A look into village-level perceptions on “land tenure security” amidst India’s land data challenges
**CONTEXT**

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflect the will of the international community to end poverty and hunger and move towards more equitable and environmentally sustainable development policies and programs. The progress towards achievement of these goals is tracked and monitored by a set of indicators by national governments, aided by data collected and reported by National Statistics Offices (NSOs) and other agencies.

In India, NITI Aayog has the mandate to oversee the adoption and monitoring of the SDGs in the country. NITI Aayog is the institution that prepares frameworks for reporting various indicators, compiles the data from a number of agencies, and prepares annual and periodic reports on the achievement of various SDGs. SDG India Index and Dashboard measures progress against various goals by different States and Union Territories. It includes a rating system based on a scale of zero to 100, where zero denotes the worst performance and 100 denotes achievement of the target. (See [https://sdgindiaindex.niti.gov.in/#/ranking](https://sdgindiaindex.niti.gov.in/#/ranking))

Since its inception in 2018, the Index has been comprehensively documenting and ranking the progress made by States and Union Territories towards achieving the SDGs. The third edition of the SDG India Index 2020 to 2021 was released on 3 June 2021 by NITI Aayog. From covering 13 Goals with 62 indicators in the first edition in 2018, the third edition in 2021 covers 16 Goals on 115 quantitative indicators, with a qualitative assessment on Goal 17.

Goal 1 of “No Poverty” is critical to developing countries like India, with land being the most important productive asset in rural and agrarian landscapes. Similarly, poorer sections of society in rural areas are heavily dependent on common lands like forests, pastures, orchards, water bodies, and other common lands for earning livelihoods. Hence, secure tenure over lands, both individual holdings and village common lands, is an important barometer that determines social and economic development. “Securing tenure rights for all” will ensure the sustainable social and economic opportunities needed to eradicate poverty (SDG 1), as well as contribute to the achievement of SDG 2 on eradicating hunger; SDG 5 on gender equality and empowerment of women; SDG 11 on building inclusive, resilient, and sustainable urban areas; SDG 15 on reducing land degradation; and, SDG 16 on fostering peace and security.

SDG indicator 1.4.2 measures the proportion of the total adult population with secure tenure rights to land: a) with legally recognized documentation, and b) who perceive their rights to land as secure, by sex and type of tenure. Responsible land governance therefore demands access to regular, quality, and gender disaggregated data on land tenure rights at the national and sub-national levels. Key policy decisions relating to transforming women’s land rights and frameworks like Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT) are influenced by this.

This study examined the tenure regimes in place across States, the data used for reporting tenure security under SDG reporting, and perceptions of tenure security among men and women for various categories of lands.
STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study involved:

- Review of literature around land records, tenure regimes in different States, land use and land holdings, and government programs on land records updating and digitization;
- Scanning of secondary data from websites of States and the central government, publications by State and central Department/Ministry of Statistics on State and district-wise availability of various categories of land, land use, patterns in land holdings, recognitions under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006; and,
- Collection of primary data from 12 villages of six districts of two States.

Sampling methods and data collection instruments

Two States in eastern India, namely Jharkhand and Odisha, were selected for in-depth study and primary data collection. Of the six districts selected, three districts are dominated by Scheduled Tribes (STs) and hence Tribal Sub Plans (TSP) are implemented there, while the other three districts have a smaller population of Scheduled Tribes. Purposive sampling was used for selection of 12 villages from which primary data were collected.

Table 1. Study States and districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial No.</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>TSP/Non TSP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jharkhand</td>
<td>Gumla</td>
<td>TSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Simdega</td>
<td>TSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Palamu</td>
<td>Non TSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Odisha</td>
<td>Koraput</td>
<td>TSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mayurbhanj</td>
<td>TSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Boudh</td>
<td>Non TSP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two villages were selected from each district, one dominated by STs and another village where STs are either not present or are not the dominant community, thus totaling 12 villages. All the villages have cases of individual forest rights claims made under the FRA and subsequently settled. All the villages have a minimum of 100 hectares of community forests. All the villages are accessible by semi-metalled/metalled roads. At least two self-help groups (SHGs) are available and operating in each of these villages.

