

State-Level FRA Conference
Report on Experience Sharing and Cross Learning,
16th December 2025, Bhubaneswar, Odisha

The State-level Forest Rights Act (FRA) Conference was held on 16th December 2025 at Hotel Excellency, Bhubaneswar, Odisha. The conference was organised as a platform for experience sharing, cross-learning, and collective reflection among grassroots practitioners, researchers, tribal leaders, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders working with tribal and forest-dependent communities across Odisha. The objective of the conference was to reflect on field-level experiences related to FRA implementation, examine stakeholder engagement and approaches, understand challenges and bottlenecks, and identify policy-level gaps that require urgent attention.

The conference began with an inaugural ceremony led by indigenous village leaders, who symbolically watered plants to mark the opening of the event. This act reflected the deep-rooted relationship between tribal communities and nature, and set the tone for discussions centered on forest stewardship and community rights. Following the inauguration, Mr. Bichitra Biswal shared the opening context of the conference.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Biswal explained the nature of practical fieldwork undertaken on the Forest Rights Act and described how FRA processes are implemented with the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including tribal communities, Gram Sabhas, Civil Society organisations, and Government departments. He emphasised that the Forest Rights Act is not merely a legal framework but is closely linked to tribal livelihoods, culture, identity, and dignity. Drawing from field experiences, he elaborated on the processes involved in applying for Individual Forest Rights and Community Forest Rights, including the mandatory procedures of claim filing, verification, and approval. He also shared the challenges encountered during implementation, such as administrative delays and coordination gaps, and stressed that policy-level issues must be discussed at a collective platform like this state-level conference. He underlined that the workshop was intended as a shared learning space where diverse regional experiences could strengthen FRA implementation across Odisha.



Mr. Biswal then introduced the resource person for the conference, Mr. Sandeep Patnaik, a well-known researcher on the Forest Rights Act with extensive experience working with tribal communities across the state. Mr. Patnaik has represented grassroots perspectives and research findings on FRA at several state and national-level forums.

In his address, **Mr. Sandeep Patnaik** welcomed Living Farms for organising the conference and extended his greetings to all participants. He highlighted the centrality of the Gram Sabha in the Forest Rights Act, stating that FRA can be meaningfully implemented only when the authority of the Gram Sabha is recognised and exercised effectively. He framed the discussion by situating FRA within its historical context, research-based insights, field experiences of practitioners, and examples of good practices from Odisha, while also encouraging open dialogue on challenges and opportunities.



Mr. Patnaik traced the history of forest governance in India back nearly three centuries, beginning with the advent of British rule around 1757. He explained that colonial forest governance was driven by extraction and exploitation rather than sustainable management, leading to large-scale forest destruction and the alienation of tribal communities from their ancestral lands. He recalled the tribal resistance that emerged in 1784, led by Tilka Majhi, who articulated a tribal worldview that considers nature as the creator of forests and views the relationship between forests and tribal people as that of a mother and child. Despite this resistance, Tilka Majhi was publicly executed by the British, symbolising the violent suppression of tribal assertion and resistance.

He further explained how colonial forest laws, particularly the Indian Forest Act of 1865, declared forests as the property of the British Crown and forcibly displaced tribal communities. Forests were classified as reserved and protected, severely restricting access to forest resources. Even though tribal use of forests was limited and sustainable, communities were denied independent rights and gradually labeled as encroachers. These colonial laws largely continued even after Independence, allowing historical injustice to persist for decades.

He emphasised that the Forest Rights Act, 2006 was enacted to correct these historical injustices. FRA recognises individual and community rights over forest land and resources while restoring the authority of the Gram Sabha. He stressed

that FRA is not confined to land ownership but also addresses biodiversity conservation, recognition of indigenous knowledge systems, intellectual property rights, and community-led forest governance. Special emphasis was placed on the role of women, acknowledging their critical contribution to forest protection, resource management, and decision-making.

He also concluded by highlighting the legal linkages between FRA, the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, the Biological Diversity Act, and constitutional provisions related to tribal self-governance. He stressed that effective implementation of FRA requires harmonising these legal frameworks and strengthening Gram Sabha institutions. He presided this session and invited speakers to share their experiences and learnings.

