Prove that Forest Rights Act is responsible for ‘negative’ change to forest cover, Tribal Affairs Ministry tells Environment Ministry

The Ministry of Tribal Affairs’ communication comes days after over 150 forest rights and civil society groups wrote to the Centre, taking issue with the latest State of Forest Report attribution of “negative” change in forest cover to FRA

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Tribal women walk back to their villages through Abhujmarh in Orchha in Chhattisgarh | Photo Credit: AP

A little over six months after the India State of Forest Report (2023) was released, which attributed "negative" change in forest and tree cover to the implementation of Forest Rights Act (FRA) among other factors, the Tribal Affairs Ministry has asked the Environment Ministry to provide evidence for this claim.

The Tribal Affairs Ministry, which is the nodal Ministry for the implementation of FRA, further said that making such claims without "adequate scientific evidence" may reinforce stereotypes among State, District, and Forest administrations "that could undermine the rights vested under the Act, as well as the effectiveness of the implementation".

The Ministry has requested a "detailed scientific analysis" for the claim "with valid instances through ground truthing as the report mentions". A senior government official told *The Hindu*, "The ISFR is meant to be a very detailed and scientific study of forests. If such claims are made, the purpose is to find out what evidence supports it. That is why this communication has been issued."

After letter from activists

The Ministry of Tribal Affairs' communication, dated July 2, comes days after over 150 forest rights and civil society groups wrote to the Union government, taking issue with the ISFR's attribution of "negative" change in forest cover partly to the implementation of FRA. They had also pointed out that this claim had been repeated by Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav in a media interview in June this year.

Former Environment Minister and Congress leader Jairam Ramesh, who had amplified the civil society groups' letter, shared the Tribal Affairs Ministry's communication on social media on Saturday (July 5, 2025) as well.

The Tribal Affairs Ministry, in its communication, said that the FRA "does not deal with regularisation of encroachments". "Instead, it acknowledges pre-existing rights that are already being exercised by eligible individuals and communities dwelling in forest areas. Beyond securing the tenure of the existing forest dwellers, FRA does not create any new rights that could potentially affect the ecological balance within protected areas," it said.

In the communication, which has been marked to the Environment Ministry's Secretary, the Tribal Affairs Ministry's FRA Division has also referred to the media interview that was flagged by the civil society groups. It noted that the ISFR 2023, in the chapter on Change in Forest and Tree Cover, has two sections — one on "positive" changes and another on "negative" changes.

In the report, under the possible reasons for "negative" changes, the Environment Ministry lists "titles given to beneficiaries under the Forest Rights Act (2006)" as one of them. According to a review of the last five ISFRs published by the Forest Survey of India (FSI) in the last decade, this is the first time, titles under FRA have been included in this list explicitly. The point on FRA as one of the reasons for "negative" change to forest cover was reiterated by Mr. Yadav in an email interview with a daily newspaper.

Notably, the Environment Ministry had denied allegations made against it by the civil society groups in a detailed statement posted on social media on Thursday (July 3, 2025). The statement had come after Mr. Ramesh had posted the civil society groups' letter on social media.

In the statement, the Environment Ministry had claimed that the Minister's interview remarks were taken out of context. It had gone on to assert that that ISFR 2023 had recorded a "substantial increase in forest and tree cover", which it said was "suggestive" of community involvement in forest management. "The inference drawn is contrary to the factual position and totally devoid of merit," it had said.

However, in the interview of Mr. Yadav, he was quoted as saying: "Although there is a net increase in dense forests in the country, there are areas where the dense prime forests have been affected with degradation." Mr. Yadav, in the interview, goes on to list possible reasons for this, including "titles given under Forest Rights Act (2006)".

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