipal acts for environmental concerns and creating a provision for a Green Fund, or Telangana Haritha Nidhi, for tree planting and related activities) need replication in other States.
- These should be supported by enabling financial and institutional support mechanisms and negotiations with stakeholders to incentivise local communities to boost efforts to conserve and develop forest resources.

Inclusive approach:

- 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'.

- 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'.

Conclusion:

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.