

Forest Rights and Livelihood Access: An Empirical Study of Implementation Gaps in Tribal Communities of Karnataka, India

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Abstract

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 in India was enacted to redress historical injustices against forest-dwelling communities by recognizing their rights over forest lands and resources. This study empirically investigates the implementation efficacy of the FRA, focusing on its impact on tribal communities' access to livelihood, through a primary study conducted in 20 tribal hamlets of Chamara Nagar district, Karnataka. By comparing primary data with secondary government records, the research uncovers significant discrepancies in application processing, high rejection rates, and substantial exclusion errors. Key findings include an alarming underreporting of applications and rejections by official sources (over 110% more applications and 140% more rejections found in primary data), a critical lack of awareness about FRA provisions and institutional roles, and systemic failures in the functioning of Forest Rights Committees (FRCs). Furthermore, the study highlights the detrimental impact of non-issuance of land records (RTCs) on access to government schemes and persistent livelihood vulnerabilities leading to distress migration. The paper argues that despite its progressive intent, the FRA's implementation is severely hampered by administrative inefficiencies, policy conflicts, and inadequate institutional capacity, thereby failing to secure tribal livelihoods and perpetuate marginalization. Recommendations for policy reform, institutional strengthening, and enhanced awareness are proposed to bridge these critical implementation gaps.

Keywords: Forest Rights Act, Tribal Communities, Livelihood Access, Implementation Gaps, Exclusion Error, Karnataka, India, Socio-economic Perspective

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1. Introduction

For millennia, tribal communities in India have maintained a symbiotic relationship with forests, deriving their sustenance, cultural identity, and traditional knowledge from these ecosystems. However, colonial and post-colonial forest management policies often dispossessed these communities of their customary rights, leading to widespread historical injustice (Gadgil & Guha, 1992). In recognition of this profound historical wrong, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, commonly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), was enacted. The FRA aims to recognize and vest forest rights and occupation in forest land to forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFDs) who have resided in such forests for generations. Beyond land tenure, the Act also seeks to secure their access to minor forest produce, traditional livelihood activities, and community forest resource management.

Despite its transformative potential, the implementation of the FRA has been fraught with challenges. Reports from various parts of India indicate slow progress, high rejection rates, and persistent issues in recognizing and vesting rights (MoTA, 2018; Vasundhara, 2013). This study delves into these implementation gaps through an empirical lens, focusing on the critical nexus between forest rights recognition and access to livelihood opportunities for tribal communities. The objective is to provide a nuanced understanding of the on-ground realities that often diverge from official narratives.

To underscore the human dimension of these policy failures, consider the poignant narrative from Attaguli Pura in Karnataka. Generations of tribal families in K.Gudi lived intrinsically linked to the forest. However, under suspicion related to a forest brigand, they were forcibly displaced, first to Hunase Halla, then to Attaguli Pura and Kanneri Colony. Though allotted 1.5 acres of land per family in Hunase Halla, their attempts to reclaim ancestral lands post-crisis were met with denial by the Forest Department. Even after the FRA's enactment, 35 families from Attaguli Pura diligently submitted applications through the Forest Rights Committee (FRC), retaining meticulous records. Despite a District Commissioner's intervention urging the Forest Department to grant their rightful claims, these applications remain uncouned in official records, leaving these families in a perpetual state of uncertainty regarding their land and livelihood. This narrative encapsulates the profound human struggle and the chasm between the progressive intent of the

FRA and its often-harsh lived reality.

This paper presents findings from a primary study in Chamarajanagar district, Karnataka, aiming to:

1. Quantify the discrepancies between official government data and ground-level realities regarding FRA application processing.
2. Analyze the extent of exclusion errors in FRA implementation, particularly for Community Forest Rights (CFRs).
3. Examine the socio-economic implications of these implementation gaps on tribal livelihoods, including issues related to land records, access to government schemes, and distress migration.
4. Propose evidence-based recommendations for more effective and equitable FRA implementation.

