



# Empowering Through Recognition: An Analysis Of Women's Participation In Forest Rights Act 2006 In Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand And Rajasthan

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**Citation:** Raghawi and Rukmani. (2024), Empowering Through Recognition: An Analysis Of Women's Participation In Forest Rights Act 2006 In Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand And Rajasthan, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1) 6743-6747  
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.10003

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

In India, the Forest Rights Act of 2006 (FRA 2006) is a significant legal initiative that aims to address past injustices experienced by underprivileged communities, especially those who live in tribal areas and forests. The gendered character of the FRA 2006 implementation warrants more examination, even if it addresses the larger issues of land and resource rights. In communities that depend on forests, women have always been essential to traditional knowledge and sustainable resource management techniques. Despite this, their contributions are frequently undervalued. Taking this into consideration, the study "Empowering Through Recognition: An Analysis of Women's Participation in Forest Rights Act 2006 Implementation" aims to explore the particular dynamics related to women's involvement in the FRA 2006 procedures. The study intends to investigate a number of aspects of women's participation, such as their engagement in decision-making procedures, the acknowledgement of their rights to land and resources, and the influence of their empowerment on community dynamics. The study aims to uncover enablers and constraints influencing women's agency in the context of the FRA 2006 through a nuanced analysis of three states: Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Rajasthan. It also aims to evaluate the wider effects of women's involvement on gender equity, community development, and traditional sustainable forest management.

**Keywords:** Forests, Forest Rights Act, Women Tribal, Participation, Implementation, Uttarakhand, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan

## INTRODUCTION

Humans for ages have engaged with and benefited from forest resources for their survival and livelihood. However, the increased population has burdened the dependency of people on forests. In order to lessen the burden on forest resources, traditional and sustainable practices to manage forests can become a way forward. The Forest Rights Act gave tribals and other traditional forest dwellers a significant chance to improve their socio-economic security along with their involvement in forest resource management. Forest management has continued to be interested in gender roles, particularly in emerging nations, and viewpoints on this topic have changed throughout time. The focus on gender issues in forest governance has evolved over time. Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), Women Environment and Development (WED), Ecofeminism, Gender, Environment and Development (GAD), and Feminist Political Ecology are some of the theoretical positions that have changed since the feminist discourses of the 1970s (Razavi and Miller, 1995, Sarker and Das, 2002, Davids et al., 2013). The degree to which policies take gender dynamics into account while planning, must be examined in order to analyze the current approach in policy (Tyagi and Das, 2018). Women contribute significantly to value chains related to Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), particularly in the areas of collection, processing and marketing. However, in some states women's contribution seems neglected. To this, the Forest Rights Act of 2006 can be taken into account to understand its significance from women's perspective. The paper tries to link the implementation of FRA 2006 and women participation and explore the effects of the policy on women's involvement. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 in India has attempted to restore the rights of traditional forest dwellers and schedule tribes by recognising their land and traditional rights. The Act has drawn notice because of its ability to strengthen the position of marginalised groups and

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advance sustainable forest management. But in the larger conversation it is imperative to explore the gendered aspects of the act's application, especially in relation to women's involvement. The Act acknowledges women's rights to obtain legal title to property on an equal basis with men, while also acknowledging the tenurial rights of forest dwellers. By granting land titles jointly in the names of both men and women in the case of married persons under FRA, 2006, women would have legally recognized ownership rights over land for the first time (Zaidi, 2019). This is because land transfer through family and kinship has historically not been an option, even for tribal women. Due to their land ownership rights under the FRA, tribal women are now capable of making strategic decisions about their lives, such as those pertaining to their means of subsistence, potential partners, and family planning (Zaidi, 2019).

Women in communities that depend on forests have been essential to the management of natural resources and biodiversity protection. Their role extends to collecting firewood, fuelwood and NTFPs. However, gender stereotypes and socioeconomic inequalities often make it difficult for women to obtain and defend their rights. Pervasive ideas of femininity and masculinity as well as informal practices have an impact on women's involvement in community-based forest management initiatives (Ramdas, 2009). The FRA can be used as an instrument for changing the role of tribal women from being marginalised and disempowered to becoming the decision maker of forest management. However, in many states of India implementational challenge remains a primary concern.