During the discussion, **Mr. Biswarup** presented data on the progress of FRA implementation in Odisha. He stated that according to a government survey conducted in 2009, approximately 7.5 lakh households were eligible to receive Individual Forest Rights. Of these, more than seven lakh households had applied for IFR, over six lakh households had received titles, and more than one lakh claims had been rejected. He noted that the conference marked nearly two decades since the enactment of FRA, making it an important moment for reflection.

Prof. Kumarjeev Pegu, Law University, Cuttack emphasised that under the Forest Rights Act, the responsibility for implementation, including demarcation of forest land and distribution of pattas, lies entirely with the Government. He described FRA as a landmark legislation aimed at addressing historical injustices faced by Scheduled Tribes and Other traditional forest dwellers. He clarified that while ownership of forest land remains with the State, forest dwellers are granted inalienable and heritable rights to occupy, cultivate, and use forest land and resources sustainably. He also highlighted the flexibility of FRA, noting that nomadic tribes can claim rights across multiple locations based on customary use, without restriction across village, district, or state boundaries. Prof. Pegu further discussed the relationship between forest-dwelling communities and protected areas, stating that wildlife laws do not mandate displacement if cohabitation between humans and wildlife is possible. He warned that forced displacement leads to irreversible cultural loss, citing the example of Similipal, where sacred tribal sites were destroyed following the declaration of a National Park.



Ms. Madhumita shared her observations on the rapid erosion of tribal culture. She noted that very few villages are existed with 100 percent tribal population. Migration of tribal people to other regions and the influx of non-tribal populations into tribal villages have led to the dilution and disappearance of traditional customs, languages, rituals, and ways of life. In many cases, she observed, tribal identity now remains only in surnames rather than lived cultural practices.

Prof. Bijaya Bhaskar reflected on the gap between research on tribal rights and actual implementation of FRA. He pointed out that while FRA falls under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, its implementation is often obstructed by conflicting forest and wildlife laws administered by other ministries. He highlighted the growing participation of youth in Gram Sabha processes and reaffirmed that under the PESA Act, the Gram Sabha holds strong constitutional authority under Article 243G.



Mr. Gouranga Mohapatra emphasised the deep link between forests, nutrition, and health in tribal communities. He explained that forest-based food systems provide a wide range of micronutrients, vitamins, and minerals that enhance immunity and disease resistance. He shared that tribal communities traditionally consume a diverse range of forest foods, including green leafy vegetables, mushrooms, tubers, and nuts, many of which are eaten raw and retain high nutritional value. He argued that displacement from forests disrupts these natural food systems and adversely affects both physical and psychological health. He also critiqued the Public Distribution System for focusing mainly on carbohydrates while ignoring nutritional diversity.

Mrs. Sailabala Panda of PRADAN spoke about the transformative potential of FRA in strengthening tribal livelihoods, food security, and cultural survival. She emphasized the importance of focusing on Community Forest Rights and Community Forest Resource Rights to protect forests while enhancing sustainable incomes. She countered the argument that FRA leads to forest degradation, stating that evidence from community-managed forests shows improvement in forest cover and biodiversity. She also stressed the need to converge FRA implementation with various government schemes to maximize benefits.



Mr. Manoranjan of BASUNDHRA highlighted that in many areas, forest departments continue to function through informal and undeclared rules, often ignoring Gram Sabha recommendations under FRA. He pointed out that some tribal communities, despite long struggles for recognition, still remain excluded from accessing their rightful forest rights.

Mr. Manoj Kumar Sahu of PRADAN highlighted the experience of Kakansura village in Kandhamal district, focused on the status, process and impact of community-led forest management in the village. Kakansura is predominantly inhabited by Kondha community, comprising around 40 households with a population of approximately 200 people. The village has access to 282 hectares of forest land, including both Revenue Community Forest and Reserve Community Forest areas. Traditionally, the forest has been deeply connected to the social, cultural, and economic life of the community.

Before PRADAN's intervention, the management and use of forest resources in the village were largely unregulated. There were no defined rules or restrictions to protect forest resources or to prevent threats such as forest fires, encroachment, and deforestation. As a first step, PRADAN, in coordination with the community, initiated awareness-building and capacity development of community cadres known as "*Jami Sathi*." The training focused on: (i) understanding forest rights and responsibilities, (ii) documentation and mapping of community forest areas, and (iii) digital demarcation of forest boundaries. The use of GIS technology for accurate demarcation and visual representation of forest boundaries significantly enhanced community confidence in managing and defending their forest rights.

