

Importance of Forest rights in India

- **Reversing the historical Injustice:** The Act helps in recognising the rights that were denied to forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers since colonial times.
- **Poverty alleviation and inclusive growth:** FRA helps in securing traditional livelihood of forest-dwelling communities by granting them access to the forest products and forest land and facilitating commercial trading in MFPs.
 - For Example, around 50-gram sabhas in the Gondia district of Maharashtra organised a federation that guaranteed competitive prices and bonus for the communities for their product collection and earned Rs 2.5 crore by selling Tendupatta.
- **Conservation of forests:** FRA recognizes the symbiotic relationship of the forest dwelling communities with the forests and allows them to manage and conserve the forest using their traditional wisdom.
 - For example, the forest cover in community forest reserves in Maharashtra increased from 6.81% in 2000 to 9.32% in 2014.
- **Decentralization:** It provides for democratic decentralisation through Gram Sabhas which facilitates communities to discuss, debate, decide, plan, and effectively implement forest management plans leading to their empowerment.
- **Curbing extremism:** Implementation of FRA in Left Wing Extremism affected districts not only leads to the development of forest dwellers but also build a relationship of trust and bond between them and the government, thereby reducing land conflict and other grievances.

Concerns regarding implementation of FRA

- **Little progress in recognition of rights:** FRA has the potential to secure the forest rights of at least 200 million tribals and other traditional forest dwellers over 40 million ha (50 per cent of India's forest land) covering 177,000 villages. However, only 13 per cent of the 40 million ha has been demarcated under the FRA by the environment ministry.
- **Inadequate efforts to promote co-existence and preservation:** Despite Community Forest Resource (CFR) having being recognized, there have been few efforts from the state forest departments to move towards co-existence and supporting and recognizing CFRs by gram sabhas.
- **Diversion of tribal Lands:** There have been instances where plantations by forest agencies are being done on land used by tribal communities and other traditional forest dwellers that are entitled to these lands under FRA.
 - As per a study, there has already been a diversion of around 0.39 million hectares (ha) of forest land between 2008 and 2019.
- **Relocation in violation of FRA:** Several people have been denied rights or relocated from Protected areas or critical wildlife habitats without prior assessment whether co-existence is possible and exercising forests rights would lead to irreversible damage to the habitat or species.
- **Discrepancies and delays in the process of recognising claims:** A large number of claims have been pending, rejected or the area recognized has been drastically reduced without any proper reasons along with imposition of extra-statutory and extraneous conditions in the title for recognised rights.
 - The situation has been worsened due to misinterpretation of the law by officials, illiteracy among forest dwellers, lack of awareness about their rights and little knowledge about procedure for filing claims.
- **Other issues:** Inadequate financial and administrative support to implement the law; lack of coordination between the tribal, revenue and forest department; poor or non-functioning of district and sub-division level committees; dissatisfactory Rehabilitation and compensation, etc.

Way Forward

- **Organizing large scale awareness campaigns:** Efforts should be made to reach out through radio, television and other media to ensure that people receive the basic communication regarding salient provisions of the Act, interpretation of community right etc.
- **Intensive capacity building approach:** Sub-division and district administration officers, especially revenue, forest and tribal functionaries entrusted with the task of processing forest rights have to be systematically trained not only the procedural requirements under FRA but also the challenges and contexts of forest resource use and access pattern.