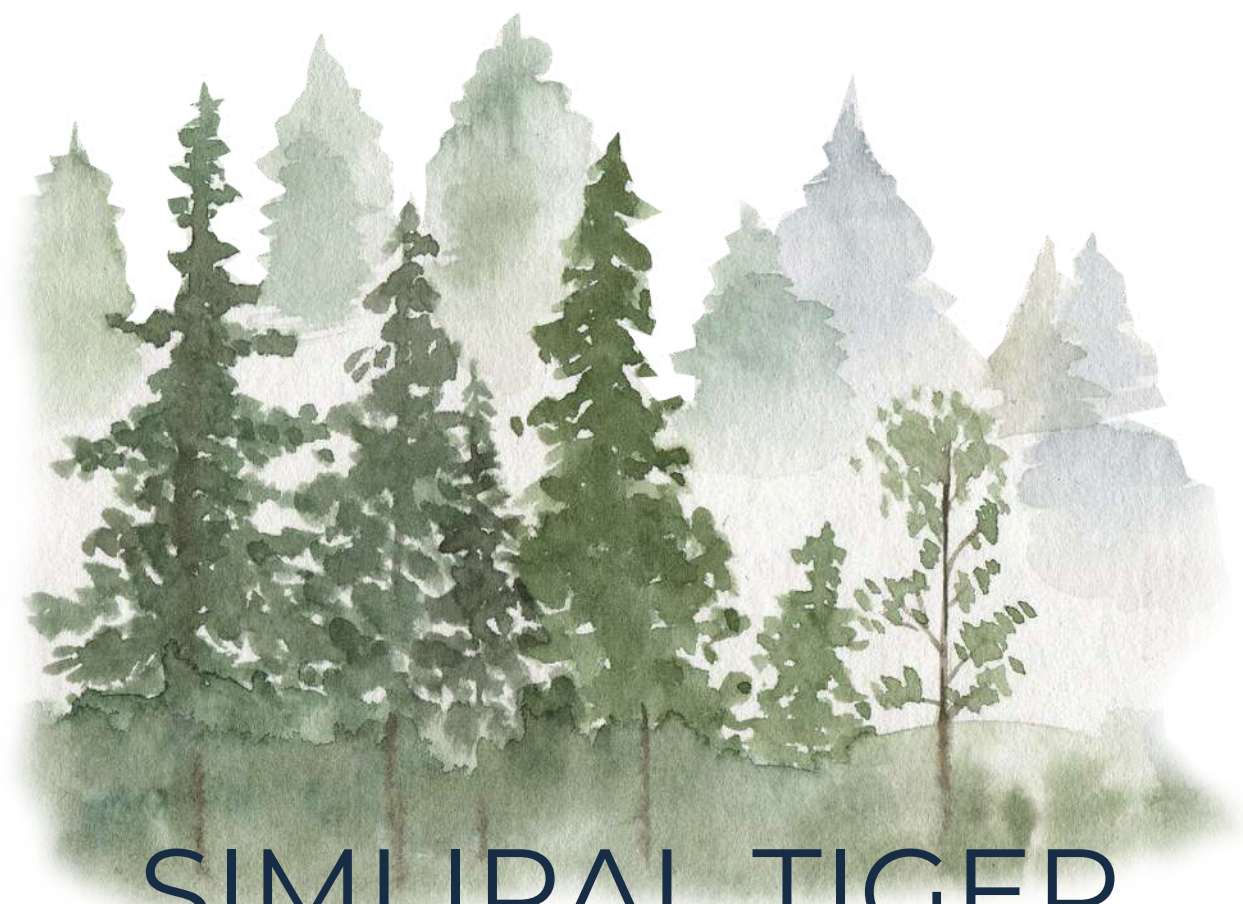


2024



SIMLIPAL TIGER RESERVE

harmonizing biodiversity
conservation with forest rights



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About Simlipal

Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR), located in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, is a significant biodiversity hotspot and a critical protected area for conservation. Covering an area of 2750 sq. km, Similipal is not only a Tiger Reserve but also a biosphere reserve, making it a vital ecological area for both flora and fauna. It was formally designated as Tiger Reserve under Project Tiger in May 1973. The Government of Odisha declared Similipal as a Wildlife Sanctuary in 1979 with an area of 2750 sq. km. Later in 1980, Government of Orissa proposed 303 sq. km of the sanctuary as National Park. Further in 1986, the area of the National Park was increased to 845.70 sq. km.



