

## **Forest Rights Act, 2006 and its impact on the livelihood of Bedia in Jahajpur Village in Purulia**

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**Abstract:** India is home to approximately 10.2 crore tribal people, commonly referred to as Adivasis. Constitutional provisions refer to them as Scheduled Tribes under Article 366. Tribal communities are often considered among society's most marginalized and disadvantaged sections. Purulia is one of West Bengal's most underdeveloped tribal districts. The tribal communities in this area maintain ancient social structures, along with rich cultural traditions, customs, values, and languages unique to their communities. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 aimed to recognize and secure traditional forest dwellers' rights, addressing historical injustices faced by these communities. This study examines the FRA's impact on the livelihood of the Bedia community in Jahajpur Village, located in the socio-economically marginalized Purulia district heavily reliant on forest resources for subsistence. Historically, the Bedia derived subsistence from forests, gathering non-timber forest products, fuelwood, medicinal plants, and small-scale agriculture on forest fringes. The FRA facilitated legal recognition of individual and community land rights, thereby reducing eviction risk and providing greater security over livelihood resources. While some households report increased agricultural productivity and diversified income sources due to secure tenure, others still face restricted forest zone access, exacerbated by overlapping conservation laws. Overall, the FRA brought partial improvements to livelihood security, income stability, and community autonomy. Still, challenges in policy enforcement, administrative coordination, and resource management stemming from structural issues limit its transformative potential. Strengthening awareness, capacity building, and institutional support remain essential to ensure the FRA fulfills its promise for Jahajpur's Bedia community.

**Keywords:** Forest Rights Act (FRA), Livelihood security, Bedia community, Socio-economic impact, Purulia district.

## **1. Introduction:**

Tribal communities are a sizable portion in India's population, accounting for 8.6% as per the last national Census. Data from 2011 shows that the vast majority of India's over 104 million Scheduled Tribe inhabitants, some 94.1 million people, live in rural or outlying regions. Forests cover approximately 71.38 million hectares of the country, or 21.71% of the total land area based on figures from the Indian State of Forest Report of 2021. More than half of tribal communities rely on these extensive woodland environments and their bountiful natural resources for their livelihoods according to estimates from TRIFED in 2019.

Since the Forest Rights Act took effect in 2006, there was some hopeful prospect for indigenous peoples. In addition to offering many avenues for tribal advancement and sustenance, it could result in long-lasting initiatives to regenerate and conserve forests. As of its establishment in 2008, 20 Indian states had ratified the FRA and over 1.96 million forest rights claims involving nearly 1.29 million acres of wooded lands had been officially acknowledged according to data of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs from 2019. The 2006 Forest Rights Act recognized fourteen specific rights given to the Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest residents outlined under MOLJ in 2007 and the CFRLA in 2016. The sole legal system in the country capable of validating the identities of right holders and their entitlements to forest resources is the FRA.

Access to forest goods, like non-timber forest products, becomes possible through legally acknowledged rights. Community Rights address issues like fishing, grazing, and nomadic practices. Individual Forest Rights pertain to the right to reside on and develop one's own land in a manner that supports the sustainable progression of the right holder. Community Forest Resources involve the administration, usage, and management of woodlands within traditional boundaries for sustainable usage.

The state of Odisha has the third largest tribal population nationally with over 9.59 million tribal people according to the 2011 Census. Sixty-four distinct tribal communities, thirteen of which are Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, are spread across 1,683 villages and settlements in fourteen Odisha districts. Data from the Census indicates the state is home to 9.17% of India's tribal populace or 22.85% of Odisha's total population. With 58,136 square

Kilometers of forest cover, it comprises 37.34% of the state's landmass and 7.53% of India's total woodland area.( Kalandi,2024)

Tribal population constitute about 8.6 % of India's total population. The total number of Scheduled Tribe population in India, according to the 2011 census, was 104.3 million, of which 94.1 million live in forest and remote rural areas. As per the trends of growth, the total and rural tribal population in India in 2020 is about 125 million and 112 million, respectively. Over 50 per cent of the tribal population lives in forest areas. (Haque, 2020)

