

Documenting the Path to Empowerment: The Journey of Haridahi Village in Securing Land Rights and Access to Government Schemes



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**Place: Haridahi village
(Bisoil Block)**

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Abstract

In the forest villages of Kunjal Dahi and Haridahi, local communities faced significant challenges in accessing government welfare schemes due to their classification as forest villages. This designation excluded them from essential services such as healthcare, education, and transportation. Recognizing this injustice, Tehsil and district coordinators took proactive steps to mobilize the villagers and advocate for their rights. Many community members were initially unaware of their legal entitlements, so they were educated about land rights and the Forest Rights Act. Through a series of collective actions, including mapping their village boundaries, identifying resource use, and forming a Forest Rights Committee (FRC), the villagers successfully engaged with authorities. Their determined efforts resulted in a change in their classification from forest villages to recognized revenue forest land.

This transformative process not only secured access to government schemes but also empowered the community, fostering leadership and solidarity. The success of Kunjal Dahi and Haridahi set a precedent for other marginalized forest villages seeking to reclaim their rights.





Introduction

In the remote village of Haridahi, a community largely unaware of their legal rights and the government schemes available to them, life was marked by poverty and marginalization. With limited access to essential services, the villagers were isolated from vital opportunities. This situation continued for years, compounded by the lack of recognition of their village boundaries and the absence of a community governance structure. Despite receiving some support from Duarasuni, a neighboring revenue village, Haridahi continued to struggle to meet its basic needs. However, the transformative journey towards empowerment began with a dedicated effort from community volunteers, district coordinators, and local leaders, ultimately enabling the villagers to secure their land rights and claim rightful access to various government schemes.

This document explores the steps taken by the villagers of Haridahi, their challenges, successes, and the outcomes of their journey toward securing their rights and improving their living conditions.

Need for Forest Rights Act, 2006

The Tribals have a more intimate relationship with the forests and have been dependent on forests for food, shelter, etc, for many centuries. But they have been progressively cut off from forests since the British rule. The situation did not change significantly even after the Independence. The adverse conditions of these forest dwellers were non-recognition of their ancestral rights and resultant displacement due to many developmental projects. To rectify these issues and re-recognize their right over forests, the Forest Rights Act 2006 was enacted. It recognizes the symbiotic relationship between forests and forest-dwellers and seeks to protect their rights while also ensuring the conservation of forests.



Forest Rights Act 2006:

The Forest Rights Act, 2006 also known as the Schedule Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act, 2006, is a landmark piece of legislation in India, which seeks to address the historical injustice faced by forest-dwelling communities by recognizing their rights over the land and resources they have been dependent on for generations. The Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA 2006) represents a significant step toward securing the livelihoods of millions of India's forest-dwelling tribes and other traditional forest dwellers along with ensuring sustainable development.

Objectives of Forest Rights Act, 2006

- To empower and strengthen the local self-governance
- To address the livelihood security of the people, leading to poverty alleviation and pro-poor growth
- To address the issues of conservation and management of natural resources and conservation governance in India.

Section 3.1. (h) of the Act mentions that

Settlement and conversion of all villages, old habitation, unsurveyed villages, and other villages in forests, whether recorded, notified, or not into revenue villages;

Rule 12B.(5) mentions that

Conversion of forest villages, unrecorded settlement under clause (h) of section 3 shall include the actual land-use of the village, including lands required for current or future community, like, schools, health facilities, and public spaces.

Rules 2A provides identification of hamlets or settlements and the process of their consolidation.

Village History

Haridahi is a small village situated in the Bisoi block, characterized by its close-knit community of 21 households belonging to the Santhal ethnic group. This village, rich in culture and tradition, has undergone significant transformations over the years, largely influenced by the region's environmental changes and socio-economic developments.

Historically, the ancestors of the Santhal people who now call Haridahi home were forest dwellers, living in harmony with the lush landscapes surrounding them. They relied on the forest for their livelihood, gathering fruits, hunting, and collecting medicinal herbs. However, as time progressed, extensive deforestation began to take its toll. The vast forests that once provided sustenance and shelter gradually diminished, compelling the community to seek new means of survival. In search of a more sustainable lifestyle, the villagers moved towards a flatter, more arable land where they could engage in agriculture. This transition was not only a change of location; it represented a profound shift in their way of life. The discovery of this new land was crucial, and in honor of an ancestor who first recognized its potential, they named the village Haridahi in his name. The name itself carries the weight of their heritage, symbolizing resilience and the enduring connection to their roots. The village is not just a collection of homes; it is a hub of cultural and spiritual significance. At one end of Haridahi lies a Jahira, a sacred site where the community comes together to worship and perform traditional rituals.