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to perform a thorough examination of women's involvement in the Forest Rights Act of 2006 implementation in Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Rajasthan. The study aims to determine the advantages and disadvantages that affect women's agency in asserting and using their rights under the FRA 2006 by looking at the policies, procedures, and results. It will also evaluate how women's participation affects resource management, community dynamics, and general socioeconomic growth. The study acknowledges that guaranteeing inclusivity, promoting sustainable development, and informing policy responses all depend on having a detailed understanding of gender dynamics within the framework of the Forest Rights Act. By means of this research, the study hopes to offer significant views that will direct subsequent efforts to improve the efficacy of the Forest Rights Act of 2006 in advancing gender parity and women's empowerment in communities that depend on forests.

The study has used a mixed method approach combining *primary* and *second sources* to analyse women's participation in the implementation of FRA 2006 across three districts – Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Rajasthan. For Uttarakhand, fieldwork was conducted in Tumariya Khatta, located in the Terai region of Nainital district. The research involved on-ground interactions with Van Gujjar community members, informal interviews with women beneficiaries, and observations of local governance processes related to FRA implementation. This provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of tribal women and their engagement with forest rights claims.

In contrast, for Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan, the study relied on secondary data sources. By combining empirical fieldwork with desk-based research, this methodology allows for both depth (in Uttarakhand) and breadth (across the three states) in analyzing gendered outcomes of forest tenure reform.

### Andhra Pradesh

In Andhra Pradesh, the implementation of the **Forest Rights Act (2006)** has been shaped by both the state's unique socio-political dynamics and its active civil society engagement. The section 4(4) of the act mandates that a joint (both the spouses) forest land title and in the name of single women. Women are eligible to claim for both the titles (Community and Individual forest right) of the act. The act also has provision to include women in Gram Sabha. This allows women representation at local level governance. In Andhra Pradesh, women are heavily involved in agriculture, especially in the management of natural resources; at both the micro and macro levels they are engaged in crop management, economic decision-making and access to economic resources (Sunandini 2020). Women participation in collecting NTFPs makes them natural supporters of forest conservation, but the policy implementation is not justifying the role of women as expected (Raj and Anitha, 2024). The execution of policies meant to acknowledge the capacity of women and grant them their land rights has been driven by bureaucracy and profit challenges (Kumar, Rao and Rao 2012). Through the establishment of legal entitlements to the lands that they have been cultivating for years, the Forest Rights Act seeks to alleviate the injustice experienced by tribal and forest-dwelling people of Andhra Pradesh (Reddy, 2011). The Andhra Pradesh Forest Department has been impeding the democratic mandate for reform, making the Act's implementation difficult (Oliver, 2013). As mentioned earlier, at Gram Sabha level women participation is essential. Despite their legal right to participate in decision making bodies (Gram Sabha) women are rarely consulted and are mostly resisted by patriarchal mindset (Rao et al; 2016).

The Forest Rights Act, 2006, which was put into effect in Andhra Pradesh, has exposed the State's patriarchal mindset and its unwillingness to grant community rights to women for the land they have been tilling. As a result, women in the state are now wage labourers (Sokal, 1996). The legislation is no longer an empowerment

tool for adivasi women but rather a bureaucratic exercise (Ramdas, 2009). The state's ongoing seizure of forest rights has also been made clear by the Act's implementation (Sharma, 2017). Overall, Andhra Pradesh's implementation of the Forest Rights Act has not succeeded in empowering women and sustaining forests, despite the Act's intention to redefine gender and environmental justice (Reddy, 2010). Despite being disadvantaged in their official duties, in one of the cases in the village of Andhra Pradesh women have utilised a forest management project to strengthen their bargaining position, acquire prominence, and elevate their prestige in the community (Nandigama, 2013). However, there are still obstacles preventing women and other marginalised groups from actively participating in collaborative forest management activities, (Balakrishna and Virmani, 2020). Gender-specific issues that have affected women in forest areas include lack of representation, discrimination based on gender, and restricted access to decision-making processes. These difficulties may make them more susceptible to marginalisation and vulnerability. For women to be empowered, included, and to protect their well-being, it is critical to acknowledge and respond to their unique needs and rights in forest areas. Gender equality, women's engagement, and the acknowledgment of their rights in the governance and management of forests cannot solely be accomplished through gender-responsive policies but a proper knowledge of the policy along with transparent implementation is required.

