

Centre's FRA Cell Initiative: Boosting Implementation of Forest Rights Act

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FRA Cell Initiative Latest News

- The Union government has started funding structural mechanisms to “facilitate” the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006.

Introduction

- For the first time since the enactment of the **Forest Rights Act (FRA)** in 2006, the Union government has initiated direct structural support to streamline its implementation.
- Under the **Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyaan (DAJGUA)**, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs has approved the establishment of over **300 district and State-level FRA cells** across India.
- This strategic push is aimed at assisting Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers in exercising their legal rights over forest land and resources.

The Forest Rights Act and its Decentralised Framework

- The **Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006** was enacted to correct historical injustices faced by tribal communities and forest dwellers.
- It decentralised the recognition of rights to the **Gram Sabha**, which in turn sets up **Forest Rights Committees (FRCs)**.
 - These committees work with **Sub-Divisional Level Committees (SDLCs)** and **District Level Committees (DLCs)** to process claims.
- Until now, the onus of implementing FRA was entirely on **State governments and Union Territories**, with the Centre offering only advisory support.
- However, limited coordination, delayed committee meetings, and lack of field-level assistance have led to **14.45% of total claims still pending**, as of March 2025.

Role and Structure of FRA Cells

- The new FRA cells, sanctioned under the **DAJGUA scheme launched in October 2024**, aim to provide **technical and administrative support** without intervening in statutory decision-making. These cells are tasked with:
 - Assisting claimants and Gram Sabhas in preparing claim documents.
 - Aiding in collection of necessary evidence and resolutions.
 - Helping in **digitisation of land records** and tracking claim status.
 - Facilitating **conversion of forest habitations into revenue villages**.
- To date, **324 district-level FRA cells** have been approved across 18 States and Union Territories, along with **State-level FRA cells** in 17 regions. The Centre funds these cells through the **Grants-in-Aid General** route, while operational control lies with State Tribal Welfare departments.
- Each district-level cell receives a budget of Rs. 8.67 lakh, while State-level cells are allocated Rs. 25.85 lakh. States like **Madhya Pradesh (55 cells)**, **Chhattisgarh (30)**, and **Telangana (29)** lead the count in terms of sanctioned FRA cells.

Divergence from FRA's Statutory Process

- Despite the declared facilitative nature, forest rights activists have raised concerns about these cells creating a **parallel implementation mechanism** that exists outside the statutory framework of the FRA.
- The original law clearly delineates roles for Gram Sabhas and statutory committees, which cannot be superseded by an administrative scheme.
- Critics argue that many responsibilities assigned to the FRA cells, like assisting with documentation and verifying evidence, already fall under the remit of statutory bodies.
- The risk, they note, is the creation of **confusion at the grassroots level** over who is responsible for which task.
- Moreover, structural gaps such as **infrequent DLC/SDLC meetings** and **inaction by Forest Departments** on approved claims continue to hinder progress, issues that mere creation of new units may not solve.

DAJGUA's Broader Vision

- The DAJGUA scheme integrates **25 tribal welfare interventions** across 17 ministries to uplift over **68,000 tribal-majority villages**. FRA implementation is just one pillar of this initiative. The overarching goal is to expedite delivery of rights, improve governance, and ensure development reaches the most marginalised.
- The operational guidelines state that FRA cells must function under the directives of State governments, aligning with existing legal and administrative frameworks. Their scope is **supportive, not supervisory**, ensuring that statutory powers remain unaffected.

Balancing Institutional Innovation with Legal Integrity

- While the Centre's direct involvement marks a major policy shift in supporting FRA implementation, success will depend on the clarity of roles and cooperation between central and State authorities.
- If implemented carefully, these FRA cells can bridge capacity gaps, reduce pendency, and empower Gram Sabhas.
- However, the approach must be **inclusive and transparent**, ensuring that the legal sanctity of the Forest Rights Act is preserved. Any deviation from the statutory process could dilute the law's purpose and undermine the trust of forest-dwelling communities.

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