

Social Justice & Tribal Welfare in Odisha: The Rights That Exist on Paper and the Distance to the Ground

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Social Justice & Tribal Welfare

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"The history of India's tribal communities and its forests is a history of the state treating both as resources to be managed — timber and people alike, logged and relocated at will. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 was, in that light, extraordinary: a formal acknowledgment that the extraction had been unjust. What happened next is the more instructive story."

In Kodalpalli village in Nayagarh district, women have been taking turns patrolling the forest since before their grandmothers were born. The system is called thengapalli — thenga means stick, palli means rotation. Every day, a different group of women walks the perimeter. Illegal loggers who are caught are brought to the village and punished under communal law. For four decades, this informal institution kept the forest standing.

In 2023, Kodalpalli's residents finally received legal recognition of their Community Forest Rights under the Forest Rights Act 2006 — a law that had existed for seventeen years before it reached them. Their village had organised itself, built capacity with the support of Vasundhara, the Bhubaneswar-based NGO that has spent decades working on tenure rights in Odisha. The legal title, when it arrived, did not create their relationship with the forest. It simply — finally — acknowledged it.

Across Odisha, communities are still waiting. Seventeen years since the FRA's passage, more than 90% of villages across India eligible for Community Forest Rights still lack them. In Odisha, when the state reviewed 148,870 rejected Individual Forest Rights claims, it rejected 1,40,504 of them again — a re-rejection rate of more than 94%. Many were re-rejected without the Gram Sabha's knowledge, during the pandemic, on procedural grounds that frequently had more to do with forest department resistance than legitimate dispute.

This is the story of social justice and tribal welfare in Odisha: not a story about rights that don't exist — they do — but about the extraordinary distance between rights on paper and rights in practice. It is a story about 62 Scheduled Tribes, 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, 93 Scheduled Castes, and over a century of systematic legal and economic dispossession being nominally addressed by laws that are implemented unevenly, weakly, and often not at all. And it is a story about what civil society organisations can actually do — specifically, in Odisha's districts — to reduce that distance.

Part One: The Landscape — Who Is Being Left Behind and Why

Odisha is home to the third-largest Scheduled Tribe population in India — 9.59 million people, constituting 22.85% of the state's total population. Among the 62 officially recognised tribes, 13 are designated as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups — the highest count of PVTGs in any Indian state. These 13 groups — the Birhor, Bondo,

Chuktia Bhunjia, Didayi, Dongria Kondh, Juang, Kharia, Kutia Kondh, Lanjia Saora, Lodha, Mankidia, Paudi Bhuyan, and Sora — are distinguished by pre-agricultural technology, extremely low health indices, and stagnant or declining population growth. They live in remote forested and hilly regions, speak languages that government systems do not accommodate, and have cultural and spiritual relationships with their ancestral territories that cannot be reduced to administrative categories.

The Scheduled Castes — 93 communities, constituting approximately 17% of the state — face a different but overlapping set of deprivations. Caste-based discrimination is not a relic of the past in Odisha. NCRB data for 2021 shows Odisha accounting for 4.5% of national atrocities against Scheduled Castes — 2,327 registered cases. For Scheduled Tribes, Odisha accounted for 7.6% of national cases — 676 registered atrocities in 2021, rising to 773 in 2022. These are registered cases, in a context where systematic under-reporting is documented: police reluctance to register FIRs under the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, victims' fear of retaliation, and geographical distance from police stations in the most affected areas all contribute to figures that experts consistently describe as significant undercounts of actual incidents.

The development indicators for these communities are stark. Among the 13 PVTG groups, health status varies but is consistently poor: a 2024 narrative review of PVTG health across 67 studies found that undernutrition, anaemia, and preventable infectious diseases remain pervasive, with limited access to healthcare compounding the burden of traditional health practices that do not always address these conditions effectively. The tribal districts of southern and western Odisha — Malkangiri, Koraput, Nabarangpur, Rayagada, Kandhamal — consistently appear at the bottom of every human development index ranking.

