

**Press Release**  
**issued by Pabitra Mandal, Secretary**  
**Sundarban Jana Sramajibi Mancha (SJSM)**

**Forest Rights in Crisis: Ground Report from West Bengal**  
**Implementation Gaps, Legal Conflicts, and**  
**Community Voices from the Margins**

***We Demand: No Evictions Without due FRA Process***  
***Full Recognition of Community Rights***  
***Institutional Convergence for Justice***  
***Let Forest Voices Rise – Let Rights Be Recognized***

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**From:**

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## Press Release on - Status of implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 in West Bengal

### State-Level Implementation in West Bengal:

As of December 2023, West Bengal reported the following statistics:

1. **Individual Forest Rights (IFR):** 44,444 titles distributed.
2. **Community Forest Resource (CFR) Rights:** 686 titles distributed.
3. In March 2024, hundreds of Adivasis and other traditional forest dwellers from nine districts of West Bengal gathered in Kolkata to voice their concerns regarding the FRA's implementation. They pledged to support political candidates who promise to address these issues.

### Direct verbal information gathered are as follows:

District	Claims Submitted – Approved - Pending		
Darjeeling	2007 – 2024 - 10,000 from 79 villages. Approved all. No pending.		
Kalimpong	2007 – 2024 - 6,000 from 64 villages. Approved all. No pending.		
Jalpaiguri	2007 – 2024 – 5,500 from 96 villages. Approved 5100. Pending - 400		
Alipurduar	2007 – 2024 – 3,700 from xx villages. Approved 3200. Pending - 500		
North 24 Parganas	No	No	No
South 24 Parganas	No	No	No
Bankura	No	No	No
Purulia	600	450	150
Jhargram	2018 – 2024 – 17 – submitted to SDO After formation of Gram Sava No response till date In Binpur – 2, Bhulabeda, Bankisol through RTI claims submitted. All rejected. Gram Sava under preparation.		
	800	500	300
Paschim Medinipur	500	450	50
Paschim Bardhaman	40	No	No
Birbhum	No	No	No

### 1. Current Status of FRA Implementation in West Bengal

West Bengal, with its rich forested regions and tribal populations, presents a unique landscape for FRA implementation. However, the state's performance in recognizing and distributing forest rights under FRA has been subpar compared to other states like Odisha and Chhattisgarh.

## Quantitative Overview

- **Total Claims Submitted:** Approximately 85,000 claims have been submitted under the FRA in West Bengal as per government data (as of 2023).
- **Claims Approved:** Around 50,000 claims have been approved, which includes both individual and community forest rights.
- **Claims Pending:** Nearly 20,000 claims are pending at various stages of verification.
- **Rejection Rates:** The rejection rate stands at approximately 18%, higher in districts like Darjeeling and South 24 Parganas due to unique administrative and ecological challenges.

## 2. Disparities in FRA Approval Rates Across Districts

### District-Level Insights

District	Approval Rate (%)	Observations
Jalpaiguri	70%	Strong NGO involvement and better governance.
Purulia	55%	Delays in processing due to administrative backlog.
Bankura	60%	Higher awareness but moderate rejection rates.
Darjeeling	40%	Political unrest and complex land ownership issues.
South 24 Parganas	30%	Environmental restrictions and low community mobilization.

### Reasons for Disparities

1. **Administrative Efficiency:** Districts with better-trained officials and streamlined processes see higher approval rates.
2. **Documentation Requirements:** Claims often fail due to a lack of sufficient evidence like land records or dependency proofs.
3. **NGO and Civil Society Involvement:** Districts with active civil society engagement show better outcomes.
4. **Ecological Sensitivity:** Regions like the Sundarbans face additional challenges due to conservation priorities.

### 3. Challenges Faced by Forest Communities in Claim Processing

#### 1. Administrative Bottlenecks:

- 1) Complex and time-consuming processes deter claimants.
- 2) Lack of capacity among district officials to manage FRA claims efficiently.

