

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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2023

1) Objections overruled, Forest Bill goes to House unchanged:

The Hindu – Page 1,10

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| Why is it in news? | A parliamentary committee, set up to examine the controversial proposed amendments to the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, has endorsed the amendment Bill in its entirety. |
| UPSC SYLLABUS RELEVANCE for prelims and Mains | Prelims: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environment and Ecology. Mains: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General Studies-III: Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment. |
| Important concepts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, 2023 |

PRELIMS PYQ EXERCISE – FIND ANSWER

Q. Consider the following statements:

- As per recent amendment to the Indian Forest Act, 1927, forest dwellers have the right to fell the bamboo grown in forest areas.
- As per the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, bamboo is a minor forest produce.
- The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forests Rights) Act, 2006 allows ownership of minor forest produce to forest dwellers.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A] 1 and 2 only
 B] 2 and 3 only
 C] 3 only
 D] 1, 2 and 3

TODAY'S PRELIMS PRACTICE QUESTION:

Q. Consider the following statements about the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, 2023:

1. The Bill seeks to amend the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, which was enacted to ensure that India's forest land is not usurped for non-forestry purposes.
2. There is a proposal to change the name of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 to the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam.

Which among the statements mentioned above is/are incorrect?

- a) 1 only
- b) 2 only
- c) Both 1 and 2
- d) Neither 1 nor 2

Correct answer: A

Explanation:

- The Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, 2023 seeks to amend the pivotal Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, which was enacted to ensure that India's forest land is not wantonly usurped for non-forestry purposes. There is a proposal to change the name of the 1980 law from the Forest (Conservation) Act to the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, which translates to Forest (Conservation and Augmentation) Act.

Mains PYQ Exercise

- Examine the status of forest resources of India and its resultant impact on climate change. (Answer in 250 words) 15 (2020)

Today's mains practice question:

- What are the proposed changes in the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, 2023? Discuss the criticisms of the bill.

DETAILED EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, 2023:

Background:

- After Independence, vast areas of forest land were designated as reserved and protected forests.
- However, many forested areas were left out, and areas without any standing forests were included in 'forest' lands.

- In 1996, the Supreme Court suspended the felling of trees across the country, and ruled that the FC Act would apply to all land parcels that were either recorded as 'forest' or resembled the dictionary meaning of forest.
- In June 2022, the government amended the Forest Conservation Rules to propose a mechanism to allow developers to raise plantations "over land on which the (FC) Act is not applicable" and to swap such plots against subsequent requirements of compensatory afforestation.

Introduction of the Bill:

- In March 2023, the government proposed amendments to India's Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, which according to some, weaken the Act's primary purpose, which is to protect and conserve the country's forests.
- The Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha on March 29, 2023 and was referred to a joint committee.

About the Bill:

- The Bill seeks to amend the pivotal Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, which was enacted to ensure that India's forest land is not wantonly usurped for non-forestry purposes.
- The Bill amends the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 to make it applicable to certain types of land.
- These include land notified as a forest under the Indian Forest Act, 1927 or in government records after the 1980 Act came into effect.
- The Act will not be applicable for land converted to non-forest use before December 12, 1996.
- The Act empowers the Centre to require that any forest land diverted for non-forestry purposes be duly compensated.
- It also extends its remit to land which is not officially classified as "forest" in State or Union government records.

About the amendments:

- While the Act has been amended several times in the past few decades — mostly in the spirit of bringing larger tracts of forest-like land under State protection — the latest set of amendments are different.
- According to the Centre, these amendments are necessary to remove ambiguities and bring clarity about the applicability of the Act in various lands.

- Some of the proposed amendments specify where the Act does not apply.
- Other amendments specifically encourage the practice of cultivating plantations on non-forest land that could, over time, increase tree cover, act as a carbon sink, and aid India's ambition of being 'net zero' in terms of emissions by 2070.
- The amendments would also remove the 1980 Act's restrictions on creating infrastructure that would aid national security and create livelihood opportunities for those living on the periphery of forests.
- The amendments were only introduced in the Lok Sabha in March, but a draft copy has been in the public domain, for comment, since June 2022.
- This has invited opposition from multiple quarters, including some northeastern States who objected that vast tracts of forest land would be unilaterally taken away for defence purposes.
- There was also opposition from several environmental groups who said that the amendments removed Central protection from vast tracts of so-called 'deemed forest' and would permit activities such as tourism in these areas, compromising their integrity.
- The Lok Sabha moved a motion to refer the Bill to a Joint Committee, which was seconded by the Rajya Sabha.

