Initiative on the Forest Economy

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JharFRA: Claiming Rights, Simplifying Process

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Executive Summary

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, also known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), was an important milestone on community forest management in India. It seeks to address the historical marginalisation of Scheduled Tribes (STs)[1] and other traditional forest-dwelling communities by legally recognising their rights over forest resources. It provides for both Individual Forest Rights (IFR) and Community Forest Resource Rights (CFRR) and vests management rights in the communities themselves.

CFRR claims are initiated by a Forest Rights Committee (FRC) elected by the Gram Sabha[2]. The FRC collates all the documents required for filing CFRR claims. These include evidence of the area customarily used by the community and the prescribed claim forms (Form A[3] and Form B[4]) under the FRA, 2006.

Once the claim forms and supporting evidence are prepared, the FRC submits the claims to the Sub-Divisional Level Committee (SDLC), constituted by the state government. The SDLC verifies claims through revenue and forest department officials. For verified cases, it prepares the Record of Rights (RoR)[5] and forwards the claims to the District Level Committee (DLC). The DLC, also constituted by the state government and chaired by the District Collector (DC)[6], approves valid claims and issues titles. The DLC's decision is binding and final.

Despite the FRA's legal framework, its implementation has lagged due to procedural complexity, weak coordination, and limited transparency. The Indian state of Jharkhand, where STs constitute 26.2 percent of the population, has been slow to recognise CFRR. Contributing factors include limited understanding of the FRA

[1] 'Scheduled Tribes' are those tribes, tribal communities, or parts or groups within such tribes or tribal communities that are specified as Scheduled Tribes under Article 342 of the Constitution of India.

[2] Under Article 243(b) of the Constitution, a Gram Sabha is the assembly of all persons registered on the electoral roll for a village within a Panchayat's area at the village level.

[3] Form A is the 'Claim Form for Rights to Forest Land' under the FRA, 2006. It records particulars of claimants, land dimensions, supporting evidence for habitation, and self cultivation rights.

[4] Form B is the 'Claim Form for Community Rights' under the FRA, 2006. It records community particulars and rights over minor forest produce, grazing, and fishing.

[5] The RoR is the primary land-record document maintained by the State and Union Territory Revenue Departments in India. It shows how rights in a parcel of land are derived, and records changes and transactions over time. It lists the person or persons who hold rights, the nature and extent of those rights, and the rent or revenue payable.

[6] A District Collector is the senior-most administrative officer of an Indian district. In many Indian states, the same officer is also the District Magistrate and Deputy Commissioner.

among the forest-dwelling communities and poor coordination across departments, particularly within the forest department. A lack of visibility in the process has further impeded progress.

The Initiative on the Forest Economy (IoFE) programme at the Bharti Institute of Public Policy (BIPP), Indian School of Business (ISB), supports the Government of Jharkhand in accelerating implementation of the FRA. In collaboration with the government, the IoFE developed JharFRA, a mobile application linked to a state-level monitoring dashboard. It provides real-time information on the number of claims submitted, in process, and approved. It also flags bottlenecks. JharFRA was launched in 2023 under the *Abua Bir Abua Dishom* (ABAD) Abhiyan, meaning 'Our Forest, Our Country'. JharFRA's primary users are the FRCs, SDLCs, and DLCs.

This case study examines the challenges and advocacy efforts underlying this technology-led intervention. It also outlines how JharFRA eases the claim filing process. Primary data were collected through interviews with stakeholders involved in the process of filing and granting CFRR. Focus group discussions were held with users of JharFRA. The study covered two FRCs in Suminbera and Jamtoli villages in Jaldega block of Simdega district.

This study finds clear benefits of JharFRA tool in speeding the implementation of FRA. JharFRA supplements claim filing by providing downloadable evidence documents, including digitised forest boundary maps and claim Forms A and B under the FRA. It also offers a claim-tracking facility for forest-dwelling communities, and a monitoring tool for state authorities. Access to digitised maps and forms reduces travel and transaction costs for claimants. Standardised, government-verified maps reduce the time and effort required for map creation and verification

JharFRA is still at a nascent stage, yet it has clear potential to accelerate the recognition of CFRR at scale. Despite the adoption of JharFRA by the Jharkhand government, there remains a few challenges in its adoption at scale.

Two factors contribute to this. First, awareness of the application is limited among government departments, civil society organisations (CSOs), and forest-dwelling communities. Second, many users find the application and its features difficult to navigate. These issues reflect the need for capacity-building by the Government of Jharkhand for the claim filing process.

Moreover, the absence of dedicated staff and a budget for the ABAD campaign continues to hinder its statewide implementation. A dedicated budget and field cadre would enable the scale of claim filing. These measures would improve village-level filing processes and advance the comprehensive recognition of CFRR across Jharkhand.

List of Abbreviations

ABAD	Abua Bir Abua Dishom
APCCF	Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests
BIPP	Bharti Institute of Public Policy
CFRR	Community Forest Resource Rights
CR	Community Rights
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DC	District Collector
DFO	Divisional Forest Officer
DLC	District Level Committee
DWO	District Welfare Officer
FES	Foundation for Ecological Security
FRA	Forest Rights Act
FRC	Forest Rights Committee
FRO	Forest Range Officer
IFR	Individual Forest Rights
ISB	Indian School of Business
IoFE	Initiative on the Forest Economy
IT	Information Technology
JSLPS	Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society
JHAMCOFED	Jharkhand State Minor Forest Produce Co-operative Development & Marketing Federation Limited
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NTFP	Non-Timber Forest Product

PD	Project Director
PDAG	Policy & Development Advisory Group
PHIA	Partnering Hope into Action
PMU	Project Management Unit
RoR	Records of Rights
ST	Scheduled Tribe
SDLC	Sub-Divisional Level Committee
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
SoI	Survey of India
TWC	Tribal Welfare Commissioner

1. Introduction

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), was a transformational legislation enacted by the Government of India. It acknowledged the alienation of forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes (STs)[7] and other traditional forest dwellers from forests, which led to their marginalisation from progress and development in India (Singh, 2015). The FRA addresses these historical injustices by providing a legal framework that recognises both Individual Forest Rights and Community Forest Resource Rights (CFRR) of these communities. It also vests the management rights over their forest land and resources in them.

To file a claim for CFRR under the FRA, the community must have customarily used the land prior to 13 December 2005. First, the village Gram Sabha[8] initiates the process of claim filing, finalises the forest areas that have been customarily used, and defines their traditional boundaries. Subsequently, the Gram Sabha elects a Forest Rights Committee (FRC) to oversee and assist with the application process for CFRR. The FRC comprises between 10 and 15 members. It must have significant representation of STs (two-thirds of members) and women (one-third of members), as mandated by the FRA rules 2012. The Sub-Divisional Level Committee (SDLC) is then informed of the formation of the FRC. The SDLC is constituted by the state government and comprises six members: the Sub-Divisional Officer, Revenue Circle Officer, Forest Range Officer (FRO), and three people's representatives from the district panchayat. Afterwards, the FRC prepares and facilitates the filing of the CFRR claims, ensuring they are adequate, verified, and documented. Once the claim forms and supporting evidence are prepared, the FRC notifies the revenue and forest departments for field verification, copying the SDLC. After the verification is complete, forest and revenue departments present a report to the FRC. The claims are then submitted to the SDLC, with the report attached for review. The SDLC investigates verified claims and prepares the Record of Rights (RoR[9]) following the procedures outlined in the FRA. It then forwards them to the District Level Committee (DLC) for approval and title distribution. The DLC is constituted by the state government and consists of six members: the District Collector (DC), Divisional Forest Officer (DFO), District Welfare Officer (DWO) from the Tribal Welfare

[7] 'Scheduled Tribes' are those tribes, tribal communities, or parts or groups within such tribes or tribal communities that are specified as Scheduled Tribes under Article 342 of the Constitution of India.

[8] Under Article 243(b) of the Constitution, a Gram Sabha is the assembly of all persons registered on the electoral roll for a village within a Panchayat's area at the village level.

[9] The RoR is the primary land-record document maintained by the State and Union Territory Revenue Departments in India. It shows how rights in a parcel of land are derived, and records changes and transactions over time. It lists the person or persons who hold rights, the nature and extent of those rights, and the rent or revenue payable

Commissioner's (TWC's) office, and three people's representatives from the district panchayat. It examines the SDLC's recommendations and, if the CFRR claims are valid, issues an authorisation letter to recognise the claims and distribute the titles. The decision of the DLC is binding and final (Bal & Panda 2023; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India and UNDP, 2014).

Despite the FRA's legal framework, its implementation remained lacklustre due to several unclear provisions. To address this, the Government of India introduced the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Amendment Rules, 2012 (also known as the Forest Rights Rules, 2012), clarifying the FRA's provisions. However, implementation still lags due to complex claim-tracking processes and accountability gaps between the legislation and its execution. To remedy this, a technology-based intermediary is needed to streamline processes, facilitate CFRR, and ensure accountability by linking grassroots activities with government institutions. Consequently, the Initiative on the Forest Economy (IoFE) programme at the Bharti School of Public Policy (BIPP), Indian School of Business (ISB), Hyderabad, has developed Ratifi. It forms part of the IoFE's Forestfi technology stack, which supports transparent, efficient forest governance and market linkages. Ratifi facilitates the generation of both IFR and CFRR claims (Chhatre, 2022).

Jharkhand is forest dense and has the twelfth-largest tribal population in India. STs comprise 26.2 per cent of the state's population, representing 8.3 per cent of India's total ST population. The state therefore has high potential to saturate CFRR claims. (Census of India, 2011). Recognising this potential, the Government of Jharkhand adopted Ratifi under the name 'JharFRA', a portmanteau of Jharkhand and FRA, in December 2023. This was part of the statewide Abua Bir Abua Dishom (ABAD) Abhiyan, meaning 'Our Forest, Our Country'. The ABAD campaign aims to expedite the implementation of FRA across Jharkhand and grant forest-dwelling communities management rights over the forests they inhabit. Under the campaign, FRA cells were established at the state, district, and block levels. The ABAD campaign uses JharFRA as its technological backbone to speed up the distribution of CFRR titles. BIPP–ISB is involved in this campaign through the state-level FRA cell, which is responsible for monitoring, facilitating, and operationalising district- and block-level CFRR claim filings.

The objectives of JharFRA are standardisation, ease, and scalability. It streamlines and digitises the CFRR claim-generation process, ensuring uniformity and efficiency at every stage. It enables government officials to access and monitor real-time data. JharFRA also improves accessibility for forest-dwelling communities in remote areas by providing necessary documentation for claim filing digitally, thereby reducing travel distances and transaction costs. It incorporates a transparent monitoring mechanism with an in-built tracking engine that reports the progress and status of claims. JharFRA also strengthens cooperation among communities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and forest department functionaries to secure tenure under the FRA.