### Uttarakhand

The case study is done in Tumariya Khatta Village in Jim Corbett National Park(JCNP) in Nainital district of Uttarakhand. Women from Van Gujjar community of Uttarakhand believe that as per the provision of FRA 2006 they are included in the Gram Sabha and Forest Rights Committee gives them a sense of legal identity in the decision making process. *"This inclusive act is not just about access to land but also about our dignity and belongingness. We will be able to conserve forests as per our traditional knowledge and techniques."* a group of women responded from Tumariya Khatta, JCNP. Involvement of civil society organisations like Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan has encouraged and informed women of Van Gujjar community in claiming their rights. Women from different households of Tumariya Khatta mentioned that, *"We are aware of the Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan, it has helped us know about our forest rights due to which we take part in Gram Sabha meetings"*. Safi a Van Gujjar community member mentions that, *"Though, women have the right to be included in the decision making process at Gram Sabha level but they barely know about their roles and responsibility making it difficult for them to make decisions."* Roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined, and women are underrepresented in decision-making and forest management (Sarin, 2001). Women participate in general meetings at FRC level but they are not regarded as important players in the decision-making process. The reservation quota for women on executive committees looks progressive on paper but does not really empower tribal women nor integrate their rights to the forest.

Women from Tumariya Khatta believe that the FRA will help them stabilise their livelihood particularly through access to forest products and grazing rights. *"But in the last 19 years of FRA, we still have not received our titles because the bureaucrats are highly critical of us and they come up with some new government rules which stops us from using forest resources"* another woman respondent from Tumariya Khatta. Women's efforts to have a stronger voice and more control over forest resources have been hampered and marginalised by governmental regulations and donor-funded forestry programs (Rukmani, 2015). Women are the bearers of indigenous traditional knowledge regarding the management and practices of forests. Women's active involvement is essential to the success of forest management since they are the bearers of traditional indigenous knowledge (Ramdas, 2009). Women in Tumariya Khatta collectively go to distant forests to collect fuelwoods and fodder for their domestic needs. Their dependence on forest makes them feel connected to the forest resources. Women of the village believe that their presence in the forests is very sustainable and does not harm any wildlife. Also, they primarily are homemakers and their everyday chores require them to maintain a sustainable life. Women respondents of Tumariya Khatta village said, *"We don't have to learn about sustainable living because we have been living this for ages. It's not a new lifestyle for us. We prefer to live like this for the coming years also."* The effectiveness of FRA to protect forests is believed to depend on women's active involvement in forest management. The Forest Rights Act in Tumariya Khatta in Nainital district of Uttarakhand has a mixed impact on women.

### Rajasthan

In Rajasthan, the customary rights of scheduled tribes and other forest-dependent people, including tribal women, to use forestland are recognized under Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 (Zaidi, 2019). In the article, 'Tribal women's empowerment through the Forest Rights Act, 2006 in southern Rajasthan' (2019) Zaidi mentions that, FRA 2006 has been essential in acknowledging tribal women's equal rights to land ownership with men, the Act has granted individual land titles to heads of single women's families as well as joint land titles to women and important male family members; also that the FRA has additionally guaranteed women's participation in administrative and decision-making positions by mandating a minimum percentage of female members in various bodies. Overall, the act has been helpful for women to achieve certain rights and claims. But in some cases the act's implementation has harmed women's access to resources (Sharma, 2017). The state's unwillingness to award community forest rights to communities has transformed the act into a bureaucratic failure and instead of the women using their traditional knowledge to nurture forests and earn