Objections against the Bill and the response of the Environment Ministry:

- Objections were raised to various aspects of the Bill, including complaints that the proposed amendments "diluted" the Supreme Court's 1996 judgment in the Godavarman case that extended protection to wide tracts of forests, even if they were not recorded as forests.
- The Environment Ministry denied this point, and argued that provisions in the Bill guarded against such situations.
- Construction of highways, hydel power projects and other such projects in geographically sensitive areas within 100 km of International Borders or the Line of Control will no longer require a forest clearance, an amendment that was "deeply problematic".
- The Environment Ministry responded that such exemptions were not "generic" and were unavailable to private entities.
- There were even objection to the proposal to change the name of the 1980 law from the Forest (Conservation) Act to the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, which translates to Forest (Conservation and Augmentation) Act.

- The objections were on the grounds that it was “non-inclusive” and left out “vast tracks of population both in South India and also in the Northeast.”
- Environment Ministry officials defended the name change, saying that it stressed the need to not only conserve but also “augment” forests, and that forest conservation involved much more than according “clearances.”

Conclusion:

- The Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, despite attracting objections and controversies, has received the endorsement of the parliamentary committee.
- The proposed amendments aim to bring clarity to the Act’s applicability and promote tree cover, national security infrastructure, and livelihood opportunities.

Godavarman case:

- In the T N Godavarman Thirumalpad case 1996, the Supreme Court (SC) accepted a wide definition of forests under the Act and held that the word ‘forest’ must be understood according to its dictionary meaning.
- This description covers all statutorily recognised forests, whether designated as reserved, protected or otherwise for the purpose of Section 2 (1) of the Act and also includes any areas recorded as forest in the government record irrespective of the ownership.
- The provisions for the conservation of forest and the matters connected therewith applies clearly to all forests irrespective of the ownership or classification.
- The freedom to define which tracts of forest qualify as forest has been the prerogative of States since 1996.
- However, this only applies to forest land that has not already been historically classified as “forest” in revenue records, or categorised so by the government as “protected” or “reserve forest”.

2) Report highlights impact of pandemic on education:

The Hindu – Page 12

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| Why is it in news? | The pandemic led to a decline in educational performance of many districts in the country, reveals a report from the Education Ministry |
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| UPSC SYLLABUS RELEVANCE for prelims and Mains | Prelims: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education and human resources Mains: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General Studies II – Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources. |
| Important concepts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performance Grading Index for Districts (PGID) |
| <p style="text-align: center;">TODAY'S PRELIMS PRACTICE QUESTION:</p> <p>Q. Consider the following statements about the Performance Grading Index for Districts (PGID):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The Performance Grading Index for Districts (PGID) was recently released by the Ministry of Education. Ati-uttam is the highest grade among the grades of this report. <p>Which among the statements mentioned above is/are correct?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 only 2 only Both 1 and 2 Neither 1 nor 2 <p>Correct answer: A</p> <p>Explanation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Performance Grading Index for Districts (PGID) released by the Ministry of Education as a combined report for 2020-21 and 2021-22 assesses the performance of school education system at the district level. Much like the PGI for States released earlier, this report too has 10 grades under which districts are categorised, with Daksh being the highest grade. | |
| <p style="text-align: center;">DETAILED EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT CONCEPTS</p> | |
| <p>Performance Grading Index for Districts (PGID):</p> <p>About PGID:</p> | |

- The PGI is a comprehensive assessment tool devised by the Ministry of Education (MoE) for evaluating the performance of the school education system at the State/UT level.
- PGI-D assesses the performance of the school education system at the district level by creating an index for comprehensive analysis.
- It assesses the performance based on various indicators and creates an index for comprehensive analysis.
- The PGI was first released for the year 2017-18 and has been updated up to the year 2020-21.
- The PGI-D assesses district-level performance in school education based on the data collected from various sources, including Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE +), National Achievement Survey (NAS), 2017 and data provided by respective districts.
- Since 2017-18, MoE has released five annual reports that provide insights on status of school education in States and UTs.
- The Performance Grading Index for Districts (PGID) released by the Ministry of Education as a combined report for 2020-21 and 2021-22, assesses the performance of school education system at the district level.