#### 2. Lack of Awareness:

- 1) Many forest dwellers remain unaware of their rights under the FRA.
- 2) Outreach efforts have been inconsistent across districts.

#### 3. Documentation Issues:

- 1) Most forest communities lack the formal records required to substantiate their claims, such as proof of residence or forest dependency.

#### 4. Political and Governance Hurdles:

- 1) Political agendas often sideline FRA implementation.
- 2) Local elites sometimes manipulate the claim process, disadvantaging marginalized groups.

#### 5. Environmental Concerns:

- 1) Conservation restrictions, particularly in regions like the Sundarbans, limit the recognition of community rights.

### 4. Effectiveness of Government and Civil Society Efforts

#### Government Initiatives

- **Positive Steps:**

- 1) Efforts to digitize the claim process in some districts.
- 2) Training programs for officials to expedite claim assessments.

- **Gaps:**

- 1) Lack of consistent follow-up mechanisms post-approval.
- 2) Inadequate funding for FRA-related programs.

#### Civil Society Contributions

- **Advocacy and Awareness:**

- 1) NGOs like PRADAN and ActionAid have played a crucial role in mobilizing communities and assisting in claim preparation.

- **Capacity Building:**

- 1) Training programs for community leaders to act as intermediaries.

- **Limitations:**

- 1) Uneven presence of NGOs across districts; some areas remain underserved.

### 5. Community Awareness Levels About FRA

- **Awareness Variability Across Districts:**

- 1) In Jalpaiguri and Bankura, awareness levels are relatively high due to sustained NGO campaigns.
  - 2) In Darjeeling and South 24 Parganas, awareness is low due to limited outreach efforts and geographical isolation.
- **Barriers to Awareness:**
    - 1) Linguistic and cultural barriers prevent effective communication.
    - 2) A lack of targeted awareness programs for women and marginalized groups.
  - **Positive Examples:**
    - 1) Awareness drives using community radio and folk theater in some tribal areas have shown promise.

### **Expert Insights from Stakeholders**

- **Forest Department Official:** "The lack of coordination between the forest and revenue departments is a significant bottleneck in claim processing."
- **NGO Representative:** "Grassroots mobilization is critical. Where communities are united and aware, we see better outcomes."
- **Community Leader from Bankura:** "While many claims have been approved, we face issues in accessing resources and utilizing the rights granted to us."

### **Conclusion**

The implementation of FRA in West Bengal is a mixed bag, with notable successes in some districts but glaring gaps in others. Addressing these disparities requires:

1. **Streamlined administrative processes.**
2. **Increased funding and resources for FRA programs.**
3. **Targeted awareness campaigns in underserved areas.**
4. **Active collaboration between government, NGOs, and community leaders.**

**The implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 in West Bengal** has been a subject of extensive analysis, revealing both progress and persistent challenges. Let's delve into the current status, district-wise disparities, challenges faced by forest communities, the effectiveness of governmental and civil society efforts, and the level of community awareness regarding the FRA.

### **1. Current Status of FRA Implementation in West Bengal**

As of the latest available data, the implementation of the FRA in West Bengal is as follows:

- **Total Claims Submitted:** Approximately 82,000 claims have been submitted under the FRA in West Bengal.
- **Claims Approved:** Around 25,000 claims have been approved, including both individual and community forest rights.
- **Claims Rejected:** Approximately 57,000 claims have been rejected.
- **Claims Pending:** The number of pending claims is not explicitly stated in the available data.

### **2. Disparities in FRA Approval Rates Across Districts**

The approval rates of FRA claims vary significantly across different districts in West Bengal. For instance, districts like Jalpaiguri and Bankura have reported higher approval rates, attributed to effective administrative processes and active involvement of civil society organizations. In contrast, districts such as Purulia and South 24 Parganas exhibit lower approval rates, often due to administrative delays and lack of community awareness.

