

ABSTRACT

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights on Forest) Act (also known as FRA), 2006, was a landmark Act, which has been passed in the Indian Parliament in order to recognize and devolve more forest rights to local communities. However, the process of implementation and the resultant implications of the act on the improvement of socioeconomic status and livelihoods of local communities and forest conservation outcomes are still unclear, especially in the Indian state of West Bengal, where a significant number of households received Individual Forest Rights (IFRs) under the FRA. The present research attempts to explain factors influencing the implementation of the FRA across Indian states; assess the impact of the FRA on food security and livelihood conditions of forest dwellers and the conservation of forests. Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been applied to collect data. Qualitative methods include focus group discussion (FGD) with different groups of forest dwellers and transect walk to forest areas. Semi-structured questionnaires have been used for collecting quantitative primary data from 300 IFRs households. The data has been analyzed using descriptive statistics and appropriate econometric techniques. The result shows that the States having a higher percentage of rural ST population have higher forest rights claims distribution rates. The assignment of IFRs is found to reduce forest dweller households' food insecurity and improve their livelihood conditions. Households with larger sizes of IFR land have less livelihood diversification. The village-level forest conservation result reveals that the villages with a higher proportion of IFR land to total forest cover have less forest degradation. At household levels, the households with more institutional membership have higher forest conservation on their IFR land. Hence, it is suggested that to help reduce households' food insecurity and improve livelihood conditions among forest dwellers in the state, the recognition of IFR land under the FRA may further be encouraged, and the forest dwellers' awareness of the FRA should be increased.

Keywords: Forest Rights Act, Forest Governance, Livelihoods, Food Security, Forest Conservation, Tribal Communities, West Bengal, India.