Joint collaboration with concerned line departments, particularly the Forest Department, along with local institutions, yielded positive outcomes. These included improved prevention of forest fires, reforestation initiatives such as plantation and seed-ball throwing, and effective measures to stop indiscriminate tree cutting. Additionally, the intervention strengthened trust and confidence between the community and the Forest Department, while also improving transparency and accountability in forest governance. The community actively took responsibility for forest protection by organising night patrols, regulating grazing, and enforcing locally agreed rules and penalties for any violations.

PRADAN facilitated convergence with MGNREGS, leading to the implementation of several soil and water conservation measures such as Staggered trenches, Contour Continuous Trenches (CCT), Water Absorption Trenches (WAT) and Individual land bunding. In addition, sustainable livelihood activities linked to forest and land management were promoted, including Ginger and turmeric cultivation, Backyard poultry farming and Black pepper cultivation.

These activities helped reduce dependence on destructive forest extraction while improving household incomes. The visible outcomes included 1. Forest species are regenerating and overall forest density has improved; 2. Increased presence of wild animals, birds, and insects, indicating ecological recovery and 3. Strengthened community ownership, responsibility, and pride in forest management.

Mr. Pradumnya Behera (Research Scholar IIT - Mumbai) shared insights on the history and present challenges of protected areas, with specific reference to Similipal Sanctuary. The concept of protected areas for wildlife conservation dates back to the British period, beginning around 1936 with Corbett National Park. While aimed at wildlife protection, these areas have caused significant struggles for tribal communities.

With the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) in 2006–07, forest-dependent communities expected justice. However, prior to FRA implementation, the Ministry of Environment and Forests issued directions to declare Critical Tiger Habitats within a short period, legally notifying tiger reserves to insulate wildlife areas from FRA claims. This led to widespread displacement in reserve areas.

In Similipal, 10 villages have already been displaced and 27 more face displacement. Criminalisation has increased in both core and buffer areas, where traditional livelihood activities such as collecting honey, mahua products, leaves, firewood, and Jhuna are treated as non-bailable offences. Primitive Tribal Groups like the Khadia and Lodha are particularly affected, facing harassment and atrocities.

Although Gram Sabha consent is legally required to declare protected forests, new circulars bypass collective consent by targeting individual families, which is illegal and challengeable. The declaration of Similipal as a National Park raises serious concerns, especially for 14 villages holding Community Forest Rights titles, and restrictions like “shoot-at-sight” orders question the future of tribal communities in the region.

Open Discussion and Voices of the Community

The open discussion session was facilitated by Dr. Sricharan, Board Member, Living Farms who encouraged tribal leaders from different regions of Odisha to share their lived experiences.

Sri Keshari Pujari, Gram Sabha President of Koserguda village, Vice-President of Koksara Block Sangha, and Member of the District Mahasangha, shared his long journey of struggle, achievement, and collective resistance in the implementation

of Community Forest Rights (CFR) in Kalahandi district. Reflecting on the early years, he highlighted that although 110 CFR titles were recorded in 2010, these titles were neither physically received nor effectively used by the people or the Gram Sabha committees. With the support and cooperation of Seba-Niketan, these gaps were identified and addressed.

Over the years, the movement expanded significantly, covering nearly 100 villages across six blocks of Kalahandi district, namely M. Rampur, Lanjigarh, Bhawanipatna, Junagarh, Golamunda, and Koksara. This collective effort led to the formation of a district-level federation known as the “**Kalahandi Gram Sabha Mahasangha**”, which became a strong platform for coordination, advocacy, and collective decision-making.

In the initial phase, mobilising people for Gram Sabha meetings was extremely challenging. Community members were hesitant and fearful of forest departments and local contractors. Shri Pujari recalled that during his tenure as Naib Sarpanch of Kebra Gram Panchayat in 2018, he personally visited villages two to three times to motivate people to attend Gram Sabha meetings. These efforts yielded encouraging results, with nearly 50 percent participation from women. Democratic Gram Sabha committees were formed, consisting of 15 members—five women, five men from tribal communities, and five members from other communities. Among them, a President, Secretary, and Treasurer were selected. All adult men and women above 18 years were recognised as members of the Gram Sabha.