Displacement is both historical and ongoing. Mining and industrial development in Odisha — bauxite, iron ore, coal, aluminium smelting — has been predominantly

located in tribal areas. A striking and deeply uncomfortable statistic: Scheduled Tribes constitute approximately 8.6% of India's national population, but approximately 55% of the people displaced by development projects. In Odisha, the correlation is direct and documented. The districts with the greatest mineral wealth are, without exception, the districts with the highest tribal populations. The communities whose land contains the resources have the least power to shape the decisions about extracting them.

Manual scavenging — constitutionally abolished, legally prohibited, practically persistent — affects Dalit communities disproportionately. While Odisha's numbers are less catastrophic than states like Uttar Pradesh or Rajasthan, the practice persists in pockets, and the broader occupational caste discrimination it represents — forcing Scheduled Caste communities into the most degrading work at the lowest pay — is documented in urban and rural Odisha alike.

Disability intersects sharply with both tribal and Dalit status. The social model of disability — understanding disability as a product of barriers in the environment rather than a deficit in the individual — is largely absent from practice in tribal Odisha. Persons with disabilities in PVTG communities are among the most multiply excluded people in the state: excluded by geography, by caste or tribe, by poverty, and by physical or cognitive difference.

Part Two: The Legal Architecture and the Implementation Gap

Understanding what NGOs can do in this sector requires understanding what the law already provides — and where the gap between provision and practice lies.

The Forest Rights Act 2006: The Largest Unfulfilled Land Reform

The FRA is, in theory, the largest land reform in India's post-independence history. In Odisha alone, at least 25 million people in 35,254 villages stand to benefit from rights

recognition under the Act. The Act provides for three categories of rights: Individual Forest Rights (IFR) to land under cultivation by forest-dwelling families; Community Forest Rights (CFR) over areas traditionally managed by communities; and Habitat Rights for PVTGs over their customary territories.

The potential is documented. The implementation is deeply troubled.

The core problem is institutional: the FRA gives gram sabhas the authority to process and endorse claims, but the Forest Department — which has an institutional interest in maintaining forest land under its own jurisdiction — controls the information that determines whether claims are accepted or rejected. In Odisha, researchers found that asymmetric information flow, deficient coordination, undemocratic participation, and lack of transparency and accountability at various levels hinder FRA implementation. The forest bureaucracy has historically treated forest-dependent communities not as rights-holders but as encroachers, and that framing did not automatically change when the law changed.

The Supreme Court's 2019 order — which threatened eviction of communities whose FRA claims had been rejected — prompted Odisha to review 148,870 rejected IFR claims. Of these, 94% were re-rejected. Field documentation by Vasundhara and other organisations found that many re-rejections were procedurally flawed: claims were rejected without Gram Sabha knowledge, records were missing at every level of the system, and communities that had submitted extensive documentation found their claims rejected on grounds that ignored the evidence.

Odisha's 2023 Mo Jungle Jami Yojana — launched with an ambition to make Odisha the first FRA-compliant state in India — represents a genuine governmental commitment to address this. The scheme provides for 7.5 lakh tribal families in 32,000 villages across all 30 districts, and includes unsurveyed and "zero area" forest villages being converted into revenue villages, enabling access to water, roads, schools, and healthcare. The scheme funds district-level FRA cells and community mobilisers — one for every ten villages. Vasundhara is supporting 12,000 villages across 15 districts.

Where it has worked, the outcomes are documented and significant. In Kalahandi, where community forest rights were recognised from 2010 onwards, the Kalahandi Gram Sabha Mahasangha has collectivised trade in kendu leaves and bamboo, eliminating middlemen and generating revenues of over ₹15 crore in 2023 and 2024 — benefiting more than 7,000 households across 78 villages. In Pajilibhandha in Rayagada, 54 tribal families, primarily women, who had previously sold forest produce to middlemen at exploitative prices, formed a Forest Rights Committee in 2023 and began producing leaf plates and tamarind products; monthly incomes rose to ₹5,000–6,000 per member.