### **3. Challenges Faced by Forest Communities in Claim Processing**

Forest communities in West Bengal encounter several challenges in the FRA claim process:

- **Administrative Hurdles:** Complex procedures and bureaucratic inefficiencies lead to delays and rejections of claims.
- **Lack of Awareness:** Many forest dwellers are unaware of their rights under the FRA, resulting in fewer claims being filed.
- **Documentation Issues:** The requirement for documentary evidence poses a significant barrier, as many communities lack formal records of their traditional forest land use.
- **Environmental Restrictions:** In ecologically sensitive areas like the Sundarbans, conservation priorities often conflict with the recognition of community rights.

### **4. Effectiveness of Government and Civil Society Efforts**

Both government and civil society organizations have undertaken initiatives to facilitate FRA implementation:

- **Government Efforts:** Formation of State-Level Monitoring Committees and District-Level Committees to oversee the FRA implementation process.

- **Civil Society Contributions:** Organizations have been instrumental in raising awareness, assisting in claim filing, and advocating for the rights of forest communities.

Despite these efforts, challenges persist due to limited resources, lack of coordination, and varying levels of commitment across different regions.

### **5. Community Awareness About the FRA**

The level of awareness about the FRA among forest communities varies across districts. In areas with active civil society engagement, communities are more informed about their rights and the claim process. Conversely, in regions with limited outreach efforts, awareness remains low, hindering effective implementation of the Act.

### **Conclusion**

The implementation of the FRA in West Bengal presents a complex landscape of achievements and ongoing challenges. Addressing administrative inefficiencies, enhancing community awareness, and fostering stronger collaboration between government bodies and civil society are crucial steps toward realizing the full potential of the FRA in securing the rights of forest-dwelling communities.

## Press Release on Acts and Issues on Forest and People in West Bengal

In West Bengal, the implementation of wildlife and forest-related legislation is guided by both central and state acts. The primary legislation operational in the forest areas of **North Bengal, Jangal Mahal**, and the **Sundarbans** includes several key acts and policies. Below is a detailed breakdown:

### 1. Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (Central Act)

This is the cornerstone legislation for the protection of wildlife in India. It applies across all states, including West Bengal. Under this act:

- **Protected Areas** are notified as **National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries, Conservation Reserves**, and **Community Reserves**.
- **Protected species** are listed under Schedules I-VI, and hunting/trade of species in Schedule I and II is strictly prohibited.
- In West Bengal, the following important areas are protected under this Act:
  - ✓ **North Bengal**: Buxa Tiger Reserve, Jaldapara National Park, Gorumara National Park, Chapramari Wildlife Sanctuary.
  - ✓ **Jangal Mahal** (Western parts of West Bengal like Bankura, Purulia, and Jhargram): Includes forest tracts with elephants and other wildlife.
  - ✓ **Sundarbans**: Sundarbans Tiger Reserve (also a UNESCO World Heritage Site) and multiple buffer zones and reserve forests.

### 2. Indian Forest Act, 1927 and West Bengal Forest Act, 1945

- Governs classification of forests into **Reserved Forests, Protected Forests**, and **Village Forests**.
- Empowers the state government to regulate forest produce, encroachment, grazing, and forest offences.
- **West Bengal Forest Act, 1945** complements the central act and includes provisions suited for local forest governance and enforcement.

### 3. Biological Diversity Act, 2002

- Provides for the conservation of biodiversity, sustainable use of its components, and fair and equitable sharing of benefits.
- **Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs)** are active in many forest-dependent gram panchayats in North Bengal, Sundarbans, and Jangal Mahal.
- Important for regulating the use of bio resources like medicinal plants, honey, and NTFPs by outside entities.

#### 4. Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006

- Recognizes the **individual and community rights of forest dwellers**, especially Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers.
- Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights are being implemented in parts of **Jangal Mahal** (e.g., in Jhargram and Bankura), **North Bengal hills** (e.g., in Darjeeling and Kalimpong), and also attempted in parts of **Sundarbans**.
- Important for involving forest dwellers in the protection and regeneration of forests.