Regular governance practices were established, with Gram Sabha meetings conducted monthly and larger meetings held two to three times annually. These platforms were used to collectively plan forest development, protection, sustainable harvesting of forest produce, and biodiversity conservation. Shri Pujari cited the example of **Mahima Jungle** near his village, which was once barren and degraded like a bald field. After the Gram Sabha collectively decided to protect the forest from fire, illegal woodcutting, and external interference, the area regenerated into a dense forest. Today, it supports rich biodiversity, including 10–15 bears, wild animals such as kutra, and numerous bird species. Many organisations and officials have visited this forest, and interactions with the Forest Department were also initiated to showcase community-led conservation. Community members proudly invite others to experience the rejuvenated forest, its flowing streams, fresh air, and the sound of birds.

Another major struggle highlighted was the opening of Gram Sabha bank accounts. Despite repeated attempts, several banks, including State Bank, Gramya Bank, and Agriculture Bank, initially refused to open accounts. This issue was taken up collectively at the District Mahasangha level, following which the

leaders approached the Collector through the grievance mechanism. Based on the Collector's directive, banks were instructed to open Gram Sabha accounts, resulting in successful account openings across different areas.

In 2019, the Gram Sabhas formally applied for permission to collect and market kendu leaves and bamboo. However, the Forest Department did not respond. Despite this, communities began collecting and attempting to market the produce by contacting vendors and companies. When the department became aware, a team attempted to seize the materials and hand them over to the VSS President. Since the Gram Sabha had already dissolved the VSS committee, the attempt failed. Subsequently, the Gram Sabha formally applied for transit permits, which were denied by the DFO citing the absence of government rules. This denial led to sustained advocacy, with letters sent to the Chief Secretary of the Forest Department, the ST & SC Department, and Forest Ministers at both state and central levels.

Sri Dasarathi Behera (Seba Niketan) further added that during this period, the then Union Forest Minister Shri Jairam Ramesh visited the village. Following this intervention, the Forest Department issued transit permit receipt books in the name of the Gram Sabha, formally recognising their authority. This marked a significant turning point. As a result of these efforts, nearly 100 villages in Kalahandi district began supplying NTFPs directly to companies, leading to substantial economic benefits. The total income generated was approximately Rs.7 crores from kendu leaves and Rs.2 crores from bamboo, significantly enhancing household incomes and ensuring community economic security.

The outcomes of Gram Sabha led forest governance were clearly visible. Rural communities began earning better incomes after taking charge of forest protection and management. Forests were conserved using indigenous knowledge and practices, leading to improved biodiversity and survival of native species. Migration reduced considerably, and both men and women experienced strengthened livelihoods and dignity as forest dwellers.

Sri Behera further shared that today Gram Sabhas maintain their own passbooks, cash books, stock registers, and records. Forest boundaries have been demarcated, and communities actively protect their forests. Gram Sabhas now have their own funds, which are utilised for activities such as creating fire lines, developing communication roads, and providing individual water supply facilities. Importantly, people now clearly understand that the Gram Sabha is the legitimate authority over local forests.

Ms. Arunima Swain, Foundation for Ecological Security (**FES**) emphasised the importance of strengthening institutional mechanisms for effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act. She highlighted that while the recognition

of forest rights is a critical first step, significant challenges remain in the areas of land acquisition and accurate recognition of entitlements under FRA. She pointed out that in many cases, the extent of land recognised does not fully reflect customary use and dependence, leading to partial or inadequate realisation of rights.

She stressed that meaningful engagement of Gram Sabhas in decision-making processes is essential to uphold the spirit of the Act. She observed that Gram Sabhas is often treated as procedural bodies rather than as empowered institutions with decisive authority, particularly during claim verification and approval stages. Strengthening the role of Gram Sabhas would ensure greater transparency, accountability, and community ownership in FRA implementation.

She further drew attention to the often-neglected aspect of post-title management of forest land. According to her, the issuance of titles must be followed by systematic support for sustainable forest management, livelihood planning, and convergence with relevant government schemes. Without post-recognition support, communities may struggle to protect, regenerate, and productively manage forest resources, thereby limiting the long-term impact of FRA.