The lesson from Kalahandi: CFR recognition is not an end state. It is the beginning of a process in which communities need sustained support — organising, market linkage, governance capacity — to realise the economic potential of their rights. The right without the accompanying support produces little.

PESA — Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996

PESA is one of the most powerful and most neglected laws in India's constitutional arsenal. It extends panchayati raj to Fifth Schedule Tribal Areas with significant modifications: gram sabhas in PESA areas have powers over land acquisition, natural resource management, minor forest produce, and local dispute resolution that gram sabhas in non-tribal areas do not. It is, in effect, a constitutional recognition of tribal self-governance.

As of late 2021, 25 years after its passage, four states had still not enacted rules to implement PESA. Odisha had, but field evidence from PESA districts consistently shows low participation and widespread confusion about the actual power of gram sabhas — both among community members and among government officials who are supposed to respect that power.

The gap between PESA's constitutional provisions and ground-level governance is one of the most important spaces for NGO work in tribal Odisha. When gram sabhas understand their PESA rights — to be consulted before land acquisition, to control minor forest produce, to approve or reject projects affecting their territory — the balance of power in development decisions shifts meaningfully. Most do not know.

SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act: Strong Law, Weak Implementation

India's SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act provides criminal penalties for a specific set of acts of violence and humiliation against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes — burning their homes, compelling them to eat inedible substances, parading them naked, sexual violence, and others. The 2015 amendment strengthened provisions and removed the requirement for prior permission before registering FIRs.

The law is robust. The implementation is not. A 2024 factsheet on atrocities against Dalit women and girls documented a conviction acquittal rate at special courts of 61.7% for most categories of atrocity — meaning that even in the cases that reach court, less than 40% result in conviction. Charge sheet rates are low, trials are slow, and the broader justice system is permeated by the same caste hierarchies the Act is designed to address.

For NGOs, the legal advocacy role is specific: supporting survivors in accessing the FIR registration process; accompanying victims through the investigation and court process; building community knowledge of legal entitlements; and creating the documented evidence base that allows policy advocates to hold the state accountable for implementation failures.

Part Three: What the Global Evidence Says About Rights-Based Approaches

The international evidence on what works to advance rights and reduce discrimination for indigenous and marginalised communities is clearer on some questions than others.

Land Rights and Economic Outcomes: The Evidence Is Strong

A substantial body of evidence across Asia, Latin America, and Africa demonstrates that secure land tenure — the formalised legal recognition of communities' relationship to their land and resources — produces measurable improvements in livelihood outcomes, household income, and investment in land management.

For India's tribal communities specifically, the evidence from FRA implementation — where it has been done well — supports this relationship. Where CFR titles have been granted and communities have received support to manage and market forest produce, income diversification and food security have improved. The Kalahandi example above is not isolated: comparable evidence from Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and other states with active CFR implementation shows that community-controlled forest tenure, combined with support for sustainable harvesting and market access, can generate meaningful economic outcomes.

The pathway from right to outcome is not automatic. Research consistently shows that tenure security is necessary but not sufficient — communities also need governance capacity (understanding how to exercise gram sabha authority), technical knowledge (sustainable harvesting practices, value addition), and market access (breaking the middleman dominance that has historically captured most of the value from tribal forest produce). NGOs that work on rights recognition without attending to these downstream requirements are doing incomplete work.

Legal Empowerment: What Changes When People Know Their Rights

Bridgespan's analysis of pathways to greater social mobility for Dalit and Adivasi communities in India identified a consistent pattern: organisations that produce durable change combine legal empowerment with identity affirmation and leadership development. Pure legal services — providing courts access to people who couldn't otherwise afford it — are valuable. What is more powerful, the evidence suggests, is when communities develop the knowledge and confidence to assert their rights independently: to approach district offices, to file FIRs, to participate in gram sabhas, to challenge decisions that violate their entitlements.

This requires programmes that go beyond legal aid provision to legal literacy — building community members' understanding of the laws that protect them, the procedures that should be followed, and the rights they hold as citizens. Vernacular-language publications, community paralegal training, and sustained relationships between community volunteers and formal legal support organisations are the models that have demonstrated this kind of impact.

