

Vasundhara — The Organisation That Has Done More for Forest Rights in Odisha Than Any Other

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Pramila Pradhan, 51, is the treasurer of Kodalpalli's forest protection committee in Nayagarh district. For forty years, her community has patrolled their forest in rotating shifts under the thengapalli system — the-nga means stick, palli means rotation, and the stick passes from household to household every day. The forest is standing, dense and biodiverse, not because the Forest Department protected it, but because the community did.

In 2023, after seventeen years of waiting since the Forest Rights Act was passed, Kodalpalli's community finally received legal recognition of what they had been doing all along. Their Community Forest Rights title was not given to them. They claimed it — with the support of Vasundhara, who had been working with communities across Odisha on FRA implementation since the Act came into force.

Tushar Dash, Vasundhara's Secretary-cum-Executive Director, has spent his career on this work. "Until now," he has said, "only communities that organised themselves and built capacity with the support of local organisations won their rights under the FRA." That sentence is the organisation's theory of change in twelve words.

Who They Are

Vasundhara is a Bhubaneswar-based civil society organisation founded with a specific mandate: securing tenure rights for forest-dependent communities in Odisha. Unlike

national organisations that work across multiple states, Vasundhara has chosen to go deep in one state rather than broad across many — a strategic choice that has produced the most comprehensive knowledge of Odisha's FRA landscape of any non-government entity in the country.

They are currently supporting 12,000 villages across 15 districts in FRA claims processes — the largest civil society operation on forest rights in Odisha. This work is funded through a combination of state government partnerships (including as an implementing partner for the Mo Jungle Jami Yojana), international philanthropy, and grants from organisations like the Rights and Resources Initiative.

Vasundhara has a staff of researchers, paralegals, community mobilisers, and field coordinators. Their model is not to file claims on behalf of communities. It is to train communities to understand, prepare, and defend their own claims — so that the capability stays in the community after any programme period ends.

The Research That Changed Odisha's Policy

In 2014, Vasundhara partnered with the Odisha SCSTRTI to conduct what became a landmark piece of policy research: a systematic mapping of the potential forest land over which rights could be recognised under the FRA across Odisha's districts. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs had asked all states to conduct this exercise. As of publication of the findings, Odisha was the only state that had completed it.

The mapping found that CFR potential in Odisha is approximately 2.7 million hectares — a figure that reframed the entire FRA conversation in the state. At least 25 million people in 35,254 villages stood to benefit from rights recognition under the community provisions alone.

Vasundhara's subsequent mapping, updated in 2025, found that Odisha has the potential to recognise Habitat Rights in over 2.27 million hectares, of which 1.12 million hectares are under forest areas. This research directly informed Odisha's 2024 Habitat Rights recognitions for multiple PVTG communities — with Vasundhara

providing technical support to the district-level committees processing claims.

The research function is not separate from the field function. Vasundhara's researchers are embedded in the same landscapes where their community mobilisers work. What they see in the field shapes the questions their research asks. What the research finds shapes how their field teams support communities. This integration of action and evidence is uncommon.

The Kalahandi Story: What Rights Actually Produce

The most documented economic outcome of Vasundhara's FRA work is the Kalahandi Gram Sabha Mahasangha — a federation of 78 gram sabhas across Kalahandi district that collectivised their kendu leaf trade after receiving CFR titles.

Before CFR recognition, kendu leaves collected by community members in these villages were sold to local traders at exploitative prices. After CFR recognition, the Mahasangha established collective procurement and direct sale through the government's kendu leaf procurement system — eliminating the traders who had captured most of the value.

The numbers documented for 2023 and 2024: ₹15 crore in kendu leaf revenues flowing to 7,000+ households across 78 villages. This is not aspirational. It is documented, verified, and cited by Vasundhara, by Rights and Resources Initiative, and in media coverage of CFR outcomes in Odisha.

The Kalahandi model is now referenced in national FRA policy discussions as an example of what community forest rights can produce when properly implemented with adequate post-recognition support. Vasundhara has documented the model specifically for replication elsewhere in Odisha and beyond.

The Habitat Rights Facilitation: 2024 Milestone

Between March 2024 and September 2024, six Odisha PVTG communities received Habitat Rights recognition under Section 3(1)(e) of the Forest Rights Act — the first Habitat Rights in Odisha's history and, in cumulative number, more PVTG Habitat Rights than any other Indian state.

Vasundhara played a direct facilitation role in multiple of these recognitions — supporting community consultations, documentation of traditional use and cultural connections, boundary mapping, and the coordination with district-level committees that the recognition process requires. Y. Giri Rao, Vasundhara's Executive Director, was quoted extensively in media coverage of the Mankidia and Juang recognitions, articulating the significance of these rights for communities whose forest relationships are simultaneously spiritual, cultural, and economic.

The next phase — extending Habitat Rights to the remaining seven of Odisha's 13 PVTGs, and ensuring that the six communities with recognition receive the post-recognition support needed to exercise those rights meaningfully — is Vasundhara's current work.

The Honest Assessment: What Hasn't Worked

Vasundhara's own documentation is honest about where FRA implementation has failed. The 94% re-rejection rate of claims reviewed during the Supreme Court order period — where Odisha reviewed 148,870 rejected IFR claims and rejected 140,504 of them again — is a figure that Vasundhara researchers have documented and publicly criticised.

Down to Earth's 2025 coverage of FRA implementation, drawing on Vasundhara researcher Nivedita Panda's analysis, identified the persistent problem: "Legal recognition under the FRA has improved livelihoods for many communities. In Kalakani village, Rayagada district, 25 tribal families previously faced harassment from forest officials. After awareness campaigns, the Gram Sabha formed a Forest Rights

Committee and successfully claimed 65 hectares." But for every Kalakani, there are dozens of villages where claims were rejected without proper process and communities lack the support to contest those rejections.

The asymmetry between what the law provides and what communities actually access — without sustained civil society support — is the gap that Vasundhara has spent decades trying to close and that remains unfinished.

What NGOs in Odisha Should Know About Vasundhara

If you work in any of Odisha's tribal forest districts and your programme touches community forest rights, NTFP livelihoods, habitat rights for PVTGs, or community conservation — Vasundhara is the organisation to contact first. Not to outsource the work, but to understand what they know from years of presence in those landscapes, what documentation exists for the communities you're engaging with, and whether there are active FRA processes you should be coordinating with rather than duplicating.

Vasundhara also produces a range of publicly available resources: factsheets on Odisha FRA implementation, district-level data on CFR potential, and documentation of community-led conservation models that are directly usable by any NGO or CSR programme designing forest rights or community conservation work in Odisha.

The UNDP India 2025 report *Securing Rights, Enabling Futures: Policy Lessons from Forest Rights Act and Future Pathways* draws on experience from Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Maharashtra — and the Odisha chapter draws extensively on Vasundhara's documented work. This is the most current comprehensive assessment of what FRA implementation has and hasn't achieved.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: vasundhara.org | **Executive Director:** Y. Giri Rao

For programme coordination and FRA technical support:

tushar@vasundhara.org (Tushar Dash, Secretary-cum-Executive Director)

Key publications:

- *Promise and Performance of the Forest Rights Act in Odisha* — Vasundhara / Rights and Resources Initiative (2016) — the foundational assessment of FRA potential in Odisha
- *Can India's Forest Rights Act Deliver? Odisha State Is Trying to Find Out* — Mongabay (November 2023) — most accessible recent narrative account
- *Mapping of Potential Habitat Rights of PVTGs Under FRA in Odisha* — SCSTRTI / Vasundhara — the research that shaped Odisha's Habitat Rights policy

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