Ms. Swain also highlighted the critical roles of the Sub-Divisional Level Committee and District Level Committee in ensuring fair and just implementation of forest rights. She noted that these committees must function proactively, with regular monitoring, timely grievance redressal, and adherence to FRA guidelines. Strengthening the accountability and capacity of SDLCs and DLCs, she emphasized, is essential for resolving pending claims, correcting wrongful rejections, and ensuring that FRA implementation aligns with both legal mandates and community realities.

Mr. Panchanan Sahu, JEET - Debagad, emphasised the critical importance of involving the younger generation in the Forest Rights Act process. He highlighted that meaningful and sustained implementation of FRA is not possible without active youth participation, as young people are the future custodians of forests, community institutions, and Gram Sabhas. He observed that when youth are engaged, they not only understand their rights more clearly but also take ownership of the process, ensuring transparency, continuity, and accountability at the community level. Mr. Sahu shared that in many areas, young community members have actively participated in awareness campaigns, claim preparation, documentation, and follow-up with authorities, thereby strengthening Gram Sabha-led initiatives.

He further raised serious concerns regarding the issue of limited land recognition and inadequate land acquisition under FRA by the concerned departments.

According to him, despite clear eligibility and customary use, many genuine forest-dwelling households receive significantly less land than what they are entitled to under the Act. He pointed out that such partial recognition undermines the spirit of FRA and discourages communities, especially the youth, from trusting institutional processes. Mr. Sahu stressed that young people are increasingly questioning these discrepancies and raising their voices through collective platforms, demanding fair measurement, proper demarcation, and transparent verification of forest land claims.

Mr. Lingaraj Kalta, Nirman reflected on the gradual erosion of tribal culture and traditional practices, noting that many customary systems such as collective hunting, community-based resource collection, and traditional village meetings are steadily declining. He emphasised that these practices were not merely cultural expressions but were deeply linked to community governance, forest stewardship, and social cohesion. The weakening of these traditions, he observed, has had a direct impact on collective responsibility towards forest protection and sustainable resource use.

Sharing the experience of the Ghinapali village Gram Sabha, Mr. Kalta highlighted community-led forest management practices as a strong example of how Gram Sabhas can play a decisive role in conservation. He explained that forest fires are not confined to the administrative boundary of a single village; when a fire breaks out, it becomes a shared responsibility of neighboring villages to respond collectively. In Ghinapali, Gram Sabhas have developed a practice of mutual support, where nearby villages proactively come forward to help control forest fires, reflecting a spirit of collective ownership over forest resources. He raised concerns regarding forest fires triggered during the mahua flower collection season. He pointed out that people often set fire to the peripheral areas of mahua trees to ease flower collection, but such fires frequently spread into surrounding forest areas, causing extensive damage. Mr. Kalta stressed the need for heightened awareness, vigilance, and collective action during this period. He shared that in Ghinapali, whenever a forest fire occurs, the Gram Sabha immediately informs the Forest Department, and villagers collectively engage in fire control efforts to minimize damage.

Mr. Kalta further emphasised the importance of protecting wildlife and biodiversity through Gram Sabha-led initiatives. He noted that forests are home to diverse forms of life, including animals, birds, insects, and reptiles, all of which depend on forest ecosystems for survival. To support wildlife, the community has taken initiatives to create small water pools and maintain water bodies within forest areas, especially during dry seasons, ensuring access to drinking water for wildlife. Such efforts, he noted, are crucial for preventing biodiversity loss and maintaining ecological balance.

In addition, he highlighted the role of community contribution in sustaining forest management efforts. He emphasized that all households contribute financially, according to their capacity, to meet the necessities of forest protection and management. This collective contribution has strengthened community ownership and accountability. He concluded by stating that due to active Gram Sabha involvement, forest protection and conservation in Ghinapali have shown positive outcomes, including an increase in forest cover, plant diversity, wildlife presence, and improved soil moisture in low-lying areas. These outcomes, he noted, clearly demonstrate that when Gram Sabhas are empowered, community-led forest management can effectively restore and sustain forest ecosystems.