SLIC (South Lawyers Initiative for Coordination) and NCDHR's work across Indian states demonstrates that setting up local legal aid centres — not just providing services but building community capacity to use legal systems — produces more sustained outcomes than service provision alone. The community paralegal model, adapted extensively in sub-Saharan Africa for similar contexts, is directly applicable to Odisha's tribal districts.

Disability and Triple Exclusion: The Evidence Gap

The global evidence on disability inclusion in tribal and rural community development programmes in India is notably thin. What exists consistently shows that persons with disabilities in high-poverty rural settings are among the most excluded from both government schemes and NGO programmes — not because programmes explicitly exclude them, but because they are not designed with their access needs in mind.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provides a framework, but its application to PVTG communities in remote areas of Odisha is almost entirely uncharted territory. This is a genuine evidence gap. NGOs working on disability inclusion in tribal Odisha are, to a significant extent, building original practice without a substantial evidence base to draw from.

Part Four: Five Organisations Doing This Exceptionally Well

1. Vasundhara (Odisha)

Vasundhara has been the most consequential civil society organisation for forest rights implementation in Odisha. Founded in Bhubaneswar with a mandate to secure tenure rights for forest-dependent communities, Vasundhara is currently supporting 12,000 villages across 15 districts in the FRA claims process — the largest civil society operation on forest rights in the state.

Their model is specific and replicable: they do not file claims on behalf of communities; they train communities to file and defend their own claims. Village-level facilitators are trained in the legal provisions, the documentation requirements, and the gram sabha procedures. When claims are rejected, Vasundhara supports communities in understanding why and preparing re-submissions. When rejection is clearly procedurally improper, they support advocacy and legal challenge.

The Kodalpalli thengapalli case demonstrates what happens when Vasundhara-supported communities get their CFR titles: the existing community institution becomes legally empowered, women's forest stewardship role is formally recognised, and the community's bargaining position on development decisions affecting their territory improves fundamentally.

The transferable lesson: Forest rights work is documentation work as much as advocacy work. Communities that keep records — of their customary use, their

boundaries, their history — have dramatically better outcomes than communities that don't. NGOs in this space need to invest in the unglamorous work of gram sabha capacity building, documentation support, and the patient process of navigating government systems on behalf of communities that have every reason not to trust those systems.

2. Landesa (India and Global)

Landesa works on land rights as a development intervention across multiple countries. Their India programme focuses on women's land rights — specifically, the formal legal recognition of women's names on land titles — and their evidence base is among the strongest in the land rights field.

Their research demonstrates that women's formal land ownership is associated with: reduced intimate partner violence; greater household investment in children's education and nutrition; increased women's mobility and voice; and improved access to credit and financial services. Odisha has provisions for joint titling of agricultural land and mandatory inclusion of women's names on FRA titles. In practice, these provisions are inconsistently implemented. Landesa's approach — working with local government officials on land records, supporting community understanding of joint titling, and building women's awareness of their entitlement to land ownership — is directly applicable to Odisha's context.

The transferable lesson: Land titling policy exists. The gap is at the implementation level — where revenue officials process titles, where gram sabha decisions about land are made, where women are or are not included. NGOs can close that gap by working with both communities and officials, not just with communities.

3. Human Rights Law Network (HRLN) — India

HRLN is India's largest network of public interest lawyers working on Dalit and Adivasi rights. They combine litigation — filing PILs and individual cases — with community legal literacy work and paralegal training.

Their model is relevant to Odisha specifically for its approach to SC/ST PoA Act cases: they train community paralegals in how to document atrocities, how to support survivors through FIR registration (which is frequently denied or delayed by police), and how to navigate the trial process in Special Courts. This is not legal charity — it is legal empowerment, designed to reduce communities' dependence on NGO lawyers over time.

The HRLN approach also includes what they call "evidence-based advocacy" — systematically compiling case documentation to produce evidence of systemic failure that can be presented in court or to oversight bodies, rather than treating each case as an isolated incident.

