

# **Democracy in the Woods: The Politics of Institutional Change in India's Forest Areas<sup>1</sup>**

*Extended abstract of the doctoral dissertation*

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Natural resources are among the prime sites where struggles for defining the contents and meanings of democracy, and citizenship are waged. Claims and counterclaims over land, water, and forests, rooted in competing interests in and ideas about resource governance, are mediated by a variety of institutions. This dissertation answer a key puzzle: Why do some citizens seek to claim rights recognized under the statute, while others sign on to the proposal for institutional change somewhat reluctantly, and still others continue to abide by the institutional regimes put in place by colonial governments? By bridging the scholarship on institutional analysis and power, the dissertation offers a comprehensive approach to understanding and analyzing institutional change in the context of environmental resources.

Few other pieces of legislation introduced in independent India have generated as bitter controversies as did the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006. Per the text of the Act, the FRA seeks to undo 'historical injustices' committed against indigenous and other forest dependent groups. The injustices related to the sweeping 'nationalization' by colonial forestry administration of the lands occupied and used in the past by forest dependent groups. Post-nationalization, the earlier inhabitants of the lands were reduced to squatters. The property rights institutions that the colonial government put in place continued to be the bedrock of forest management in post-independence India. The enactment of FRA by Indian parliament is the first comprehensive effort to recognize the private and collective rights apparently usurped by colonial and post-colonial governments. The FRA triggered passionate responses from actors concerned with the questions of forests and forest rights.

Some among the nature conservation groups dubbed the Act as 'probably the most dangerous act' of any Indian government since 1947, and its passing as Indian 'democracy's lowest hour'. These conservationists argued that the act would prompt 'vote hungry' politicians to encourage a land rush threatening India's remaining forests. Such claims, which influential sections within media, political leadership, and governments supported, were the subject of television and YouTube commercials, a first for policy advocacy in Indian history. The FRA supporters, on the

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other hand, hailed it as landmark legislation that met the aspirations nurtured by generation of forest dwellers. However, the emerging empirical evidence, including the data collected under this dissertation, presents an intriguing picture: the levels of claim-making under FRA in most cases does not support the enthusiasm implied by either the activists or the conservationists. Despite extreme poverty and landlessness among the forest dependent groups, the political populism and the land rush anticipated by the conservationists did not occur even in the highly politically competitive study regions. Indeed, for a variety of reasons discussed at length in the dissertation, many apparently eligible claimants failed to put forth their claims.

Why did the FRA evoke such a muted response? What implications might this have for the distinct but equally important goals of environmental conservation and democratic institutional reforms? What might the FRA tell us about theories of institutional change? My dissertation seeks to answer these questions by developing and testing a research approach in the political economy of institutional change, focusing on the interplay of pre-existing institutions—the historically shaped rules, norms, and conventions—and the extant political economy relations. To analyze these effects, the dissertation employs a carefully constructed comparative research design and a suit of quantitative and qualitative research methods. The statistical hypothesis testing, which draws upon a unique primary dataset that I collected for the dissertation, is combined with a rigorous qualitative analysis of the processes and causal mechanisms leading up to the outcomes.

An analysis of the historical and the contemporary policy context shows that even in colonial times, intrasociety and intracommunity asymmetries were critical in shaping the extant distribution of property rights that the FRA seeks to alter. Post-independence, the democratic forces of electoral competition and social movements helped foster informal contestation of institutional status quo, eventually leading to enactment of the FRA. However, social movements face significant barriers against their role as forest rights interlocutors. These challenges relate, among others, to a strong belief among some of the potential FRA beneficiaries in the legitimacy of the state as the sole arbiter of property rights. Even so, the potential for social movements broadening the terms of political debates were most clearly visible in the regions with higher levels of electoral competition.

The effect of past forest protection arrangements on FRA claims in a community depended on the interests and actions of local 'forest leaders', i.e. those leading the past forest conservation arrangements in a community, and represented on the locally elected forest rights committees, which coordinated the first tier of adjudication of the FRA claims. Forest leaders' presence on the locally elected FRA committee was the strongest negative predictor of the household forestland

cultivation claims under the FRA. Qualitative inquiries revealed, with an eye on maintaining their stronghold, forest leaders in many cases actively worked to prevent the eligible right holders from claiming FRA rights. In other words, forest leaders worked against the mandate they sought as the elected representatives of "local communities".

The elected leaders represented at the provincial assemblies and nominated to the sub-district and district level FRA committees, often collaborated with and helped secure the interests of public forest officials. Similarly, instead of getting into inter-bureau turf battles as suggested by the public administration literature, bureaus with apparently competing interests stood united in decrying the legitimacy of the rights that the FRA sought to impart to the citizens. These outcomes are attributable to the sediments of long-held prejudices among public officials against the forest-dependent groups, particularly the indigenous adivasi groups. The subjective understanding of institutions and institutional change that different actors brought to the table greatly shaped the actors' response to the institutional change.

The dissertation offers concrete evidence on the manner in which power relations shaped the FRA proceedings, often leading to counterintuitive outcomes. For instance, the dissertation suggests that under conditions of power asymmetry participatory forest conservation projects might reinforce historical inequity and injustices. On the other hand, the effects of local power asymmetries, reinforced through earlier rounds of 'participatory forestry programs', also permeated through the locally elected committees put in charge of implementing the FRA. This dissertation contributes to the debates over questions of institutional change, democratic representation, and participatory reforms under conditions of power asymmetries.

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