JharFRA is designed for use only by the primary stakeholders directly involved in the claim filing process, either as claimants or government functionaries verifying the claims. It has three primary stakeholders: the FRCs, SDLCs, and DLCs. The State Level Monitoring Committee (constituted by the state government as per the FRA provisions) is the fourth stakeholder, with a role limited to monitoring progress at the state level. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) cannot access JharFRA directly as users, but they can assist forest-dwelling communities in navigating the application and understanding its features.

Given JharFRA's defined stakeholder roles and objectives, it is critical to assess its operational effectiveness, implementation challenges, and the overall impact. This study analyses the use of JharFRA for recognising CFRR claims in Jharkhand under the government-initiated ABAD Abhiyan. It investigates IoFE designed technological interventions, examines implementation challenges, and assesses user experiences in upscaling IFR and CFRR under the FRA.

The research objectives include:

- to provide an overview of technological intervention of JharFRA, focusing on design, implementation, and key learnings;
- to identify and analyse the operational, administrative, and technical challenges encountered during JharFRA's implementation in Simdega;
- to evaluate JharFRA's effectiveness in generating and tracking CFRR claims, considering user experience, feedback, and claim-process efficiency; and
- to extract insights from the pilot implementation to guide the statewide roll-out of the application and enhance its usability.

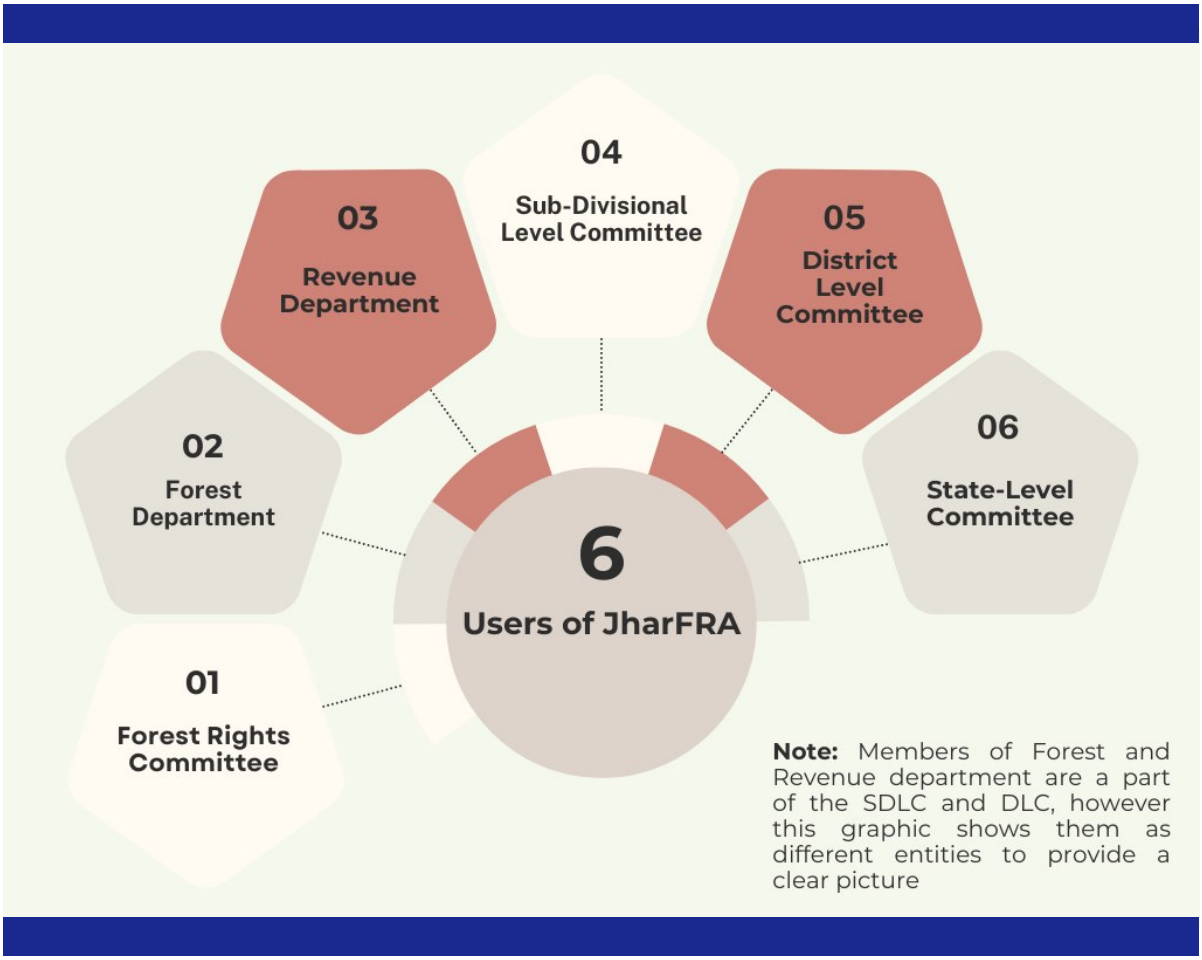


Figure 1: Users of JharFRA. **Source:** Created in Canva.

Note: The following users can register on JharFRA:

1. The Forest Rights Committee (FRC).
2. The Sub-Divisional Level Committee (SDLC).
3. The District Level Committee (DLC).
4. The State Level Monitoring Committee.
5. Forest Department officers can register based on their roles: for example, the District Forest Officer (DFO) at the DLC and the Forest Range Officer (FRO) at the SDLC.
6. Revenue department officers can register based on their roles: for example, the Revenue Officer at the subdivisional level.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted from February 2024 to October 2024 in Simdega, the pilot district for the implementation of JharFRA.

2.1. Research Design

A qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews was adopted to gather in-depth insights into JharFRA's implementation for upscaling CFRR claim filings. This approach provided consistency and adaptability by allowing open-ended dialogue tailored to participants' responses.

2.2. Sampling Strategy

Both purposive and convenience sampling methods were used to select participants with direct experience of JharFRA operations in Simdega. Purposive sampling ensured inclusion of knowledgeable stakeholders, whereas convenience sampling included additional eligible respondents referred by key informants. Stakeholder were recommended by the principal investigator, IoFE National Coordinator, Simdega District Coordinator, and the Jharkhand Project Management (PMU) Unit.

2.3. Data Collection

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with government officials, CSO representatives, JharFRA master trainers, interns, and district coordinators regarding the platform's operations. Two focus group discussions with 15 community members were held in Suminbera and Jamtoli villages in Simdega district to gather community feedback on JharFRA's usability and impact. Recurrent interviews with the state PMU lead and the IoFE National Coordinator captured evolving perspectives and the implementation chronology at the state and district levels. All interviews were held in person to facilitate interactive discussion and real-time clarification of technical and procedural issues. Internal BIPP documents, government FRA materials, and secondary literature on claim filing and the forest economy were also reviewed.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent, written or verbal, was obtained from all participants, who were briefed on the study's purpose and procedures. No direct incentives were provided. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were emphasised throughout interviews and focus groups.

3. Challenges Addressed by JharFRA

Prior to JharFRA, the CFRR claim process imposed substantial transaction costs due to repeated travel and lengthy delays from manual documentation. Claimants spent considerable time travelling to obtain documents, track claim progress, and resolve technical issues, such as missing stamps, signatures, or officials' absence. Limited interaction between forest dwelling communities and forest and revenue departments during field verification caused further delays in converting claims into titles. Manual paperwork and record keeping made tracing interactions between communities and government departments difficult, leading to lost documents and procedural rejections.

When claims failed to follow FRA procedures, the SDLC highlighted discrepancies and forwarded the forms to block offices. These block offices were then expected to inform the respective village FRCs. In reality, block officers frequently failed to relay this feedback. Thus, the forms remained unattended or were misplaced. During field verification, the FRC members often did not receive 'receiving letters' from Forest or Revenue Officers confirming their submissions. Without such evidence, officers could deny having received the claims, further delaying the distribution of CFRR titles.

Another significant challenge was the lack of transparency in tracking claims submitted to the SDLC, which imposed extra costs on the claimant communities. For example, Munda[10] and Kharia[11] communities in Jamtoli and Suminbera villages reported difficulties in tracking the status of their claims. They either travelled long distances or were uncertain which government department to approach.

Additionally, manual filing of CFRR claims created substantial inefficiencies. Claims stored manually at the block offices often resulted in disorganised records, with many documents misplaced or lost before reaching the SDLC for approval. Consequently, forest dwelling communities frequently had to restart

[10] The Munda are an Austroasiatic-speaking tribal community of India, who chiefly speak Mundari as their mother tongue, and are notified as a Scheduled Tribe for the State of Jharkhand under Article 342 of the Constitution of India.

[11] The Kharia are a Scheduled Tribe notified for the State of Jharkhand under Article 342 of the Constitution of India. The community comprises Dudh Kharia, Dhelki Kharia, and Hill (Pahari) Kharia. The Hill Kharia are also notified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in Jharkhand by the Government of India. Dudh and Dhelki Kharia primarily speak Kharia, a Munda (Austroasiatic) language, whereas Hill Kharia commonly use Kharia Thar, an Indo-Aryan variety.

the entire claim filing process. Minor issues, such as incorrect spellings or names in forms, typically led to outright rejection rather than correction, as ineffective communication prevented re-evaluation.

JharFRA minimises transaction costs by improving document availability in the CFRR claim process. It introduces a bidirectional communication and feedback mechanism with notification alerts. It maps each village to its designated forest range, ensuring respective forest officers receive immediate verification notifications. When an FRC initiates field verification, the application alerts forest and revenue departments and enables users to upload postal receipts as digital proof. JharFRA provides real-time information flow, which allows all stakeholders to track claim status at every stage, fostering transparency and accountability.

3.1. Novelty of JharFRA

JharFRA contributes to Jharkhand's Forest economy by digitising CFRR claims in a secure repository, preventing lost paperwork, and ensuring permanent traceability. It provides prefilled forms, government verified forest maps, and evidence documents, reducing community effort and eliminating long journeys for documentation. Furthermore, its offline functionality enables uninterrupted use in remote areas. A smart logic engine monitors claim filings and approvals across all three requisite levels: the FRCs, SDLCs, and DLCs. The platform also facilitates digital interactions between claimants and government officials, enabling issue resolution and feedback in real time.

The key features of JharFRA are as follows:

- **Centralised Repository**

  JharFRA has a centralised digital repository that functions as an organised 'vault', ensuring all claim forms and receipts remain accessible. Lost documents can be traced, minimising the need to restart a claim.