2. Literature Review (Brief)

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) is widely regarded as a paradigm shift from a protectionist forest regime to a rights-based approach, recognizing the symbiotic relationship between forest communities and their environment (Saxena, 2011). Scholars have highlighted the Act's potential to enhance forest conservation, improve tribal livelihoods, and strengthen local governance through institutions like the Gram Sabha and Forest Rights Committees (FRCs) (Kumar, 2013; Rangarajan, 2011).

However, numerous studies have also documented significant challenges in its implementation. These include:

- **Bureaucratic hurdles and lack of awareness:** Complex procedures, insufficient knowledge among both claimants and implementing agencies, and a general lack of political will often impede the process (Vasundhara, 2013; MoTA, 2018).
- **Discrepancies in data:** Official figures often fail to capture the true scale of applications, rejections, and pending cases, leading to a distorted picture of progress (Roy & Singh, 2012).
- **High rejection rates:** Many claims are rejected on technical grounds, often without proper verification or due process, leading to widespread exclusion (Pattanaik & Das, 2016).
- **Conflict with other forest laws:** Overlapping jurisdictions and the supremacy of other

conservation laws (e.g., Wildlife Protection Act) often undermine FRA provisions, particularly in protected areas (Agarwal & Chhatre, 2011).

- **Post-recognition challenges:** Even after rights are recognized, issues like non-issuance of proper land records (e.g., RTCs) prevent beneficiaries from accessing development schemes, thus limiting the livelihood benefits (Sahu, 2017).
- **Limited recognition of CFRs:** Despite the emphasis on community rights, the focus often remains on individual claims, neglecting the collective aspects crucial for sustainable forest management and community livelihoods (Menon & Kohli, 2019).

This study builds upon existing literature by providing recent empirical evidence from Karnataka, offering a detailed quantitative comparison of official and ground-level data, and highlighting specific socio-economic ramifications of FRA implementation gaps.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data collection through household surveys with qualitative insights derived from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and In-Depth Interviews (IDIs).

Study Area: The research was conducted in 20 tribal hamlets within the Chamarajanagar district of Karnataka, a region characterized by significant forest cover and a substantial tribal population.

Data Sources:

- **Primary Data:**
 - *Household Survey:* A comprehensive survey was administered to tribal families across the 20 sampled hamlets to collect data on FRA application status, acceptance/rejection, pending cases, awareness levels, livelihood patterns, and access to government schemes.
 - *FGDs and IDIs:* Qualitative data was gathered through FGDs with community members and IDIs with key informants, including tribal leaders, local government officials, and non-governmental organization representatives. These provided nuanced perspectives on FRC functioning, challenges in application processing, and socio-economic conditions.
- **Secondary Data:**
 - Official records from the District Tribal Welfare Department, Chamarajanagar, were

accessed to obtain government-reported statistics on FRA applications, rejections, and acceptances.

- Minutes books of Forest Rights Committee (FRC) meetings were reviewed where accessible.

Sample Size: The study collected primary data from 1066 families who applied for FRA rights across the sampled hamlets. A specific in-depth persona verification was conducted for 76 applicants out of 172 government-rejected applications in the district.

Data Analysis:

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages and comparisons to identify discrepancies between primary and secondary data. Error rates were calculated to highlight the extent of underreporting and exclusion. Qualitative data was analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and insights into the implementation challenges.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal significant disparities between official records and the ground reality of FRA implementation in Chamarajanagar district and Karnataka state, leading to substantial implications for tribal livelihoods.

4.1. Discrepancies in Application Processing: A Tale of Two Realities

A direct comparison between secondary data from the Tribal Welfare Department and our primary survey data from the 20 sampled hamlets in Chamarajanagar district exposes alarming discrepancies in the reporting of FRA applications:

Metric	Secondary Data (Official)	Primary Data (Study)	Discrepancy (Primary vs. Secondary)
Families Applied	507	1066	+110.26%
Accepted	347	644	+85.60%

Applications			
Rejected Applications	160	385	+140.63%
Pending Applications	0	37 (from a decade)	100% Error (zero reported vs. 37 found)

Discussion: The official figures severely underreport the actual number of applications submitted by tribal communities. Our primary data indicates over 110% more applications were submitted than officially recorded, and 140% more rejections were observed. Critically, while the secondary data claimed zero pending applications, our study found 37 applications that have been pending for over a decade, indicating a complete failure in official reporting of pendency. This 'error of omission' in official records masks the true scale of the challenge and the backlog of unresolved claims, directly impacting the lives of those awaiting recognition of their rights.

