

PEOPLE'S INVOLVEMENT IN FOREST GOVERNANCE IN TRIPURA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE FOREST RIGHTS ACT, 2006

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INTRODUCTION

According to the UN Factsheet Forests for People-2011, over 1.6 billion people are dependent on forests for livelihoods. The forest policy is likely to affect the livelihood of people. Therefore, people's involvement in forest governance is sine-qua-non to study its success and failure. Northeast India is home to different forest dwelling tribal communities. More than half of this region is covered with forests and people who live in the forests are mainly from tribal communities. The tribal communities of Tripura, the second smallest state in the region, also mostly depend on forest resources to meet their daily essential requirements such as food, fuel, and medicines for survival. Many of their social ceremonies, cultural rites and rituals, arts and crafts, literature and music, etc have been developed in connection with forests. The inseparable relationship of the tribal people with forests demands their involvement in forest governance.

Normally, a forest policy refers to a plan formulated and implemented by the government for protecting forest resources and the environment. It defines the laws and regulations for maintaining healthy forest ecosystems. According to the Government of India, "forest policy of a country specifies certain broad principles for the use of a nation's forest resources."

A Forest policy, according to Donald L. Grebner and Kevin Boston, refers to the steps and measures used in forests governance and administration. Governments at national and local level and organizations including individuals can take the initiative to formulate action plans for forest governance. (Donald L. et al, 2013)

An attempt is made here to understand people's involvement (tribal people)

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in forest governance with reference to the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 in Tripura.

OBJECTIVES

The broad objectives of the paper are as follows

1. To assess the implementation of the Forest Rights Act 2006 at the grassroots in Tripura
2. To find out the challenges of the implementation of the Act with feedback from the stakeholders

METHODOLOGY

This study has been conducted from two perspectives.

- (i) People's representation as members in decision-making, and
- (ii) People's participation as beneficiaries in different welfare initiatives available under the Forest Rights Act, 2006.

Two villages, namely South Maharanipur under Mungiakami R.D Block and South Ramchandraghat under Padmabil block, have been chosen. A total of 100 respondents with 50 respondents each from these two ADC villages have been randomly selected to collect first-hand information. The study has also consulted secondary data from various records of the Forest and tribal welfare departments, the government of Tripura, relevant books, articles, websites, and various other official gazettes and notifications.

PEOPLE'S INVOLVEMENT IN FOREST GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

Environmental protection is now given topmost priority in forest governance. People's involvement in forest governance also became important part for forest conservation in countries like India, where a large population primarily depend on forest resources for their survival. The significance of people's participation in forest governance was also emphasized in Indian epics and mythologies like the 'Ramayana' and the 'Mahabharata' showing that many ancient Indian civilizations had a very close relationship with the forest (Ghosal, 2011). In ancient India, the forest was in the hands of the forest communities who used the forest resources in a sustainable manner for their own existence. During that period, the relationship between the forest dependent communities and forest was ecologically sustainable (Guha, 1983). The kings used forests mainly for hunting

and hiding purposes. These forests in the medieval period were used for resources only. In the absence of centrally maintained forest rules, traders of those days exploited the Indian forests for timber and medicinal plants. The tribals, also known as Adivasis, were the main forest-dwelling communities in India (Pattanaik, 2013)). Numerous tribal communities started living in natural forests long before the arrival of the Mughals and British in India. They put in place their legitimate claims of traditional entitlements over forest land and forest resources. They resided in forests and earned livelihoods from forest resources. Therefore, the tribal communities protected forest ecology against degradation for their survival.

The colonial government introduced forest governance which converted many natural forests into protected and reserved forests curtailing the traditional and customary forest rights of tribal people. The policy also caused displacement of thousands of forest dwellers. But the British forest policy encouraged commercial exploitation of the forest resources, which neither helped forest conservation nor secured the livelihoods of the tribals (Singh, 2022).