This space serves as a focal point for their cultural identity, reinforcing the bonds among villagers and providing a sense of continuity in their spiritual practices. To the east of Haridahi, Muchuri Dunguri rises, adding to the natural beauty and significance of the landscape. This site is important for various community activities and gatherings, further enhancing the social fabric of the village. On the northern side, the villagers have established their cremation ground, reflecting the community's deep respect for their traditions and the cycle of life and death.

The residents of Haridahi received formal land ownership rights in 2021. This development marked a turning point, as it not only provided them with security and recognition but also empowered them to make long-term plans for their future. With legal ownership, the villagers can now invest in their homes and agricultural practices, laying the groundwork for sustainable development and prosperity.

Over the years, the villagers have actively engaged with various government schemes and initiatives, many of which have been facilitated through the neighboring Revenue village of Duarshuni. These programs have played a crucial role in improving the villagers' living conditions and providing access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities that were previously out of reach. The government has released a list of 589 villages under Section 3(1)(h) that designates rights for settlements. This includes converting all surveyed villages, old unsurveyed habitations, and other villages with records, whether notified or not, into revenue villages. Unfortunately, Haridahi village is not included in this list. However, the tahsil has identified both Haridahi and Kunjaldahi as villages classified under forest villages.



HARIDAH VILLAGE

01.

Notification for Claim Filing

- Step 1.1: The Collector of the district is tasked with initiating steps to enable the inhabitants of forest villages, un-surveyed villages, or forest tracts to file their claims for conversion into revenue villages. This process ensures that the villagers are aware of the opportunity and have the means to submit their claims.
- Step 1.2: The Collector issues a general notice that informs the inhabitants of the forest villages, un-surveyed villages, and forest tracts about the opportunity to file their claims for conversion into revenue villages. This notice is key to initiating the legal process for conversion.
- Step 1.3: The notice is published through:
 - Beat of the drum in the locality: This traditional method ensures that even those who cannot read or write are informed.
 - Affixing a copy of the notice in a prominent place in the village, with the presence of at least two village members, to ensure its visibility and acknowledgment.
- Step 1.4: A copy of the notice is also sent to relevant authorities:
 - Tahasil Office: This ensures that the local revenue authorities are notified.
 - Revenue Inspector (RI) Office: To involve local revenue officials in the process.
 - Gram Panchayat (GP): The local village governing body is kept informed.
 - Forest Rights Committee (FRC): Involved as they play a key role in the process.
- Step 1.5: The notice is also sent to the District Forest Officer (DFO) to ensure that the forest department is aware of the proceedings.
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02.

Awareness Campaign

- Step 2.1: The Revenue Inspector (RI) visits the village or tract to personally inform the inhabitants about their right to file a claim for conversion into a revenue village. This visit helps clarify any doubts and ensure that everyone is aware of the process.

- Step 2.2: District coordinators work with volunteers to form a Forest Rights Committee (FRC), ensuring that one-third of the committee members are women, fostering inclusivity in decision-making.
- Step 2.3: A meeting is organized, where the RI meets with villagers, FRC members, and local foresters. This meeting, attended by district coordinators, aims to explain the claim process and answer any questions.
- Step 2.4: The Collector ensures that all inhabitants are fully informed and enabled to file their claims. This step is essential for ensuring that no one is excluded from the process due to lack of information.

03.

Filing of Claim Application

- Step 3.1: The Gram Sabha (village council) files the claim for conversion collectively. This emphasizes the importance of community involvement and ensures that the claim reflects the collective will of the village.
- Step 3.2: The Gram Sabha elects a Forest Rights Committee (FRC), which will play a crucial role in assisting with the claim submission. If the number of adult residents is less than the minimum required for a full FRC, a smaller FRC can be formed to represent the village.
- Step 3.3: In small habitations near a revenue village, the villagers can pass a resolution to request inclusion in the larger village after conversion. This option provides flexibility for communities that wish to merge with neighboring revenue villages.

04.

Details in the Claim Application

- Step 4.1: The Gram Sabha/FRC must define the boundaries of the village and create a detailed map showing the present land use of the village. This map will serve as a key document in determining the land that will be included in the revenue village.
- Step 4.2: The map must include the following land uses and areas:
 - Cultivable land: Areas used for agriculture.
 - Homestead lands/buildings: Residential areas and buildings within the village.
 - Forests: Forested areas used by the community.

