Similipal Forest Fire

Why in news?

- The Similipal forest reserve area frequently witnesses forest fires during dry weather conditions.
- The recent one took weeks to come to control and the massive fire has threatened to cause colossal damage to the Similipal Biosphere.

What is the Similipal Biosphere reserve?

- Similipal is a national park and a tiger reserve.
    - Similipal derives its name from 'Simul' (silk cotton) tree.
- It is situated in the northern part of Odisha's Mayurbhanj district.
- Similipal and the adjoining areas was declared a biosphere reserve by the Government of India in 1994.
- It lies in the eastern end of the eastern ghat.
- **Biodiversity** - Similipal is the abode of 94 species of orchids and about 3,000 species of plants.
- The identified species of fauna include 12 species of amphibians, 29 species of reptiles, 264 species of birds and 42 species of mammals.
- All of this collectively highlights the biodiversity richness of Similipal.
- Sal is a dominant tree species.
- The transition zone of the reserve has 1,200 villages with a total population of about 4.5 lakh.
- Tribals constitute about 73% of the population.

How fire prone is Similipal forest?

- Generally, with the onset of summers and towards the end of autumn, the forest area remains vulnerable to forest fires.
- They are a recurrent annual phenomenon, but are also brought under control due to short span of precipitation.
    - The months of January and February witness rainfall of 10.8 and 21 mm, respectively.
- This duration coincides with the shedding of deciduous forests in the forest areas.
- The fallen leaves are more vulnerable to catching fire.
- They facilitate the spreading of forest fires quickly over the entire forest

area.
- The last incident of a major forest fire was reported in 2015.

What are the main causes?

- Natural causes such as lighting or even soaring temperatures can sometimes result in these fires.
- But forest officials and activists say most of the fires can be attributed to man-made factors.
- With dried leaves and tree trunks, even a spark can lead to a raging fire.
- Instances of poaching and hunting, wherein the poachers set a small patch of forest on fire to divert the wild animals, can lead to such fires.
- They do not douse the fire after hunting; this particular time is very vulnerable for fires to spread quickly.
- Secondly, jungle areas are also set on fire by villagers to clear the dry leaves on the ground for easy collection of mahua flowers.
    - These flowers are used to prepare a drink which is addictive in nature.
- Villagers also believe burning patches of sal trees will lead to better growth when planted again.

- This year, along with man-made factors, an advanced heat wave with the early onset of summer further deteriorated the condition.
- A total of 399 fire points have been identified in the fringe areas bordering the forest, close to the villages, during the recent fire.

How are these forest fires controlled and prevented?

- Such fires are generally brought under control by natural rains.
- Some of the methods to prevent fires include –
    i. forecasting fire-prone days
    ii. including community members to mitigate incidents of fire, creating fire lines, clearing sites of dried biomass
    iii. crackdown on poachers
- The forest fire lines, which are strips kept clear of vegetation, help break the forest into compartments to prevent fires from spreading.
- The forest department recently intensified its mitigation measures.
- It formed a squad each for 21 ranges across the five divisions to closely monitor the situation.
    - 1,000 personnel, 250 forest guards were pressed into action.
    - 40 fire tenders and 240 blower machines were used to contain the blaze.
- Awareness programmes are also being initiated at the community level to prevent such incidents.

Source: The Indian Express