

Women's Participation in Forest Governance after the Forest Rights Act, 2006: Evidence from Junglemahal, West Bengal

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Abstract: *The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (Forest Rights Act or FRA) introduced a rights-based approach to forest governance in India by recognizing the legal rights of forest-dwelling communities over forest land and resources. An important dimension of the Act is its emphasis on women's participation through joint ownership of individual forest rights and their involvement in Gram Sabha-based decision-making. In the forested region of Junglemahal in West Bengal, where tribal communities such as the Santhal, Munda, Bhumij, Lodha, Kheria Sabar, and Oraon depend heavily on forests, women's participation has become increasingly important for both livelihood security and sustainable forest management. Earlier studies on Joint Forest Management (JFM) in West Bengal found that women contributed significantly to forestry activities but often had limited representation in decision-making institutions. The FRA has created greater opportunities for women's involvement, although implementation challenges remain.*

Keywords: Forest Rights Act, Women Empowerment, Forest Governance, Junglemahal, Gram Sabha, Community Forest Resource Rights, Tribal Women.

I. INTRODUCTION

Forests are central to the lives of tribal communities in India, providing food, fuelwood, fodder, medicinal plants, housing materials, and income through non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Women are often the primary collectors and managers of these resources and possess extensive traditional ecological knowledge. Despite this, they have historically remained underrepresented in formal forest governance.

The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 marked a significant policy shift by recognizing individual and community rights over forest resources and by strengthening the authority of the Gram Sabha. The Act also promotes gender equity through provisions encouraging joint titles for spouses and women's participation in local decision-making. Junglemahal, located across Jhargram, Paschim Medinipur, Bankura, and Purulia districts of West Bengal, offers an important setting to assess how these reforms have influenced women's participation in forest governance and rural development.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study seeks to:

- Examine the role of women in forest governance after the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006.
- Assess the contribution of women to sustainable forest management in Junglemahal.
- Identify the socio-economic benefits of women's participation.
- Analyze the major challenges affecting effective participation.
- Suggest policy measures for strengthening women's leadership in community forest governance.

III. FOREST RIGHTS ACT, 2006 AND GENDER INCLUSION

The FRA was enacted to address historical injustices faced by Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers. The Act recognizes:

- Individual Forest Rights (IFR)
- Community Forest Resource (CFR) Rights
- Rights over Minor Forest Produce (MFP)
- Rights to protect and conserve forests
- Rights to participate through Gram Sabhas
- A notable gender-sensitive provision is the encouragement of **joint ownership of land titles in the names of both spouses**, which strengthens women's legal and economic status. The Act also recognizes the importance of women's participation in community-level institutions responsible for forest governance.

IV. JUNGLEMAHAL: SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Junglemahal is characterized by extensive sal forests and a large tribal population. Major tribal communities include:

- Santhal
- Munda
- Bhumij
- Lodha
- Kheria Sabar
- Oraon
- Mahali

Women in these communities contribute substantially to household livelihoods through:

- Collection of sal leaves
- Gathering mahua flowers and seeds
- Honey collection
- Fuelwood collection
- Bamboo craft production
- Medicinal plant collection
- Livestock management
- Agricultural activities

These responsibilities make women central stakeholders in forest conservation and sustainable resource management.

V. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN FOREST GOVERNANCE

5.1 Participation in Gram Sabhas

Following the FRA, Gram Sabhas have become the principal institutions for recognizing forest rights and preparing community forest management plans. Women's attendance and participation have increased in many villages, particularly where awareness campaigns and civil society organizations have supported local communities.

Women's contributions include:

- Participating in claim verification.
- Identifying traditional forest boundaries.
- Preparing conservation plans.
- Monitoring forest use.
- Resolving local disputes.

5.2 Community Forest Protection

Women actively participate in:

- Forest patrols.
- Fire prevention.
- Preventing illegal logging.
- Monitoring grazing practices.

- Regeneration of degraded forests.

Research from West Bengal has shown that women's dedicated forest protection groups can improve participation and contribute significantly to conservation outcomes.

5.3 Management of Minor Forest Produce

Women play a leading role in collecting and processing:

- Sal leaves
- Mahua flowers
- Tamarind
- Mushrooms
- Medicinal herbs
- Honey
- Lac

Recognition of forest rights has enhanced their ability to access these resources legally, improving household income where markets and local institutions function effectively.

5.4 Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Women possess extensive knowledge regarding:

- Seasonal harvesting practices.
- Medicinal plants.
- Seed conservation.
- Water sources.
- Wildlife behaviour.
- Sustainable harvesting methods.

Integrating this knowledge into community forest management strengthens ecological sustainability.

VI. IMPACT ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Implementation of the FRA has contributed to several positive changes.

Economic Empowerment

Women have gained:

- Greater access to forest products.
- Improved household income.
- Better livelihood opportunities.
- Increased financial independence.

Social Empowerment

Participation in Gram Sabha meetings has strengthened women's confidence and visibility in public decision-making.

Political Empowerment

Women increasingly participate in:

- Forest Management Committees.
- Village development planning.
- Community conservation initiatives.

Evidence from studies on community forestry suggests that stronger representation of women in forest governance is associated with improved institutional functioning and better conservation outcomes.

VII. CHALLENGES

Despite these advances, several barriers continue to limit meaningful participation.

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Limited Awareness

Many women remain unaware of:

- Their legal rights under the FRA.
- Procedures for claiming Community Forest Resource rights.
- Available government support programmes.

Social and Cultural Constraints

Traditional gender norms may limit women's ability to speak openly in Gram Sabha meetings or assume leadership roles.

Administrative Delays

Challenges include:

- Delayed recognition of claims.
- Complex documentation requirements.
- Limited institutional support.

Weak Market Linkages

Women engaged in collecting non-timber forest products often face:

- Low prices.
- Dependence on intermediaries.
- Poor transport infrastructure.
- Limited value-addition opportunities.

Institutional Coordination

Effective implementation requires better coordination among:

- Forest Department.
- Tribal Development Department.
- Panchayati Raj Institutions.
- Gram Sabhas.
- Civil society organizations.

Studies of FRA implementation in West Bengal have noted that institutional arrangements and administrative processes continue to influence how effectively community rights are realized.

VIII. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen women's participation in forest governance, the following measures are recommended:

- Expand legal awareness programmes focusing on women's forest rights.
- Ensure active participation of women in Gram Sabha meetings.
- Promote women as leaders of Community Forest Resource committees.
- Strengthen self-help groups linked to forest-based enterprises.
- Improve access to markets through producer cooperatives and value addition.
- Encourage participatory forest management based on traditional ecological knowledge.
- Build the capacity of women through training in leadership, financial management, and sustainable harvesting.
- Improve coordination among government departments and local institutions.
- Introduce regular monitoring of women's participation in FRA implementation.

IX. CONCLUSION

The Forest Rights Act, 2006 has significantly expanded opportunities for women to participate in forest governance by recognizing their legal rights and strengthening the role of Gram Sabhas. In Janglemahal, women continue to play a

vital role in forest conservation, livelihood generation, and community resource management. Their involvement in collecting non-timber forest products, protecting forests, and contributing traditional ecological knowledge demonstrates that gender-inclusive governance can support both environmental sustainability and rural development. Nevertheless, challenges such as limited awareness, socio-cultural barriers, administrative delays, and weak market access continue to restrict the full realization of these benefits. Strengthening women's leadership, improving institutional coordination, and supporting sustainable forest-based livelihoods will be essential for ensuring that the objectives of the Forest Rights Act are achieved in both social and ecological terms.

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