The government of India inherited the British colonial forest policy (Bandyopadhyay, 2010). Naturally, it witnessed several tribal movements which demanded for inclusion of the experiences and knowledge of the forest-dwelling people for forest governance.

The Indian Government introduced the Scheduled Tribes & Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (RoFR) Act, 2006 on December 18; 2006 and notified it on January 2, 2007. The objectives of this Act included (i) addressing the grievances of the forest-dwelling Schedule Tribes (FWSTs) and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFDs) conferring land ownership over forests, and (ii) strengthening the forest conservation system through people's participation in forest governance by conferring responsibilities and authority of Forest Rights holders.

The Act includes the following most noticeable features: ¹

It confers the right of holding and living in the forest land to the eligible FWSTs and OTFDs

1. The Act entitles the right of collecting, using and disposing of the traditionally collected minor forest produces within or outside the village boundaries.

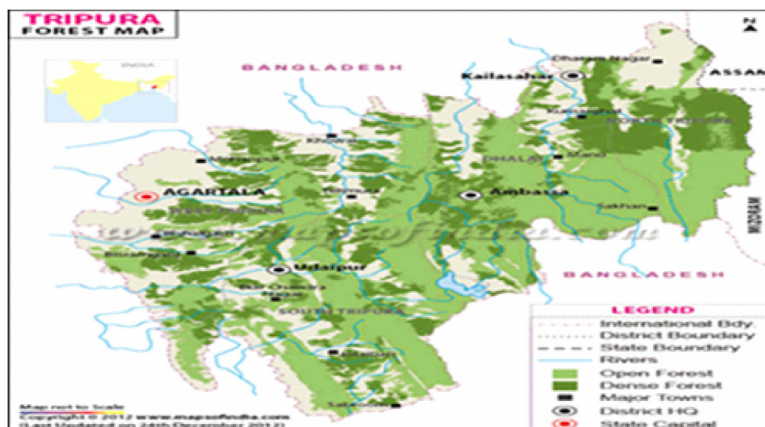
2. The right of entitlements such as grazing, the product of water bodies including fish and use of other traditional seasonal resources.
3. The FWST and OTFD communities are entitled for protecting, regenerating or manage the traditionally conserved and protected community forest resources for sustainable use.
4. The Act also confers the right of intellectual property over traditional knowledge and to claim for equal benefits arising out of the use of diverse bio-resources.

For proper implementation of the Act, it provides a provision for constitution of committees at state, district, sub divisional and gram panchayat level.

IMPLEMENTATION OF FOREST RIGHTS ACT, 2006 IN TRIPURA AND PEOPLE'S INVOLVEMENT IN FOREST GOVERNANCE

Tripura houses lush green tropical forests and biodiversity. The registered Forest Area of Tripura is 6,249 sq. km. which includes 4,175 sq. km Reserved Forest; 2 sq. km Protected Forest and 2,117 sq. Km Unclassified Forest.

Figure-1: Forest Map of Tripura



Source: www.google.com/search?q=tripura+forest+map

The livelihood of tribal communities of Tripura are largely depended on forests. They cultivate jhum (shifting cultivation) on the hills as the basic source of livelihood. During kingship period, the king was the absolute owner of land and forests. Following Tripura's merger with India in 1949, these forests were recognized as the government's forests. However, the tribal people of Tripura

continued to live in the forests without any legal ownership with a conviction of their traditional ownership over forest land. Naturally, the tribal forest dwellers of Tripura have been facing eviction from forests until the enactment of the FRA, 2006.

With the acceptance of the FRA, 2006 in 2008, the government of Tripura took up the responsibility for granting forest rights to the eligible forest dwellers. Since most of the forest lands in Tripura come under Tripura, Tripura Tribal Area Autonomous District Council (TTAADC), the Tribal Welfare Department (TWD) was made as the Nodal Department for implementing the different clauses of the FRA 2006. The TWD, in association with other departments like forest, revenue, fishery, and animal husbandry, executes different plans and programs for improving the economic condition of the beneficiary families. In accordance with the FRA, 2006, the Government of Tripura constituted different Committees to monitor the implementation process of the FRA, 2006.