The transferable lesson: Individual legal cases and systemic advocacy are complementary, not alternatives. An organisation that only litigates individual cases addresses symptoms; one that also uses those cases to build evidence of systemic failure can drive institutional change. For Odisha's social justice sector, building that documentation capacity — particularly around FRA implementation failures and PoA Act enforcement — is high-value work.

4. Agramee (Odisha)

Agramee has worked in Odisha's KBK region — Kalahandi, Bolangir, Koraput — for over three decades. Their model is explicitly rights-based: they do not deliver services to communities; they build communities' capacity to claim their entitlements from the state.

Their approach to PESA implementation is particularly instructive. In PESA-covered districts, Agramee works with gram sabhas to understand and exercise their powers — on mining proposals, on land acquisition, on forest produce management. They have documented cases where gram sabhas, once trained in PESA rights, have effectively halted or modified project proposals that would have displaced community members without adequate compensation. This is not always comfortable work — it

places NGOs in tension with government and corporate interests. But it is constitutionally grounded, and the communities it serves know the difference between an organisation that advocates for their rights and one that helps them accept displacement gracefully.

The transferable lesson: PESA-backed gram sabha authority is constitutionally robust when exercised correctly. An NGO that invests in helping communities understand and use that authority is doing something that no government programme can do — because the authority being exercised is specifically against government decisions that violate community rights.

5. NCDHR — National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights

The NCDHR coordinates over 500 Dalit and Adivasi civil society organisations across India. Their model — Dalit Human Rights Monitoring — combines systematic fact-finding, legal aid, and documentation with national advocacy. In 2023, NCDHR's affiliate NDMJ conducted 234 fact-finding missions, provided legal aid to survivors, and supported cases through to court hearings.

Their monitoring approach is specifically relevant to Odisha: they track atrocities systematically by district, cross-referencing NCRB data with community-reported incidents to produce a more accurate picture of the prevalence of caste violence than official statistics alone. This kind of parallel evidence generation — comparing what is reported to what is happening — is essential for any credible advocacy on PoA Act implementation.

The transferable lesson: Human rights monitoring is a distinct skill set that produces a distinct type of impact. Organisations that document violations systematically — rather than handling individual cases in isolation — build the evidence base that enables both legal challenge and policy advocacy. In Odisha's context, where both tribal rights violations and Dalit atrocities are under-documented, this work is foundational.

Part Five: The Odisha Adaptation — What Transfers, What Doesn't, What Must Be Built

What Transfers Directly

Community legal literacy in vernacular languages transfers directly from HRLN's national model and from Landesa's work on land rights. Odisha has documented models — from Agramee, from Vasundhara, from CYSD — of effective vernacular-language legal awareness across tribal communities. The challenge is scale: these models work in the communities where specific organisations have invested sustained relationships, but they have not reached the majority of communities who need them.

The community mobiliser model for FRA — as piloted through Mo Jungle Jami Yojana, with Vasundhara and other NGOs supporting — is a directly transferable approach that is now embedded in Odisha's government programme. NGOs that can work as implementation partners to the MJJY scheme, providing the community-level support that government can fund but not directly deliver, have a clearly defined and high-value role.

Gram sabha capacity building on PESA transfers directly from Agramee's three decades of work in the KBK region. The constitutional provisions are the same across PESA-covered districts; the practice of building gram sabha understanding of those provisions is replicable by any organisation with the relationship-building patience to do it.

Fact-finding and documentation — the NCDHR model of systematic human rights monitoring — transfers directly to Odisha's context. The infrastructure exists: districts have PoA Act records, courts have case data, communities experience violence that is under-reported. An organisation that systematically tracks and documents the gap between legal entitlement and actual experience provides a service that no government system can provide about itself.

What Requires Significant Adaptation

Land titling approaches designed for non-tribal contexts require fundamental adaptation for Odisha's tribal communities, where customary land use patterns, joint family structures, and the specific provisions of the Fifth Schedule create a legal environment quite different from the settings in which Landesa's India programme primarily operates. The principles transfer; the procedures need careful redesign.

