Concerns with Draft Forest Policy

What is the issue?

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- The MoEFCC recently released the draft National Forest Policy 2018. Click here to know more.
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- The shift in approach and various other provisions in the policy raise some serious ecological and social concerns.
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What does forest policy aim at?

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- The multiple goods and services that forests offer, flowing to different beneficiaries, cannot be simultaneously maximised.
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- Forest policy, therefore, focusses primarily on which benefits and beneficiaries to prioritise.
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- Another focus area is to decide when and through what process to allow diversion of forest land for “non-forest” activities.
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What was the earlier policy approach?

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- Forest policy in colonial India focussed on maximising products and revenues for the state.
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- The imperial forest department functioned as sole owner, protector and manager of the forest estate.
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- Unfortunately, post-Independence policy too continued this 'state-managed forestry' approach.
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- Forests were seen as sources of raw material for industry.
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- On the other hand, local communities were merely treated as labour.
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How did 1988 forest policy address this?

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- In a paradigm shift, the 1988 Forest Policy recognised the multiple roles of forests.
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- Significantly, it prioritised environmental stability over revenue maximisation.
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- It acknowledged the rights of forest-dependent communities on forest produce.
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- Also, the policy emphasised people’s involvement in protecting and regenerating forests.
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- It thus formally recognised the limitations of state-managed forestry.
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What is the post-1988 experience?

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- **Devolution of control** - Joint forest management (JFM) was initiated in the 1990s to facilitate people’s involvement.
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- Foresters created thousands of village forest committees.
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- But their autonomy and jurisdictions were severely limited.
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- Donor money was spent on plantations but activities were stopped once funds ran out.
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- “People’s participation” by executive order was too weak.

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- What was actually required was substantive devolution of control over forests
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- **Community rights** - The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 created a historic opportunity for such devolution.
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- Its community forest resource provisions gave communities rights to both access and manage forests.
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- **Forest Diversion** - FRA also democratised the forest diversion process.
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- It mandated community concurrence for forest diversion once community forest rights are recognised.
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- E.g. the Adivasis of Niyamgiri in Odisha exercised this provision to prevent bauxite mining in their sacred hill tracts.
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What are the concerns with the new draft forest policy?

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- **Production forestry** - In the past, production forestry has led to replacing
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i. natural oak forests with pine monocultures in the Himalayas
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ii. natural sal forests with teak plantations in central India
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iii. wet evergreen forests with eucalyptus and acacia in the Western Ghats
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- All this had significantly affected forest diversity.
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- It has dried up streams and undermined local livelihoods.
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- **Ecology** - The stress on commercially important species like eucalyptus and poplar raises concerns for the ecology.
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- These species are known to be water-demanding, with deep root systems that deplete groundwater.
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- Also, poplar and eucalyptus have negative allelopathic properties i.e. they do not encourage vegetative growth under their cover.
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- Non-indigenous plantation species to meet afforestation targets and timber requirements would be counterproductive to public investments in such initiatives.
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- **Livelihoods** - There are about 1.3 lakh villages in and around India's forests.
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- An estimated 350-400 million people depend directly on these forests for sustenance, involving in management and protection.
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- The new policy fails to acknowledge this symbiotic relationship between the tribal people and forests.
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- **Community Participation** - There is little about decentralised governance in the draft policy.
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- Local communities would have challenged the production forestry model if they had had a say in forest governance.
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- **PPP** - The 1988 policy clearly states that the requirements of the local communities should not be sacrificed for the sake of forest based industries.
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- However, the PPPs in the new policy go against this and will entail more forest destruction.
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- It is a way of granting the private sector access to public resources.
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- The profits and benefits are also thus likely to end up in corporate hands.
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- **Mechanism** - The draft policy talks of "ensuring synergy" between gram sabhas and JFM committees.
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- But the actual need is to replace JFM committees with statutorily empowered gram sabhas.
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- Harmonization with other laws like the FRA could certainly leave scope for concern in administrative jurisdictions.
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- It may put environmentalists and bureaucracy at loggerheads as the former

may see it as an attempt to weaken the role of gram sabhas.
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- In all, the new Policy seems to be falling back to the practice of state-managed forestry of the 1950s as well as shifting focus from community and ecology to industry and raw materials.
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Source: The Hindu

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