- **Document Availability**

  Claimants can download soft copies of CFRR maps, consolidated *Khatian* Part II[12], evidence documents, and Forms A[13], B[14], and C[15] directly from the JharFRA directory. This eliminates long journeys to government offices, saving time and reducing transaction costs for claimants.

- **Forest Maps**

  Community-level Forest maps are downloadable via JharFRA for Gram Sabha authentication prior to submission. To develop these maps, the IoFE team integrated topography data from the Survey of India (SoI) and revenue and forest boundary layers from the Jharkhand Space Applications Centre. This mitigates forest boundary conflicts by standardising map legitimacy across all the levels.

- **Bi-directional Communication**

  JharFRA sends alerts to the forest and revenue departments when the FRCs initiate field verification and captures digital receipts. It also returns feedback from the SDLCs via platform-based comments to the FRCs, streamlining issue resolution and enhancing transparency.

- **State Support**

  A government issued Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) booklet mandates JharFRA's use for claim filings, field verification, and SDLC/DLC approvals. This establishes the legal foundation for its largescale implementation across Jharkhand.

Together, these features establish JharFRA as a pioneering platform that reduces transaction costs, enhances transparency, and strengthens accountability at each stage of CFRR claim filing.

[12] Khatian Part II (Revisional Survey Khatian Part II) is a vital land record register in Jharkhand and West Bengal. It presents a revised Record of Rights with updated ownership details, plot delineations, and related particulars.

[13] Form A is the 'Claim Form for Rights to Forest Land' under the Forest Rights Rules 2007. It records particulars of claimants, land dimensions, supporting evidence for habitation, and self cultivation rights.

[14] Form B is the 'Claim Form for Community Rights' under the Forest Rights Rules 2007. It records community particulars and rights over minor forest produce, grazing, and fishing.

[15] Form C is the 'Claim Form for Rights to Community Forest Resources' under the Forest Rights Rules, 2007. It records Gram Sabha resolutions and lists resource sites and boundaries.

Foundation: Securing Land Tenure

Secure land tenure is the essential foundation upon which all other interventions rest. We work to operationalise the FRA, transforming collectors from informal labourers into rights-holders capable of collective action and economic agency. Without legal recognition of forest rights, communities cannot formalise their economic activities or invest back in sustainable management of their forests.

Four Building Blocks of Change

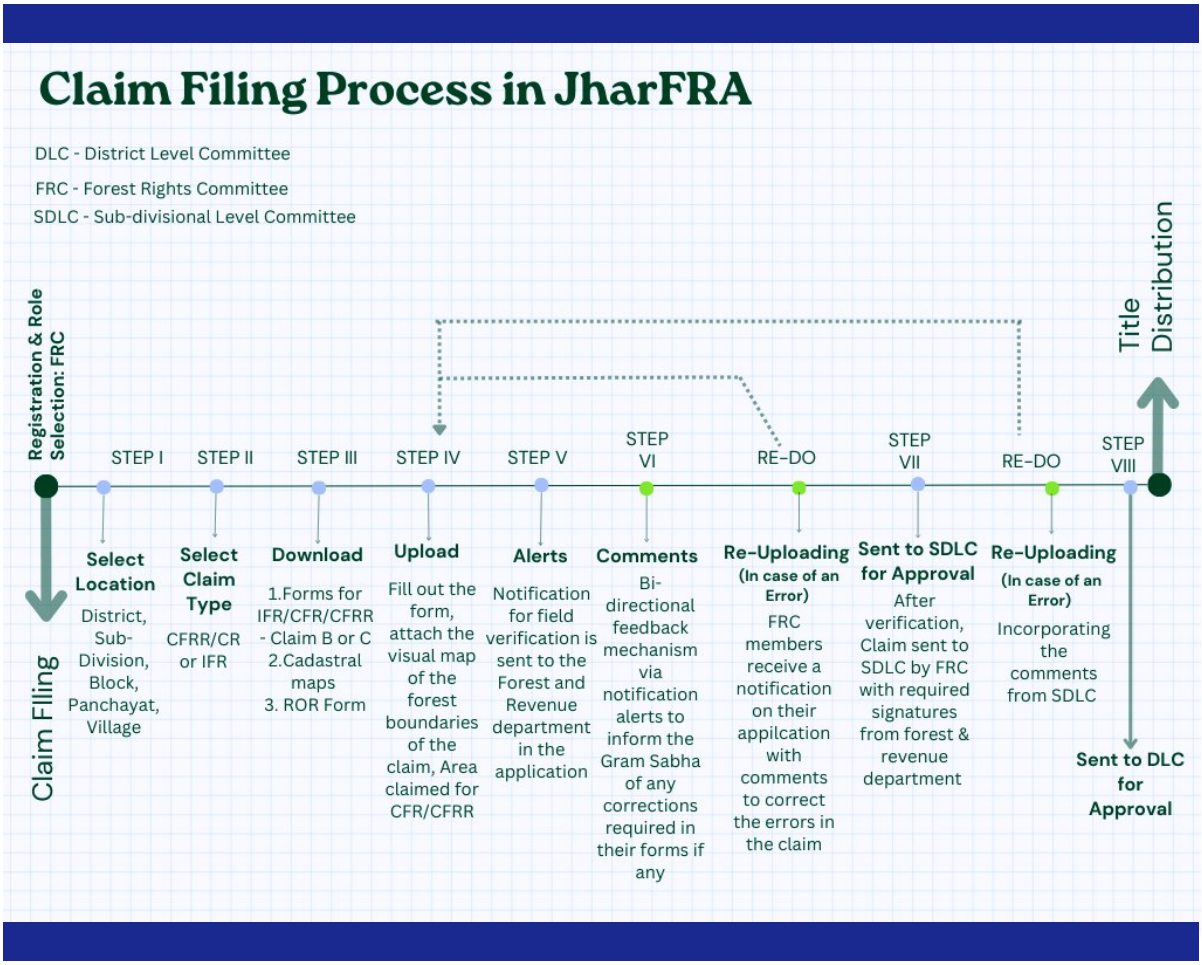
1. **Building a Business Ecosystem –** We create economies of aggregation through women-owned PCs. These enterprises enable communities to capture value locally while establishing formal market linkages with industrial buyers, addressing the fragmentation that has kept SFPs in the informal economy.

2. **Cultivating Women's Leadership –** We equip women collectors to lead enterprises through trainings, capacity building, and peer learning networks that strengthen their agency and institutional effectiveness while recognising their deep knowledge of forest ecosystems.

3. **Leveraging Technology for Transparency and Efficiency –** We integrate mechanical and digital innovations-from Geographic Information System (GIS)-enabled boundary mapping to a blockchain-based supply chain traceability application. These tools increase transparency and traceability, maintain community ownership of data, and enable evidence-based management.

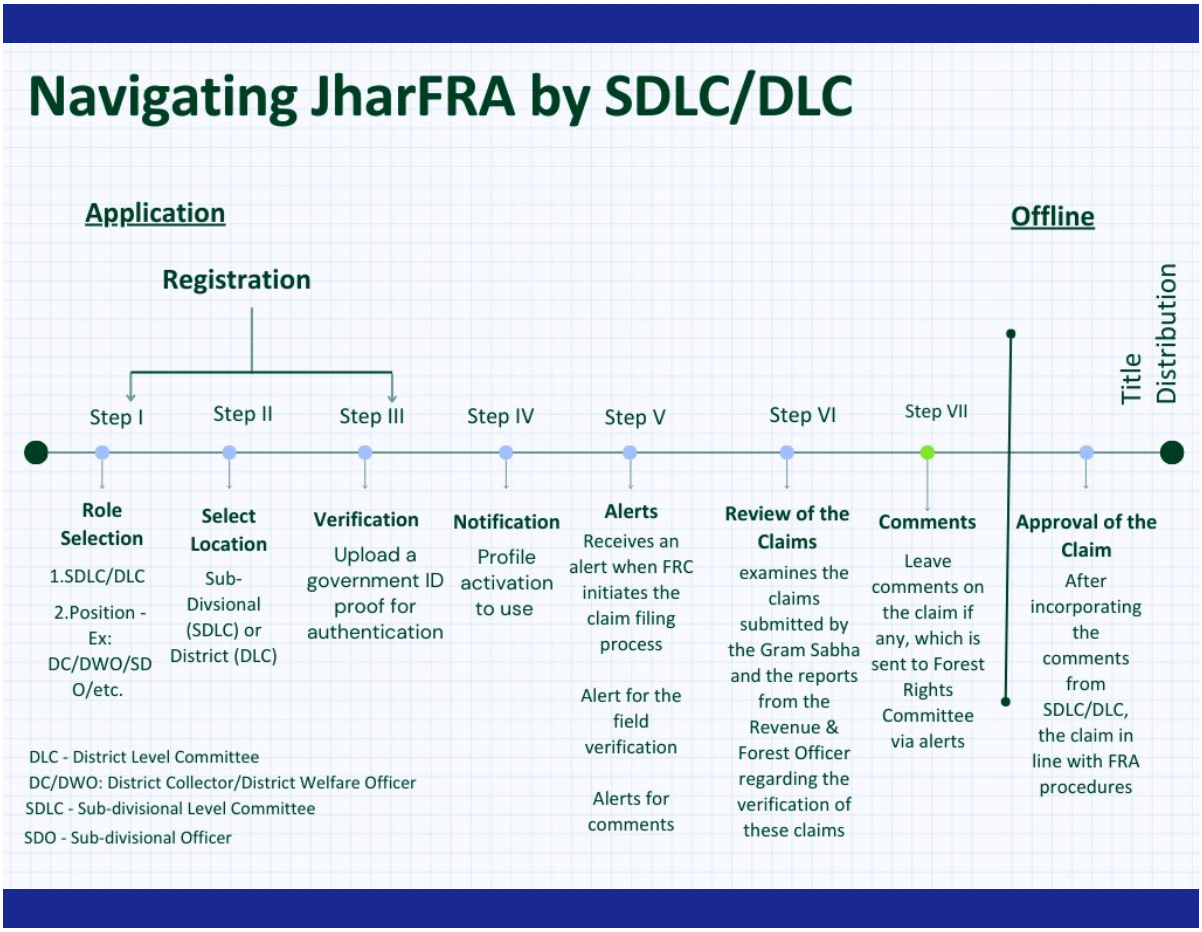
4. **Multi-Stakeholder Partnership –** We partner with governments, civil society organisations, the private sector, and academic actors by leveraging comparative advantages towards shared objectives. We maintain community agency as the central organising principle, thereby creating enabling ecosystems for transformation.

Anchored in secure land tenure, these building blocks work in sequence and in synergy: tenure enables aggregation; aggregation unlocks market linkages; and visibility and trust invite investment. Together, they deliver women's empowerment and strengthen sustainable forest governance.