Structure of the Index:

- The PGI-D structure comprises total weightage of 600 points across 83 indicators, which are grouped under 6 categories viz., Outcomes, Effective Classroom Transaction, Infrastructure Facilities & Student's Entitlements, School Safety & Child Protection, Digital Learning and Governance Process.
- Much like the PGI for States released earlier, this report too has 10 grades under which districts are categorised, with Daksh being the highest grade (above 90%), followed by Utkarsh (81%-90%); AtiUttam (71%-80%); Uttam (61%-70%); Prachesta-1 (51%-60%); Prachesta-2 (41%-50%); Prachesta-3 (31%-40%); Akanshi-1 (21% to 30%); and Akanshi-2 (11% to 20%).
- The lowest grade is Akanshi-3, for districts that score less than 10%.

Recent rankings:

- While none of the districts were able to earn Daksh and Utkarsh, in the latest report, 121 districts were graded as Ati-Uttam for 2020-21, though this number fell by more than half in 2021-22, with just 51 districts making the grade.

- Further attesting to the pandemic effect, while 2020-21 had 86 districts under Prachesta-2 (sixth-highest grade), this number rose to 117 in 2021-22.
- In 2021-22, Chandigarh retained its Ati-Uttam status, as well as some districts of Delhi and Gujarat.
- In Maharashtra, Satara, Kolhapur, Nashik and Mumbai achieved this status as did Kolkata.
- Tamil Nadu has several districts in the fourth best grade (Uttam) and three — Ramanathapuram, Pudukkottai and Theni — in Prachesta1. Uttar Pradesh has several districts under Uttam and Prachesta-1, and four under Prachesta-2.
- Most of the districts of Jammu and Kashmir fall under the Prachesta 1 and 2 grades.
- South Salmara-Mankachar district was the only district in Assam under Akanshi-1 for 2021-22, grade) while the two grades at the bottom had no districts.

Importance of the report:

- The PGI-D report is expected to assist state education departments in identifying gaps at the district level and improving performance in a decentralized manner.
- By prioritizing areas for intervention, districts can work towards reaching the highest grade and enhancing overall education quality.

3) Ahead of U.S. diplomats' visit, EU sends election team to Bangladesh:

The Hindu – Page 13

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| Why is it in news? | Ahead of the arrival of high-power American diplomats, a six-member Election Exploratory Mission of the European Union started a two-week visit to Bangladesh early on Sunday. |
| UPSC SYLLABUS RELEVANCE for prelims and Mains | <p>Prelims:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current events of national and international importance. <p>Mains:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General Studies II - India and its neighbourhood- relations. |

Important concepts

- European External Action Service (EEAS)

TODAY'S PRELIMS PRACTICE QUESTION

Q. Consider the following statements about the European External Action Service (EEAS):

1. The EEAS was formally launched in the year 2021.
2. It was created by signing of the Treaty of Lisbon.

Which among the statements mentioned above is/are correct?

- a) 1 only
- b) 2 only
- c) Both 1 and 2
- d) Neither 1 nor 2

Correct answer: B

Explanation:

- The European External Action Service (EEAS) was formally launched in the year 2011. It was created by the Treaty of Lisbon which was signed in 2007 and entered into force in late 2009.

DETAILED EXPLANATION OF IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

European External Action Service (EEAS):

About EEAS:

- The External Action Service (EEAS) of the European Union is officially an autonomous body within the EU.
- It is in part the successor to the directorate general for external affairs of the European Commission, elements of Council's secretariat and supplemented by personnel from the member states.
- Its main task it to support the EU in making and implementing foreign and development policies.

- At the request of member states the EEAS acts as a diplomatic service. The EEAS also co-ordinates EU activities such as the missions to Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan.
- The European intelligence services is part of the EEAS as well.
- The European External Action Service (EEAS) is the diplomatic service and combined foreign and defence ministry of the European Union (EU).
- The EEAS is led by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP), who is also President of the Foreign Affairs Council and vice-president of the European Commission, and carries out the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).
- The EEAS does not propose or implement policy in its own name, but prepares acts to be adopted by the High Representative, the European Commission or the Council.
- The EEAS is also in charge of EU diplomatic missions (delegations) and intelligence and crisis management structures.

