

Recognition of Prior Learning — Certifying What Tribal Communities Already Know

Recognition of Prior Learning is a government programme under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), implemented by the National Skill Development Corporation through Sector Skill Councils and their accredited assessment agencies.

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B practice-note Skill Development

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What it is: An assessment-based certification process that evaluates a person's existing skills against National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF) standards, and issues a PMKVY certificate to those who meet the standard. The certificate is the same qualification as one issued after completing a full PMKVY training course.

What it is not: Training. RPL does not require workers to sit through weeks of training in skills they already have. The process involves: an orientation session (typically one day) explaining the assessment criteria and process; a brief upskilling module (typically 2–3 days) covering gaps and safety standards; and a skills assessment conducted by a certified assessor.

Who it is for: Any person aged 18–45 with an Aadhaar card who has prior learning or work experience in a recognised trade. The most relevant categories for Odisha's tribal communities:

- Handloom weavers (Sambalpuri, Kotpad, Bomkai — covered under the Handloom, Wool, Silk and Handicrafts Sector Skill Council)
- Handicraft artisans (Pattachitra, Dhokra casting, stone carving, Tarakasi silver filigree — covered under the same SSC)
- Agricultural workers (crop cultivation, soil preparation, irrigation management — covered under the Agriculture Sector Skill Council)
- Construction workers (masonry, carpentry, plumbing, electrical work — covered under Construction SSC)
- Food processing workers (traditional millet processing, pickle making, dried fish processing — covered under Food Processing SSC)
- Forest produce collectors and processors (NTFPs, bamboo work — partially covered under relevant SSCs)

The full list of trades under each SSC is available on the NSDC website (skillindiadigital.gov.in).

Why RPL Fits Tribal Communities Better Than Standard Training

Standard PMKVY training has four characteristics that systematically disadvantage tribal workers in remote areas:

Duration: PMKVY courses run from 150 to 300 hours, typically over 2–3 months. For agricultural labourers, NTFP collectors, and artisans whose livelihoods are seasonal, disappearing for 2–3 months is economically catastrophic. RPL's 3–5 day process is compatible with working life.

Location: Training centres are in block headquarters or district towns. Travel and accommodation costs are prohibitive for workers in remote hamlets. RPL can be conducted at mobile assessment camps that come to the community — the "RPL through Camps" mode specifically targets traditional and artisan clusters.

Language: PMKVY training is predominantly delivered in Odia or Hindi. For tribal workers whose primary language is Gondi, Kharia, or Santali, training in a second language produces lower retention and lower certification rates. RPL assessment, when conducted by assessors familiar with the trade, can be demonstrated rather than verbally explained — a significant advantage for workers with limited Odia proficiency.

Skills already held: The most fundamental mismatch: standard training requires workers to learn skills they already have, wasting their time and the programme's resources. RPL starts from what workers know.

The RPL Process: What Actually Happens

Phase 1: Identification and mobilisation (2–4 weeks before assessment)

The NGO or community organisation identifies candidates and connects them with an accredited RPL assessment agency or Training Partner. This connection is the most critical facilitation step — most tribal artisans and agricultural workers have no knowledge of RPL's existence, and even if they do, the process of finding and contacting an accredited assessment agency is inaccessible.

How to find accredited agencies: The NSDC's Skill India Digital platform (skillindiadigital.gov.in) lists accredited Training Partners and Assessment Agencies by state and sector. For Odisha, the Odisha Skill Development Authority (OSDA) maintains a state-level list. Contact the relevant Sector Skill Council directly — for handloom and handicrafts, the HWSSC

(Handloom, Wool, Silk and Handicrafts SSC); for agriculture, the ASCI (Agriculture Skill Council of India).

The mobilisation conversation: Be honest about what RPL offers and doesn't offer. It offers a nationally recognised certificate in a trade they already practice. It offers potential income improvement if they are accessing markets where certification matters (formal buyers, government procurement, export channels). It does not guarantee a job. It does not change the structure of the informal market they are currently selling into. For artisans in remote areas, the immediate income benefit may be modest — the certificate's value scales with market access.

Documentation to prepare: Each candidate needs: Aadhaar card (mandatory); a bank account in their name (for the certification incentive payment — currently ₹500 per certified candidate deposited directly to the bank account); proof of work experience (if available — not mandatory but supports the assessment). Many tribal workers will not have formal proof of experience. The assessment itself is the demonstration.

