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## CHALLENGES FACED BY ELDERLY POPULATION

THIS ARTICLE COVERS 'DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS' AND THE TOPIC DETAILS OF "CHALLENGES FACED BY ELDERLY POPULATION". THIS TOPIC IS RELEVANT IN THE "SOCIETY" SECTION OF THE UPSC CSE EXAM.

### WHY IN THE NEWS?

Amidst the fervent discourse surrounding India's demographic dividend, a less noticed trend is the steady growth of the older population within the country. Overlooked in the midst of discussions about the youthful workforce, the number of individuals aged 60 and above is quietly increasing. From 100 million in 2011, this demographic segment is poised to more than double, reaching 230 million by 2036, constituting almost 15 percent of the nation's total populace. Projections indicate a further surge to 319 million by 2050, accounting for nearly one-fifth of the entire population.



*Status of elderly population in India*

### CONTEXT

The shift towards an aging population in India is propelled by declining fertility rates and lengthening life expectancy. Notably, the average household size has markedly reduced from 5.94 individuals in 2011 to 3.54 in 2021.

This trend signifies a significant departure from traditional family structures and poses challenges for the health and social care systems. With fewer family members available to provide care and an

increasing number of older individuals susceptible to chronic illnesses, there is a pressing need to reevaluate how we approach eldercare.

The blurred distinction between social and health care complicates matters further, particularly regarding home-based care for seniors. As families adapt to these changing dynamics, there is a growing reliance on external support systems to assist in caring for older relatives at home.

## **CHALLENGES FACED BY ELDERLY POPULATION**

**Healthcare Access and Affordability:** Aging is often accompanied by increased healthcare needs due to chronic conditions, disabilities, and age-related ailments. However, access to affordable and comprehensive healthcare services can be limited for elderly individuals, particularly in rural areas or for those without adequate insurance coverage.

**Social Isolation and Loneliness:** As individuals age, they may experience diminishing social networks due to factors such as retirement, loss of friends and family, or physical limitations. Social isolation and loneliness can have serious repercussions on mental and emotional well-being, leading to depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline.

**Financial Insecurity:** Many elderly individuals face financial challenges, including inadequate retirement savings, rising healthcare costs, and limited earning opportunities post-retirement. Economic insecurity can exacerbate stress and impact access to essential goods and services.

**Elder Abuse and Neglect:** Vulnerable older adults are at risk of various forms of abuse, including physical, emotional, financial, and neglect. Abuse may occur within families, care facilities, or communities, often due to factors such as dependency, power imbalances, or lack of awareness and resources for prevention and intervention.

**Ageism and Discrimination:** Negative stereotypes and discrimination based on age, known as ageism, can marginalize older adults and limit their opportunities for employment, social participation, and access to resources. Ageism can also influence healthcare decisions and treatment options, leading to disparities in care.

**Digital Divide:** As technology becomes increasingly integral to daily life, older adults who are not proficient in using digital devices or accessing online services may face challenges in staying connected, accessing information, and participating in activities such as telehealth appointments or online banking.

**Housing and Transportation:** Adequate housing options that are affordable, accessible, and age-friendly can be scarce for older adults, particularly those with mobility issues or disabilities. Additionally, limited access to transportation services can restrict mobility and independence, making it challenging for elderly individuals to access essential services and social activities.

## **STEPS TAKEN BY GOVERNMENT**

The Indian government has implemented various measures to support elderly people in the country. Some of the key steps taken include:

1. **National Policy for Older Persons (NPOP):** The Government of India formulated the NPOP in 1999 to address the welfare needs of senior citizens. The policy aims to ensure financial security, healthcare, and social support for the elderly.

