

4. Draft Geo-heritage Sites and Geo-relics (Preservation and Maintenance) Bill, 2022

Prelims Syllabus: Environment

Mains Syllabus: GS-III Environment & Biodiversity | Climatic Change Conservation, Environmental Pollution & Degradation, Eia



Why in News?

- The country's geo-sciences and palaeontology experts have raised concerns over the Draft Geo-heritage Sites and Geo-relics (Preservation and Maintenance) Bill, 2022 as they believe that the Bill vests powers entirely in the hands of the Geological Survey of India (GSI).

Draft Geo-heritage Sites and Geo-relics (Preservation and Maintenance) Bill, 2022:

- As a signatory to the UNESCO Convention on Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, India was required to formulate legislation for protecting and preserving the geo-heritage of the country.
- In this context, the Union Ministry of Mines has formulated a draft of the Geoheritage Sites and Geo-relics (Preservation and Maintenance) Bill, 2022.
- The Bill aims to provide for the declaration, preservation, protection and maintenance of geo-heritage sites and geo-relics of national importance for geological studies, research and spreading awareness about such sites.

- Geo-heritage sites are those sites that are of rare and unique geological and geomorphologic significance having geomorphological, mineralogical, petrological, paleontological, and stratigraphic significance.
- Geo-relics are those relics or materials of geological significance or of national and international interest such as various minerals, meteorites, etc.
- The protection under the Bill also extends to caves, fossils, sedimentary rocks, natural rock sculptures, natural structures, etc.
- The draft Bill further notes that the deterioration of such material of geo-heritage and geo-relics significance will result in harmful impoverishment of the natural heritage of the Indian subcontinent that showcases unique geological characteristics of outstanding universal value.

Salient features of the draft Bill:

- The draft Bill empowers the Union Government to declare a geo-heritage site to be of national importance.
- While declaring such sites, the Union Government is required to provide two months' notice and consider objections before the declaration.
- The Bill has further empowered the Union Government to acquire an area under a geo-heritage site under the provisions of the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013.
- Both the Union Government as well as GSI are required to undertake measures to preserve and maintain every geo-heritage site and are authorised to inspect, survey, collect measurements and samples, undertake exploration operations, examine documents, etc.
- The Bill prohibits the construction, reconstruction, repair, or renovation of any building within the geo-heritage site area except for the purpose of conservation and maintenance of the geo-heritage site or if such construction is essential to the public.
- The Bill further provides penalties for destruction, removal, defacement, and misuse of geo-heritage sites and geo-relics.
- **The powers accorded to GSI:**
 - ✓ Identifying and declaring sites as having “geo-heritage” value.
 - ✓ Take possession of relics that rest in private hands.
 - ✓ Prohibit construction about 100 metres around geo-heritage sites.
 - ✓ Impose penalties against vandalism, defacement, and violations of directives of a site.

Associated concerns

- Experts, despite welcoming a geo-heritage bill, believe that instead of providing all authority to the Director General of GSI, there must be provisions to form a wider committee of experts from a range of institutions.
- Experts opine that by extending powers entirely to the hands of GSI, the Bill has neglected the interests and difficulties faced by researchers who actually undertake field studies.
- Furthermore, according to experts, the GSI is not equipped to manage such tasks of geo-heritage conservation, as it is mainly a research body.
- They believe that the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) is more experienced in the conservation, preservation, and restoration of artefacts and sites.
- The new Bill also empowers the Union government to denotify existing geo-heritage sites without any provision for public consultation if the Government believes that such sites are no longer of national importance.
- The Bill fails to provide for collaborations with other departments and also dilutes the powers of the State Governments which are currently managing most of the geo-heritage monuments.