The Government of India declared it as a biosphere reserve in 1994. UNESCO added this National Park to its list of Biosphere Reserves in May 2009. Simlipal also comes under Mayurbhanj Elephant Reserve that includes the adjacent Hadgarh and Kuldiha Wildlife Sanctuaries.

Simlipal and People

There are 1265 villages inside the Simlipal Biosphere Reserve with a total population of 4.98 lakhs of whom 73.44 per cent belong to scheduled tribes (Census, 2011). Out of 1265 villages, 65 villages are situated inside the Sanctuary area of which 61 villages are in the buffer area and remaining three villages are in core area. The population residing inside the Simlipal Sanctuary is more than 12,500 according to the Census 2011 report.

Notably, 87% of the population in the buffer zone consists of Scheduled Tribes, while the core area is entirely comprised of 100% Scheduled Tribes.



These communities—comprising the Ho, Kolha, Santhal, Bathudi, Mahali, Bhumija, Saunti, Munda, and Gonda—depend on the forests for a variety of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), fuelwood, food, and medicinal plants. Additionally, the sanctuary is home to two Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs): Hill Khadias, and the Mankirdias. The Hill Khadia community inhabits 37 villages across 21 Gram Panchayats within 6 Blocks of the Mayurbhanj District, while the Mankirdia community resides in 18 villages spanning 2 Blocks and 12 Gram Panchayats.

Hill Khadias & Mankiridias belong to semi-nomadic communities, their survival heavily relies on forests. They gather various forest products like honey, sal resin, and arrowroot, mostly from the Simlipal Tiger Reserve and forested regions. Mankirdias have a longstanding tradition of crafting ropes and baskets using Siali fiber and Sabai grass. Additionally, they prepare plates from both Sal leaves and Siali leaves sourced from the forests.

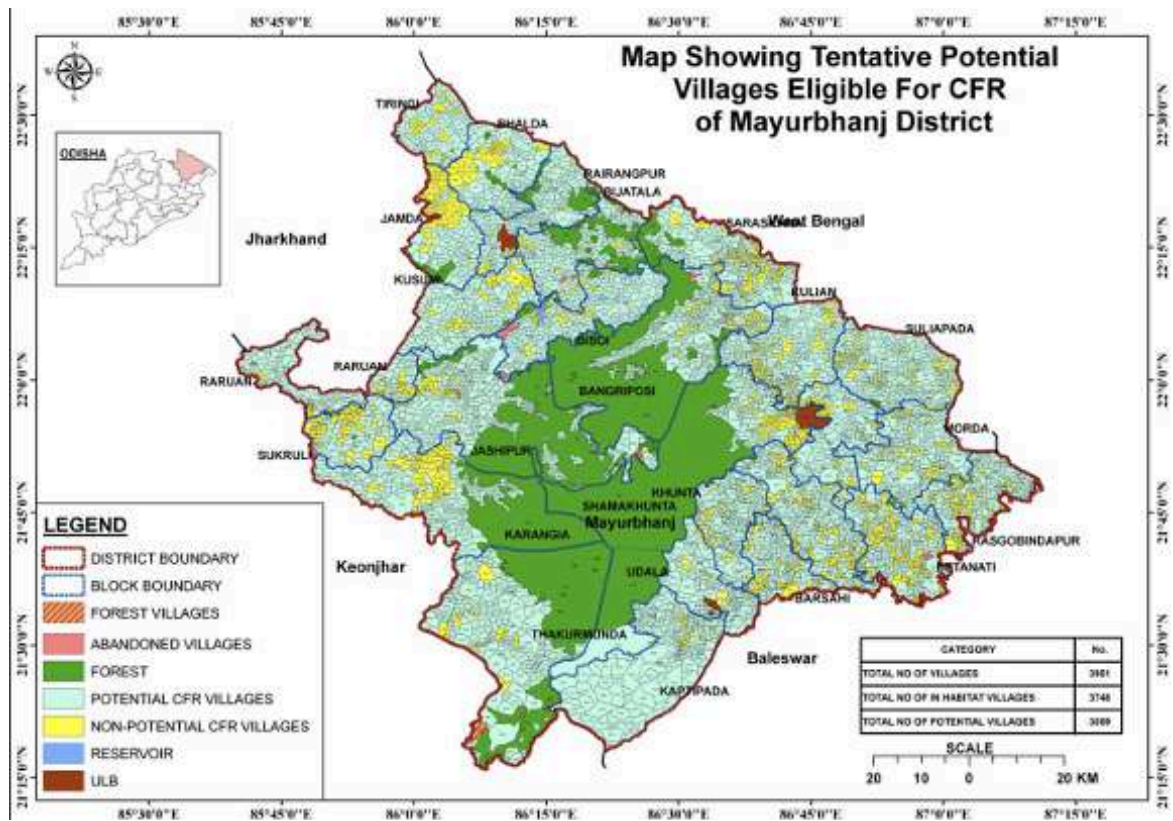
Most sacred sites of the communities are situated within the Simlipal Tiger Reserve. For instance, the Bhatudi tribe, part of Odisha's Scheduled Tribes, celebrates their annual festival at 'Athara Deula,' which is located within the STR. Similarly, the Hill Khadia community reveres Sal trees. Each village has a sacred area known as 'Jahirasthan,' where a grove of Sal trees thrives. These communities also hold a profound respect for honey bees, believing that their presence reflects the happiness of their deity towards them. They celebrate more than 15 festivals annually, all closely connected to the forests and their resources. Nearly all the festivals celebrated by local communities are connected to forests and forest products, highlighting their deep relationship with forest ecosystems and biodiversity.



