

**HOW FORESTS CAN HELP IN DOUBLING FARMERS' INCOME**

**Prelims:** Economics- Agriculture

**Mains:** GS-III- Major crops cropping patterns in various parts of the country, different types of irrigation and irrigation systems storage, transport and marketing of agricultural produce and issues and related constraints; e-technology in the aid of farmers.

**Background:**

- ▶▶ The Government of India is working out a plan to double farmers' income by 2022.
- ▶▶ The government plans to take up a number of measures and expand into allied sectors, promote zero-budget farming, organic farming, etc to double the income of the exiting farmers.

**What Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, said:**

- ▶▶ "One of the best ways to double farmers' income is to halve the number of farmers."

**Importance of Agriculture in Indian Economy:**

- ▶▶ Agriculture is the mainstay of the Indian economy even though it contributes less than 15 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product. Almost 50 per cent of Indian families are dependent on farms for their livelihood and they have made India a food-surplus country.

**Surplus food production issue**

- ▶▶ Surplus Production in some of the irrigated pockets – by canals, lift irrigation from rivers and groundwater – has not only made farming unsustainable for the small segment of farmers who have attained some sort of a success and achieved a good amount of income, but has also **destroyed ecology and local food diversity**.

**Issue with cost of production**

- ▶▶ At this point of time, while the so-called 'successful' farmers are struggling to maintain their income, which essentially means putting in more and more investment, the other farmers are busy struggling for subsistence.

**Shift to other Sectors:**

- ▶▶ The small and marginal land-holders should shift to other sectors as wage labourers as their farms are fit only for subsistence and their land holding is so small and fragmented that it is difficult to go for intensive agriculture.

- ▶▶ That is the reason the youth in the villages are no more interested in farming. According to the 2011 Census figures, 2,000 farmers are giving up farming each day. In 2016, the average age of an Indian farmer was 50.1 years and that's worrying.

### Issue of Food Security:

- ▶▶ If the trend of farmers moving out of their original occupation continues like this, it will be a **great challenge to meet our food requirements by the year 2050** when the food demand is expected to double than what it is now as because our population is expected to touch 1.9 billion, more than two thirds of which will be in the middle-income group.
- ▶▶ Food imports will be too costly and if farm distress continues the way it is, we can't anyway keep all farmers in villages and in their farms anyway.
  - ❖ Whether they will be gainfully employed in other sectors is another big question and we are not dealing with that at this moment.

### Farming class:

- ▶▶ While average statistical figures don't actually tell us as to which category of farmers — the **intensive agriculture segment or the subsistence segment** — is **gradually vanishing from the farms**, experience tells us that the small farmers are more vulnerable to migration. And that's exactly where we have a big problem.
- ▶▶ **Stats**
  - ❖ We have about 83 per cent rural people who are either entirely landless or own less than one hectare (ha) of land.
  - ❖ Another 14 per cent own less than three ha, and that is as good as a small and non-profitable farm holding depending on the irrigation status and other factors.
  - ❖ Only about 0.25 per cent of rural households own more than 10 ha of land and a minuscule 0.01 per cent own over 20 ha.
  - ❖ In terms of national per capita income parameters, the majority of small farmers — let's say more than 80 per cent — cannot stick to agriculture if they are not provided with other supports and social security measures.
- ▶▶ Their younger generations would have no motivation to stay with farming anyway and will gradually move out.

### Farmers are also forest protectors :

- ▶▶ There is a specific segment of farmers who live in and with forests. Most of these small and marginal farmers, including the **indigenous communities**, who live in and around our forests, do another big job for all of us.
- ▶▶ They protect our natural forests, besides adding to the country's food security.

- ▶▶ There are thousands of villages in India that are protecting local natural forests for various reasons.
- ▶▶ Many of these indigenous communities consider the forests as their ancestors, part of their family; and protect them for fuelwood, household timber, food, nutrition, medicinal plants and various other profits which they derive.
- ▶▶ **Stats**
  - ❖ In fact, globally, such communities are said to own or manage at least a quarter of the world's land surface.
  - ❖ While a recent global study says that as much as 22 per cent of income for the rural people living in and around forests comes from timber and non-timber forest resources, my own assessment from several villages spread across **India's central highlands finds out this to be up to 50 per cent or even more.**

### Benefits of people staying in Forest:

- ▶▶ They help absorb a huge amount of our carbon emission.
- ▶▶ New analysis reveals that indigenous peoples and local communities manage 300,000 million metric tons of carbon in their trees and soil — 33 times the energy emissions from 2017.

### Doubling of income for this section of farmer:

- ▶▶ For this segment of farmers, therefore, the doubling of income would need different strategies.
- ▶▶ **Rights to the forests**, better systems to support them for the ecosystem services — including water conservation through forestry — they are providing, improved market and augmented price for the various forest produce they market as a major livelihood support system, and provide them with better amenities.

### Way Forward:

- ▶▶ In her budget speech, India's Finance Minister said the government is considering zero budget farming as a key tool in their strategy to double farmers' income.
- ▶▶ These communities can take a lead in organic farming and even zero budget farming as most of them are still practicing low external input farming in their rain-fed farms.