

Banni grassland

May 25, 2021

In news- The National Green Tribunal (NGT) recently ordered all encroachments to be removed from Gujarat's Banni grasslands within six months and directed a joint committee to prepare an action plan in a month.

More information-

- The region's nomadic pastoralist community, the **Maldharis**, united under Banni Pashu Uchherak Maldhari Sangthan (BPUMS), had filed a case against the rampant encroachment in the ecologically-sensitive grassland in May, 2018.
- The court said that the Maldharis will continue to hold the right to conserve the community forests in the area, granted to them as per the provisions in **Section 3 of Forest Rights Act, 2006**.

About the grassland-

- It forms a belt of arid grassland ecosystem on the outer southern edge of the desert of the marshy salt flats of **Rann of Kutch in Kutch District** and accounts for **almost 45 per cent of the pastures in Gujarat**.
- Two ecosystems, **wetlands and grasslands**, are juxtaposed in Banni.
- The word 'Banni' comes from the Hindi word '**banai**', **meaning made**.
- The land here was formed from the **sediments that were deposited by the Indus and other rivers** over thousands of years.
- On May 11, 1955, the court notified that the grassland will be a **reserve forest**.
- On July 3, 2019, the NGT ordered to demarcate the boundaries of the Banni grassland and restricted non-forest activities.

- **Banni Grasslands Reserve and Narayan Sarovar Sanctuary**, both in Kutch, have been classified by Wildlife Institute of India (WII) as the last remaining habitats of the cheetah in India and possible reintroduction sites for the species.
- The grasslands are home to mammals such as the **nilgai, chinkara, blackbuck, wild boar, golden jackal, Indian hare, Indian wolf, caracal, Asiatic wildcat, desert fox, Indian wild ass**.
- During good rainfall years it forms important staging grounds for **migratory birds** like flamingos, cranes and resident birds.

Maldharis-

- Maldharis are **descendants of nomads** who periodically came from Pakistan, Rajasthan and other parts of Gujarat, and finally settled in the Banni grasslands.
- Their major communities include Sindhi Sunni Muslims and Vadhas.
- The literal meaning of Maldhari is **keeper (dhari) of the animal stock (mal)**.
- They are notable as the traditional dairymen of the region, and once supplied milk and cheese to the palaces of rajas.
- The majority of the Maldharis in Gir belong to **(Charan) minority castes which include Koli, Kathi, Bawa, Meghwal and Makranis**.
- The Maldharis of Gir, Alech and Barda have been included among the **Scheduled Tribes** since 1956, although these castes are not classified as Scheduled Tribes outside the forest areas.
- In some areas, **weddings are traditionally held just one day each year, on Krishna Janmashtami**, which falls in the midst of the monsoon.
- They have developed a local breed of buffalo called **Banni Buffaloes** which have strong resilience to the

harsh conditions of the Banni.

- The Banni Buffalo was recognized as the **11th breed of buffalo in the country in 2010**, the first one to be registered post independence.
- The breed registration process was carried out through the Maldharis themselves.

The buffaloes **yield 12-18 litres of milk a day** and survives by **feeding on the grassland.**