Phase 2: Bridge training and orientation (1–3 days)

The RPL process includes a mandatory bridge training module — a short (8–16 hour) upskilling session that covers: safety standards relevant to the trade; quality standards against which the assessment will be conducted; and any technical gaps identified during the pre-assessment interaction.

For tribal artisans: The bridge training for Pattachitra painters, Dhokra casters, or Sambalpuri weavers should be conducted by trainers who understand the traditional form — not generic trainers reading from a national curriculum. The risk is that bridge training becomes a session where external trainers tell master artisans how their craft "should" be done, which is both disrespectful and counterproductive. Advocate with the assessment agency for trainers with sector-specific knowledge, or for community master artisans to co-facilitate the bridge training.

Language: Bridge training materials are often in Odia or English. Request vernacular-language materials from the SSC, or provide community volunteers as interpreters. The Jaipur Rugs Foundation's RPL work with carpet weavers demonstrated that when bridge training was conducted in the local language and by culturally familiar trainers, certification rates significantly improved.

Phase 3: Skills assessment (half day)

A certified assessor — accredited by the SSC — conducts the assessment. For trade skills, this is primarily practical: the candidate demonstrates the skill being assessed, and the assessor evaluates against the NSQF standard criteria.

For handloom weaving: the assessor will evaluate yarn selection, loom setup, weaving technique, pattern execution, and quality finishing. For agricultural work: field operations, tool

use, crop identification, soil preparation. The assessment is pass/fail — candidates who meet the standard receive a Grade A, B, or C certificate; those who don't meet the standard receive a participation mark sheet but no certification.

Key issue: Assessors from outside the community may be unfamiliar with the specific techniques and quality markers of traditional tribal craft forms. A Pattachitra assessor who does not know the difference between ritual Pattachitra and tourist Pattachitra may misapply standardised quality criteria. Advocate for assessors with trade-specific knowledge, and document any cases where assessment criteria appear to misrepresent traditional quality standards. This documentation is valuable for SSC feedback.

Phase 4: Certification and linkage

Successful candidates receive: PMKVY certificate (physical and digital, accessible through the DigiLocker platform); incentive payment of ₹500 deposited to their bank account; and in principle, access to NSDC's Skill India Digital platform where certified workers can create profiles visible to employers and buyers.

The certificate is the beginning, not the end of the NGO's facilitation role. A certificate sitting in a folder in a tribal hamlet produces no income. The income gain documented in research (19% premium) accrues when the certificate is used — when the artisan presents it to a premium buyer, when the agricultural worker uses it to apply for a government scheme position, when the food processor uses it to access a formal supply chain.

Market linkage after RPL: For artisans specifically, the certificate's value is realised through market access. AIACA's Craftmark certification, TRIFED's Tribes India retail network, and e-commerce platforms like the Government e-Marketplace (GeM) all give preference to or specifically accommodate certified artisans. Help RPL-certified artisans access these channels. This is the livelihoods work that makes RPL worthwhile.

The Limitations to Communicate Honestly

RPL certification does not: change the underlying market structure for NTFP and agricultural produce; guarantee employment in the formal sector; provide the same quality of skills assessment and feedback as a full training course; or address the economic barriers (working capital, equipment, market access) that limit artisan incomes.

For workers in deep informal markets — Bonda artisans selling siali leaf plates to the local trader, Juang forest collectors selling mahua to the village contractor — RPL certification changes nothing immediately. The market that determines their income doesn't know or care about NSQF certificates.

RPL's value is highest for workers who are one step away from a market that would reward formal credentials: the weaver who has a potential buyer in an urban craft market; the agricultural worker applying for a government farmer scheme position; the food processor approaching an institutional buyer who requires supplier certification.

Matching RPL facilitation to workers for whom the certificate has proximate market value is the NGO's most important judgement call in programme design.

Related Knowledge Commons content: Skill Development Sector Primer (Sector 06) · Practice Note: Demand-Driven Skill Training · Practice Note: Artisan Market Development — Provenance, Certification, Premium Access

Evidence Grade: B — Multi-study. This Practice Note draws on NSDC's RPL programme documentation, AIF's RPL analysis, the Skill India RPL PIB documentation (2022), and field evidence from Jaipur Rugs Foundation's artisan RPL implementation. Last reviewed: April 2026.

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