

DELHI

Forest Rights Act: well begun, and now Odisha is ready for the home run

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While many States are nowhere near completing implementation of the historic Act, Odisha is aiming for a full rollout by 2024; State makes budgetary provision for implementation of the central Act

Rights for the dwellers

What the Forest Rights Act, 2006, entails

- Tenurial security over the forestland under occupation prior to December 13, 2005
- Recognition of community right over forest and forest products
- Protection and conservation of community forest resources
- Conversion of all forest villages and habitation located inside the forestland into revenue villages
- In situ rehabilitation of displaced persons evicted without compensation prior to December 13, 2005
- Recognition of ancestral



Residents of Gunduribadi village in Odisha's Nayagarh district get ready for mapping their land boundaries for the Forest Rights Act implementation. ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups

- Seasonal access to nomadic, pastoral and semi-nomadic

- Conversion of all leases granted by erstwhile governments, zamindars and king into permanent land



Tucked away in a forested region of Odisha's Mayurbhanj district, Juguni Ho had long nursed a dream of owning a piece of land. The resident of Budhabalanga village can now not only boast of possessing 5.15 acres in the forests of the Similipal Biosphere Reserve but also log on to a website and show the land records.

Jasai Soren and his forefathers have lived in the Khuribhanga forest village in Dhenkanal district from times immemorial, but the village did not exist in government records for years. Khuribhanga is now recognised as a revenue village and government welfare programmes have started to flow seamlessly.

Pramilla Pradhan of Sinduria village in Nayagarh district always believed the residents had first right to forest resources in the adjoining areas. The village has secured community forest rights on 760 acres of Sulia forest; the villagers' annual income from cashew harvesting alone now touches ₹4 lakh.

Juguni Ho, Jasai Soren and Pramilla Pradhan are among the 2.59 lakh beneficiaries of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, which has entered its 16th year of implementation in Odisha.

The implementation, which involves raising awareness among the largely uninformed population, rummaging through voluminous government records, ground truthing and further vetting by government departments, has been a knotty affair. But while many States are nowhere near completing implementation of the historic Act, Odisha is aiming for a full rollout by 2024.

It is the first State in the country to make budgetary provision for implementation of the Central Act – ₹8 crore for 168 FRA cells in 2021-22. Till last year, forest rights committees were functioning in Tribal Sub Plan areas. Now, they have been extended to the entire State. The State is not only ensuring tenurial security and entitlement over land but also addressing livelihood and food security under the Act.

“We are confident about launching Mission 2024 for FRA by granting all kinds of forest rights whether it is for the individual, community or habitat,” says Odisha's ST and SC Development Secretary Ranjana Chopra.

The mission, currently under Finance Department and Planning and Convergence Department scrutiny, aims at granting the tribal people their rightful ownership.

As of March 2022, a total of 6,27,998 claims had been received by gram sabhas of which 4,52,164 claims were upheld and titles distributed. As many as 1,31,062 claims were rejected. According to the Bhubaneswar-based Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute (SCSTRTI), Odisha has an estimated 7.32 lakh potential claimants, which indicates that around 3 lakh eligible families are still left out.

“Though the gap appears to be huge, the platform is ready for the government to expedite FRA implementation on mission mode,” says Y. Giri Rao, who has been involved in the Act's implementation for over a decade. “Most processes are already halfway through. The government needs to bring all departments on one platform for its completion by 2024.”

While ST and SC Development Department remains the nodal agency for the Act's implementation, forest rights cells would function from the State level right down to the tahasil level. Besides, district-level nodal officers, civil society organisations, Panchayati Raj Institution members, revenue inspectors and local youth will work in tandem for faster implementation of the Act.

The State government has also set up a dedicated project management unit only for FRA implementation.

Empirical studies carried out from time to time by the SCSTRTI have helped the government plug the gaps in implementation of the Act.

“Granting of habitat rights to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) has been a non-starter in the entire country. However, habitat right proposals have been duly approved by gram sabhas and many of those proposals are under active consideration of subdivisional-level committees,” says SCSTRTI director A.B. Ota.

Of the 13 PVTGs identified in Odisha, habitat rights are being processed for 11 groups. Mr. Ota says the Lodhas and Lanjia Sauras, who do not believe in the concept of habitat, and could apply for individual forest rights.

Mr. Rao says FRA implementation remained virtually static in almost all States except Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh during the past year. While neighbouring Chhattisgarh has been in the forefront on reporting and settling individual forest rights and community forest rights claims, Odisha’s new push could close the gap in the months ahead.

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