Background:

- European External Action Service (EEAS) was formally launched on 1 January 2011.
- It was created by the Treaty of Lisbon which was signed in 2007 and entered into force in late 2009.
- It's location is at Brussels, Belgium.

Structure:

- Most of the daily work at the EEAS headquarters is overseen by the Secretary General, assisted by the Deputy Secretaries-General.
- Six large departments cover areas of the world – Africa, the Americas, Asia and Pacific, Europe, Eastern Europe & Central Asia, Middle East & North America. Another department is dedicated to Global Agenda and Multilateral relations.

What does the EEAS do?

- It supports the EU High Representative in conducting EU foreign and security policy manages diplomatic relations & strategic partnerships with non-EU countries works with the national diplomatic services of EU countries, the UN and other leading powers
- Practical examples include:

- i. peace building – through political, economic and practical support
- ii. ensuring security – under the Common Security & Defence Policy
- iii. maintaining good relations with the EU's immediate neighbours through the European Neighbourhood Policy
- iv. development and humanitarian aid and crisis response
- v. tackling climate change and human rights issues

India and EU:

- India and the European Union have a strategic partnership since 2004 and the strategic partnership has been growing ever since.
- However, particularly in the last couple of years, there has been a momentous transformation.
- We now are partners in a broad spectrum of issues.
- It is a partnership, which is underpinned by shared values- democracy, individual freedom, pluralism and strong belief in multilateralism.
- India and the European Union believe in a cooperative approach to international relationships.

MODEL MAINS ANSWER FOR TODAY'S EXPECTED MAINS QUESTION

Q. What are the proposed changes in the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, 2023? Discuss the criticisms of the bill.

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| Why this question? | UPSC PYQ: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine the status of forest resources of India and its resultant impact on climate change. (Answer in 250 words) 15 (2020) |
| First step is to understand the demand of the question | Question has two parts: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the proposed changes in the bill? 2. What are the criticisms of the bill? |
| Introduction | The Bill seeks to amend the pivotal Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, which was enacted to ensure that India's forest land is not wantonly usurped for |

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| | <p>non-forestry purposes. The Act empowers the Centre to require that any forest land diverted for non-forestry purposes be duly compensated. It also extends its remit to land which is not officially classified as “forest” in State or Union government records.</p> |
| Body | <p>Proposed changes in the Bill</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Construction of highways, hydel power projects and other such projects in geographically sensitive areas within 100 km of International Borders or the Line of Control will no longer require a forest clearance It proposes to insert a preamble to the Act to encompass the country's rich tradition of preserving forests, their bio-diversity and tackling climate change challenges within its ambit. The Bill adds that the central government may issue directions for the implementation of the Act to any other authority/ organisation under or recognised by the centre, state, or union territory. <p>Criticisms of the Bill</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The amendment Bill, instead of completing the demarcation process on the ground, seeks to limit the applicability of the FC Act only to land recorded as ‘forest’. It seeks to exempt all strategic linear projects of "national importance and concerning national security" within 100 km of international borders, the LAC, and the LoC. Even after the enactment of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, the scope for their consent has eroded incrementally when it came to the diversion of forest land for development projects. In addition to livelihood impacts, biodiversity impacts, and hydrological impacts, the climate impacts of such development |

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| | <p>projects also cannot adequately be ‘compensated’ by compensatory afforestation.</p> |
| Conclusion: | <p>Forests are not just a collection of trees. Unlike man-made plantations, natural forests perform a range of ecosystem services that are key to the survival and well-being of millions of species.</p> <p>Objections were raised to various aspects of the Bill, including complaints that the proposed amendments “diluted” the Supreme Court’s 1996 judgment in the Godavarman case that extended protection to wide tracts of forests, even if they were not recorded as forests. Research has found that natural ecosystems sequester more carbon. The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report also stated that not degrading existing ecosystems in the first place will do more to lower the impact of the climate crisis than restoring ecosystems that have been destroyed.</p> |