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Forest cover has increased by 1540 sq. km compared to last assessment, informs Ashwini Kumar Choubey

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“The forest cover of the country has increased by 1540km² as compared to the last assessment i.e., India State of Forest Report (ISFR) 2019. Further, the overall increase in forest cover in the last one decade is 21,762 sq. km.” This information was provided by the Minister of State for the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Ashwini Kumar Choubey in the Lok Sabha.

The Forest Survey of India (FSI), Dehradun, an organization under the Environment Ministry assesses the forest cover of the country biennially. The findings of the assessment are then published in the India State of Forest Report (ISFR). The assessment gives the requisite data on the change in forest cover in the country.

Increase in Forest Cover

As per the ISFR 2021, the total forest cover of the country is 7,13,789 sq. km which is 21.71% of the geographical area of the country. Andhra Pradesh has a total forest cover of 29,784km² meanwhile Arunachal Pradesh has 66,431 sq. km covered in forest. Similarly, as per the ISFR 2021, Delhi has 195.00 sq. km and Goa has 2,244 sq. km of total forest cover.

As, which is 24.62% of the geographical area of the country. It was 24.56% of the total geographical area as per

the 2019 report.

Impact of Climate Change

Climate Change is real and is expected to impact the diverse ecosystems of the country in different ways. As per India's Third Biennial Update Report (2021) submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the studies on forests and biodiversity indicate that many natural ecosystems in the country are vulnerable to ongoing and future climate change.

However, the studies also show that Indian forests still retain the considerable potential for carbon sequestration (a natural or artificial process by which carbon dioxide is removed from the atmosphere and held in solid or liquid form). Furthermore, the dominant forest type in the country, namely the tropical dry forest, has considerable resilience to store carbon and maintain diversity in the face of climate-related disturbances such as drought or fire.

The Western Ghats is expected to witness certain changes in tree species composition while the natural grasslands of the country will be vulnerable to climate change with the risk of invasion by alien and native woody plants. There are already indications that both herbaceous and woody plants are moving to higher elevations in mountain regions such as the Himalayas.

Schemes of the Government

The Central and State Governments/Union Territory Administration is implementing several initiatives for increasing forest and tree cover in the country. These include the National Afforestation Programme (NAP) and Green India Mission (GIM), implemented by the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change.

National Afforestation Programme (NAP)

The Centrally Sponsored Scheme, National Afforestation Programme is a Scheme for the regeneration of degraded forests and adjoining areas in the country. It is being implemented through a three-tier institutional setup of the State Forest Development Agency (SFDA) at the State level, Forest Development Agency (FDA) at the Forest Division level, and Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) at the Village level.

Further, the Green India Mission under the National Action Plan on Climate Change, aims at protecting, restoring, and enhancing India's forest cover and responding to climate change using plantation activities in the forest and non-forest areas.

In addition to these, afforestation activities are also taken up under various programmes/funding sources such as Compensatory Afforestation Funds under the Environmental Protection Act, 1986, Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA), and the National Employment Guarantee Scheme.

Scheme (MGNREGA), National Agroforestry Policy and Sub-mission on Agro-forestry (SMAF), National Bamboo Mission and National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture.

Notably, State and UT Governments also have their afforestation and reforestation programmes. Almost every State has activities under social forestry, which largely focuses on tree planting in the areas outside forests.