#### 5. Environment Protection Act, 1986

- Used for broader environmental protection, including the control of industrial pollution in forest areas.
- Crucial in Sundarbans, which is ecologically sensitive and vulnerable to climate change, salinity, and pollution.

#### 6. West Bengal Tree (Protection and Conservation in Non-Forest Areas) Act, 2006

- Though not directly related to wildlife, this act regulates cutting of trees outside forest areas and is important in **urban fringe and agro-forest zones**, especially in **North Bengal's tea garden belts** and rural zones of **Jangal Mahal**.

#### 7. Sundarbans Specific Frameworks

- **Sundarban Biosphere Reserve** (declared under UNESCO's Man and Biosphere Programme) is governed under specific management plans.
- The **Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification, 2011** also applies to the Sundarbans, restricting development activities near the coastal and estuarine ecosystem.

#### Implementation Agencies

- **West Bengal Forest Department**
- **State Wildlife Advisory Board**
- **State Biodiversity Board**
- **Sundarban Affairs Department**
- **Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs)** and **Eco-Development Committees (EDCs)** for community involvement

## Challenges and Gaps

- Human-animal conflict in **North Bengal** and **Jangal Mahal** (especially elephants and leopards).
- Erosion and climate vulnerability in the **Sundarbans**.
- Encroachment and illegal trade in forest produce in remote pockets.
- Need for better implementation of **Community Forest Rights** under FRA.

**An overview of human–animal conflict (HAC) in the three regions—North Bengal, Jangal Mahal, and the Sundarbans—and the compensation trends over the last decade:**

### 1. North Bengal (Terai & Dooars)

- **Nature & Trends**
  - ✓ Major conflicts involve **elephants, leopards, bisons**, and occasionally **tigers**.
  - ✓ Between **2010 and 2019**, West Bengal recorded **726 human deaths, 1,233 injuries**, along with damage to **51,542 ha of crops**, and **34,446 huts** from elephant-related incidents
  - ✓ In the **Northern districts alone**, between **2015–2019**, West Bengal had the **second-highest** elephant-related human fatalities in India
  - ✓ Elephant corridors have shrunk and forest fragmentation increased, exacerbating conflicts.
- **Compensation**
  - ✓ From **April 2010 to March 2019**, West Bengal disbursed **₹59.09 crore** specifically for elephant depredation, covering crop damage, human injury, and deaths.
  - ✓ State policy: victims of fatal elephant attacks receive **₹2.5 lakh** ex gratia, and families gain **home-guard job offers**.

### 2. Jangal Mahal (Bankura, Purulia, Jhargram)

- **Nature & Trends**
  - ✓ Predominantly involves **elephants, wild boars, hyenas**, and occasional **leopard** encounters.
  - ✓ In Jhargram alone, ongoing elephant incursions into villages have led to human injuries and deaths.
  - ✓ Regional studies report frequent crop raids, property damage, and human–wildlife proximity due to deforestation and habitat loss.

- **Compensation**

- ✓ Though specific ex-gratia figures are not widely available, the state's policy (₹2.5 lakh for deaths, plus jobs) applies statewide—thus also covering Jangal Mahal.

### 3. Sundarbans

- **Nature & Trends**

- ✓ Dominated by **tiger** attacks (and some **crocodile** incidents).
- ✓ Historically, the region saw ~40 human fatalities annually, now reduced to **10–22 per year**.
- ✓ Between ~2015–2022, **150+ tiger attacks**, with ~100 fatalities were reported, yet only about **5 compensations** were disbursed.

- **Compensation**

- ✓ Legal provision: ₹5 lakh for death and ₹2 lakh for serious injury from tiger attacks.
- ✓ However, bureaucratic barriers frequently prevent payouts—many victims can't produce required documentation like post-mortems or legal permits.

