

Minor forest produce, major returns

My 1-year-old is battling Acute Leukemia. Please help me save my Aadriti

Last week, The Indian Express reported the widespread rejection of forest rights claims by Maharashtra's Tribal Development Department (['Official figures say 62 per cent of land claims made by tribals were rejected in Maharashtra'](#), IE, June 5). Such rejection, though not uncommon, is against the spirit of The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA). The Act vests a number of rights with forest-dwelling communities, including rights over forest land for habitation and cultivation, right of ownership, access to collect, use, and dispose of minor forest produce, right to govern and manage any community forest resource which they have been traditionally conserving for sustainable use. Historically, during the colonial and post-colonial periods, forest management and access to forest resources like non-timber forest products (NTFPs) was largely driven by the principles of centralisation, exclusion and exploitation. The FRA envisages to change this and ensure that the economic benefits of NTFPs accrue to tribal people — this is one reason that claims on forest resources should be addressed without bias.

The report of the sub-group on NTFPs and their sustainable management in the 12th Five Year Plan highlighted that NTFPs constitute one of the largest unorganised sectors in India. Almost 275 million people depend on NTFPs with a turnover of at least Rs 6,000 crore per annum. There is a strong potential to scale up NTFP collection and processing. However, NTFPs potential as a source of development and poverty alleviation has been deeply neglected. Prior to the enactment of the FRA in 2006, forest laws nationalised non-timber forest produce and regulated the market process, creating severe inefficiencies.

The FRA provides the legal basis of ownership rights over NTFPs to forest dwellers. The remarkable impact of ownership rights over these forest products in terms of incomes and empowerment can, in fact, be observed in Maharashtra's Vidarbha region, where community rights under FRA have been implemented at scale, with almost 5.86 lakh hectares of forests being transferred to the jurisdiction of gram sabhas. We obtained information from 247 villages from this region, which reveals how ownership over minor forest produce, specially tendu leaves and bamboo, has improved the economic condition of forest dwellers. These villages earned a total of nearly Rs 35 crore in 2017 by selling NTFPs.

Discussions with villagers in the region suggest that there is a significant change in their socio-economic condition due to the additional income from NTFPs. Migration has reduced and in some areas, reverse migration has started. Villagers also report that dependence on middlemen for loans has come down drastically as the payment for NTFPs like tendu leaves and bamboo is made before June, which helps them in their agricultural activity. Even more important, investment in education and health by the villagers has increased. The improvement in their economic condition has empowered the poor, marginalised tribal and forest dweller to be more assertive in the decision-making process at the gram sabha and panchayat level. These are remarkable developments, wherein recognition of rights over forests and forest products seem to have kick-started a process of economic development and empowerment in one of the poorest, left-wing extremist affected parts of India.

The recognition of rights over forests and forest products has transferred the decision-making power to communities to decide when, where, how and to whom to sell their non-timber forest products and how to govern their forests. The FRA also fosters democratic control over customary forests by forest-dependent communities, ensuring more effective, sustainable and people-oriented forest conservation, management and restoration. For instance, in the aforementioned

districts in the Vidarbha region, the recognition of community rights over forest resources and land has led to dramatic reduction in incidence of forest fires. The forest cover regeneration has improved and indiscriminate felling and diversion of forests has been contested.

Unfortunately, such positive developments have been largely confined to Vidarbha, a few villages in Kalahandi district of Odisha and Gujarat's Narmada and Dangs districts. In the rest of the country, state governments continue to resist and create hurdles in the implementation of community rights over NTFPs and forests. Despite several orders from the nodal agency, the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs, the implementation of the provision of collective rights over NTFPs under the FRA has been weak and ineffective. The failure to recognise access rights of forest dwellers over NTFPs is a perpetuation of the historical injustice on India's forest-dwelling communities and a missed opportunity to democratise forest governance and improve the economic condition of marginalised forest communities.

A report of the Rights and Resources Initiative (2015) suggests that if the FRA is implemented properly, it could lead to the recognition of the rights of at least 150 million forest-dwelling people over 40 million hectares of forestland in more than 1,70,000 villages. The economic impact of this could be huge in rural areas as NTFPs constitute about 20 per cent to 40 per cent of the annual income of forest dwellers. It provides them critical subsistence during the lean seasons, particularly for tribal groups such as hunter-gatherers, and the landless. Given that most of the NTFPs are collected, used and sold by women, it would also lead to financial and social empowerment for millions of women.

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