As per the request of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in 2005, a draft of the Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) bill came to least problems and the backdrop of globalisation, liberalisation, and rapid growth. After entry of multinational organisations created anarchy among the tribal people. The Forest Rights Act-FRA passed in 2006 and came into effect on 1st January 2008. It is noted in the Rules that the rights of the forest-dwelling people are recognised in the Indian forest policy formation for the first time. The general assembly of United Nations adopted a Declaration of the Right to Development on 4th December 1986 recognizing that, development is a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the wellbeing of the entire population and of all individuals based on their active, free and meaningful participation in development and the fair distribution of benefits resulting there from. (Wilson, 2018)

India's tribal communities have historically shared an intimate and symbiotic and deep relationship with forests. Their lives, livelihoods, culture, and belief systems are deeply rooted in forest ecosystems. However, post-independence legal frameworks and conservation policies have often marginalized these communities, leading to severe socio-economic challenges. The 2006 Forest Rights Act, which is (officially known as the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act) has had profound and contrasting impacts on tribal as well as on all forest-dwelling communities. In the context of Jahajpur Village in Purulia district of West Bengal, the Bedia community, a tribal group that depends significantly on forest resources, provides a compelling case study of how these two legal frameworks interact—often in tension—and shape the daily lives and livelihoods of indigenous people.

Tribals or 'Adivasis' are known as the aboriginal inhabitants or settler of the World. Since time immemorial, they have had an integral and close relationship with the forest have been dependent on the forest for livelihoods and their all requirements and existence. Indian forests are home to 8.2 % of the nation's population and which is more than 84 million people, according to the 2011 census. (Mathew, Tracking The Status of Forest Rights Act, 2006 and its Impact on the Livelihood of Tribal Communities in Wayanad District, 2019).

Globally Forest is the lifeline of a sustainable world. Without forests, we can't think about life or cannot exist. Human beings are dependent on forests for many things. Forests acts as natural carbon sinks; they help to maintain temperature, refresh air, and provide oxygen. Forests are full of natural resources that are useful to human beings. They are rich in flora and fauna, which are completes the ecosystem. Humans utilise natural resources such as timber and different parts of plants for medicinal purposes and collect minor forest products like leaves, honey, wax, herbs, etc. (Sahoo, 2024)

The Bedia tribe, categorized as a Scheduled Tribe under the Indian Constitution, traditionally depends on forest-based subsistence activities such as minor forest produce (MFP) collection, fuelwood gathering, seasonal hunting, and shifting cultivation. In Jahajpur, a forest-fringed village in the rugged and undulating terrain of Purulia, the Bedia people have lived for generations near nature, practicing sustainable forest use long before formal conservation models were introduced.

The Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA) wrote in its preamble, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, strongly accepted and recognizes the historical injustice meted out to the Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers. It seeks to secure traditional rights on forest land and community forest resources and establish democratic community-based forest governance. FRA also recognizes 14 pre-existing rights of the tribals and all forest dwellers on all categories of forestland, including protected areas. The major rights are: Individual Forest Rights (IFRs) and Community Rights (CRs) of use and access to forest land and resources; Community Forest Resource (CFR) Rights to use, manage, and govern forests within the traditional boundaries of villages; and Empowerment of right-holders, and the Grama Sabha, for the conservation and protection of forests, wildlife, and biodiversity, and them natural and cultural heritage (Section 5, FRA). Developmental rights, the FRA also gives powers to the Government for diverting the forest land to build schools,

hospital or dispensaries, anganwaris, fair price shops, electric and telecommunication lines, drinking water facilities, etc. However, the FRA makes it clear that the forest land, which can be diverted for other uses, is less than one hectare (for any single use), provided the felling of trees does not exceed 70 trees per hectare. (Mathew, 2019)