legitimate incomes, they are now wage labourers (Bose and Bose, 2011). Tribal women and other oppressed groups do not have better access to forest resources as a result of the recent identity-based forest tenure reform, which is viewed as token legislation (Ramdas, 2009). Rajasthan has faced a very patriarchal mindset which affects the claiming process of the Act. Women under the Act can claim for joint land title but with a male dominant set back it becomes difficult. While acknowledging the customary rights of indigenous and tribal people, India's Forest Rights Act of 2006 exhibits a male-biased approach to allocating individual property rights, making it more difficult for women to obtain forest resources and land. Forest tenure reforms tend to provide a progressive intent on paper but in practicality it produces gender inequality by marginalising tribal women's rights to forest resources. To guarantee that tribal women's voices and rights are not silenced brings the necessity for a more inclusive strategy that empowers all women that goes beyond symbolic representational reservation quotas. In order to avoid additional devastation of forests and unrest among the women population living in forests the Forest Rights Act needs to be addressed in a gender neutral manner immediately. To fully grasp the Act's ramifications from a gender viewpoint, in-depth study and empirical investigation are required.

### **SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS**

The FRA 2006 marked the beginning of a new era in community-centric governance by enshrining their rights over traditional lands and intending to recognize and restore them. The empowerment of these communities through forest rights assert their long-standing link with the forest ecosystem. These traditional communities have always relied on women to preserve their indigenous knowledge of medicinal herbs, forest biodiversity, and sustainable farming methods (Singh et al, 2015). Tribal women are granted the same land ownership rights as men under the FRA 2006. Though the Act does not give additional land but acknowledges already-cultivated property in the name of women ownership. Under the Act, land titles have given women a sense of inclusion, but challenges persist in different states. Institutional impediments, socioeconomic inequality, and gender stereotypes frequently silence the voices of tribal women and restrict their access to resources.

However, it is essential that women participate in decision-making processes. In the case of Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Rajasthan, women empowerment has a shortfall due to various reasons like patriarchal thought, socio-cultural barriers and misuse of political power. In Andhra Pradesh, the implementation of the Act is a challenge. The State's unwillingness to award community rights to both men and women applicants point to a bureaucratic failure. Consequently, women are no longer allowed to practise their traditional expertise and for a living; instead, they are forced to work as wage labourers on government plantations. In the case of Uttarakhand, roles and responsibilities are not properly defined which gives a niche for forest officials and elite men of the village to overrule the law and corrupt the system by sidelining women from the main political scenarios. In Tumariya Khatta in Nainital district of Uttarakhand the Van Gujjar Community can claim land rights through the Act. As per the Act women are included in the Gram Sabha and Forest Rights Committee meetings but are not regarded as an important player in decision making. In the case of Rajasthan, the impact of FRA on women has been limited and uneven. There is a significant gap between policy and field reality. While FRA includes progressive provisions for women's land and forest rights, its implementation in Rajasthan—especially among tribal communities in semi-arid regions—has often failed to deliver tangible benefits to tribal women.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Forest Rights Act (2006) was introduced to address historical injustices faced by forest-dwelling communities, with the promise of legal empowerment through land and resource rights. However, this study shows that women's participation in FRA implementation remains limited and uneven across Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Rajasthan. While Uttarakhand demonstrates some positive outcomes due to better awareness and civil society engagement, women in Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan continue to face significant barriers including patriarchal norms, bureaucratic obstacles, and low levels of legal literacy. Despite these challenges, the Act still holds transformative potential. When women are meaningfully recognized as rightsholders and active participants in forest governance, it not only strengthens gender equity but also enhances community stewardship of natural resources.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

To ensure the FRA achieves its full potential, state governments must take concrete steps to make implementation more gender-responsive. Provisions for joint land titles and individual claims by single or marginalized women need to be strictly enforced, with regular monitoring that includes gender-disaggregated data. Women's participation in Gram Sabhas and Forest Rights Committees must go beyond quotas, with real support through training and capacity-building to ensure their voices influence decisions.

Awareness of the Act's provisions remains low among women in many regions, especially in remote or tribal areas. Targeted outreach using community-based, visual, and oral methods in local languages can help bridge this gap. Collaboration with NGOs and women's collectives is also key, as these groups play an important role in mobilizing communities and supporting women's claims.

Finally, there is a need for gender-sensitive evaluation tools to measure women's actual access to rights and their involvement in forest governance. Equally important is the recognition of women's traditional forest knowledge, which should be integrated into forest management practices. Empowering women through legal recognition must go hand-in-hand with structural and cultural shifts to truly fulfill the spirit of the FRA.

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