Disability inclusion programming designed for urban or non-tribal contexts — focused on assistive devices, inclusive education in urban schools, employment in the formal sector — requires complete rethinking for PVTG communities in remote forest areas. What does disability support look like when the community is three hours from the nearest paved road? When the concept of disability is understood through a cultural framework that does not map onto medical classification? When the government scheme designed to help requires a disability certificate that requires a government hospital visit? The answers need to be built from scratch, with communities, not imported from elsewhere.

Legal aid at scale in tribal areas faces a structural barrier that no programme design fully solves: there are very few lawyers from tribal or Dalit communities practising in the districts where legal aid is most needed, and the legal system itself operates in languages and systems that are often inaccessible to PVTG communities. Bridging this gap requires not just paralegal training — which helps — but sustained investment in training lawyers from tribal communities and building legal aid infrastructure that can operate in conditions of extreme geographic isolation.

What Must Be Built

A functioning CFR governance system in Odisha — not just the recognition of rights, but the institutional infrastructure that makes those rights economically and environmentally meaningful — does not yet exist at scale. Individual districts have examples: Kalahandi's Mahasangha is exceptional. But a state-wide system in which recognised CFR gram sabhas have the governance knowledge, market linkage, and

institutional support to actually manage their forests sustainably and benefit economically from them is a multi-decade project that is just beginning.

Systematic monitoring of displacement and rehabilitation in Odisha's mining-affected tribal districts is essentially absent. The data on how many communities have been displaced by mining and industrial projects in Odisha, and what happened to them — whether rehabilitation was provided, whether it was adequate, whether affected communities received the legal protections they were entitled to — is not available in any comprehensive form. Building this evidence base is foundational to any serious policy advocacy on tribal displacement.

A community legal support network that reaches PVTG communities — specifically, the 13 most vulnerable groups in Odisha whose isolation, language, and cultural specificity make standard legal literacy approaches inapplicable — does not exist and needs to be designed. It would require long-term investment in relationships within specific PVTG communities, legal advocates fluent in relevant languages and cultural contexts, and a model of support that respects these communities' autonomy and decision-making capacity while building their knowledge of legal protections.

Part Six: Government Scheme Mapping

Forest Rights Act 2006 (Central): Provides IFR, CFR, and Habitat Rights to forest-dwelling ST and OTF communities. Implemented through gram sabhas, Sub-Divisional Level Committees, and District Level Committees. NGO role: community mobilisation, documentation support, gram sabha training, claim preparation, advocacy on rejected claims.

Mo Jungle Jami Yojana (Odisha, 2023): State scheme to achieve full FRA compliance for 7.5 lakh families in 32,000 villages. Funds district FRA cells, community mobilisers, and NGO support. NGO role: direct implementation partner, community mobiliser support, documentation and training.

PESA (Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996: Grants gram sabhas in Fifth Schedule areas enhanced powers over land, resources, and local governance. NGO role: gram sabha training on PESA rights, support for exercising PESA powers in development decisions, documentation of violations.

SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989 (amended 2015): Criminal penalties for specific atrocities against SCs and STs. Supported by Scheduled Castes and Tribes Welfare Department in Odisha. NGO role: community awareness, FIR registration support, survivor accompaniment, systematic monitoring.

PM-JANMAN (Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan): Central government's flagship programme for PVTGs — housing, connectivity, mobile medical units, drinking water, education, livelihoods. Launched 2023. NGO role: supporting community awareness and enrolment, monitoring actual delivery, documenting gaps.

PVTG Micro Projects (Odisha): 17 Micro Project Agencies specifically for Odisha's 13 PVTGs — providing healthcare, education, livelihood support. NGO role: complementing micro project work with community-level rights awareness and scheme linkage.

Disability Schemes (NSAP, ADIP, RPWD Act): National Social Assistance Programme includes disability pension; ADIP provides assistive devices; Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 provides legal framework. NGO role: identification and enrolment of persons with disabilities in PVTG communities, support for disability certification process, monitoring of scheme delivery.

