# 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**