**News:** The number of stray cattle in the country has marginally come down to 50.22 lakh in 2019 from 51.88 lakh in 2012 — a *decline of 3.2 per cent* — according to the latest data of the *20th Livestock Census* released by the *Ministry of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries.*

**Background**

- On October 16 last year, the ministry had released provisional figures of the 20th Livestock Census. However, at that point, the number of stray cattle was not known. The government had started collecting information about stray cattle from the 19th Livestock Census in 2012.

- According to the 20th Livestock Census, the information on the approximate number of stray cattle was *collected from a single source in the village or ward* such as sarpanch or a panchayat member or a patwari.

**Key findings**

- The number of stray cattle is additional to the total cattle population in the country, about 19.34 crore in 2019 — 1.3 per cent up from 19 crore in 2012.

- While the data shows a *decline at the national level,* there is *substantial increase in stray cattle population in states* such as Uttar Pradesh (17.34 per cent), Madhya Pradesh (95 per cent), Rajasthan (34.48 per cent), Gujarat (17.59 per cent), Chhattisgarh (33.93 per cent) and Punjab (38.69 per cent) in 2019 in comparison to 2012.

- However, in *some states,* a *sharp decline has been registered* in the stray cattle population. These include Odisha (86.68 per cent decline), West Bengal (73.59 per cent), Bihar (66.54 per cent) and Tamil Nadu (23.95 per cent).
West Bengal has the highest number of cattle — 190 lakh in 2019 from 165 lakh in 2012. Bengal has become the state with the largest cattle population during the tenure of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

In the same period, the number of cattle has also gone up in other eastern states, such as Bihar (from 122 lakh to 153 lakh) and Jharkhand (from 8.7 lakh to 112 lakh).

Case of Uttar Pradesh

- The sharp increase in the number of stray cattle in Uttar Pradesh shows that efforts to control the problem have not yielded desired results.

- The state government had imposed special duty on liquor in its last budget to raise Rs 165 crore for maintenance of stray cattle.

- It also allocated Rs 247.60 crore for construction of gaushalas (cow shelters) in rural areas and Rs 200 crore for Kanha Gaushalas to house the stray animals in urban areas. But the increase in the stray cattle population shows no relief on ground.

Importance of livestock in poverty alleviation:

- Livestock rearing is a key livelihood and risk mitigation strategy for small and marginal farmers, particularly across the rain-fed regions of India.

- Share in agricultural GDP: Livestock products comprised 32 per cent of the total value of agriculture and allied activities in 2006-07 which was a noticeable increase from 27 per cent in 1999-2000 and from 1980-81 when it represented 14 per cent of the agricultural gross domestic product.

Why does it require special attention?

- Livestock rearing at the household level is largely a women-led activity, and
therefore income from livestock rearing and decisions related to management of livestock within the household are primarily taken by women.

- Livestock rearing, particularly in the rain-fed regions of the country, is also emerging as a key risk mitigation strategy for the poorest. They face increasingly uncertain and erratic weather conditions which negatively impact crop productivity and wage labour in the agriculture sector.

**Challenges:**

- Although livestock products make important contributions to food security and poverty reduction for many low-income rural families, the policy and institutional framework has failed to serve the needs of these poorest households and to get them onto the conveyor belt of development.
- A lack of public services in animal health that reach out to the poorest in rural areas and a failure to link small holder livestock keepers to better paying markets.
- The institutional and policy frameworks tend to support intensive and commercial livestock rearing, both in the provision of services and also in facilitating access to markets.
- Livestock producers, including traditional pastoralists and smallholders, are both victims of natural resource degradation and contributors to it.
- Animal health systems have been neglected in many parts and this has led to institutional weaknesses that in turn lead to poor delivery of animal health services and higher risks to livelihoods and human health.

**Way forward:**

Livestock wealth is much more equitably distributed than wealth associated with land. Thus, when we think of the goal of inclusive growth, we should not forget that from equity and livelihood perspectives, livestock rearing must be at the centre of the stage in poverty alleviation programmes.