4.2. State-Level Analysis of FRA Application Processing in Karnataka

The patterns observed at the micro-level in Chamarajanagar are mirrored, and in some cases exacerbated, at the state level in Karnataka:

Category	Application Received	Title Deeds Distributed (%)	Application Rejected (%)	Application Pending (%)
IFR ST (Individual Forest Rights Scheduled Tribes)	47,708	12,674 (26.57%)	32,869 (68.90%)	2,165 (4.54%)

IFR Outside Forest Dwellers (OTFD)	240,605	1,976 (0.82%)	169,301 (70.36%)	69,328 (28.81%)
CFR (Community Forest Rights)	5,938	1,343 (22.62%)	3,136 (52.81%)	1,459 (24.57%)

Discussion: The state-level data paints a grim picture of FRA implementation. For Individual Forest Rights (Scheduled Tribes), nearly 69% of applications have been rejected, with only about 26.6% leading to title deeds. The situation is even more critical for Individual Forest Rights for Outside Forest Dwellers, where less than 1% of applications have resulted in title deeds, and over 70% have been rejected, with a significant 28.8% still pending. This highlights a systematic bottleneck, particularly for non-ST forest dwellers whose claims are often more complex to verify. Community Forest Rights (CFRs), crucial for collective resource management, also show a high rejection rate of over 52% and nearly 25% pending, indicating a failure to adequately recognize and vest collective rights. These high rejection and pendency rates across all categories underscore the systemic barriers preventing tribal communities from securing their legitimate rights.

4.3. Extent of Exclusion Error in CFR Provision

Our study specifically examined the exclusion error in CFR provision in Chamarajanagar district:

TALUKA	NO. OF FRC FORMED	NO. OF COMMUNITY CLAIMS APPLIED	NO. OF COMMUNITY CLAIMS SANCTIONED (%)	NO. OF COMMUNITY CLAIMS REJECTED (%)

Total	121	121	77 (63.64%)	44 (36.36%)
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Discussion: While 63.64% of CFR claims were sanctioned in the study district, a substantial 36.36% were rejected. A critical aspect of our research involved an in-depth personal verification of 76 applicants whose claims were officially rejected (out of 172 total rejected applications in the district). This verification revealed that 67 out of these 76 applicants were, in fact, eligible for FRA rights. This translates to an exclusion error of 17% within the verified sample. When this error is extrapolated to the total 172 rejected applications in the district, it suggests that up to 154 applications might be eligible, leading to an estimated exclusion error of 44% for rejected CFR claims. This finding is profoundly significant, indicating that nearly half of the rejected claims might be valid, pointing to severe flaws in the verification and decision-making processes by the District Level Committees (DLCs) and Sub-Divisional Level Committees (SDLCs).

4.4. Findings on Land Rights and Records

- **Absence of RTCs:** A critical barrier to livelihood benefits is the lack of proper land records. 38% of beneficiaries who received individual land under FRA do not possess RTC (Record of Rights, Tenancy and Crops) for their land.
- **Impact on Scheme Access:** Consequently, 99% of these beneficiaries are unable to access government schemes designed for agricultural development, credit, or other welfare programs, effectively negating the economic benefits of land allocation.

Discussion: The non-issuance of RTCs renders the land titles practically ineffective for economic empowerment. Without these crucial revenue documents, tribal beneficiaries remain excluded from the formal financial and developmental ecosystem, perpetuating their economic vulnerability despite having legal recognition of land rights.

4.5. Extent of Land Provided

The extent of land sanctioned under FRA varied from 0.5 to 4 acres, with an average per capita land distributed under FRA being 2.21 acres per household.

Discussion: While the Act allows for up to four hectares (approximately 10 acres), the average land provided is significantly lower. This marginal landholding often proves insufficient for

sustainable agricultural practices or achieving 'economies of scale,' especially for communities historically practicing shifting cultivation or those displaced multiple times. Fixing a minimum viable acreage, perhaps one hectare, could ensure better economic viability.

