

Shifting Agriculture Policy

Why in News?

The government is formulating a new policy that would lend legal recognition to shifting agriculture as a form of agro-forestry.

What is the objective of this move?

- By lending legal recognition, the government wants to enable nomadic farmers get bank credit and agriculture-related subsidies.
- This move has consequences that are likely to be disastrous.
- In India, shifting farming is still practiced largely in the ecologically fragile hilly terrains in the Northeast, alongside some other states.

What is Shifting Agriculture?

- It involves clearing of forests, burning the stubble and cultivating the land for a few years before moving to another plot, leaving the old patch for regeneration.
- It is also known as jhumming or slash-and-burn agriculture.
- This mode of farming has ill-effects on ecology, biodiversity, habitats and other natural features.
- It also causes loss or deterioration of forest cover leading to soil erosion and degradation of catchments of rivers and other water bodies.

What was NITI Aayog's idea?

- The NITI Aayog which had mooted the idea of redefining jhumming land-use as agro-forestry in a 2018 report.
- It is based on the contention that shifting farming is essentially a method of putting land to two distinct uses alternately,
 1. **Agriculture**, when it is under cultivation, and
 2. **Fallow forestry**, when it is left untilled for revival of forest.
- This plea seems well founded, but it cannot be disregarded that the time given for renewal of forests (3 to 4 years) is insufficient for that purpose.
- This phase used to be as long as 10 to 40 years in the past.
- The green cover now rarely comes up to the level where it can be deemed as secondary forest.

What do farmers need?

- The farmers engaged in jhumming (jhumias) are themselves fed up with this kind of nomadic life.
- As they feel jhumming is economically unviable, they want to move beyond subsistence farming to take up market-linked agriculture.
- They want opportunities for higher income from farming and non-farm employment, education and medical facilities and other civic amenities apart from access to government schemes.
- These are unduly denied to them in the absence of land titles (pattas) in their name.
- They don't get the benefits provided under the Forest Rights Act.
- At present, they are treated neither as farmers nor as forest dwellers.

What could be done?

- The farmers could be given financial assistance for terracing the hill slopes where jhumming is practised now.
- So, the jhumias would gladly shift to permanent farming.
- This should be complied with to put an end to the socio-ecological curse that shifting farming has virtually turned into.

Source: Business Standard