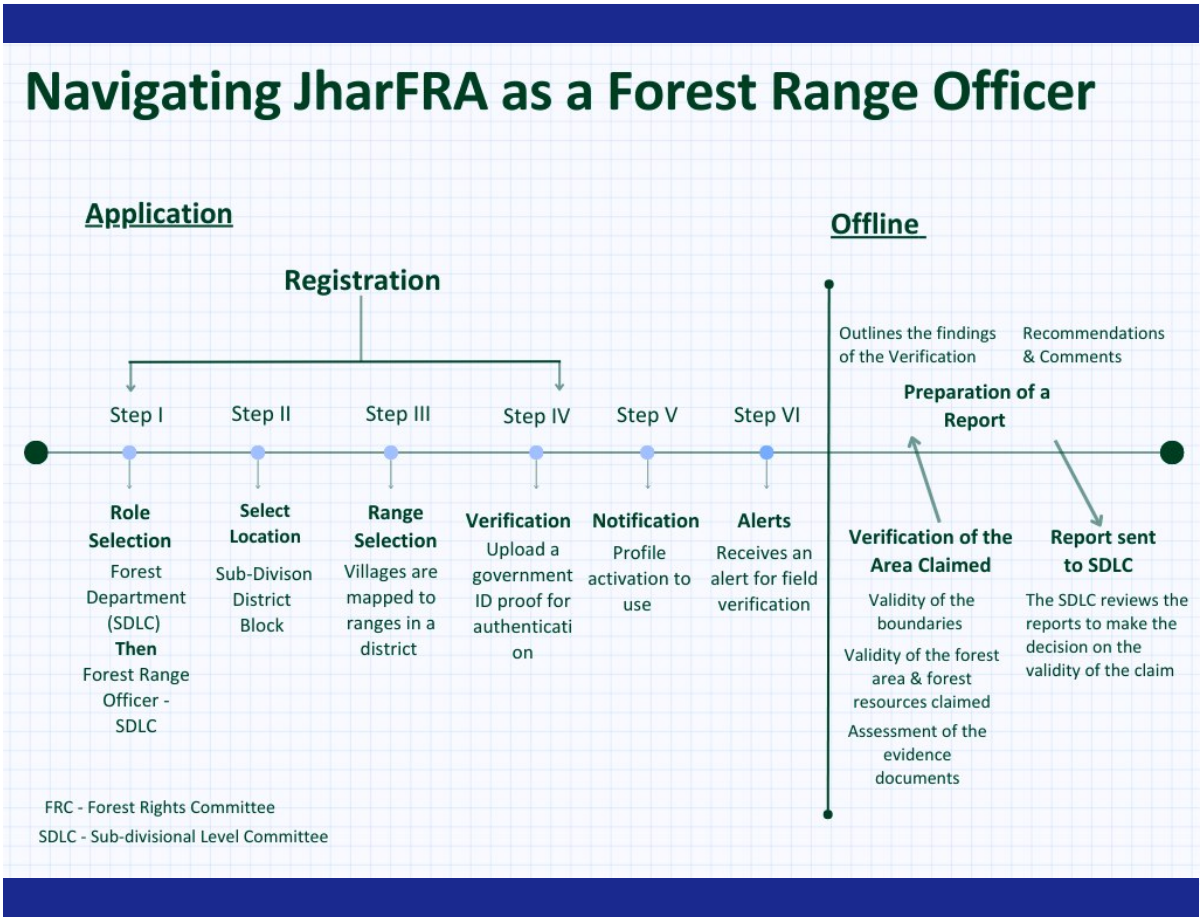
Source: Created in Canva.
Figure 2: Claim filing process followed by the Forest Rights Committee (FRC) members in JharFRA.

Note: The FRC members prepare claims on behalf of the Gram Sabha, initiate field verification, and submit finalised claims to the Sub-Divisional Level Committee (SDLC)/ District Level Committee (DLC).



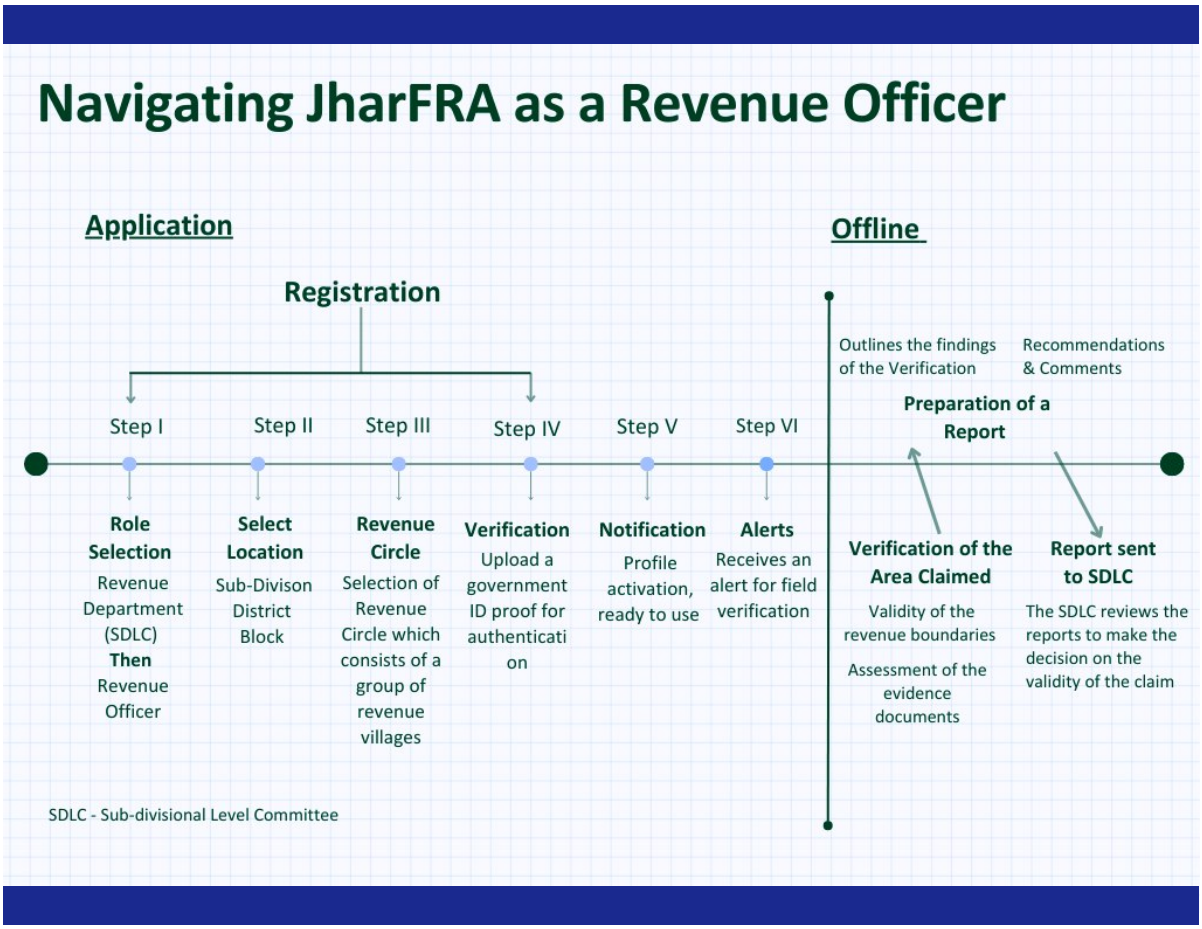
Source: Created in Canva.
Figure 3: Process steps for the District Level Committee (DLC)/Sub-Divisional Level Committee (SDLC) members in JharFRA.

Note: The SDLC operates at the sub divisional level, whereas the DLC functions solely at the district level.



Source: Created in Canva.
Figure 4: JharFRA workflow for a Forest Range Officer (FRO) in the Sub-Divisional Level Committee (SDLC).

Note: The FRO serves on the SDLC under the forest department, performing field verification and compiling a detailed report for the subsequent SDLC review.



Source: Created in Canva.
Figure 5: JharFRA Workflow for a Revenue Officer in the Sub-Divisional Level Committee (SDLC).

Note: The Revenue Officer serves on the SDLC under the revenue department, performing field verification and compiling a detailed report for the subsequent SDLC review.

4. Current Status of JharFRA's Implementation

With its statewide adoption under the ABAD Abhiyan, the government piloted JharFRA in Simdega before expanding to Gumla, West Singhbhum, and East Singhbhum. The application has since been customised for use in 24 districts, but its implementation remains at an early stage, with significant upscaling potential.

As of May 2025, JharFRA has registered approximately 2,640 FRCs, 19 SDLCs, and 32 DLCs. The IoFE team registered 88 revenue department officials and 43 forest department officials under the SDLCs on JharFRA, each with co-shared responsibility for CFRR claim processing. Additionally, 977 documents, including claim forms, RoR, and community-level forest maps, have been downloaded using the application.

The IoFE's current operational focus centres on technological training for JharFRA under the ABAD campaign at different levels. Participants include government officials, CSO staff, and village communities. The objective is to improve the understanding of JharFRA and awareness of the FRA rules, enabling effective CFRR claim filing via the application.

5. Implementation Chronology of JharFRA

5.1. Advocacy and Institutional Collaboration

Technology intervention in Jharkhand required consistent and repeated advocacy efforts at various levels, engaging government agencies, CSOs, and local communities throughout the process. The IoFE team used a top-down approach. Initial efforts focused on securing the state government's support for technological intervention, working closely with the Policy & Development Advisory Group (PDAG). The effort was further scaled by involving CSOs for wider implementation. Early advocacy emphasised technology-driven solutions for CFRR claim filing to improve tenure security and promote sustainable development.

On 29 December 2021, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between BIPP–ISB and the Government of Jharkhand. The signatories included the Department of Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste, Minority and Backward Class Welfare and the Department of Forest, Environment & Climate Change. The MoU was later extended to the TWC's office for streamlined communication and operations. The MoU aimed to facilitate secure tenure and establish large-scale pilot projects across Jharkhand. These projects would, in turn, create direct market linkages between local communities and industrial value chains for raw materials, primarily Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). By recognising their CFRR, the initiative intended to empower local communities and formalise their participation in the industrial value chain.

The government was responsible for implementation support and capacity building to meet the MoU's socio-economic objectives. This collaboration enabled the implementation of JharFRA, designed by BIPP–ISB, which initially focused on CFRR claim filing. However, at the Chief Minister's suggestion, an option for IFR applications was also incorporated. The primary objective of JharFRA remained to upscale CFRR, with individual applications available for local communities.