4.6. FRCs Functioning and Purview

- **Dysfunctional FRCs:** Qualitative findings and household surveys indicate that almost all FRCs have not met for three to four years, primarily functioning only for initial application forwarding. 72% of respondents reported FRCs in their villages are currently not working.
- **Lack of Documentation:** Basic documents like minute registers were often not found in the possession of FRCs.
- **Limited Perception of Role:** Most implementation-level personnel perceive FRA solely as provisioning Individual Forest Rights (IFR), neglecting its broader spirit for social development, livelihood support, and conservation.

Discussion: The FRCs, intended as the cornerstone of FRA implementation and community empowerment, are largely defunct or limited in their function. This institutional weakness at the grassroots level severely hampers the effective processing of claims, grievance redressal, and the broader developmental role envisioned by the Act.

4.7. Amenities – Roads

- Strict restrictions by the Forest Department often impede road construction in tribal hamlets, citing wildlife or forest conservation acts.
- The paradox exists where resorts near tribal colonies have good quality roads without affecting biodiversity, yet tribal hamlets are denied similar access.

Discussion: Lack of motorable roads is a fundamental barrier to accessing markets, healthcare, education, and other essential services. This restriction, often justified by conservation acts, creates a double standard and further isolates tribal communities, hindering their socio-economic integration and development. Policy-level clarity is urgently needed on which act prevails in such situations.

4.8. Need for Creating Effective Awareness of FRA Provisions

- **Low Awareness:** About 30% of respondents are unaware of FRA 2006 and its 2012

amendment.

- **Ignorance of FRC Role:** Nearly 80% of respondents do not know the role of FRCs.
- **Lack of Committee Awareness:** Awareness regarding higher-level committees is abysmal: 98% unaware of SDLC, 91% unaware of State Level Monitoring Committees, and 82% unaware of FRA Gram Sabha.
- **Literacy Gap:** The overall literacy rate among respondents was 18.7%, significantly below the district average of 61.9%, exacerbating awareness challenges.

Discussion: The profound lack of awareness about the Act's provisions, the roles of various committees, and the application process is a major systemic failure. This knowledge gap, compounded by low literacy rates, renders tribal communities vulnerable to exploitation and unable to effectively assert their rights or navigate the bureaucratic process. Initial training efforts have not been sustained.

4.9. Findings on Livelihood Opportunities

- **Distress Migration:** About 51.74% of respondents reported family members migrating in search of jobs to meet household expenses, with a higher proportion (72.37%) from non-beneficiary families compared to beneficiaries (41.56%).
- **Demand for MGNREGA:** 87.83% of respondents expressed demand for employment under MGNREGA, but work seasons often do not align with local needs (e.g., coffee plantation areas need work from August to December).
- **Positive Models:** Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) linked with Coffee Boards and coffee cultivation have been beneficial, offering protection from wild animals and alternative income.
- **Ineffective Schemes:** Large Area Multipurpose Societies (LAMPS) Scheme was found to be contractor-driven and ineffective.

Discussion: Limited and seasonal livelihood opportunities within forest areas compel tribal communities into distress migration, undermining their traditional forest-based economies. While MGNREGA is a crucial safety net, its implementation needs to be flexible and locally tailored. Promoting forest-sensitive agricultural models and diversifying livelihood opportunities through convergence of schemes (e.g., NRLM, Van Dhan Yojana) is essential.

4.10. Minor Forest Produce (MFP)

The study found that the Forest Department unilaterally prohibits the collection of certain MFPs, despite the FRA empowering District Level Committees (DLCs) to make such decisions based on local context.

Discussion: Unilateral decisions by the Forest Department undermine the rights of tribal communities over MFPs, which are vital for their subsistence and income. Empowering DLCs with multi-stakeholder representation is crucial for context-specific and equitable regulation.