Forest Rights Act and Simlipal Tiger Reserve

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006, which seeks to rectify historical injustices by recognizing the rights of tribal and forest-dwelling communities, provides a unique framework for addressing the complex issues surrounding conservation and community rights in protected areas. Simlipal serves as a progressive example of how these rights can be recognized within a biodiversity-rich sanctuary while ensuring ecological integrity. In 2008, shortly after the Gazette notification of the Act, the Government of Odisha initiated the constitution of Forest Rights Committees in all villages, including those within the Simlipal Tiger Reserve. Although the National Tiger Conservation Authority issued a clarifying circular on September 8, 2008, regarding the applicability of the Forest Rights Act of 2006 within Tiger Reserves, the process of claim filing did not commence until 2014.

In 2014, the District Administration initiated a focused campaign to process claims in accordance with the Forest Rights Act of 2006. That same year, the District Administration collaborated with Vasundhara to create the FRA Atlas of Mayurbhanj, which served as a blueprint for the effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act. As a result, over 600 Individual Forest Rights (IFR) claims, along with 42 claims for Community Rights and Community Forest Resource Rights, were submitted to the Sub-Divisional Level Committees (SDLC). Subsequently, the District Level Committee (DLC), based on the recommendations from the SDLCs, approved all submitted IFR claims, as well as

