4. India’s Paper Industry- Environment

Access open- India’s paper industry wanted forest rules eased The Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 2023 (formerly the Forest Conservation Act, 1980) has undergone significant updates aimed at bridging the gap between ecological conservation and industrial resource requirements. These changes have a profound impact on the Indian Paper Industry, which has historically struggled with a domestic wood deficit.

1. Evolution of Regulatory Norms (2012–2026)

The transition from the 1980 Act to the 2023/2026 framework reflects a shift from "conservation only" to "conservation and augmentation."

Feature	Pre-2023 Guidelines	2023/2026 Amended Rules
Legal Status of Plantations	Treated as "non-forest activity" (especially medicinal plants).	Legally classified as “forestry activities.”
Levies (NPV & CA)	Mandatory payment of Net Present Value (NPV) and Compensatory Afforestation (CA).	Exempted from NPV and mandatory CA for specified plantations.
Approval Authority	Prior Union (Central) approval was mandatory.	State-approved “Working Plans” suffice; central approval simplified.
Role of Private Sector	Restricted access to forest land for leasing.	Central govt specifies terms for leasing to private companies.

2. Rationale- The Paper Industry’s Resource Crisis

India is the world's third-largest paper producer, yet the sector operates under significant strain due to a raw material "glass ceiling."

The Wood Gap- Domestic wood availability is ~9 million tonnes/year, while current demand exceeds 11 million tonnes/year.

Underutilised Capacity- Out of approximately 900 pulp and paper mills, only 550 are operational due to inadequate access to raw materials.

Import Dependence- Shortages have led to a sharp increase in paper imports, particularly from ASEAN countries, hurting domestic competitiveness.

Farmer Engagement- Currently, over 90% of wood is sourced from agroforestry. Around 500,000 farmers manage plantations on 1.2 million hectares, but this remains insufficient to meet the industrial scale.

3. Ecological and Social Concerns

While the industry welcomes these norms, environmentalists have flagged critical "Red Flags" regarding the long-term impact on biodiversity.

Monoculture Risks- Commercial plantations often rely on fast-growing species like Eucalyptus, Poplar, and Acacia. These cannot replicate the complex ecological functions (carbon sequestration, water table maintenance) of natural forests.

Biodiversity Erosion- Monocultures can lead to "green deserts" where native wildlife, birds, and insects cannot survive, potentially degrading soil health and groundwater.

Ecological vs. Commercial Value- Critics argue that the amendment prioritizes "Ease of Doing Business" over the Non-Forestry Purpose safeguards established by the Supreme Court in the 1996 Godavarman case.

4. India’s Paper Industry Profile

The industry is a vital part of the circular economy, though its raw material mix is diverse.

Global Share- Accounts for roughly 5% of global production.

Raw Material Composition

1. Wood-based- 18–20%
2. Recycled Fibre- 74–76% (The largest component)
3. Agro-residue (Bagasse/Straw)**-** 6–8%

Species Diversity- Key plantation species include Eucalyptus, Subabul, Casuarina, and Acacia.

5. Way Forward- A Balanced Growth Model

To prevent "Viksit Bharat" from coming at the cost of "Harit Bharat" (Green India), the following strategies are proposed-

Zonation of Plantations- Commercial activity should be strictly restricted to degraded and open forest lands, ensuring ecologically sensitive "Old Growth" forests remain untouched.

Dual Monitoring- State Forest Departments must establish strong ecological safeguards to prevent invasive species from spreading during monoculture cycles.

Promoting Agroforestry- Strengthening the link between mills and farmers can reduce the pressure to divert state forest land.

Circular Economy- Further incentivizing recycled fibre uses to reduce the net demand for virgin wood pulp.

6. Conclusion

The 2026 amendments to the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam represent a bold bet on commercial forestry as a tool for carbon sequestration and industrial self-reliance. However, their success depends on whether the "forestry activity" classification is used to restore degraded land or simply as a loophole to bypass ecological accountability.

Source- https-//www.downtoearth.org.in/forests/access-open-why-indias-paper-industry-wants-forest-rules-eased#google_vignette