Advocacy for JharFRA's implementation continued throughout 2022 and 2023 via consultations involving the IoFE team, PDAG officials, and senior government representatives. These included the Chief Secretary of Jharkhand, Principal Secretary of Tribal Welfare, Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (APCCF), and the TWC. Ongoing engagement with state-level stakeholders helped to operationalise the MoU's vision. These stakeholders included the Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS) and the Jharkhand State Minor Forest Produce Cooperative Development & Marketing Federation Limited (JHAMCOFED). However, frequent transfers of key government officials and lack of clear state directives delayed JharFRA's implementation, particularly in Simdega. Resistance also emerged in some areas because there was no formal state endorsement of JharFRA for CFRR claim filing.

5.2. Testing and Feedback for Application Development

The IoFE team tested Ratifi (later renamed JharFRA) in Simdega from 16 June to 3 July 2022 in three phases. Phase 1 validated core features: profile creation, user type designation (claimant or government official), authentication, and form access. This ensured that all required forms were included and correctly rendered (grammar, spelling, and language) in the application. Phase 1 also refined the interface and overall user experience while revealing weak cellular connectivity in rural areas, causing slower downloads of large files. Phase 2 optimised download speeds using feedback from Phase 1 testing. Phase 3 tested the application's claim filing features with local community members. Consistent testing and feedback refined its user interface, improving efficiency and navigability.

5.3. Lack of Priority

Despite the 2021 MoU, the implementation of JharFRA remained limited as it ranked low on the government's agenda. In October 2022, the Jharkhand government launched the first phase of *Aapki Yojna Aapki Sarkar Aapke Dwar* campaign, shifting focus to service delivery and infrastructural support. It was only during the second phase of the ABAD campaign, launched in November 2023, that JharFRA was rolled out with full force and enthusiasm.

However, JharFRA enabled CFRR claim filing operations remained limited well into 2024. Ineffective information dissemination among key officers created

significant delays and necessitated continuous awareness drives and workshops to boost implementation.

5.4. Establishing Synergies with Other CSOs

Before the ABAD Abhiyan's launch, a meeting was held with the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) and Partnering Hope into Action (PHIA) Foundation, the campaign's knowledge and technology partners. After extensive deliberation on different digital applications for CFRR claim filing, the partners adopted the versatile, interactive platform Ratifi for statewide implementation. On the Chief Minister's suggestion, Ratifi was renamed JharFRA.

Government concerns regarding the accessibility of documents, such as the RoR and Voters List, led to restricting access only to stakeholders involved in claim filing. To address concerns about IFR exclusion, JharFRA's functionality was expanded to accept IFR claims, allowing forest dwellers to submit them electronically.

To coordinate JharFRA's implementation and ensure its statewide rollout, a state level FRA cell was established, comprising the FES, PHIA Foundation, and the IoFE team.

5.5. Continuous Feedback Integration

Ratifi evolved from a basic functional interface to JharFRA through continuous and extensive feedback from stakeholders. These included government officials, CSOs, and the IoFE team. Consistent testing and stakeholder engagement improved the application's efficiency, functionality, accessibility, and user interface. It also enhanced its uptake across the state. However, feedback was integrated only when it aligned with the FRA framework. For instance, the FES suggested a separate login for *Bir Bandhus*[16], also known as *Rojgar Sevaks*. This was not incorporated as it did not align with the FRA requirements.

[16] Bir Bandhus are community-appointed grassroots workers in Jharkhand. They assist the FRCs in claim facilitation and raising awareness about forest rights under the FRA, 2006.

5.6. Accessibility of Government Data

Despite support from the state government, challenges emerged in securing timely access to official data required for JharFRA. The forest and revenue departments delayed providing necessary datasets. Letters from commissioners granting access were shared, yet departmental resistance persisted. The intervention of the Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister resolved the delays. After the data was acquired, multiple discrepancies were found. These included missing villages, incorrect names, mismatched records, and faulty information. Furthermore, digitised RoR and cadastral maps[17] were missing. Correcting these errors required time and effort, further delaying JharFRA's implementation.

5.7. JharFRA Dashboard Visualisation

The JharFRA dashboard provides information on the total claims filed, the current status of filed claims, claimed areas, claim types, and village coverage. The first version, launched in October 2023, was basic and displayed only state-level application numbers and registrations. It did not provide information on claimed areas or district-wise distribution.

The second version, launched in July 2024, integrated feedback from stakeholders and incorporated a more comprehensive database. It included district-wise distribution of registrations, CFRR claim filings, village-level coverage, application form submissions, and claimed areas. Furthermore, dashboard access was granted to the DCs, TWC, and other government officials involved in CFRR claim filing.

[17] Cadastral maps, often called *Bhu Naksha*, are large-scale parcel maps that form part of India's land records. They show the boundaries of sub-divisions (plots) and their measurements and identifiers. These maps are linked to ownership or

6. On-Ground Challenges in JharFRA's Implementation

Several challenges have arisen in the statewide implementation and operationalisation of JharFRA, including community-level constraints, bureaucratic inefficiencies, technical failures, and institutional weaknesses.

6.1. Lack of Knowledge Regarding the FRA Among Forest-Dwelling Communities

A fundamental challenge to JharFRA's implementation lies in the lack of awareness regarding the FRA among forest-dwelling communities. Since claim generation forms the basis of JharFRA, limited knowledge of CFRR and claim procedures has created significant barriers. Gram Sabhas often struggles to understand the FRA and the claim filing process, which delays implementation. Several Gram Sabhas have even convened without the required quorum, undermining procedural legitimacy. The FRCs have also failed to comply with statutory requirements, with many members unaware of their responsibilities or even their membership. These limitations weaken claim generation efforts and highlight the urgent need for capacity building and community handholding throughout the claim filing process.

6.2. Technology-Related Barriers and Delays

Technical failures have posed significant barriers to JharFRA's expansion across the state. Being in its nascent stage, the application has faced multiple glitches that, although solvable, have stalled claim filing at scale. Difficulties in uploading supporting documents and unstable internet connectivity have created persistent delays, often forcing claimants to restart applications and resulting in inefficiencies.

6.3. Weak Cellular Connectivity

Cellular connectivity represents another serious challenge, particularly in Jharkhand's remote villages. Many villages lack mobile towers and necessary

infrastructure, forcing claimants to travel long distances to access connectivity. While JharFRA offers a synchronisation feature to enable offline filing, communities must still travel to upload forms, increasing the burden of claim submission. Connectivity failures have frequently slowed registrations, leaving claims incomplete and discouraging sustained use of the application. This has weakened trust in the system and reduced community motivation to file claims digitally.

6.4. Limited Awareness and Uptake of JharFRA Among Government Officials and CSOs

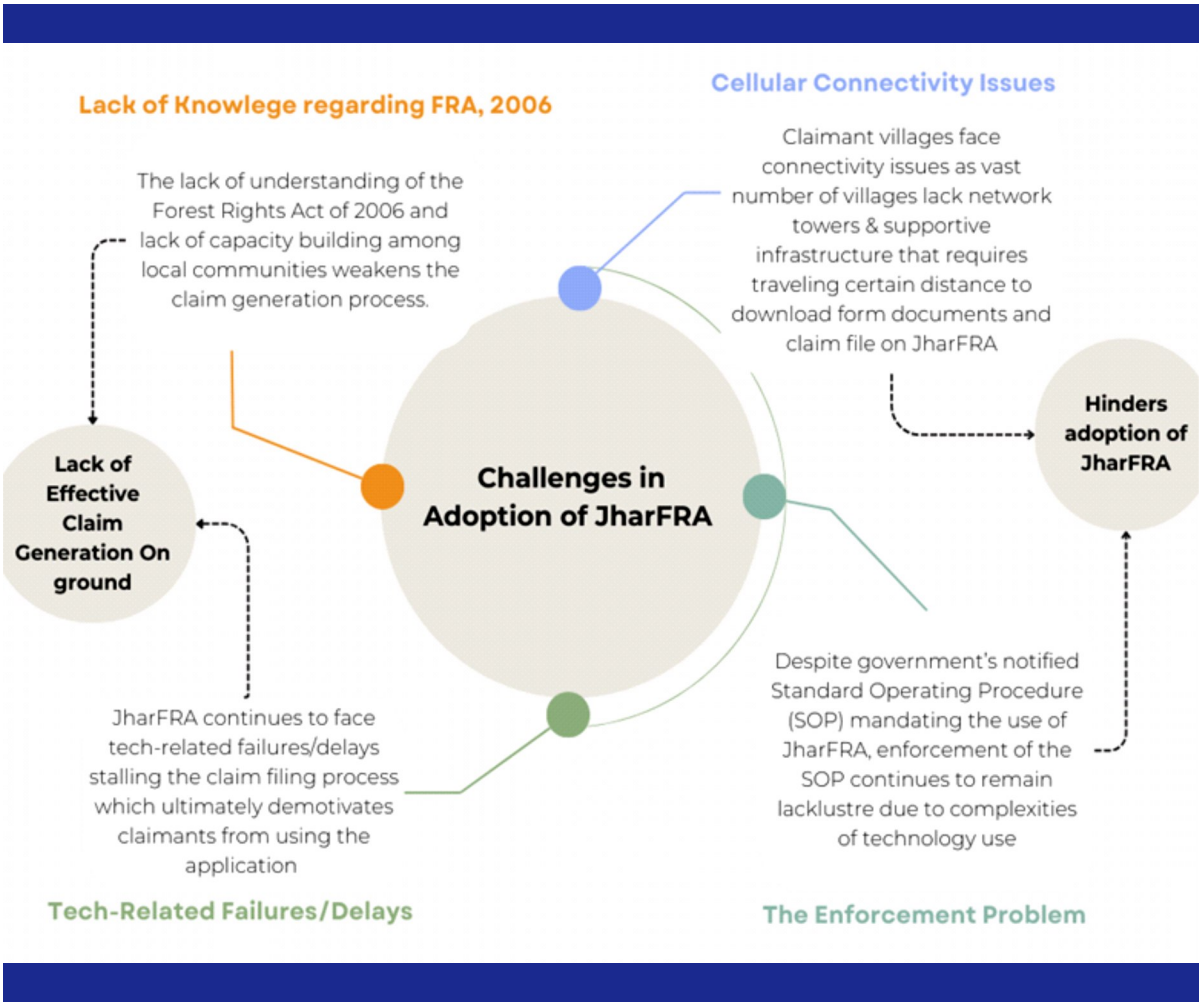
Awareness of JharFRA among government officials and CSOs remains limited. This is due to insufficient dissemination of information about the application's role in filing CFRR claims in the state. Furthermore, although the Government of Jharkhand has notified an SOP mandating JharFRA's use for filing claims, enforcement remains weak.