Data collection in all these villages was facilitated by local NGOs. Focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIs) were used for collecting data. Separate FGDs were conducted for women to get an idea about their perceptions of tenure security over individual holdings and common lands.

Table 2. Participants of 24 FGDs and KIs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>FGD Female</th>
<th>FGD Male</th>
<th>KII Female</th>
<th>KII Male</th>
<th>Total Female</th>
<th>Total Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jharkhand</td>
<td>44 (27 STs)</td>
<td>73 (48 STs)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odisha</td>
<td>48 (24 STs)</td>
<td>69 (37 STs)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Box 1. Questions asked during the FGDs and KIIs

**FGD Guide Questions**

- How many households have Records of Rights (RoRs) for all lands cultivated by them?
- Have you seen your village revenue map, land records of your household?
- Whose names are found/recorded in the RoRs?
- How many times have you gone to the local revenue office in the past two years and for what purposes?
- Do you have correct maps of all plots owned by you/registered in your name?
- How many households have women’s names recorded in the RoRs?
- What are the conflicts relating to land in your village?
- How many households got land under some government program in the past five years? What were the criteria? How were they selected?
- How many households have forest rights titles? What is the area of land so recognized? Do you have maps for these titles? Is there any discrepancy?
- If you face problems in land records, whom do you approach in your village and outside the village?

**KII Guide Questions**

- What are the land records including maps maintained by the Revenue Department at various levels and offices?
- How are they updated and what is the frequency of updating of major records?
- What are the major citizen services offered by the Revenue Department?
- What are the sources of State level data on land tenure and how are they collected, collated?
- Which data and records are already digitized? What is the impact of the Land Records Modernization Program?
- What are the major challenges in land records maintenance?
- What are the changes that have come up in land data reporting in the past five years?
- How can we move towards gender segregated data on land tenure?
- How can we correct land records pertaining to forest rights titles? What are the challenges in this exercise?
- What are the ways and means of moving towards better reporting of land tenure under the SDGs?

These questions were not asked sequentially. For most respondents, SDG goals were explained first as part of confidence building and transparency while collecting data.

**Profile of the study States**

**Odisha**

Odisha, an eastern State of the Indian Union, is the ninth largest State accounting for 4.7 percent of the country’s geographical area. As per the 2011 Census, the population of the State stands at 41.9 million of which 84 percent live in rural areas. STs constitute 22.13 percent of the State’s population whereas SCs account for 16.53 percent. Around 39.2 percent of the State’s population lives below the poverty line as per National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) Round 2009 to 2010 following the Tendulkar Committee methodology. The State has
a forest area of 58,136 square kilometers which covers 37 percent of the total geographical area of the State (ENVIS Centre of Odisha’s State of Environment, 2020). Odisha is divided into four geomorphological zones, namely: Northern Plateau, Central Table Lands, Eastern Ghats, and Coastal Plains. STs mostly reside in the Northern Plateau and Eastern Ghats of the State. Administratively, the State is divided into 30 districts, with 42 percent of the geographical area under Schedule 5 of the Constitution. Scheduled Areas are spread over 12 of the State’s 30 districts. The State is home to 56 tribes, including 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).