- Water bodies: Rivers, ponds, or lakes within the village.
- Common lands: Areas used for communal purposes, such as grazing land and burial grounds.
- Community buildings: Such as schools, religious places, health centers, and playgrounds.
- Community forest resources: Areas where community forest rights are exercised.
- Step 4.3: The Tahasildar (local revenue official) and Revenue Inspector (RI) assist the FRC in preparing the map, ensuring its accuracy and compliance with legal requirements.
- Step 4.4: The Gram Sabha must approve the map and submit it, along with a resolution for conversion into a revenue village, to the Sub-Divisional Level Committee (SDLC) for further processing.

05.

Submission of Claim at SDLC

- Step 5.1: The Gram Sabha submits the following documents:
 - The approved map showing the land-use details.
- Step 6.2: The DLC makes the necessary recommendations to recognize the settlement's right to conversion into a revenue village, ensuring that all legal requirements are met.
- Step 6.3: Within two weeks of the DLC's decision, the Collector takes necessary steps to declare the settlement as a revenue village and begin the process of settling land rights under revenue laws.
 - Step 5.2: If the claim is incomplete, it is not rejected outright but sent back to the Gram Sabha with specific instructions on the additional information required.
 - Step 5.3: The Sub-Divisional Level Committee (SDLC) reviews the submitted documents, including the claim, map, and list of residents. The SDLC then forwards their recommendation to the District Level Committee (DLC).

06.

District Level Committee (DLC) Review

- Step 6.1: The District Level Committee (DLC) reviews the submitted claim, map, and recommendations from the SDLC.
- Step 6.2: The DLC makes the necessary recommendations to recognize the settlement's right to conversion into a revenue village, ensuring that all legal requirements are met.

- Step 6.3: Within two weeks of the DLC's decision, the Collector takes necessary steps to declare the settlement as a revenue village and begin the process of settling land rights under revenue laws.

07.

Declaration of Revenue Village

- Step 7.1: The Collector prepares the case record for the declaration of the revenue village, which includes:
 - Map of the village.
 - List of inhabitants.
 - List of claimants.
 - Gram Sabha resolution.
 - Approval from the DLC.
- Step 7.3: The Collector submits the case record to the District Level Revenue Settlement (DL&RS) for the declaration of the village as a revenue village.
- Step 7.4: The Board of Revenue reviews the case record and, if satisfied, issues the declaration of the revenue village. This declaration is then sent to the government for further processing.
- Step 7.5: The Board of Revenue sends a notification to the government for further steps, ensuring the legal formalization of the village as a revenue village.

