

Democracy in the Woods¹

Natural resources are among the prime sites where struggles for defining the contents and meanings of democracy and citizenship are waged in the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Claims and counterclaims over land, water and forests, rooted in competing interests and ideas about resource governance, are mediated by a variety of institutions. This piece answers a key puzzle: Why do some citizens seek to claim rights recognized under the statute, while others sign on to the proposal for institutional change somewhat reluctantly, and still others continue to abide by the institutional regimes put in place by colonial governments? By bridging the scholarship on institutional analysis and power, the contribution offers a comprehensive approach to understanding and analyzing institutional change in the context of natural resources such as land, water and forests. While the empirical research was conducted in India, the findings are applicable to forested regions that scholars have referred to as social and political hotbeds.²

Few other pieces of legislation introduced in independent India have generated as bitter controversies as did the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006. With regards to the text of the Act, the FRA seeks to undo 'historical injustices' committed against indigenous and other forest dependent groups. The injustices related to the sweeping 'nationalization'

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by colonial forestry administration of the lands occupied and used in the past by forest dependent groups. In post-nationalization period, the earlier inhabitants of the lands were reduced to squatters. The property rights institutions that the colonial government put in place continued to be the bedrock of forest management in post-independence India. The enactment of the FRA by Indian parliament is the first comprehensive effort to recognize the private and collective rights apparently usurped by colonial and post-colonial governments. The FRA triggered passionate responses from actors concerned with the questions of forests and forest rights.

Some among the nature conservation groups dubbed the Act as 'probably the most dangerous act' of any Indian government since 1947, and its passing as Indian 'democracy's lowest hour'. These conservationists argued that the act would prompt 'vote hungry' politicians to encourage a land rush, threatening India's remaining forests. Such claims, which influential sections within media, political leadership, and governments supported, were the subject of television and YouTube commercials,

a first for policy advocacy in Indian history. The FRA supporters, on the other hand, hailed it as a landmark legislation that met the aspirations nurtured by generations of forest dwellers. However, the emerging empirical evidence, including the data collected under the dissertation, presents an intriguing picture: the levels of claim-making under FRA in most cases does not support the enthusiasm implied by either the activists or the conservationists. Despite extreme poverty and landlessness among the forest dependent groups, the political populism and the land rush anticipated by the conservationists did not occur, even in the highly politically competitive study regions. Indeed, for a variety of reasons discussed at length in the doctoral dissertation, which is summarised in this note many apparently eligible claimants failed to put forth their claims.

Why did the FRA evoke such a muted response? What implications might this have for the distinct but equally important goals of environmental conservation and democratic institutional reforms? What might the FRA tell us about theories of institutional change? The dissertation seeks to answer these questions by developing and testing a research approach in the political economy of institutional change, focusing on the interplay of pre-existing institutions – the historically shaped rules, norms, and conventions – and the extant political economy relations. To analyze these

effects, the dissertation employs a carefully constructed comparative research design and a suit of quantitative and qualitative research methods. The statistical hypothesis testing, which draws upon a original primary datasets that were collected for the dissertation, is combined with a rigorous qualitative analysis of the processes and causal mechanisms leading up to the outcomes.

An analysis of the historical and the contemporary policy context shows that even in colonial times, intra-society and intra-community asymmetries were critical in shaping the extant distribution of property rights that the FRA seeks to alter. In post-independence, the democratic forces of electoral competition and social movements helped foster informal contestation of institutional status quo, eventually leading to the enactment of the FRA. However, social movements face significant barriers against their role as forest rights interlocutors. These challenges relate, among others, to a strong belief among some of the potential FRA beneficiaries in the authority of the state as the sole arbiter of property rights. Even so, the potential for social movements broadening the terms of political debates were most clearly visible in the regions with higher levels of electoral competition.

The effect of past forest protection arrangements on FRA claims in a community depended on the interests and actions of local 'forest leaders', that is, those leading the past forest conservation arrangements in a community, and represented on the locally elected forest rights committees, which coordinated the first tier of adjudication of the FRA claims. Forest leaders' presence on the locally elected

FRA committee was the strongest negative predictor of the household forestland cultivation claims under the FRA. Qualitative inquiries revealed, with an eye on maintaining their stronghold, that forest leaders in many cases actively worked to prevent the eligible rights holders from claiming FRA rights. In other words, forest leaders worked against the mandate they sought as the elected representatives of 'local communities'.

The elected leaders represented at the provincial assemblies and nominated to the sub-district and district level FRA committees, often collaborated with and helped to secure the interests of public forest officials. Similarly, instead of getting into inter-bureau turf battles as suggested by the public administration literature, bureaus with apparently competing interests stood united in decrying the legitimacy of the rights that the FRA sought to impart to the citizens. These outcomes are attributable to the sediments of long-held prejudices among public officials against the forest-dependent groups, particularly the indigenous adivasi groups. The subjective understanding of institutions and institutional change that different actors brought to the table greatly shaped the actors' response to the institutional change.

The dissertation offers concrete evidence on the manner in which power relations shaped the FRA proceedings, often leading to counterintuitive outcomes. By implication, under conditions of power asymmetry, participatory forest conservation projects could reinforce historical inequity and injustices. On the other hand, the effects of local power asymmetries, reinforced through earlier rounds of

'participatory forestry programs', also permeated through the locally elected committees put in charge of implementing the FRA. The author, who is currently working on a book manuscript based on this research, hopes to engage with researchers with similar interests in questions of institutional change, democratic representation and participatory reforms under conditions of power asymmetries.

Notes

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2. Brechin, S. R., Wilshusen, P. R., Fortwangler, C. L., & West, P. C. (2002). *Beyond the Square Wheel: Toward a More Comprehensive Understanding of Biodiversity Conservation as Social and Political Process*. *Society & Natural Resources*, 15, 41-64.

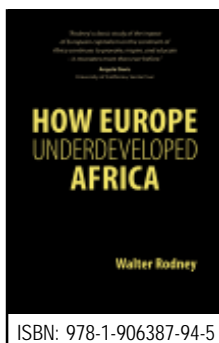
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A pre-publication draft of the dissertation is available from the author, who may be reached at prakash.kashwan@uconn.edu.

How Europe Underdeveloped Africa

Walter Rodney



Few books have been as influential in understanding African impoverishment as this groundbreaking analysis. Rodney shows how the imperial countries of Europe, and subsequently the US, bear major responsibility for impoverishing Africa. They have been joined in this exploitation by agents or unwitting accomplices both in the North and in Africa.

With oppression and liberation his main concern, he 'dives into the past', as he says in his preface, 'only because otherwise it would be impossible to understand how the present came into being ... In the search for an understanding of what is now called "underdevelopment" in Africa, the limits of inquiry have had to be fixed as far apart as the fifteenth century, on the one hand, and the end of the colonial period, on the other hand.' He argues that 'African development is possible only on the basis of a radical break with the international capitalist system, which has been the principal agency of underdevelopment of Africa over the last five centuries'. His Marxist analysis went far beyond previously accepted approaches and changed the way both third world development and colonial history are studied. Although first published in 1972,

How Europe Underdeveloped Africa remains an essential introduction to understanding the dynamics of Africa's contemporary relations with the West and is a powerful legacy of a committed thinker.