4.11. Other Grave Issues

- **Policy Conflicts:** Policies like Critical Tiger Reserves declared under the Wild Life Protection Act 2012 prevail over FRA provisions, leading to repeated displacement and loss of traditional habitats.
- **Loss of Documentary Evidence:** Frequent forced shifts of habitation (due to Eco Sensitive Zones, National Forests, Tiger Forests) lead to the loss of documentary evidence required to prove original domicile and extent of cultivated land.
- **Challenges with Oral Evidence:** While oral evidence is acceptable, the low life expectancy of tribals in Karnataka (63.9 years) means few elders are alive to provide oral proof of 75 years of residence prior to the cut-off date.
- **Lack of Spot Verification:** Insufficient and improper spot verification by implementing functionaries (SDLC and DLC) contributes to exclusion errors. Local authorities (GP/FRC) are often not enabled for verification.
- **Insufficient Information:** A significant lack of understanding of the Act's sections and subsections among both STs and implementing agencies (Forest officials, PDOs) is a major reason for implementation gaps. Training has not been continuous.
- **Need for Identity Cards:** The absence of Individual Forest Rights Identity Cards forces tribals to rely on face recognition by local forest guards for forest entry, leading to arbitrary restrictions on livelihood activities.

Discussion: These systemic issues collectively create an environment where the FRA's protective and empowering provisions are continuously undermined. Policy conflicts, bureaucratic inertia, and a lack of sensitivity to tribal realities perpetuate their marginalization and vulnerability.

4.12. Qualitative Findings from Case Study of ST and PVTG Participation

- **Low PVTG Participation:** Participation of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in schemes like MGNREGA is notably low, influenced by document availability issues, shyness, contentment with immediate food security, and preference for daily wages.
- **Lack of PVTG Data:** No specific records are maintained on PVTG participation. A compiled GP data showed only 61% job card holding among PVTG households.
- **No Special Job Cards:** PVTGs are not being issued special job cards as envisaged by the MGNREG Act.
- **Mixed ST Participation:** Participation of other STs is mixed, influenced by higher wages from coffee plantations, inadequate MGNREGA wages, and preference for Forest Department work. Women's participation in MGNREGA is positively shaped by its higher wage compared to market rates.
- **Awareness Gaps:** Awareness of MGNREGA among PVTGs is low, and other STs have gaps in knowledge of rights and entitlements. Remoteness and reclusiveness hinder awareness efforts.
- **Preference for Forest-Based Work:** Forest-based tribes like Soligas prefer forest-based work, but challenges exist in incorporating such works under MGNREGA due to ecosystem fragility and Forest Department's reluctance for convergence.
- **Positive Convergence:** A positive development is the convergence between Forest Department, MGNREGA, and NRLM for Lantana removal and grassland development in some GPs of Gundlupet taluka, Chamarajanagar, from FY 2022-23.

Discussion: PVTGs, being the most vulnerable, face unique barriers to accessing welfare schemes, further exacerbating their marginalization. The lack of specific data and tailored approaches for PVTGs is a significant oversight. While challenges exist, successful convergence models demonstrate the potential for integrating forest conservation with livelihood generation under MGNREGA.

5. Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings, the following recommendations are crucial for improving FRA implementation and securing tribal livelihoods:

1. Application Submission – Review & Settlements:

- All applications should be mandatorily registered and acknowledged at the Grama Panchayat level.
- Grama Panchayats and FRCs should be capacitated to play a robust role in application scrutiny and recommendation, verifying basic records.
- Rejected applications should undergo mandatory verification by the District Level Committee (DLC) to minimize exclusion errors.

2. Land Rights and Records:

- Revenue authorities must prioritize the issuance of RTCs (Record of Rights, Tenancy and Crops) for all land beneficiaries under FRA.
- Until RTCs are issued, the 'Letter of Rights (Hakku Patras)' provided by forest/revenue authorities should be officially recognized for provisioning benefits of various Government Schemes.
- To protect land rights, the right to sell FRA-granted land should be prohibited, similar to provisions for other marginalized communities.

3. Extent of Land Provided:

- As provisioned in the Act, authorities should consider providing land up to four hectares.
- A minimum acreage (e.g., one hectare) should be fixed to ensure economic viability and 'economies of scale,' especially considering historical shifting cultivation practices and forced displacements.