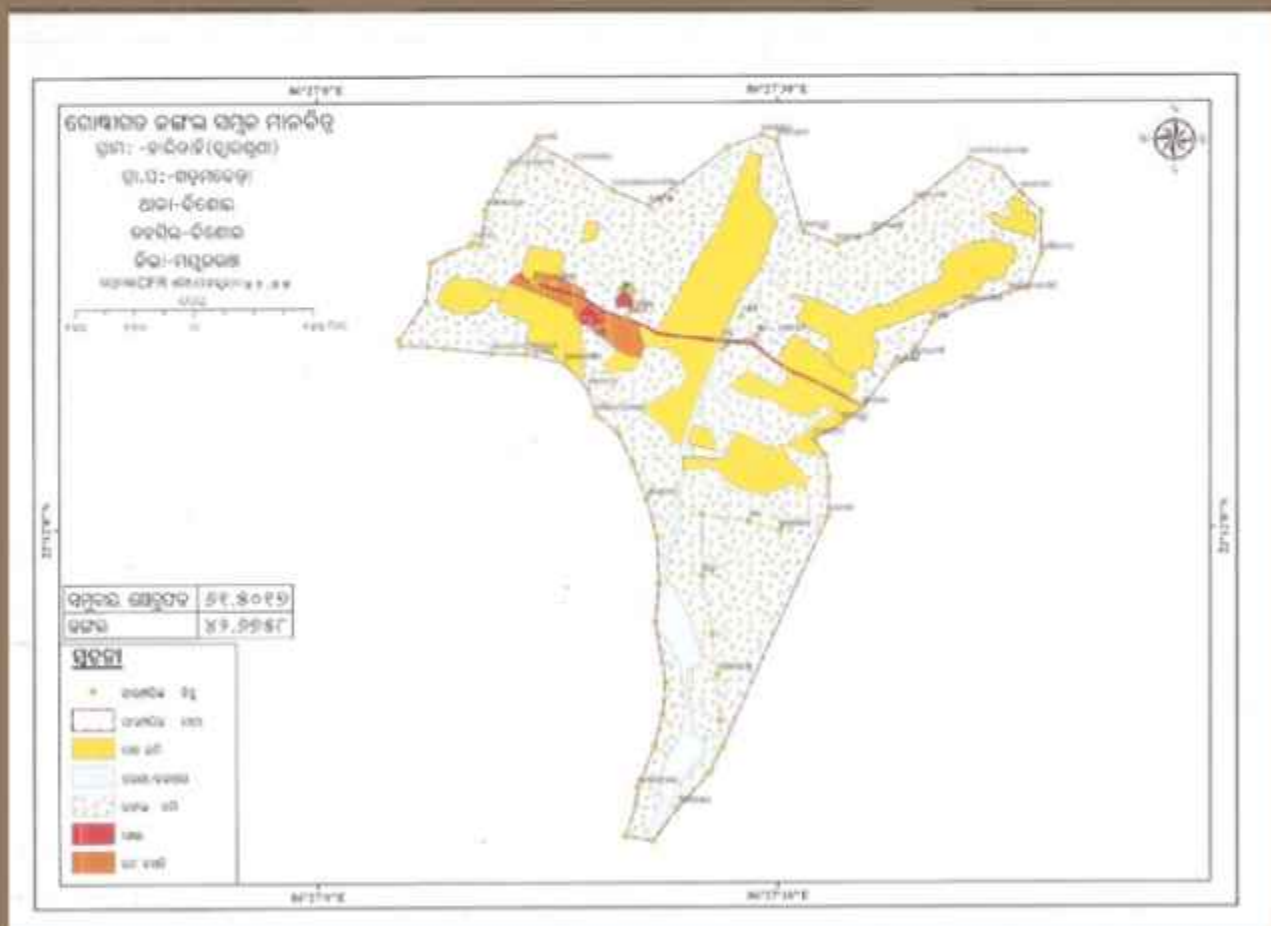
08.

Survey and Record of Rights

- Step 8.1: Once the village is declared a revenue village, the usual survey process is initiated, where the land is mapped and rights are recorded according to the applicable laws.
- Step 8.2: This process includes:
 - Land survey to establish ownership and boundaries.
 - Preparation of the record of rights to document the legal ownership and rights of the villagers.
 - Publication of the final record of rights under the OS&S Act, 1958 or OSS&S Act, 2012, ensuring that the land rights are officially recognized and settled for the new revenue village.

Problem Identification: The fight for revenue village

The villagers of Haridahi faced multiple challenges, primarily restricted by their lack of knowledge about their land rights and available government schemes. This ignorance contributed significantly to their marginalization, preventing them from accessing crucial services and benefits. Moreover, the absence of a clearly defined boundary for their village and the lack of an organized community governance structure worsened their situation. Without official recognition, the villagers were unable to participate fully in the schemes that could have alleviated their poverty.



01 Community Engagement and Initial Steps

The first significant step in addressing these issues involved the tehsil identification of the villages and a group of dedicated volunteers, alongside district coordinators, initiated this process by engaging in detailed discussions with the village sarpanch (village head) and the villagers. These discussions were vital in understanding the core issues faced by the community. The volunteers focused on educating the villagers about the importance of raising their voices and taking collective action to secure their rights.

A key component of this process was the explanation of how government schemes worked and how the villagers could benefit from them if they were properly documented. The volunteers guided the villagers to write detailed notes about their village, including crucial information such as the number of households, the extent of land cultivated, and other essential data. This documentation served as the foundation for the subsequent steps in securing their land rights and accessing government services.

02 Awareness Program and Legal Understanding

In parallel with the community mobilization, an extensive awareness program was conducted to educate the villagers about their legal rights, specifically focusing on the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and the process of obtaining Community Forest Rights (CFR). The FRA, enacted to recognize and vest the forest rights of forest-dwelling communities, provided a framework for the villagers to assert their rights to the land they had traditionally used.



The legal provisions under the FRA empowered the villagers to claim ownership of forest land and resources, allowing them to participate in the management and utilization of these resources. The awareness program also included educating the community about the importance of having proper documentation, understanding the role of the Forest Rights Committee (FRC), and the procedures required to submit their claims to the government. This knowledge proved crucial in preparing the villagers for the advocacy and documentation efforts that would follow.