**Jharkhand**

The State of Jharkhand came into being on 15 November 2000 as the 28th State of the Indian Union. It occupies the northeastern part of the Deccan Plateau and covers 79,714 square kilometers. Chhotanagpur plateau, its most prominent physiographic feature, is actually a series of flat-topped plateaus, hills, and valleys. The State is drained by three major river systems: Damodar, Subarnarekha, and Brahmani. The total recorded forest area is 23,605 square kilometers, which is 29.61 percent of its geographical area (Forest, Environment and Climate Change Department, Government of Jharkhand, n.d.). Both tropical dry-deciduous and moist deciduous forest vegetation are found. Indigenous tribal communities like Munda, Oraon, Ho, Santhal, Paharia, and Chero constitute 28 percent of the 27 million-strong population (Jharkhand State Open School, n.d.). Administratively, the State is organized into 24 districts, 33 sub-divisions, 247 Blocks, 3979 gram panchayats, and 32,620 villages. Some 134 Blocks in 15 districts are included in the Tribal Sub Plan. The State’s tenure regimes have historically recognized community tenure over common lands, including forests. The Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act and the Santal Parganas Tenancy Act were enacted to recognize traditional land tenure regimes prevalent among the indigenous population of the area after two famous rebellions occurred during colonial rule.

**Reflections from literature review**

**Legal frameworks and tenure regimes**

Land and land revenue is a State subject under the Constitution of India. State legislatures make laws on all matters pertaining to land, land records, settlement, and distribution of lands. The revenue departments of the State governments are the nodal departments for administration and management of lands.

Such is the legacy of the British colonial system governing all categories except forest lands. Forests are in the Concurrent List of the Constitution and hence both Union and State governments exercise authority over these. Every State has a land records organization that keeps data on land and land holdings and maps of such holdings. Multiple tenure regimes which are a product of legacies during different rulers co-exist in the States. The broad regimes are:

- Individual homestead and agricultural holdings with clear record of rights;
- Individual homestead and agricultural holdings without proper record of rights;
- Hereditary regimes over lands vested/gifted in the name of deities, temples, mosques, etc.;
- Common lands like pastures, orchards, and water bodies administered by the local self-governments/gram panchayats;
- Common lands/government lands administered by the Revenue, Irrigation, and Fishery Departments; and,
- Forest lands under Revenue and Forest Departments.

Except for the first and last regimes, clear disaggregated data is not easily available at the State and district levels. Moreover, there are huge differences in actual possessions, textual data in land records, and spatial maps of villages where land parcels are recorded with a number. In remote forested areas, lands above a certain elevation were not surveyed. All such lands were deemed as forest lands or government lands. A large part of the current State of Odisha was ruled by the princes and kings before Indian independence from British rule. These areas were not surveyed in the manner British-held areas were surveyed and settled resulting in various local tenure regimes being unrecognized. However, the enactment of the FRA in 2006 addressed the issue of unsurveyed areas to some extent.

The State of Jharkhand is unique in many ways. It is the only State outside northeastern India which recognizes communal tenure regimes. The system of “khutkhatti” practiced by Munda tribes is recognized under the Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act. Similar provisions exist in Santal tribe-dominated areas called Santhal Parganas. Under these tenure regimes, villagers collectively decide on the lands to be cultivated by individual households. Similarly, most of the forest areas are recorded within village revenue boundaries, enabling legal access to forest areas for collection and use by local communities.

The FRA brought in seminal changes in tenure regimes over forest lands. Odisha has more than 29,000 villages having forests within village boundaries. Similarly, Jharkhand has around 16,000 villages having recorded forest lands. Under the FRA, all these lands are expected to be brought in under community tenure regimes instead of current State or management control of the Forest Department. Similarly, actual possessions of STs and other traditional forest dwellers in forest lands are to be recognized and the record of rights distributed to all such eligible households. Odisha recognized the land rights of 0.42 million households using the provisions of this law. However, Jharkhand has been able to settle the rights of only 54,000 households to date.

The Bhoodan movement in India is a Gandhian non-violent method of land redistribution launched by the late Vinoba Bhave. Every State has a Bhoodan law for distribution of lands donated by the landlords. However, as per literature review, there are hardly any records available in most State and district levels on the redistribution of Bhoodan land and the settlement and issuance of records of rights.