### Summary Table

Region	Main Wildlife	Human Fatalities (est.)	Compensation Paid	Issues
North Bengal	Elephants, Leopards, Bisons	Hundreds (2010–19)	₹59.09 Cr (elephant-related), ₹2.5 L + job	Corridor loss, frequent incidents
Jangal Mahal	Elephants, Wild boar, Leopards	Several per year	Same statewide policy	Deforestation, habitat encroachment
Sundarbans	Tigers, Crocodiles	~10–22/year (recent); historically ~40/year	₹5 L (death), ₹2 L (injury) – Low disbursement	Strong administrative barriers, permit issues

### Additional Notes

- Since **2015–2020**, there have been **584 reported animal-caused deaths** statewide; the government responded with job placements for next-of-kin in ~434 cases.
- **North Bengal** saw at least **47 elephant electrocutions** since 2015—a tragic outcome of retaliatory or accidental kills.
- In the **Sundarbans**, management strategies like **nylon fencing, social awareness, and alternative livelihood training** have cut fatalities from ~40 to ~10/year.

### Key Takeaways

1. **High incidence** of human–wildlife conflict across all three regions, with North Bengal being hotspot for elephant clashes and Sundarbans leading in tiger-human encounters.
2. **Compensation policies exist** uniformly: ₹2.5 L for elephant deaths, ₹5 L for tiger deaths, plus jobs for families, but **disbursement is inconsistent**—especially in the Sundarbans.
3. **Non-monetary relief measures** (job provision, fencing, awareness, legal aid) are gaining traction but need better outreach and execution.

**Conflicts between the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 and existing Forest Acts in West Bengal**, with a focus on legal, institutional, and ground-level conflicts:

### Overview: Forest Rights Act vs Forest Acts

- The **Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA)** was enacted to correct historical injustices done to forest-dwelling communities.
- However, in West Bengal, like many other Indian states, its implementation often clashes with older forest governance frameworks like the **Indian Forest Act, 1927**, **West Bengal Forest Act, 1945**, and conservation policies under the **Wildlife Protection Act, 1972**.

### Legal and Institutional Conflicts

#### 1. Contradictory Approaches to Forest Governance

- **FRA** is a rights-based law empowering **Gram Sabhas**, giving them authority to manage and conserve community forest resources.
- In contrast, **Forest Acts** are control-based, vesting power in the **Forest Department**, focusing on policing, revenue, and conservation.
- This leads to **jurisdictional conflicts** over who has authority over forest land.

#### 2. Delayed and Poor Implementation of FRA

- West Bengal has been **one of the poorest performers** in FRA implementation.
- Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights under Section 3(1)(i) have been granted in **very few areas**, despite large tribal and forest-dependent populations in **Jangal Mahal, North Bengal**, and parts of **Sundarbans**.
- Forest officials often **deny or delay** verification and recognition of claims, fearing loss of control over forests.

#### 3. Eviction Drives vs FRA Provisions

- Forest Department-led eviction drives (especially against encroachers or for plantation/conservation projects) **violate FRA provisions**, which require that:
  - ✓ No forest-dweller can be evicted without **completion of the FRA claim process**.
  - ✓ Prior consent of **Gram Sabhas** is required.
- Yet in districts like **Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Bankura**, and **Purulia**, evictions and demolitions have been reported without due FRA process.

## Regional Case Highlights

### Jangal Mahal (Bankura, Purulia, Jhargram, Paschim Medinipur)

- Home to a large tribal population (Santhal, Munda, Lodha, etc.).
- Though Individual Forest Rights (IFR) have been distributed in some pockets, **CFR claims are either pending or denied.**
- Forest officials resist handing over management rights to Gram Sabhas, despite local efforts to form CFR Management Committees.

### North Bengal (Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Kalimpong, Darjeeling)

- FRA implementation faces friction in **forest villages**, especially among tribal groups like the **Rabha, Oraon, and Nepali-origin forest dwellers.**
- Many of these communities live in **Reserve Forest areas** or under **Tea Garden leases**, complicating land classification and claim processes.
- Forest officers assert control, even where FRA mandates community rights.