Although state- and district-level trainings were conducted by the IoFE team, many officials and CSOs still find the application difficult to navigate. Uptake of JharFRA is particularly low among lower-tier officials, such as FROs. Knowledge transfer from state and district officials to block and range levels has been inadequate. As a result, many officials remain outside JharFRA's user base.

Many CSOs have attempted to use the application. However, uptake remains limited because many organisations lack the requisite technical capacity and the process knowledge needed for consistent use.

6.5. Workload and Incentive Constraints Among Bir Bandhus

Bir Bandhus were included in the ABAD campaign to provide technical and infrastructural support to the FRCs. However, many were already occupied with Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, (MGNREGA) responsibilities. They had limited time and few incentives to participate in the FRA process. In the absence of monetary incentives, motivation remained low, which reduced their engagement in the claim filing process.



Source: Created in Canva.
Figure 6: Challenges encountered in the implementation and use of JharFRA for filing Community Forest Resource Rights claims.

6.6. System Design Limitations

A recurring challenge in JharFRA's implementation is the application design, which constrains officials' ability to discharge their responsibilities. The architecture assigns each official to a single district. In practice, officials hold and share multiplied responsibilities across multiple geographies for claim processing. Departments in Jharkhand are severely understaffed, and large areas cannot be supervised by one official. Consequently, more than one officer often oversees the same district. This misalignment limits implementation. Registering each official for only one district creates inefficiencies, complications, and delays. The system requires flexibility to register officials for multiple districts, with shared responsibilities and clear permissions.

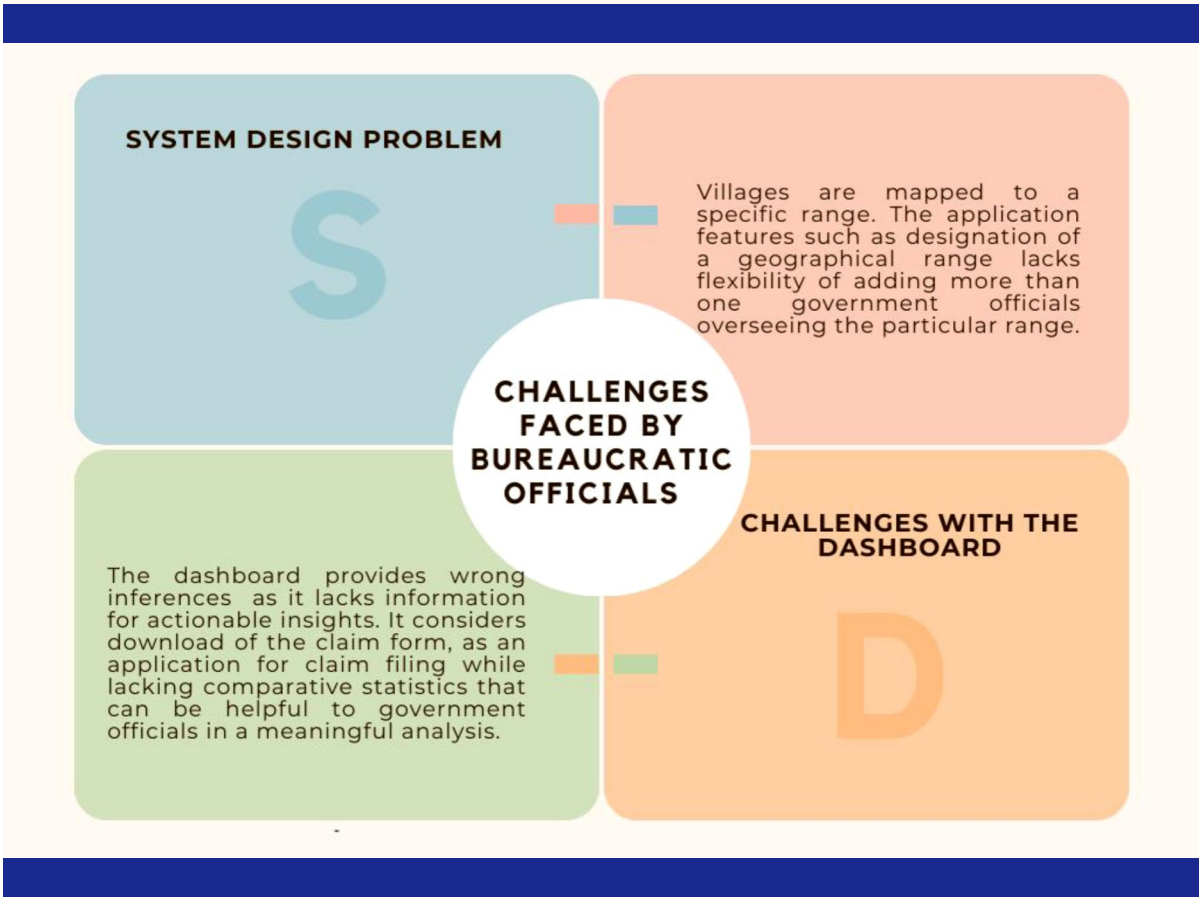
Another design weakness is data loss arising from frequent transfers. Officials are registered with personal phone numbers, which severs the audit trail when postings change. Comments, feedback, and approvals lose visibility and traceability following transfer. Successors cannot readily access prior actions, which delays the implementation of JharFRA and undermines accountability. The IoFE team is addressing this by creating official, role-based email addresses for DLC and SDLC members. This would preserve continuity, enable secure access after transfers, and strengthen data retention.

6.7. Dashboard Limitations

The JharFRA dashboard, despite updates, remains fraught with issues. It counts downloads of the claim form as submitted applications. This inflates activity metrics and yields misleading inferences for analysis

The dashboard does not present comparative and actionable statistics. It lacks disaggregated views by district, block, and claim stage. Generic counts, such as form downloads, do not support planning, implementation, or resource allocation for CFRR.

Without granular, status-specific metrics, officials cannot assess whether claim processing is on track or behind schedule. The dashboard therefore undermines its objective of providing a holistic, accurate view. Incomplete visualisation enables misinterpretation and can misstate overall progress.



Source: Created in Canva.
Figure 6: Barriers to effective use of JharFRA by government officials for filing Community Forest Resource Rights claims.

6.8. Inactive District- and Block-Level FRA Cells

Under the ABAD campaign, FRA cells were responsible for equipping village-level FRCs with resources for CFRR claim filing. These included the SOP booklet, the JharFRA user manual, and other materials, collectively termed the FRA kit. FRA cells were also tasked with distributing these resources to villages.

However, the district- and block-level FRA cells mandated to coordinate and monitor the campaign remain largely dormant, existing primarily on paper. This dormancy has produced several setbacks. For example, the state FRA cell supplied kits to blocks, which were expected to pass them to panchayat offices. Panchayat offices were then to deliver the kits to village FRCs. Because the cells are dormant, many kits have remained idle in block offices.

There is no monitoring and review mechanism at the district or block level. Such a mechanism would set targets for claim generation and oversee operational plans

for scaling claim filing. This absence hinders the efforts to expand the use of JharFRA and scale up CFRR claim filing across the state. Despite initial enthusiasm and optimism, the lack of a dedicated government budget has rendered the campaign ineffective and largely dormant.

6.9. Gaps in the Training Process

Several gaps in the training process have impeded the implementation of JharFRA across the state. The cascade model envisaged a top-down approach. The state-level FRA cell would train Master Trainers selected from each district. These Master Trainers would then train Bir Bandhus at the block level, after which efforts would reach village FRCs. In practice, dormant district- and block-level FRA cells meant the state cell delivered most trainings at both state and block levels. This reduced coverage and depth.

The design of the training module was another constraint. Attempting to cover the FRA framework and the full JharFRA workflow in one day proved ineffective. The module did not translate legal provisions into role-specific tasks with sufficient clarity. For example, Bir Bandhus were briefed on the FRA but not on the precise they needed to undertake. Subsequent revisions have begun to address this gap. The FES, the IoFE's knowledge partner, provided inputs to make the modules more specific, and actionable.

6.10. Continued Reliability Issues with Government Data

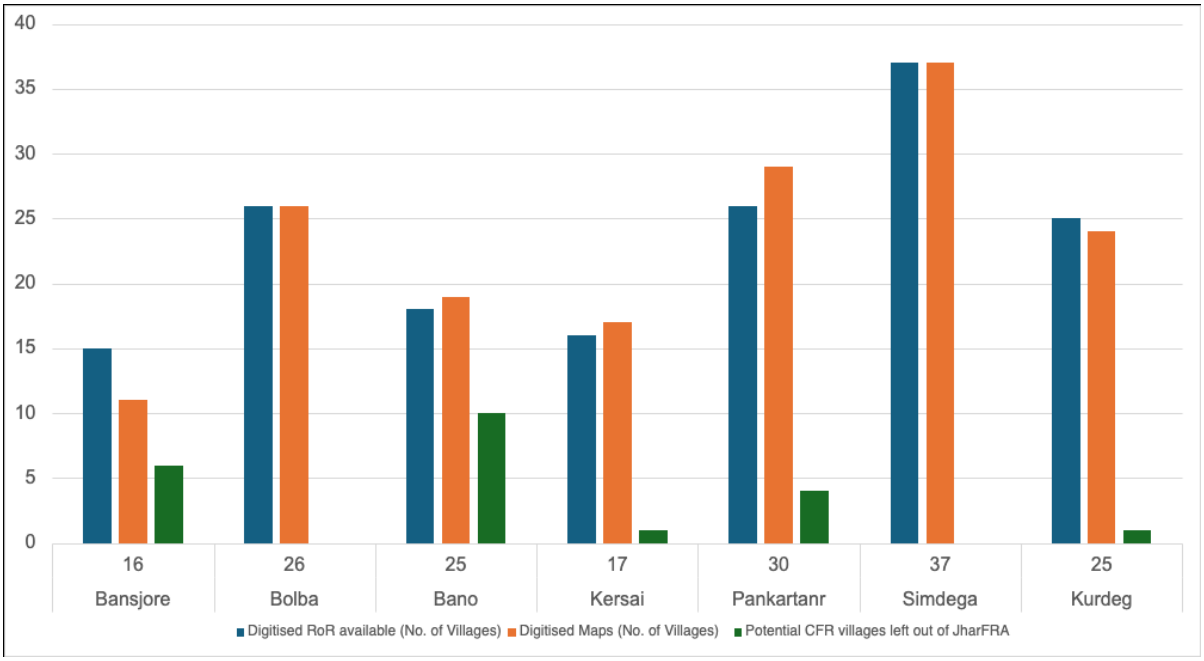
Reliability issues persist in datasets provided by the Government of Jharkhand. During a JharFRA technical training session, several villages were found to be missing from the application database. This delayed registrations of participating FRCs from those villages. When cadastral maps, forest layers, and RoR were requested, digitised documents for many eligible villages were not available in government inventories. For example, in Dumaria block, East Singhbhum district, only 20 of 69 villages with potential CFRR claims had digitised RoR and cadastral maps. These gaps discourage stakeholders and slow JharFRA's uptake, undermining efforts to scale claim filing through digitisation. Table 1 summarises reliability issues in revenue department data for blocks in Simdega district, including the omission of villages eligible for CFRR.