**Availability and accessibility of data**

The following documents, reports, and websites were scanned for data pertaining to land, land records, and land tenure to understand the nature and quality of data available, access systems of such data, the costs to be incurred, and government programs that make land data and records easily accessible to the common people:

- Economic survey of Central and State Governments;
- Statistical Handbooks of the State and districts;
• NITI Aayog’s SDG Index and Dashboard;
• Reports of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India;
• Reports of the Department of Land Resources, Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India;
• State portals on land records of Bhulekh, Odisha and Jharbhoomi, Jharkhand;
• Annual reports of the Directorate of Land Records of States;
• Reports of the National Council of Applied Economic Research; and,
• Reports pertaining to land holdings of the NSSO.

The above sources are rich in data as far as categories of land available in each State, district, and tehsil (sub-district); the number and type of holdings, current land uses, land transactions and transfers in a tehsil, etc. However, data about tenure are not available or reported as mandated under SDG 1.4.2. It may be the case that all land recorded in the names of individuals may be inferred as having secure tenure rights, and data about the number of landless households and landless laborers is available in such reports. However, as field findings reveal, there are huge under-estimations of the numbers in both the States studied.

**MAIN FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY AREAS**

The primary data were collected from 12 villages of the two States and analyzed against district-level secondary data for legally recognized documentation for both individual and common lands. Perceptions of various communities were separately recorded in focus group discussions (FGDs). Separate meetings of Women Self-Help Groups were held to better understand the perceptions of tenure security among women.

Two FGDs were conducted in each village, one with men and another with women. Hence, a total of 24 FGDs were conducted involving 142 men and 92 women (See Table 2). In six of the villages, the participants were mostly STs; while in the other six villages, it was a mixed caste group. Participant households own land (they have private lands) and are dependent on common lands including forests. The FGDs were conducted between 11:00 in the morning to 3:00 in the afternoon in the different communities, when the villagers were back from either their farms or the forests and were available in their homes. In the non-tribal villages, this was also the time when the women would have finished cooking. The FGDs were conducted mostly in common and open places in the village (village deity’s place, under a tamarind or mahua tree). There were two to three men as “onlookers” during the FGDs with women in each of these villages.

Key informant interviews (KII) were conducted with the following respondents:
• Revenue officials at the tehsil level – six from the two States;
• Retired State revenue department officials - two from each State;
• Official of land records modernization program - one from Odisha;
• NGO staff - six from six districts;
• President of the Odisha State chapter of the National Association of Women Organizations;
• State Conveners of the Right to Food network - one each from the two States;
• Two advocates from two States working on land rights of Dalits (Scheduled Castes); and,
• Convener of Jharkhand Jungle Bachao Andolan (a State-level network of forest conservation groups in Jharkhand).

It was revealed that people are able to access their private land records from State land portals. However, the data in many of these sites, portals, and reports are outdated — thereby impinging on the usability of the data by both the people and policymakers. Gender segregated data are neither kept nor available. Both the States have introduced stamp duty incentives to register lands in the names of women. Stamp duty is collected by the State government as a percentage of the total value of transactions when land is sold and transferred to another person. The amount is often substantial and exemption from reduction in the duty acts as an incentive. In Odisha, around three percent of land transactions have been registered in the names of women in the past three years.

The data on common lands is the weakest area of the two States’ records. Laws refer to all common lands as government lands. Hence, the owner of such lands is the State. The State can therefore alienate or acquire such lands without the consent of the local communities for public purposes as defined under land acquisition laws. In Odisha, however, grazing lands cannot be alienated without making provisions for a minimum area of grazing land as mandated under law. This lack of quality data on common lands is one of the reasons for a higher perception of tenure insecurity among the people. Data on encroachments on various categories of common lands is neither aggregated nor reported. All data needs to be collated at the tehsil level to get a picture of actual availability versus recorded common lands. Similarly, data on religious endowments (lands) and their current status is not available centrally.