## **2. Objectives of the Study:**

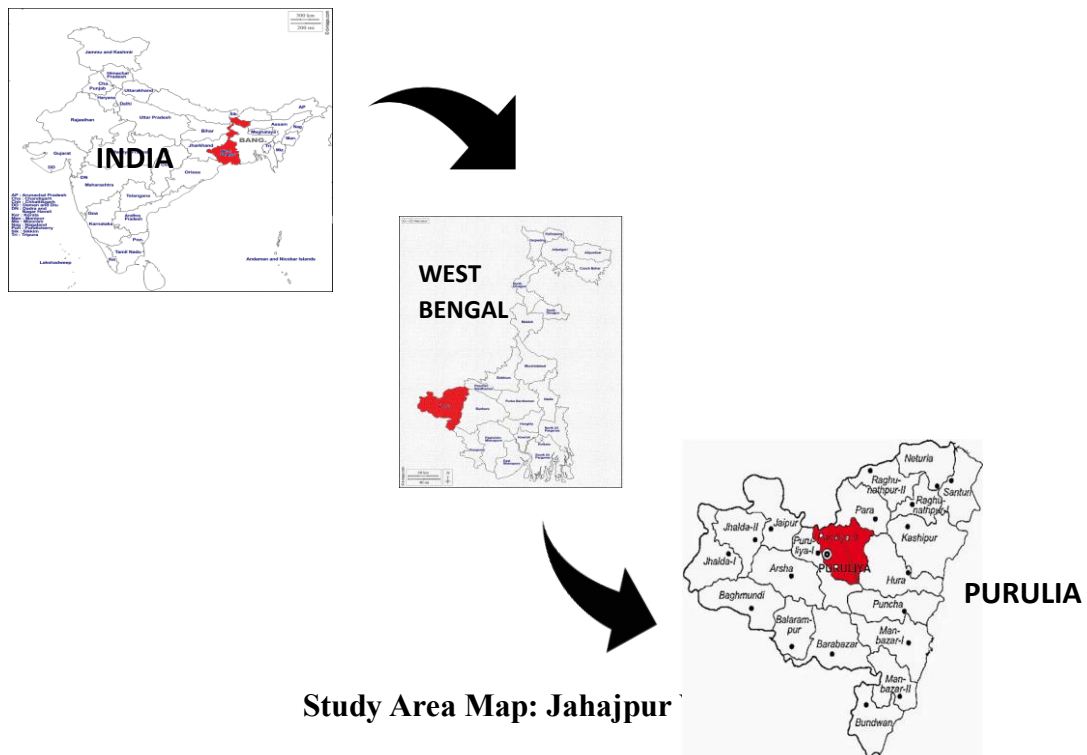
1. To Analysing the changes in the traditional forest use practices and lifestyle of the Bedia community in the context of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA).
2. To assess the level of awareness and understanding among the Bedia community about the Forest Rights Act, 2006.
3. To assess the changes in the social and economic conditions of the Bedia community after the Forest Rights Act, 2006.

## **3. Research Questions:**

- Q1. What forest-based resources do the Bedia community rely on for their livelihood?
- Q2. What are the major challenges in implementing forest-related laws in Jahajpur village?
- Q3. What impact have forest laws had on traditional practices like grazing, firewood collection, or hunting?

## **4. Research Methodology**

**Area of the Study:** This study will be conducted in one village under one CD Block of Purulia district. Jahajpur village is situated in Purulia II CD Block. Purulia is also known as one of the backward districts of West Bengal. It is a drought-prone district in the state. However, despite being a backward district, Purulia is very developed and rich in terms of culture. Here, it is seen that the cultural connections of people from different communities are still maintained.



**Sample Size:**

In Jahajpur village, a total of 81 respondents are taken for present study. They belong to the Bedia community. Total Male 30 and Female 51 respondent were participated in this research.

**Research Tools for data collection:**

The Present study was exploratory research, which is based on the qualitative data. The study were utilised the tools such as semi-structured Schedule, interview schedules, focus group discussions, and observation checklists to collect data. Participatory mapping and case studies are helped to understand local experiences. Secondary data from government records, articles, journals, and reports are also employed to analysis of the impact on the Bedia community's livelihood due to FRA, 2006.