2. **Integrated Programme for Older Persons (IPOP):** Under the social justice ministry, the IPOP provides financial assistance to NGOs for running old age homes, day care centers, and mobile Medicare units for the elderly.
3. **National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP):** The NSAP includes the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS), which provides monthly pensions to eligible senior citizens living below the poverty line.
4. **Rashtriya Vayoshri Yojana:** Launched in 2017, this scheme provides assistive living devices like walking sticks, hearing aids, and spectacles free of cost to senior citizens living below the poverty line.
5. **Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007:** This legislation mandates adult children to provide maintenance to their elderly parents if they are unable to support themselves financially. It also provides for setting up old age homes and mechanisms for speedy resolution of disputes.
6. **Healthcare Initiatives:** The government operates various healthcare programs aimed at elderly citizens, including the National Programme for Health Care of the Elderly (NPHCE), which focuses on providing accessible, affordable, and quality healthcare services to senior citizens.
7. **Pension Schemes:** Apart from the IGNOAPS, various pension schemes, including the Employees' Pension Scheme (EPS) and the Atal Pension Yojana (APY), provide financial security to elderly citizens, including those from the organized and unorganized sectors.
8. **Senior Citizens Savings Scheme (SCSS):** This savings scheme, launched by the government, offers a high rate of interest and tax benefits to senior citizens, providing them with a secure investment option.
9. **Awareness and Empowerment Programs:** The government conducts awareness campaigns and empowerment programs aimed at educating elderly citizens about their rights, entitlements, and available support services.
10. **Old Age Homes and Day Care Centers:** The government supports the establishment and maintenance of old age homes and day care centers, providing residential and day care facilities to elderly citizens who are destitute or in need of care and protection.

## WAY FORWARD

An essential step is to acknowledge the dual role of “home” as both a caregiving space and a workplace for caregivers. This recognition holds significance for safeguarding the rights and ensuring the safety of both care recipients and providers. The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) acknowledges the concept of home-based hospitalization under specific conditions, indicating a shift towards legitimizing home care as a viable healthcare option.

It is crucial to recognize that providing care at home differs significantly from care in institutional settings like hospitals or nursing homes. Treatment plans and engagement strategies must be adapted to suit the unique dynamics and environment of home-based care.

In response to the escalating demand for skilled caregivers, it's imperative to standardize their vocational training, job titles, responsibilities, and opportunities for career advancement. This standardization will enhance the quality of care provided and ensure consistency across caregiving services.

**Promoting Healthy Aging:** Investing in preventive healthcare programs and initiatives that promote healthy lifestyles can help reduce the burden of chronic diseases and disabilities among older adults, thereby enhancing their overall well-being and quality of life.

**Ensuring Social Inclusion:** Creating age-friendly communities and fostering intergenerational connections can help combat social isolation and loneliness among older adults. Encouraging participation in social activities, volunteer programs, and community events can promote a sense of belonging and purpose.

**Enhancing Financial Security:** Implementing policies that ensure adequate income support, pension schemes, and social security benefits for older adults can alleviate financial strain and improve their economic stability. Additionally, promoting financial literacy and access to affordable banking and insurance services can empower older adults to manage their finances effectively.

**Preventing Elder Abuse:** Strengthening legal frameworks, raising awareness, and providing support services for victims of elder abuse can help prevent and address instances of mistreatment, neglect, and exploitation.

**Improving Access to Healthcare Services:** Expanding healthcare infrastructure, especially in rural and underserved areas, and enhancing access to affordable and quality healthcare services tailored to the needs of older adults can improve health outcomes and promote active aging.

**Facilitating Lifelong Learning and Skill Development:** Offering opportunities for lifelong learning, skill development, and vocational training tailored to the interests and capabilities of older adults can enable them to stay engaged, productive, and socially connected.

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## FOREST FIRES IN UTTARAKHAND

THIS ARTICLE COVERS 'DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS' AND THE TOPIC DETAILS OF "Forest Fires in Uttarakhand". THIS TOPIC IS RELEVANT IN THE " ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY" SECTION OF THE UPSC CSE EXAM.

### Why in the News?

The forest department in Uttarakhand has verified that the wildfires currently spreading in Nainital and Pauri Garhwal districts have been predominantly triggered by "mischievous elements" and negligent behaviour. This includes instances where individuals have intentionally set fires in their agricultural lands, leading to the subsequent spread into the nearby forests.