**Legally recognized documentation**

“Pattas” or Records of Rights are considered legal documents that ensure secure tenure over individual land holdings. In terms of land use, individual holdings cover homestead plots, agricultural lands, orchards, and small water bodies. These pattas have a number and indicate the total area of holdings in a given revenue village. Common land parcels like pastures, village forests, water bodies, roads, playgrounds, cremation/burial grounds, common orchards, nullahs (water channels), stone quarries, hills, etc. are also assigned a number in the village revenue map. Hence, both textual and spatial records reflect the total amount of land ownership and land uses. However, ownership changes due to sale and succession are not updated regularly in these records.

The findings from the two study States are summarized below. Some 92 percent of the lands reported under the individual holdings category have some form of legally recognized documentation. This includes FRA individual forest rights titles wherever settled.

• About 87.8 percent of the cadastral maps of these two States are uploaded in the websites.
• Seventy-one percent variations are observed in actual and textual records in the study villages. This is primarily on account of non-recording of sale or informal transactions and lack of updating reflecting succession to the next generation after family divisions.
Seventy-eight percent of Bhoodan lands are not distributed in Odisha, meaning these lands are officially listed as property of the Bhoodan land committee. But the record of rights and actual possession are, in effect, in the hands of landlords or their progenies. Most of these lands are now tied up in litigations in various courts.

Correction of the Record of Rights for individual forest rights has been done for 41 percent of the title-holders across the country as per Ministry of Tribal Affairs. It is 67 percent in case of Odisha. The process is yet to begin in the State of Jharkhand.

Encroachments on common lands are reported for all the 12 study villages. Such encroachment ranges from 12 to 24 percent of the total common lands in these villages.

**Gender disaggregated data**

Current data on gender disaggregation is sketchy and limited across States in the country. Not many insights can be drawn regarding the study States and villages. However, some initiatives have been taken by various State governments to collect, compile, and report gender segregated data in the future.

- Twelve Indian States, including the two study States, have issued orders for collecting and maintaining gender segregated data on land holdings and transactions (NCAER Index).
- Eight States have introduced some form of incentives in the form of tax and duty concessions to encourage registration of lands in the names of women (NCAER, State Revenue Department websites).
- Both the study States have introduced programs for providing land to single women households in rural areas (State Revenue Department websites).
- Seven States reported provisions for leasing common lands, such as water bodies for pisciculture, to women self-help groups (National Rural Livelihoods Mission literature).
- Individual forest rights titles are supposed to be recorded in the names of both men and women heads of households. Some 34 percent of FRA titles have names of women entered in these titles (Presentation by Tribal Research Institute of Odisha in a webinar in July 2021).

**Perceptions of tenure security**

Perceptions about tenure security vary greatly among various communities and for different categories of lands. Scoring methods using small stone chips through participatory rural appraisal (PRA) were employed during FGDs to understand these varying perceptions. The major findings are summarized below.

- Homestead and agricultural lands enjoy the highest percentage of perception of tenure security among respondent groups in both study States. More than 98 percent believed that these lands cannot be alienated without their explicit consent. The only exception was a group of displaced people in Odisha who have been affected by a minor irrigation dam project.
- Forty-one percent of households who have been cultivating religious endowment lands for generations felt insecure in terms of tenure. They felt that government can take away their lands.
Seventy-three percent of the respondent groups felt that grazing lands or village pastures are secure. The threats reported were primarily on account of existing encroachments on pastures by the village elites and on stone quarries close to pasture lands.

Perceptions on access to forest lands varied widely among the study villages, depending on the communities involved. Dalits felt most insecure while accessing forest lands for various livelihood needs. Around 52 percent of STs felt secure while accessing forest lands, while 78 percent of the other caste groups felt secure while collecting forest products.

There was near unanimity that common lands are most insecure in the villages. Barely 11 percent felt secure that common lands will not be alienated by various means. Apart from encroachments by local elites, earmarking of common lands for industrial and compensatory afforestation Land Banks by government were cited as major threats by key informants.

No major difference was observed between men and women in terms of perception of tenure security in the case of individual holdings. However, 17 percent less women felt secure when it came to tenure over common lands.