## **5. Findings and Discussion**

### **Objective 1. Analysing the changes in the traditional forest use practices and lifestyle of the Bedia community in the context of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA),**

The implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 has brought notable changes in the traditional forest use practices and lifestyle of the Bedia community of Purulia. For generations, the dense woodlands surrounding their villages had supplied the Bedias with crucial provisions—fuel, fodder, and materials that sustained not only their daily routines but cultural customs deeply rooted in the cycles of the forest. Hunting small game and harvesting forest fruits, tubers, medicinal plants, and bamboo canes were woven into the fabric of Bedia life.

However, since the FRA's enactment secured the community's legal rights over these lands, shifts have begun. Initial expectations of empowerment and security have given way to new pressures, findings show. While certain families profit from cultivable plots within the forests, dependency on collecting from the untamed woods has lessened for many. Cultivation, wage labor, and involvement in local markets now replace earlier subsistence activities sourced from the surrounding greenery. Younger Bedias especially migrate towards non-woodland occupations like construction or factory work, weakening intergenerational exchange of ecological understanding and healing methods passed down through the people for ages.

Additional restrictions under conservation law have curtailed long-held hunting and gathering customs, compelling adaptation. Diets and rituals evolve as ancient forest practices fade. Women once central to gathering fuel and minor forest produce face diminished roles in woodland harvesting yet heightened involvement in paid work outside the home. This alters the balance within families.

Overall, though the FRA formalized certain rights, sustainable livelihoods have not been fully guaranteed for the Bedia community. Traditional reliance on the forest dwindles as lifestyle pivots to a blended economy of agriculture and employment. But cultural detachment from their ancestral woodland realm grows. The findings reveal both empowerment and erosion—where legal protections now exist but socioeconomic forces pull the people further from their ordinary forest-centric identity.

**Objective 2. To assess the level of awareness and understanding among the Bedia community about the Forest Rights Act, 2006**

The socio-economic and administrative situation, knowledge may be below average on the overall village level and because the community is the socio-economically marginalized, it is still the background as well; overall level of awareness and understanding of the FRA, 2006 among the Bedia community remains low and unequal. Field observations suggest that the community knows of the Act because of government officials, local leaders or NGOs; in just a few households, there seems to be an understanding of what the Act contains and what it entitles them to.

The general awareness Gram sabha about the FRA among most respondents relates to the rights of tribal as well as Tribals and other forest-dwelling communities over forest land and resources. But the nuances such as how to file claims the role of the Gram Sabhas or the difference between individual and community forest rights are almost lost on many. The Act is misconceived in many households and is often believed to mean ownership of land in perpetuity without restrictions, or a guarantee of government employment. This suggests that the official messaging has not been adequately accessible or culturally competent.

Awareness is more or less limited by things like literacy levels and economic hardship. Though women are the principal users of forest produce, they are lesser aware of FRA provisions, mainly because meetings on these topics and awareness campaigns conducted by NGOs are male-centric. Younger members, even further removed from forest-related livelihoods, have little interest in the Act since it seems irrelevant to their career choices and wage-labor economy.

The awareness through NGO interventions or Panchayat is again patchy and in villages where the claims for a land title have been settled, the understanding is better. In these places, people regard FRA as a way to protect themselves from getting evicted and as a means for them to attain cultivation rights. Bureaucratic delays, corruption, and limited grassroots facilitation have sapped enthusiasm and trust in the law.

In sum, the results reveal that awareness among Bedia community members of the FRA is partial, fragmentary and shallow, and hence inadequate for significant empowerment. It is clear

that FRA can become an effective tool of empowerment for the Bedia, if we can sustain awareness campaigns, capacity building and participatory involvement.

**Objective 3. To assess the changes in the social and economic conditions of the Bedia community after the Forest Rights Act, 2006**

The FRA, 2006 was intended as a remarkable landmark as a Indian history's legislation to right the historical wrongs faced by tribal and other forest-dwelling communities that include the Bedia community of Purulia. Recent study of the social and economic condition of Bedia community in the post-FRA period shows that there is some progress but it is partial, both the individual status and the situation has transformed only to some extent.