4. Strengthening FRCs Functioning and Purview:

- FRCs must be reactivated and strengthened beyond mere settlement of IFRs, playing a long-term role in social development, livelihood promotion, and supporting forest conservation.
- Regular meetings, proper documentation (minute registers), and continuous capacity building for FRC members are essential.

5. Addressing Amenities – Roads:

- Policy-level deliberation is urgently needed to clarify which act prevails regarding road construction in tribal hamlets within forest areas.
- Motorable roads are a foremost need and solutions must be found to overcome policy/legal hurdles, ensuring basic connectivity and access to services.

6. Need for Creating Effective Awareness:

- Implement continuous, targeted, and culturally sensitive awareness campaigns about FRA 2006 and its amendment rules, focusing on the Act's provisions, the roles of FRCs, Gram Sabhas, SDLCs, and DLCs.
- Develop simplified IEC (Information, Education, and Communication) materials in local languages.

7. Diversified Livelihood Opportunities:

- Promote convergence of existing schemes like NRLM (National Rural Livelihood Mission) and Van Dhan Yojana to create diversified livelihood opportunities.
- Adapt MGNREGA work months to suit local agricultural cycles and seasonal employment needs.
- Encourage niche and distinct cropping plans for forest areas (e.g., coffee cultivation in BR Hills), promoting organic farming and dairy models sensitive to the forest ecosystem.
- Strengthen FRCs to coordinate livelihood activities instead of creating multiple agencies.

8. Minor Forest Produce (MFP) Regulation:

- Bestow the power of prohibition or regulation of specific MFP collection to District Level Committees under FRA, allowing for context-specific decisions based on multi-stakeholder consensus.

9. Addressing Other Grave Issues:

- Resolve policy conflicts where acts like the Wild Life Protection Act override FRA provisions, ensuring the primacy of FRA in tribal areas.
- Develop mechanisms to accept and verify oral evidence more effectively, acknowledging the challenges posed by low tribal life expectancy and historical displacements.
- Ensure proper spot verification by implementing functionaries (SDLC and DLC) and empower local authorities (GP/FRC) for initial verification.
- Provide continuous training and refresher courses for all implementing agencies on the comprehensive understanding of FRA.
- Issue Individual Forest Rights Identity Cards to beneficiaries to facilitate their legitimate access to forests for livelihood and other rights.

10. Addressing	PVTG	Specific	Needs:
	Develop tailored strategies for PVTG participation in welfare schemes, addressing document availability, shyness, and preference for immediate payments. Maintain specific records on PVTG participation and issue special job cards as envisaged by the MGNREG Act.		
	• Ensure representation of PVTGs and STs among mobilization functionaries to enhance reach and trust.		

6. Conclusion

The Forest Rights Act of 2006 represents a crucial legislative attempt to correct historical injustices against India's forest-dwelling tribal communities and secure their rights to land and livelihood. However, this empirical study from Chamarajanagar, Karnataka, unequivocally demonstrates that the Act's noble objectives are being severely undermined by significant implementation gaps. The pervasive discrepancies between official records and ground realities, alarmingly high rejection rates, substantial exclusion errors, and the systemic failure of key institutional mechanisms like FRCs, collectively paint a picture of continued marginalization.

The human cost of these failures is profound, leading to persistent poverty, lack of access to essential government schemes, and distress migration. The challenges are compounded by a critical lack of awareness among beneficiaries, policy conflicts that prioritize conservation over rights, and insufficient capacity within implementing agencies. While a few positive convergences offer a glimmer of hope, they remain isolated instances in a landscape dominated by systemic hurdles.

For the FRA to truly fulfill its promise, a concerted and multi-pronged approach is required. This includes streamlining application processes, ensuring the issuance of proper land records, strengthening grassroots institutions, enhancing awareness through sustained campaigns, diversifying livelihood opportunities in a forest-sensitive manner, and resolving critical policy conflicts. Only through such comprehensive and sensitive implementation can the Forest Rights Act genuinely empower tribal communities, secure their livelihoods, and foster a more equitable and just relationship between people and forests.

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