### HOW VULNERABLE IS UTTRAKHAND TO FOREST FIRES?

- **Mainly Human-Induced Origins:** Approximately 95% of forest fires in Uttarakhand stem from human activities, including the negligent disposal of cigarette ends, unsuccessful controlled burning practices by farmers, and deliberate acts of arson. This significantly heightens the vulnerability of the forests to fire outbreaks.
- **Highly Combustible Flora:** Uttarakhand's Himalayan foothills are cloaked with temperate and subtropical pine forests, notably the Chir pine variety, which shed substantial quantities of extremely flammable pine needles onto the forest floor.

- **Challenging Topography and Soil Erosion:** The distinct mountainous terrain of Uttarakhand's Kumaon region exacerbates the severity of forest fires.
- **Inadequate Firefighting Resources:** Limited by financial constraints and a lack of environmental consciousness, the Uttarakhand government allocates minimal resources for tackling forest fires, thereby facilitating their rapid propagation.

### India's Vulnerability to Forest Fires

- India witnessed a staggering 345,989 forest fires between November 2020 and June 2021, marking the highest number recorded for that timeframe in the country's history. This surge represents a significant escalation compared to previous years, with Uttarakhand alone reporting 21,487 forest fires during this period.
- **The State of Forest 2021 report by the Forest Survey of India** underscored a startling 186% rise in detected forest fires between 2013 and 2021, despite a meagre 0.48% uptick in total forest cover during the same timeframe.
- An examination conducted by the Forest Survey of India in 2019 revealed that **nearly 36% of India's forests are susceptible to fires**, with approximately one-third of these areas categorized as highly vulnerable. This highlights the widespread risk of forest fires across various regions of India.
- **States at Risk:** The eleven primary states experiencing frequent forest fires in recent periods include Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand.
- **Forest Fire Season in India:** The period from **November to June** is recognized as the forest fire season in India, with particular intensity observed from February onwards as summer draws near. Typically, April and May emerge as the most severe months for fires nationwide.
- **Forest Fire Scenario in 2024:** In March 2024, the Forest Survey of India data indicated that the greatest number of forest fires occurred in **Mizoram (3,738), Manipur (1,702), Assam (1,652), Meghalaya (1,252), and Maharashtra (1,215).**



## Causes of Forest Fires

### ANTHROPOGENIC FACTORS:

- **Human Activities:** The majority of forest fires in India are sparked by human actions, such as:
  - Careless disposal of burning materials like cigarettes, matches, or campfires.
  - Intentional arson for various reasons, including land clearing or vandalism.
  - Agricultural practices like slash-and-burn farming, where farmers set fire to crop residues to clear land for cultivation.
- **Urbanization and Encroachment:** The expansion of human settlements into forested areas increases the risk of accidental fires due to activities like construction, industrial operations, and electrical malfunctions.

### NATURAL FACTORS:

- **Climate Conditions:** Dry and hot weather conditions, particularly during the summer months, create ideal circumstances for the ignition and rapid spread of fires.
- **Biological Factors:** Certain species of plants, especially those with highly flammable foliage like pine needles, contribute to the flammability of forest ecosystems.
- **Lightning Strikes:** Natural occurrences such as lightning strikes during thunderstorms can ignite fires, particularly in regions prone to dry lightning.
- **Volcanic Activity:** During a volcanic eruption, molten magma from beneath the Earth's surface is ejected as lava, which flows down slopes and extends across the forest terrain, initiating fires.

### Impact of Forest Fires

- **Loss of Biodiversity:** Forest fires can lead to the destruction of habitats, resulting in the loss of plant and animal species. Some species may struggle to recover or may face local extinction following a severe fire.
- **Degradation of Ecosystems:** Fires can disrupt the natural balance of ecosystems by altering soil composition, nutrient levels, and water cycles. This can lead to long-term changes in vegetation patterns and ecological processes.
- **Air Pollution:** The smoke and ash generated by forest fires contribute to air pollution, releasing harmful pollutants such as particulate matter, carbon monoxide, and volatile organic compounds. Prolonged exposure to these pollutants can have adverse effects on human health, particularly for those with respiratory conditions.
- **Water Contamination:** Runoff from burnt areas can contaminate water sources with sediment, ash, and chemicals, affecting aquatic ecosystems and water quality. This can have implications for both wildlife and human communities that rely on these water sources for drinking, irrigation, and other purposes.
- **Economic Losses:** Forest fires can cause significant economic damage by destroying timber resources, agricultural land, and infrastructure. In addition to direct losses, there may be indirect impacts on industries such as tourism, forestry, and agriculture.
- **Increased Risk of Natural Hazards:** Following a fire, the loss of vegetation can increase the risk of soil erosion, landslides, and flooding, especially in steep terrain or areas with heavy rainfall. This can pose hazards to communities downstream and exacerbate the impacts of extreme weather events.