MGNREGS in Tribal Areas: As an entitlement (not charity) programme, MGNREGS is particularly important in tribal districts where alternative employment is scarce. Gram sabhas in PESA areas have enhanced powers over MGNREGS worksite selection and payment. NGO role: awareness of entitlement, support for gram sabha oversight, monitoring of wage payments and work quality.

Part Seven: Further Reading

Forest Rights and Tenure:

- *Can India's Forest Rights Act Deliver?* — Mongabay (2023): The clearest available narrative of FRA implementation in Odisha, anchored in the Kodalpalli thengapalli case. Accessible and specific.
- *Promise and Performance of the Forest Rights Act in Odisha* — Rights and Resources Initiative / Vasundhara (2016): The most systematic assessment of FRA potential and implementation gaps in Odisha. Essential reading for anyone designing CFR work.
- *Forest Rights Act Implementation in Odisha: Redressing Historical Injustices* — Satpathy, SAGE (2017): Academic analysis of implementation challenges using field evidence from Mayurbhanj district.

Dalit and Tribal Rights:

- *Pathways to Greater Social Mobility for India's Dalit and Adivasi Communities* — Bridgespan (2022): The most useful analysis for NGO programme designers of what approaches produce durable social mobility outcomes. Directly applicable to Odisha.
- *Everyday Atrocity: Mapping the Normalisation of Violence Against Dalits and Adivasis* — Citizens for Justice and Peace (2025): Current, documented, and sobering account of the persistence of caste violence in India.

PESA and Tribal Governance:

- *Fifth Schedule and PESA: Tribal Governance in India* — Ministry of Panchayati Raj / multiple sources: The legal framework document. Read alongside field documentation to understand the gap between provision and practice.

Health and PVTG:

- *Health Status of PVTGs of Odisha: A Narrative Review* — Journal of Health, Population and Nutrition (2024): The most comprehensive recent review of health status across all 13 of Odisha's PVTGs. Establishes the baseline evidence on which any health-linked rights programme should be built.
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A Final Note: On Who This Work Is For

Social justice work in Odisha's tribal and Dalit communities operates in a space where the language of development — beneficiaries, interventions, outcomes — can obscure the more fundamental dynamic: these are communities whose rights have been systematically violated by the state, and whose claims to justice are constitutionally grounded.

This framing matters for how NGOs approach their work. The question is not "what can we do for these communities?" but "what can we do to support these communities in claiming what is already theirs?" The distinction produces different programmes. It produces different relationships. And it produces, the evidence suggests, more durable outcomes — because communities that have exercised rights are more resilient than communities that have received services.

For CSR managers reading this: the most effective investment in this sector is not in service delivery. It is in the legal empowerment, documentation support, and institutional capacity work that NGOs like Vasundhara and Agramee do — work that takes years, is hard to photograph, and produces outcomes that a photogenic school inauguration does not. The communities who need this work most are the ones whose rights are most systematically violated. The organisations doing it most effectively are the ones who have stayed long enough to be trusted.

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Related Knowledge Commons Content:

- Practice Note: Community Forest Rights — From Title to Livelihood
- Practice Note: PESA Implementation — What Gram Sabhas Can Actually Do
- Practice Note: SC/ST PoA Act — Supporting Survivors Through the Justice System
- Org Spotlight: Vasundhara — Forest Tenure Rights in Odisha
- Org Spotlight: Agramee — Rights-Based Development in KBK
- Sector Primer: Women Empowerment (Sector 02) — Intersection with tribal women's rights
- Sector Primer: Agriculture & Markets (Sector 09) — Minor forest produce as livelihood

Government Schemes Referenced:

- Forest Rights Act 2006
- Mo Jungle Jami Yojana (Odisha 2023)
- PESA Act 1996
- SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989/2015
- PM-JANMAN
- PVTG Micro Projects
- MGNREGS in Tribal Areas
- Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016