The status of implementation of the FRA, 2006 as of December, 2021

Table No-1

Sl No	Category	No. of claims received	No. of claims considered	Quantum of land involved (in hectares)	No. of economically benefitted ST families	No. ST families provided with IAY house
1	ST	1,66,575	1,30,902	1,88,753.26	1,09,662	32,722
2	OTFD	33,774	2			
3	Community	88	Nil	207.632		

Source: <https://twd.tripura.gov.in/forest-rights-act-2006>

The demarcation of individual land rights over forests is done through erection of boundary posts. The economic benefits like Indira Awas Yojana (Now Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana) aided with building of a houses for 7953 Individual Forest Rights (IFR) householders by 2013. The other initiatives included were the "Tripura Forest Environmental Improvement and Poverty Alleviation Project" funded by the Japanese Government through the Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA) (Tiwari and Kayenpaibam, 2006) and the Indo-German Development Cooperation Project (IGDCP) as "Participatory Natural Resource Management Project" for upliftment of the tribal forest dwellers in Tripura. The aim of these

projects was to generate livelihood opportunities for the wholly or partially forest dependent tribal householders (Khosla and Bhattacharya, 2020).

JICA-Tripura provided formation of Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMC) and Women Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in the village. The SHGs and JFMC availed loans for plantations, poultry and piggery, etc.

The IDGCP is providing assistance for forest conservation and socio-economic development of tribal jhumas. A total of 28,150 individual land rights holders have been benefited out of this project for achieving sustainable land management. A cumulative plantation under 8847 hectares of land involving 12,163 people was also achieved. Dams built for practicing fisheries has benefitted 3359 villagers.

Figure-2: Status of District-wise Implementation of FRA in Tripura (as on 20.09.2022) beneficiaries

District	Total Record	Total Updated	Total Pending for Updating	Total Verified & Locked	Total Scrutiny
Dhalai	33517	33281	236	32146	2323
Gomati	25828	24643	1185	24632	1757
Khowai	15301	15179	122	14302	608
North Tripura	15033	13767	1266	13462	236
Sepahijala	7839	7775	64	7709	976
South Tripura	20596	20434	162	19599	2893
Unakoti	6201	6201	0	6201	3855
West Tripura	5150	4881	269	4881	308
	129465	126161	3304	122932	12956

(Source: Status Report 20th September, 2022, Tribal Welfare Department, Tripura)

Tripura ranked first in 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016 in conferring land rights as compare to the number of claims (Khosla and Bhattacharya, 2020). The TWD in coordination with other departments provided various assistance to the beneficiaries such as cash crops or industrial crops like rubber, horticulture,

loan to self-help groups etc.

The socio-economic status of the respondents of the two villages are given below:

Table-2
South Maharanipur ADC village

Category of Beneficiaries	<i>Scheduled Tribe Males & females</i>
Age of Beneficiaries	<i>Age group between 35 years - 85 years</i>
Educational Qualification of Beneficiaries	<i>Mostly uneducated.</i>
Range of Land holding	<i>5 kami – 10 kani³</i>
Income range of Beneficiaries	<i>24,000/- to 1,44,000/ per year</i>
Source of Income of Beneficiaries	<i>Rubber Plantation, Bamboo Cultivation, Pine-apple cultivation</i>

Table -3
South Ramchandraghat ADC village

Category of Beneficiaries	<i>Scheduled Tribe Males & females</i>
Age of Beneficiaries	<i>Age group between 37 years - 87 years</i>
Educational Qualification of Beneficiaries	<i>Mostly uneducated. Some are undereducated (up to high school)</i>
Range of Land holding	<i>2 kani – 6.25 kani</i>
Income range of Beneficiaries	<i>30,000/- to 1,50,000/ per year</i>
Source of Income of Beneficiaries	<i>Rubber Plantation, Bamboo Plantation, Litchi Plantation, Banana Plantation, betel nut Plantation</i>