**Economic Changes:**

One of the most tangible impacts of FRA has been the provision of pattas, or formal land titles, to some Bedia households, which enables them to cultivate forest land legally. And that gives, first of all, a sense of security and ownership, as well as taking away the anxiety about being evicted every day. Due to the establishment of rights over land, households have been able to cultivate paddy, maize and vegetables, which have helped to provide food security and lead to small rises in income. Nonetheless, the gains are not spread evenly etc. However, for most families the promises of land titles in fact never materialized, due to bureaucratic obstacles before government offices, and the plots actually allocated are either too small, overexploited, or without irrigation, and therefore unproductive.

With the decline of traditional forest-based livelihoods through legal reforms restricting practices like firewood collection, hunting and minor forest produce gathering and through ecological degradation, many Bedia have gradually moved towards wage labor in agriculture, brick kilns, construction and other informal sectors. This has brought more varied income, but also more forms of precarious and low-paying work. Even though FRA was a boon in terms of opportunities to utilise the forest legally, ineffective implementation and lack of supporting services (credit, irrigation, markets) has left the community in a disadvantaged economic position.

## **Social Changes**

The Act has brought a sense of legal recognition and inclusion on the social front. The Bédias were earlier labelled encroachers on a forest land, treating them worse than the criminals. Though the possession of titles is limited, however, it has enhanced the social confidence of the people, lower the harassment from forest officials. The role of Gram Sabha in the decision making process of the claims has in some way helped to enhance the local self-governance and collective decision making which however is employed poorly given the power equation in the Panchayat and the general lack of awareness.

Educational and awareness level of the population seems to have slightly improved in the post FRA scenario due to several government and NGO facilitated campaigns. There is a bit more tendency among families who have a secure land right to send their children to schools because of lack of pressure to take children off to earn their living. However literacy is still low. The lack of education had aggrieved the Bédias from proper decision making not just in economic systems but also in political level. The Bédias are varied and hierarchically stratified and aside from this, reluctant to include the women to participate in man's decision which still persist today.

About culture, with time the Bédias close link from the forest has been changing. Rituals by way of sacrificing animals are continued by even the younger generation. Sacred groves and protectors of the forest are parts of their Community lives. The use of traditional hill or forest which is the emblem of Hausism 'not to lie' is also practiced during negotiations and beliefs on various gods in the forest for the fulfillment of varied requirements are also abound. However the younger generation is lost due to the fact that the younger generation does not care to go any longer with traditional knowledge and with their decreasing dependency on the forest. This has become a part of silent cultural apartheid leading gradually to slow erosion of cultural identity of the forest Bédias.

## **Challenges and Limitations**

Even with the favorable changes, structural obstacles remain. Far from fully realized, the promises of the Act are held back by delays in implementation, corrupt processing of claims,

and limited institutional support. For many in Bedias, FRA is seen more as a symbol than a transformative act, as the security of their livelihoods is still tenuous. Women in particular equally have been neglected Student Men are still involved in the decision in the decision making process.

## **6. Conclusion**

The Forest Rights Act of 2006 protects the basic rights of people living in protected areas, especially in the Jahajpur village, where forests are important for local livelihoods. However, these communities often face problems from human–animal conflicts, such as damaged crops, loss of livestock, and dangers to human safety. At the same time, human activities harm wildlife, destroy habitats, and reduce biodiversity. Both the central and state governments work to support the rightful claims of forest dwellers while also focusing on protecting biodiversity. still so many drawbacks in the act therefore it is not implemented impact fully. Lengthy process tribals not bothered as well as so many long processes is there. Therefore they not go to the appropriate place for getting these rights which is mentioned. Bedias main occupation or livelihood was forest resources and the snake charming as well as shifting agriculture is decreased due to the different type of laws and now they are shifting their livelihood and become day labour. Still they are struggling for their existence.

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