03 Advocacy and Documentation



Armed with knowledge of their rights, the next step was to formalize their claims through advocacy and documentation. A letter was drafted detailing the problems faced by the villagers and requesting intervention from the authorities. The letter, signed by all members of the Gram Sabha (village council), was addressed to key government officials, including the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) officer, the Collector, and the Tehsildar (revenue officer).

The villagers' advocacy efforts received a positive response from these authorities, which provided the necessary support to move forward. This marked a turning point in the community's journey, as they began to take more organized steps to address their issues. One of the significant milestones during this phase was the formation of the Forest Rights Committee (FRC). The FRC was tasked with overseeing the process of documenting the villagers' claims and ensuring that the community was actively involved in the advocacy efforts.

The formation of the FRC was a critical step in ensuring that the process was community-led and that all members of the community, including women, were represented. However, the process of selecting committee members was not without its challenges, particularly in ensuring the inclusion of women in decision-making roles. This required careful consideration and discussions within the community, as women played a crucial role in raising awareness and ensuring that the benefits of the advocacy reached all members of the community equitably.

04 Mapping and Identification Process



One of the most critical aspects of the advocacy process was the identification of village boundaries and the mapping of resources. To ensure that their claims were accurately represented, the community used modern technology, including GPS mapping tools, to precisely document the boundaries of the village and the locations of valuable resources such as Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), which the villagers relied on for their livelihood.

In addition to the GPS mapping, a hand-drawn map was also created to provide a visual representation of the village's layout and resources. This map was crucial for the villagers to present a clear and organized case to the authorities, demonstrating their historical ties to the land and the resources they had traditionally used.

The process of mapping also involved the Revenue Inspector (RI) and the forest department, who worked closely with the community to verify the areas claimed by the villagers. These authorities helped determine the exact location of community land, including vital areas such as the village playground and traditional gathering places. This verification process ensured that the villagers' claims were legitimate and by legal provisions.



05 Final Review and Submission

After completing the mapping and verifying the land and resource claims, a final review meeting was held at the Gram Sabha. This meeting provided an opportunity for the villagers, along with community volunteers and leaders, to thoroughly review all documentation, including the maps, letters, and other necessary records, to ensure that everything was accurate and in order.

Once the documents were reviewed and approved, they were formally submitted to the relevant authorities, including the Gram Panchayat (village council). This submission marked the conclusion of a year-long effort, from 2022 to 2023, to secure the villagers' rights. It was a significant achievement, as it not only represented a victory for the community but also set a precedent for other marginalized communities in the region to follow.

Emergence of Leadership:



Sama Munda

Community leader

One of the most positive outcomes of this process was the emergence of Sama Munda, a community volunteer, as a leader within the village. Sama Munda played an instrumental role in coordinating efforts, ensuring that the villagers remained engaged and motivated throughout the advocacy process. His leadership was crucial in maintaining unity within the community and ensuring that all voices, including those of women and marginalized groups, were heard.

Sama Munda's leadership is a testament to the power of grassroots organizing and community mobilization. His efforts ensured that the community remained focused on their goals and that they were able to successfully navigate the complexities of legal processes, documentation, and advocacy.

Challenges Faced

The process of mobilizing the community was not without its challenges.

- The villagers' initial lack of awareness about their rights and government schemes presented a significant barrier to engagement. Many villagers were initially fearful of taking part in the process, largely due to their lack of knowledge and understanding of the legal framework.
- Another significant challenge was the process of forming the Forest Rights Committee (FRC), particularly in ensuring the active participation of women. This required careful deliberation and efforts to ensure that women had a voice in decision-making processes. Overcoming these challenges was a crucial step in empowering the community and ensuring that the benefits of the advocacy reached all members equitably.

A Model for Other Communities

CONCLUSION

The journey of Haridahi village demonstrates the transformative potential of community mobilization and advocacy in securing land rights and accessing government schemes. Through their collective efforts, the villagers were able to raise their voices, document their claims, and advocate for their rights. The creation of Sama Munda as a leader and the establishment of the Forest Rights Committee were significant achievements that ensured the community would continue to push for their rights in the future.

The process also highlighted the importance of awareness programs and legal education in empowering marginalized communities. Moving forward, the example set by Haridahi serves as a powerful model for other forest villages facing similar challenges. By coming together, educating themselves, and advocating for their rights, communities like Haridahi can break the cycle of marginalization and secure a better future for themselves and future generations.

Through collective action, perseverance, and leadership, Haridahi Village has shown that even the most marginalized communities can overcome significant obstacles and achieve lasting change.