Figure-33: Achievements under Economic Development Scheme (2013)

<i>Schemes</i>	Rubber plantation	horticulture	Tea plantation	Coffee plantation	Self-help groups	Help given
<i>beneficiaries</i>	17040 families	25574 families	932 families	310 families	1502 SHGs	3119

DISCUSSION WITH THE BENEFICIARIES

As of December 2021, a total of 1, 67,575 claims have been received from Scheduled Tribes (STs) for allotment of forest lands. After allotment of forest lands ranging from two kanis to seven kanis (average), the beneficiaries have been planting different kinds of plants on the allotted land. This has been helping them for earning income at an average of Rupees 30, 000 to Rupees 1,50,000 per year. According to discussion with the respondents, the FRA, 2006 has

immensely benefitted them, and accordingly, their dependence on government forests has declined to a greater extent. Moreover, through the plantation of various plants such as bamboo, litchi, banana, betel nuts, etc, the beneficiaries have been helping the forest department to protect forest resources. The land ownership also brought them under the purview of different government schemes such as the Construction of pucca houses under PMAY.

However, the beneficiaries also pointed out some problems such as inadequate representation of the forest dwellers in the District Level Committees (DLC) to understand various provisions of the FRA, 2006. Such under representation derails the working of decentralized forest governance, one major objective of the FRA, 2006. At the ground level, it has been found that those who are made members of Committees at various levels lack proper education. They are not well aware about the various schemes available under the Act. No adequate awareness training is conducted to increase awareness among the forest dwellers about the various provisions of the FRA, 2006. It is also observed that very insignificant participation of women in forest governance.

Awareness, knowledge and capacity building among the key stakeholders are an essential requirement for proper implementation of the FRA, 2006 and achievement of its basic objectives. However, the study observed that the forest dwellers and members of the Gram Sabha performing the responsibility as selectors did not have adequate knowledge and awareness about promoting environmental sustainability through the implementation of the FRA, 2006. So, the key stakeholders lack environmental literacy and do not know how their participation in the forest governance will promote environmental conservation. Another important challenge related to conservation of environmental sustainability and preservation of ecological balance is the decision of the state Tribal Welfare (TW) Department to encourage rubber plantations among the beneficiaries without considering the biodiversity issue. As a result, considering economic benefits, many beneficiaries have started growing rubber plantation, a mono cultural practice, which is not environmentally sustainable in terms of the preservation of varieties in the bio-resources. The initiative of rubber plantation on patta definitely questions about environmental sustainability.



Pictures of rubber cultivation taken by the authors on 25/02/2024 at Hezamara R.D. Block under Mohanpur Subdivision of West Tripura district

Secondly, it was observed that in many cases due to cover of dense forest, the allotted land pattas were not used for either plantation or housing purposes. As per the FRA, 2006, the ownership of allotted land is non-transferrable. However, the study has observed that many beneficiaries have sold out their allotted forest lands. This practice has made them virtually landless once again forcing them to become dependent on government forests as once they were. The lack of proper monitoring by the TWD is responsible for this practice. If this trend continues, the FRA, 2006's core objectives will get derailed.

The difficulty of coming within the purview of the FRA, 2006 as a beneficiary is the third difficult challenge. As per the FRA, 2006, one must produce evidence of 25 years of continuous residence in a particular plot of forest land. Jhum cultivation is a normal practice in the hills of Tripura. This profession makes jhum cultivators nomadic, shifting from one place to another in search of suitable plots for the next harvesting. In such a situation, it is difficult for a forest dweller-jhum cultivator to produce 25 years of continuous residence. The statistics of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, as of March 2020 reveal that 17,52,553 claims have been rejected in twenty states. In Tripura, 35,673 claims from the Scheduled Tribes have been rejected so far on various grounds including the lack of evidence of 25 years of continuous residence.