Sashi Bhusan from Ranapur shared that how women play the critical role on forest preservation and said that “**women are not just beneficiaries but leaders in forest protection and conservation**” Their active role in safeguarding forests and educating the younger generation ensures the sustainability of both natural resources and community livelihoods. Strengthening women's leadership, recognising their contributions in Gram Sabha and CFR processes, and supporting their initiatives can significantly enhance community-led forest governance.

Girish Chandra Samal (SWATI), Kandhamal highlighted several critical issues related to the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA). His observations reflected the ground realities, institutional gaps, and policy-level challenges that continue to affect the effective realisation of forest rights for tribal and forest-dwelling communities.

One of the major concerns raised by him was that Gram Sabha meetings are not being conducted properly in many villages. In several cases, meetings are held irregularly or merely in a symbolic manner, without meaningful participation from community members. Discussions on issues related to the Forest Rights Act (FRA) are rarely given priority. Since the Gram Sabha is the central authority under the FRA, its weak functioning directly undermines the recognition and protection of both Individual Forest Rights (IFR) and Community Forest Rights (CFR).

He pointed out that Government officials are largely focusing on road and building construction, while FRA implementation remains neglected. Although development is important but without Gram Sabha consent often increases conflict between communities and the forest administration. Non-Governmental Organisations are currently playing a more active role in promoting and supporting FRA implementation, Supporting Gram Sabhas in claim filing and documentation, Facilitating capacity building and legal literacy among communities.

He appreciated the efforts of Living Farms in organising the event and emphasised that such workshops should be conducted at the district level to ensure wider participation of Gram Sabha representatives, community leaders, NGOs, and line department officials. Cross-learning and sharing of experiences across blocks and villages, along with direct dialogue with the district administration on existing bottlenecks and possible solutions, can help translate state-level discussions into actionable local strategies. Despite years of FRA implementation, several policy-level challenges continue to persist. These include contradictions between forest laws, wildlife policies, and the Forest Rights Act; delays in claim verification, approval, and distribution of titles; and a lack of clarity in government guidelines, coupled with frequent procedural hurdles. These unresolved policy challenges continue to restrict the full realisation of forest rights.

Mr. Samal also explained the **Adikarmayogi Yojana**, highlighting that the scheme aims to cover 100 wards. He noted that the scheme has the potential to strengthen outreach and service delivery at the grassroots level. However, proper convergence with FRA implementation is necessary to ensure that benefits reach forest-dwelling communities. Without active involvement of the Gram Sabha, such schemes risk becoming top-down initiatives.

Dasapalla Gramasbha Samuha members shared an important experience highlighting the collective strength of Gram Sabhas in protecting their legal authority over forest resources. The experience demonstrated how united action by Gram Sabhas can address unauthorised forest activities and ensure respect for community rights, even in matters linked to religious and cultural events. The Dasapalla Gram Sabha Samuha comprises 84 Gram Sabhas from the Dasapalla area. These Gram Sabhas work collectively to safeguard community forest resources and to ensure that decisions related to forest use are taken only through Gram Sabha consent, as mandated under the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

In Tilabadi village, forest department allowed to cut trees from the forest for Lord Jagannath Ratha Jatra without any consent from the Gram Sabha. The department not only bypass the mandatory legal processes but also ignore the and Gram Sabha rights. This act is opposed by Gram Sabha and does not allow to cut the trees and block the roads to prevent transportation of wood. They directly challenged the Divisional Forest Officer regarding this illegal activity. As a result of this firm and united stand, the Government officials forced to visit and discuss with Gram Sabha members and acknowledged their mistake. In mutual consent the community agreed and facilitated the whole process with celebration.

Mr. Rohit, Program Manager of TDH, who emphasised the importance of saturation-based FRA implementation across Odisha. He highlighted that FRA is not only about securing rights but also about ensuring sustainable forest management and dignified livelihoods for tribal communities. In his concluding remarks, he stressed the need for continued engagement and strengthened coordination in the future.



The conference concluded with a vote of thanks to all participants for their valuable contributions and active participation. The collective discussions reaffirmed the need to strengthen Gram Sabha institutions, address policy contradictions, and promote community-led forest governance to ensure justice, dignity, and sustainability for tribal and forest-dependent communities in Odisha. The conference also marked the establishment of a strong state and district level network among key stakeholders.