Table 1: Availability of digitised Records of Rights (RoR) and cadastral maps for filing Community Forest Resource Rights (CFRR) claims via JharFRA in eligible villages of Simdega district, Jharkhand

Block	No. of villages	Villages with digitised RoR	Villages with digitised cadastral maps	Potential CFRR villages Left out of JharFRA
Bansjore	16	15	11	6
Bolba	26	26	26	0
Bano	25	18	19	10
Kersai	17	16	17	1
Pakartanr	30	26	29	4
Simdega	37	37	37	0
Kurdeg	25	25	24	1

Source: Author's own compilation.

Note: Villages lacking digitised cadastral maps, digitised RoR, or both, fall outside JharFRA's claim filing workflow.



Source: Author's own compilation.
Figure 8: Availability of digitised Records of Rights (RoR) and cadastral maps by block in Simdega district, Jharkhand.

Note: Eight of Simdega's ten blocks are included, as only these have forest areas eligible for Community Forest Resource Rights (CFRR).

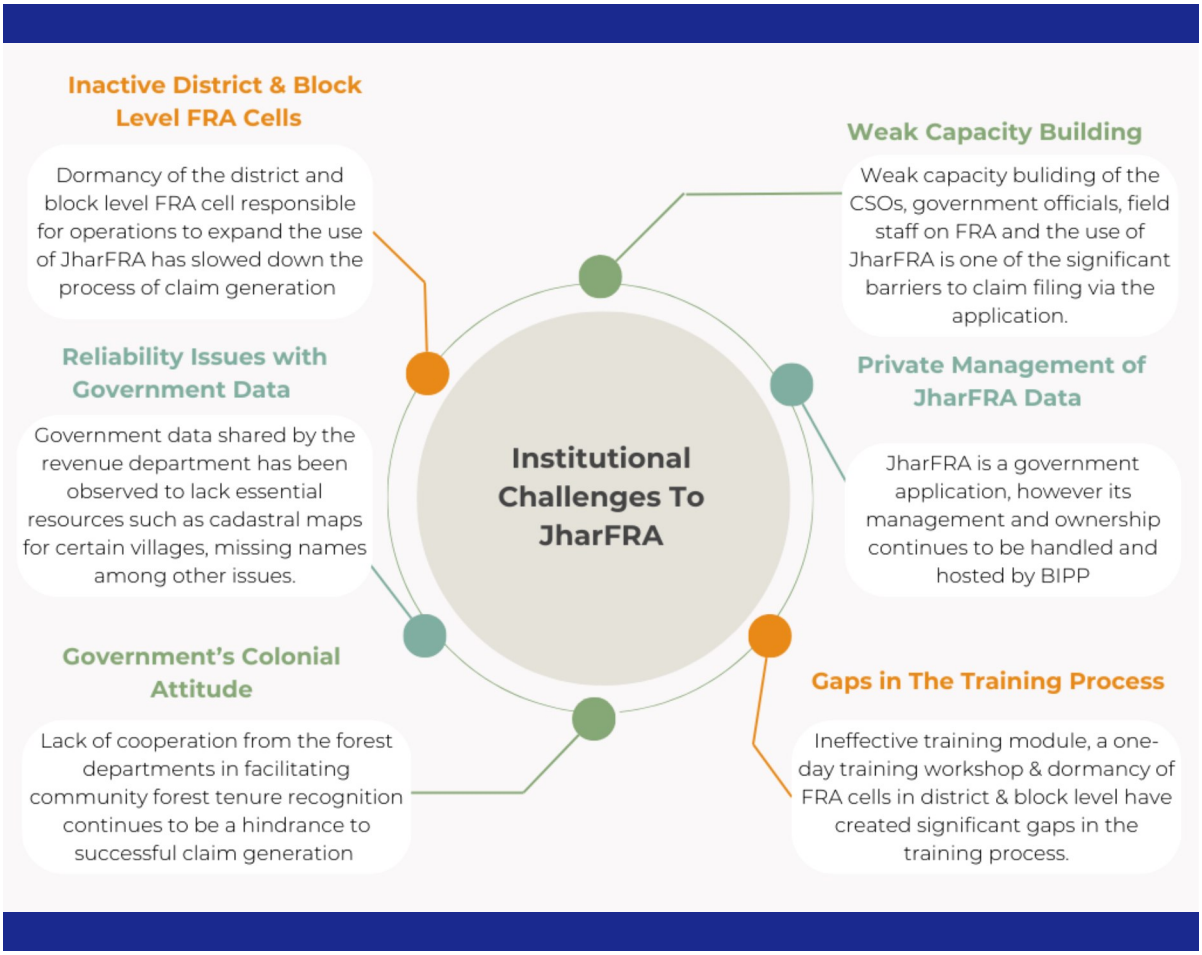
6.11. Colonial Attitude of the Forest Department

Attitudinal barriers within the forest department continue to impede the distribution of CFRR titles. Officials often prefer to confer Community Rights (CR), which provide only access to and use of forest for livelihoods, rather than recognise CFRR, which confer management and decision-making authority on villages. Reasons cited include the absence of historical written documentation and a view that departmental management has historically prevented deforestation.

There is also persistent confusion regarding the FRA across different administrative levels. This results in delays, higher evidentiary thresholds than those envisaged by the Act, and decisions guided by personal interpretations rather than the legal framework. These practices undermine the FRA's intent to vest resource governance in forest-dwelling communities.

6.12. Private Management of JharFRA Data

Given JharFRA's adoption by the state, data should be hosted on the Jharkhand State Data Centre's servers. However, old infrastructure and the absence of dedicated government information technology (IT) personnel have delayed the shift. As a result, hosting and maintenance continue on ISB servers, and the Google Play listing still reflects ownership by the IoFE. The absence of a formal handover reinforces perceptions of private ownership and may create a trust deficit among users. A dedicated government IT unit is required to complete migration manage hosting and security, strengthen data governance, and provide ongoing user support.



Source: Created in Canva.
Figure 9: Institutional challenges to the implementation of JharFRA in Jharkhand.

7. Trial-and-Error Approach

As JharFRA continues in the operational phase, a trial-and-error approach has been adopted. Iterative testing of features, workflows, and training content enables timely identification of technical gaps and procedural bottlenecks. Corrective updates are deployed to address these issues.

This iterative method also improves the data inventory. Regular validation and supplementation of village lists, maps, and RoR help ensure that the application remains aligned with the current requirements for filing CFRR claims.

8. Study Limitations

The study planned three focus group discussions in three villages of Simdega district. Given the early stage of JharFRA's implementation and the need for field interns to support community engagement, only two discussions were conducted in Suminbera and Jamtoli. Low digital literacy in several forest-dwelling communities also informed this decision.

The study period was not sufficient to capture long-term effects. Institutional implementation and socio-economic outcomes may take longer to materialise. The findings presented here, therefore, reflect current challenges, efforts, and operational outcomes rather than long-term impacts.

9. Conclusion

JharFRA has enabled collaboration among forest-dwelling communities, the IoFE, the Government of Jharkhand, and CSOs. The government provides scale and continuity, the CSOs offer community networks and field presence, and the IoFE supplies technical solutions and process design. Together, this partnership addresses coordination failures and low visibility in the claim filing process.

Paper-based systems obscure interactions between forest-dwelling communities and government officials. They also make it difficult for claimants to track progress or receive timely feedback. JharFRA increases procedural transparency in the claim filing process from village initiation to block, district, and state review.

Currently, JharFRA's implementation remains at a nascent stage. The platform has clear potential to improve efficiency and accelerate CFRR claim filings. However, the absence of a dedicated government budget and staffing for the ABAD campaign constrains scale. Reliance on Bir Bandhus has been insufficient because of competing responsibilities and weak financial incentives. A dedicated government field cadre is therefore essential. This cadre would support communities' understanding of the FRA, assist FRCs with the filing process, and track progress within JharFRA.

The support of CSOs remains important, but it cannot substitute for institutional capacity within the Government of Jharkhand. CSOs have limited funding and geographically bounded mandates. Government investment in personnel and sustained awareness campaigns is required to expand village-level uptake of JharFRA and secure full recognition of CFRR claims.

Future work should track outcomes beyond process metrics. This includes timely title issuance, the quality of field verification, community satisfaction, and effects on local forest governance and livelihoods. Iterative improvements, guided by these indicators, will help JharFRA mature into a robust, scalable public platform. With adequate public investment in personnel, training, and data stewardship, JharFRA can accelerate the recognition of community forest tenure in Jharkhand.

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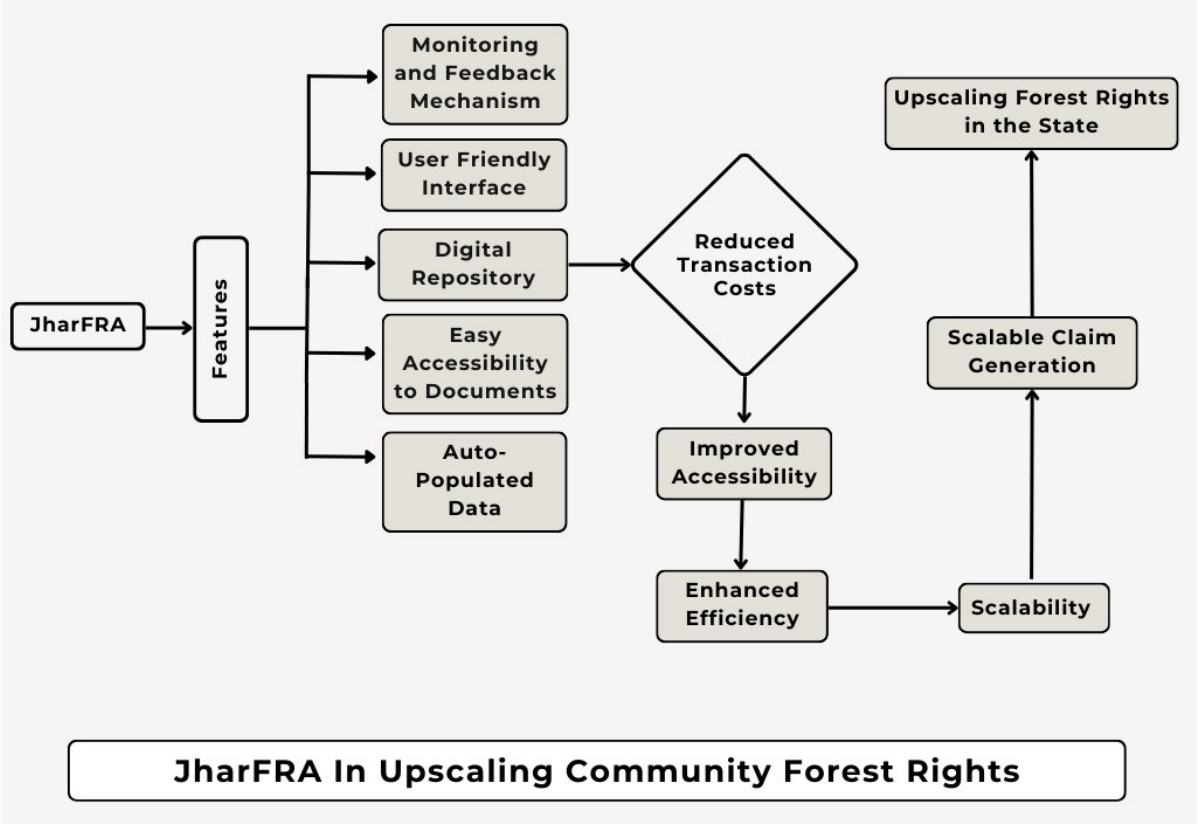
11. Annexure