## Initiatives taken by the Government

- **Forest Management Plan (FMP):** This comprehensive strategy, devised under the Ministry of Environment, Forests & Climate Change (MoEFCC), encompasses preventive measures against wildfires and post-fire recovery efforts. It entails delineating crucial fire-prone zones, establishing buffer areas around high-risk sites, bolstering forest management frameworks, preventing unauthorized access to restricted regions, and conducting surveillance activities.
- **National Wildfire Prevention Control Room:** Instituted in 2004 by the MoEFCC, this control room serves as a central coordinating body overseeing responses to forest fires nationwide round the clock.
- **Wildfire Management Plan 2015:** Formulated by the Central Wildlife Board of India (CWBI) and executed by the Ministry of Environment, Forests & Climate Change, this plan covers 52 critical elephant corridors susceptible to forest fires. It focuses on augmenting fire resilience in these corridors through diverse interventions involving local communities residing along these pathways.
- **Forest Fire Alert System:** Since 2004, the Forest Survey of India (FSI) has created the Forest Fire Alert System to observe forest fires in real-time. With its upgraded version introduced in January 2019, the system now relies on **satellite data collected from NASA and ISRO for improved accuracy.**
- **Van Agni Geo-portal:** It acts as a centralized platform for all information concerning forest fires in India.
- **Bambi Bucket Operations:** The Indian Air Force utilized a Mi-17 V5 helicopter to carry out numerous "**Bambi Bucket operations,**" releasing approximately 16,000 litres of water onto the fires.

**The Bambi Bucket, known as a helicopter bucket or heli bucket,** is a specialized container suspended by a cable beneath a helicopter. It can be filled by lowering it into a river or pond and then aerially discharged over a fire by opening a valve at the bottom of the bucket.

- **Training Initiatives:** Forest departments conduct regular training sessions for staff engaged in firefighting and forest conservation tasks. These programs encompass a wide spectrum of topics, from fundamental firefighting methods to sophisticated approaches employing contemporary equipment and technologies.

## Wayforward for India

- **Forest Fire Line:** This involves preventing fire by clearing forest debris along the entire perimeter of the forest, known as the "**Forest Fire Line.**" This line acts as a barrier to prevent fire from spreading between different sections of the forest. The collected debris is safely burned in designated areas.
- **Satellite Technology:** Employing satellites to observe forests from elevated orbits, identify fires at an early stage, and monitor their progression for swift intervention.
- **Fire-Fighting Robots:** Utilizing robots such as Thermite, designed by Howe and Howe Technologies, to suppress fires in locations too hazardous for human firefighters to enter.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Government agencies conduct public awareness campaigns emphasizing the significance of forest preservation, safe behaviour during wildfires, and reporting instances of illegal activities contributing to forest fires.

## **Prelims based Question**

**Q1.Consider the following statements regarding forest fires in India:**

1. Montane temperate forests are the most vulnerable to forest fires.
2. Anthropogenic triggers most of the forest fires in India.

**Choose the correct answer using the codes given below:**

- (a).1 Only
- (b).2 Only
- (c).Both 1 and 2
- (d).Neither 1 nor 2

**ANSWER: B**

## **Mains based Question**

**Q1.Evaluate the significance of public awareness campaigns and community engagement in forest fire prevention and mitigation efforts. Discuss the importance of fostering a culture of responsible environmental stewardship and collaborative action to address the root causes of forest fires in India.**

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