Political interference in the process of selection of the beneficiaries is another major challenge for promoting decentralized forest governance and proper execution of FRA, 2006. The timing of selection and the selection of the beneficiaries have been done with political consideration. For instance, about 90% of the households received land rights at individual level under the FRA, 2006 just on the eve of the Tripura's Legislative Assembly Election, 2008 and

Lok Shaba Election in 2009 to take political benefit (Khosla and Bhattacharya, 2018). The study has observed that the selectors of the beneficiaries are politically biased with the ruling class.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For the tribal people, the entire forest area is their home. They believed that as the real owners of forests, they had the right to use forest resources for subsistence reasons. They had freedom of movement from one place to another in the forests for collecting their daily essential requirements such as food, fodder, firewood, and many other products. A forest policy has to take care of the forest products and needs of people. It also relates to involving the communities in forest management practices. Tribals, who are the forest-dependent people in India, have been continuously neglected for generations. The FRA, 2006 was a rightful initiative in this regard to address the grievances of the tribal forest dwellers. The Act included the socio-economic concerns of the tribal forest dwellers, including Tripura. The Government of Tripura adopted the FRA, 2006 in 2008. Following its introduction, Tripura ranked foremost in 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016 in terms of vesting land rights compared to the claims. Tripura government brought together many development schemes which also include the two bilateral projects namely IDGCP and JICA under the process of implementation of FRA, 2006 to support the socio-economic development of tribal areas.

The Act has immensely benefited the forest-dwelling beneficiaries. As part of their involvement in forest governance, they have been planting varieties of trees such as bananas, jackfruits, mangoes, beetle nuts, litchee, etc. Such a plantation is helping them to generate income at an average of Rs. 30,000/- to 1,50,000/- per annum. It is also helping to promote environmental sustainability. It has expanded the scope of people's involvement in forest conservation and governance. Following ownership of land, the FRA, 2006 has also helped the beneficiaries to come under the PMAY scheme.

However, the study has also observed some challenges. The villagers are not adequately represented at various levels of the implementation committees. Training programs have not been organized at regular intervals to sensitize the villagers about various clauses of the FRA, 2006 and environmental sustainability.

The criteria of 25 years of continuous residence and occupancy on forest land have been another challenge for bringing more forest dwellers within the purview of the FRA, 2006. The absence of monitoring of the TWD, Government of Tripura regarding transfer of ownership of patta land has been encouraging many beneficiaries to sell the patta land illegally. Moreover, instead of planting varieties of seasonal fruits giving trees, the TWD has been encouraging rubber cultivation on the patta lands which goes against environmental sustainability and biological diversities.

WAY FORWARD

For proper implementation of the FRA, 2006 and more involvement of the forest dwellers in forest governance, the government may consider following measures:

- (i) The Implementation Monitoring Committees at various levels may be reconstituted with more representation of villagers,
- (ii) Training programs may be organized at regular intervals to create awareness among the villagers about the need to promote environmental sustainability and also to be well aware of various provisions of the FRA, 2006.
- (iii) Rubber cultivation, a mono-cultural practice, although economically beneficial, may be discouraged due to its negative impact on environmental sustainability.
- (iv) The TWD, Government of Tripura the nodal Department, may take necessary intervention against unlawful transfer of patta landownership.
- (v) Finally, considering the nomadic life of the tribal people, the provision of 25 years of continuous residence may be made more flexible so that more forest-dwelling tribal families can be brought within the purview of the FRA, 2006.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationship which has influenced them for writing this paper.

Footnotes

1. <https://twd.tripura.gov.in/forest-rights-act-2006>
2. *Kani* is a local unit of measurement for land, used in Tripura.

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