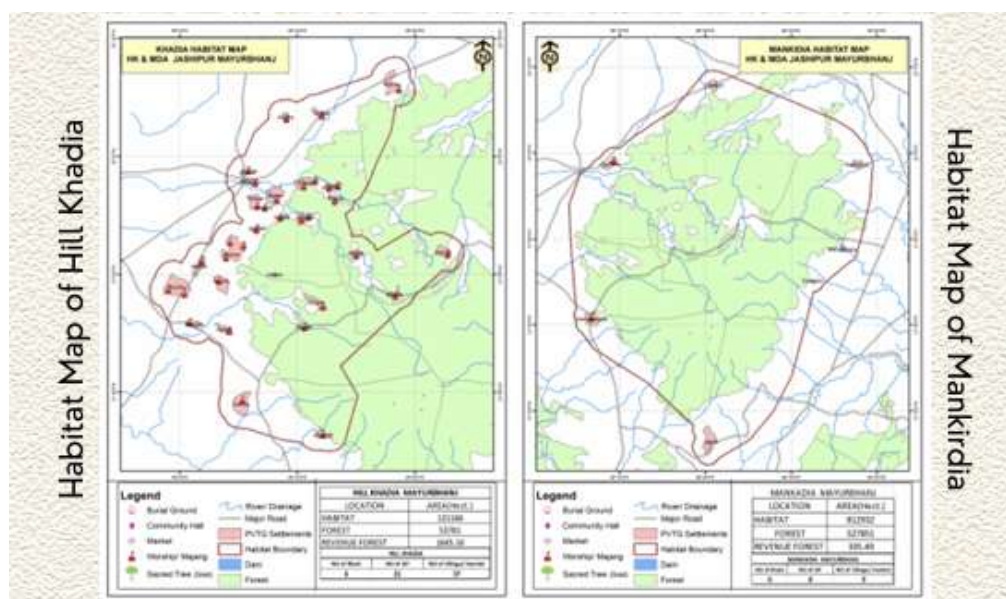


The DLC sanctioned a total of 659 IFR claims covering more than 500 hectares, in addition to 24,584 hectares of forest land designated for Community Forest Resource Rights within the Simlipal Tiger Reserve and National Park.

Habitat Rights of PVTGs

The historic Forest Rights Act of 2006 marked a significant advancement in recognizing the habitat rights of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Specifically, Section 2(h) of the Act defines "habitat" as the area encompassing both the customary habitat and other habitats within reserved and protected forests that pertain to primitive tribal groups, pre-agricultural communities, and other forest dwelling scheduled tribes. Furthermore, Section 5(c) empowers forest right holders and their institutions to "ensure that the habitat of forest-dwelling scheduled tribes and other traditional forest dwellers is preserved from any form of destructive practices that may impact their cultural and natural heritage." In Mayurbhanj, which is home to three PVTGs, the district administration, in partnership with Vasundhara, initiated the process of filing habitat claims for the Mankirdia community in 2015. This initiative aims to safeguard their cultural heritage, enhance their relationship with forest ecosystems, and secure their forest-based livelihoods.

Although the District Level Committee (DLC) approved the habitat claim for the Mankirdia community in 2016, progress was halted due to opposition from the Simlipal Tiger Reserve Authority, resulting in an abrupt cessation of the process. In 2019, the SCSTRTI, a leading Tribal Research Institute under the Department of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes Development, reinitiated the Habitat Rights claim process in collaboration with Vasundhara and the District Administration. On September 11, 2024, the District Level Committee of Mayurbhanj, established under the Forest Rights Act of 2006, granted habitat rights claims for the Hill Khadia and Mankirdia communities concerning their ancestral lands. This approval encompasses an area of 554.26 square kilometers for the Hill Khadia and 5,281.87 square kilometers for the Mankirdia, all situated within the Simlipal Tiger Reserve.



On November 15, 2024, the Honorable Chief Minister of Odisha presented Habitat Rights Titles to the traditional leaders of the Hill Khadia and Mankirdia Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). With this initiative, Odisha became the first state in India to officially recognize the Habitat Rights of PVTGs within the country's Tiger Reserves.



Post Rights Recognition

The District Administration of Mayurbhanj has undertaken various initiatives aimed at conserving forests and preserving biodiversity both within and outside the Simlipal Tiger Reserve. One notable initiative involved raising awareness about Section 5 of the relevant Act, which delineates the roles and responsibilities of rights holders and the Gram Sabha in protecting and conserving forests, forest biodiversity, wildlife, and ecologically sensitive areas. Consequently, 42 villages from three Gram Panchayats established a collective organization known as the 'Simlipal Surakhya and Vikas Committee.' This committee assists the Gram Sabhas in formulating protocols for forest conservation and the preservation of their cultural heritage. The recognition of forest rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) in Similipal exemplifies a balanced approach to conservation, wherein the protection of biodiversity is harmonized with the rights of indigenous communities. Rather than being perceived as obstacles to conservation efforts, local tribal communities are acknowledged as stewards of the forest, possessing traditional knowledge and practices that have sustained these ecosystems for generations. By affirming their rights, Odisha has advanced a conservation model that actively involves tribal communities in the stewardship of their lands. This approach resonates with global conservation paradigms that highlight the crucial role of indigenous peoples in biodiversity preservation. It underscores the notion that indigenous and tribal communities are not only capable of coexisting with biodiversity but are also vital to its protection. In Similipal, the integration of traditional ecological knowledge with contemporary conservation strategies presents a promising pathway for protected areas throughout India and beyond.