11.1. Initiative on the Forest Economy (IoFE)

The Initiative on the Forest Economy is based at the Bharti Institute of Public Policy (BIPP), Indian School of Business (ISB), Hyderabad. It is a longitudinal programme built on sustainability, scalability, and technology. It aims to drive large-scale development and improve economic well-being in India's forest landscapes.

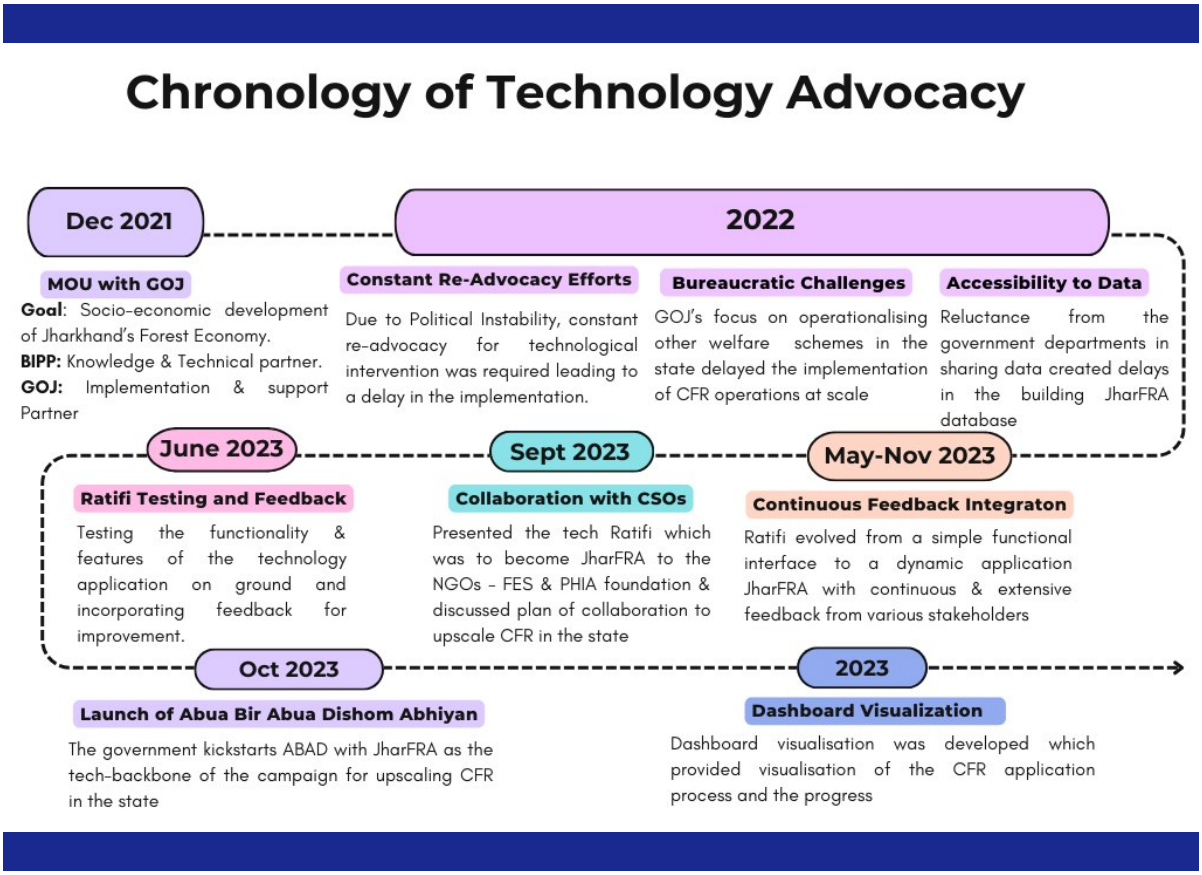
The IoFE focuses on strengthening forest-based value chains through collective community management of forest resources. This requires engagement with state governments, civil society organisations (CSOs), academic and research institutions, industries, and private companies. It also collaborates with government and NGO partners to execute interventions on the ground.

11.2. Annexure II



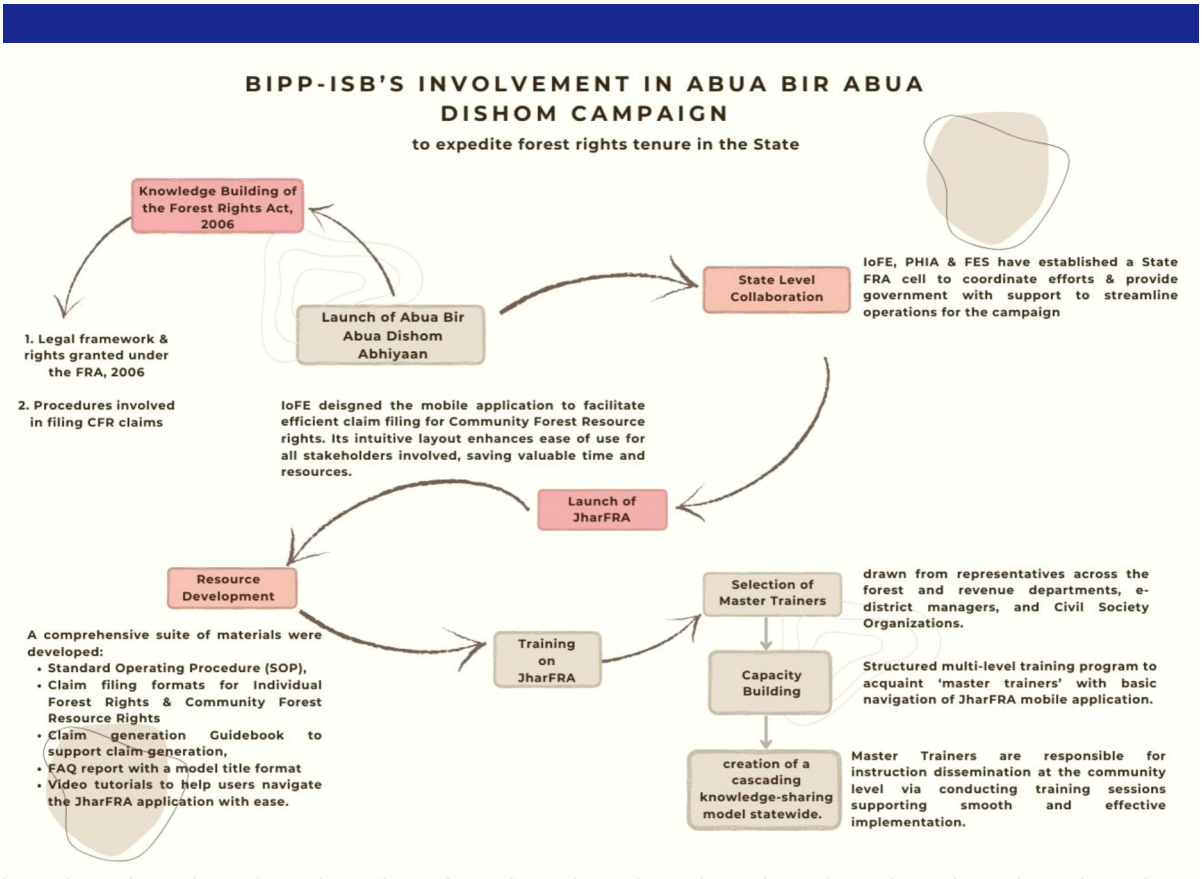
Source: Created in Canva.
Figure 10: Rationale for JharFRA.

Note: The figure shows how JharFRA can scale up community forest tenure. Its features, including monitoring and feedback, claim tracking, and auto-populated data, enable ease, standardisation, and scale.



Source: Created in Canva.
Figure 11: Chronology of advocacy for technology intervention in Jharkhand.

Note: The figure presents the advocacy timeline for a technology-led approach to scaling up Community Forest Resource Rights (CFRR) in Jharkhand. It highlights sustained engagement with government departments and civil society organisations (CSOs) and shows how collaboration and policy support enabled the statewide roll-out of JharFRA.



Source: Created in Canva.

Figure 12: Role of the Bharti Institute of Public Policy, Indian School of Business (BIPP–ISB) in the statewide campaign for forest tenure in Jharkhand.

Note: The figure maps BIPP–ISB's role in advancing comprehensive recognition of Community Forest Resource Rights (CFRR) in Jharkhand. It summarises BIPP–ISB's contributions in JharFRA development, training, inter-agency coordination, and monitoring.

About BIPP

The Bharti Institute of Public Policy (BIPP) at the Indian School of Business (ISB) is a premier research and education centre, and a leading public policy think tank. The institute engages with policy makers by providing them with critical, evidence-based analysis of public policy rooted in data. The institute works on policy challenges across diverse domains, primarily Agriculture & Food, Environment & Climate Change, Public Finance, and Education. The institute, recognised for its reputable standing in the field of public policy, undertakes various initiatives, including Research Projects, Asynchronous Courses, Legislative Support Programme, and most notably, the flagship Advanced Management Programme in Public Policy (AMPPP). BIPP collaborates closely with various ministries of the Government of India and several state governments across the country. It also partners with leading national institutions and government agencies engaged in governance, policy research, capacity building, and public administration.

ISB Bharti Institute of Public Policy

We are always open to partnerships, ideas, and conversations.

Reach out to explore collaboration or to learn more about our work.

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