The transgender community felt most insecure about their current holdings. However, they were participants in only one village in Odisha.

STs have the highest perception of security of their current individual holdings, except for the displaced community mentioned above. This is intriguing as it goes against normative beliefs. It may be mentioned here that six of the 12 villages studied are exclusive tribal villages.

**Observations on availability and access to Government Data**

There are multiple agencies that are responsible for collection and upkeep of various types of land data. Often the data maintained by these agencies do not match. The most common mismatch is the data and maps maintained by the Revenue and Forest Departments. There is no single repository where these data are pooled, analyzed, and reported. Data at the State level are not updated regularly. The progress of the Land Records Modernization Program, which was expected to digitize land records and provide access to real-time and updated data, is very slow in many districts except for new transactions, sales, and registrations. Access to internet connectivity in rural areas is still very low thereby limiting the benefits of digitization.

**Major developments**

Some major developments in the last year, 2020, bring hope of better access to land data and better services by various agencies responsible for land administration:

- 10 States are providing a facility for automatic generation of a note in the Record of Rights (RoR) when a transaction is registered.
- States are now making the cadastral maps available in mosaic format with the actual measurement of plot boundaries.
- The Government of India launched a new scheme called SVAMITVA for surveying of villages and mapping of land parcels with improved technology (https://svamitva.nic.in/).
The Land Records and Services Index 2021 by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) ranks States according to various parameters of land administration. This is expected to foster competition among the States to provide better and faster services relating to land.

Conclusion

Reporting of land governance including land tenure data in India is a major challenge given multiple tenure regimes and the multitude of laws in different States of the country. Although land tenure data is available at lower levels of revenue administration (revenue circles, tehsils), the complexity of these data makes it difficult for compilation and reporting at State and national levels. Land classification and their categories vary from State to State — making comparison extremely difficult. A large part of these data are dated and not updated regularly. In remote tribal areas, survey and settlement processes are often incomplete, making availability of land records and data difficult. While the FRA recognized legitimate possessions of indigenous people, land records are yet to be updated reflecting the new reality. Gender segregated data is likewise not available for all parameters, except new transactions/sale deeds. Programs of land records modernization initiated by the Central and State governments in the past few years are expected to improve data availability, reliability, and reporting in the future.
Acronyms

FES          Foundation for Ecological Security
FRA          Forest Rights Act
FGD          focus group discussion
KII          key informant interview
NGO          non-governmental organization
NSO          National Statistics Office
NSSO         National Sample Survey Organization
NCAER        National Council of Applied Economic Research
PRA          participatory rural appraisal
PVTGs        Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups
RoR          Record of Rights
SCs          Scheduled Castes
SDGs         Sustainable Development Goals
SHG          self-help group
STs          Scheduled Tribes
TSP          Tribal Sub Plans
VGGT         Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests

Acknowledgment

The paper is a collaborative effort of many organizations and individuals. We would like to thank PHIA Foundation, Jharkhand Jungle Bachao Andolan, SPREAD, Koraput, CREFTDA, Mayurbhanj, and District Forestry Forum for their support in field work. Revenue officials (select Tahsildars) of Koraput and Boudh in Odisha and Gumla and Simdega in Jharkhand shared information and their views in a personal capacity on land records and data maintenance, current challenges, and how the same can be improved.

We would like to thank the concerned officials. Appreciation goes to Shri Gadadhar Parida, IAS (Retired) and Shri Gupteswar Panigrahi, advocate for developing understanding of revenue laws and land records in Odisha. We extend our heartfelt thanks to Professor Pradeep Kumar Mishra of Xavier University, Bhubaneswar; Professor (retired) Samar Bosu Mallick of Xavier Institute of Social Service, Ranchi; and, Dr. Mihir Kumar Jena, Consultant to the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes Development Department, Government of Odisha for their valuable inputs.

Citation


Disclaimer

This report was made possible with the financial support of the International Land Coalition (ILC). The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect those of ILC.
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