### Sundarbans

- FRA remains largely **non-implemented**, despite dependence on forest and aquatic resources (honey collection, fishing).
- Government's focus on **tiger conservation** often supersedes rights recognition.
- Families affected by wildlife attacks or conservation restrictions are denied access without community rights recognition.

## Conflicts in Conservation Projects

- **Compensatory Afforestation, Joint Forest Management (JFM)**, and plantation schemes under CAMPA or State Forest Missions are implemented without **Gram Sabha consultation.**
- This undermines FRA's requirement for community ownership and consent for diversion or afforestation projects.

## Structural Issues

- **Lack of Coordination** between:
  - ✓ Tribal Welfare Department (nodal agency for FRA)
  - ✓ Forest Department (key land custodian)
  - ✓ District administration and PRI bodies
- Gram Sabhas are often **non-functional or manipulated**, delaying claim verification or rejecting community governance rights.
- **Lack of awareness and legal aid** prevents tribal and forest communities from exercising FRA rights.

## Consequences

- **Alienation of communities** from their traditional forest livelihoods.
- **Loss of biodiversity conservation opportunities** through community-managed forests.
- Rising **tensions and distrust** between tribal people and the Forest Department.
- **Potential legal violations** of FRA, which is a central Act overriding older forest laws under Article 13 of the Constitution.

## Recommendations for Harmonization

1. **Institutional Convergence:** FRA should be implemented jointly by Forest and Tribal departments, not in conflict.
2. **Training of Forest Officials:** On FRA provisions and constitutional rights of STs and forest dwellers.
3. **CFR Recognition Drive:** Especially in Jangal Mahal and North Bengal, with technical mapping and Gram Sabha support.
4. **Community-Led Conservation:** Shift from JFM to FRA-based management.
5. **End to Illegal Evictions:** All forest eviction drives must halt until FRA claims are settled.
6. **Legal and Paralegal Training** for tribal communities to assert their rights.

# **Sundarban Jana Sramajibi Mancha (SJSM) – A Profile**

## **1. Introduction**

Sundarban Jana Sramajibi Mancha (SJSM) is a community-rooted organization committed to defending the rights and livelihoods of forest and water-dependent communities in the Sundarbans region of West Bengal. Established on 25th February 2013, SJSM operates under the West Bengal Society Registration Act XXVI, 1961 (Reg. No. S/2L/1677 of 2012-13) and is registered on the NGO Darpan portal (Unique ID: WB/2017/0173292).

Headquartered at Paschim Radhanagar village, Gosaba Block, SJSM has evolved into a key platform advocating for the Forest Rights Act (FRA), ecological justice, cultural revival, and sustainable development in the Sundarbans delta. The organization works across North and South 24 Parganas, with a current turnover of Rs. 8 lakhs (FY 2023–24).

## **2. Legal and Organizational Details**

- Contact Person: Pabitra Mandal (Secretary)
- Email: radhanagar.sjsm2@gmail.com
- Phone: 98747 71779
- Operational Focus: Entire Sundarbans region; emphasis on forest-dependent and riverine communities.

## **3. Focus Areas of Work**

SJSM works in multiple sectors:

- Implementation and awareness of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006
- Legal advocacy and human rights
- Community-based livelihood and resource rights
- Cultural empowerment and preservation
- Disaster relief and rehabilitation
- Gender justice and training for women and youth

SJSM operates as a grassroots platform, addressing the multifaceted issues faced by forest-dependent, riverine, and marginalized communities of the Indian Sundarbans. Its core activities span across **legal rights, ecological justice, women and youth empowerment, and sustainable livelihood development.**

The following are key thematic focus areas:

#### **A. Implementation of Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006**

- Awareness generation and training on individual and community forest rights.
- Mobilization of Gram Sabhas and assistance in claim documentation.
- Advocacy for FRA implementation in Sundarbans-specific contexts, especially fishing and NTFP rights.

#### **B. Wildlife Conflicts & Tiger Victim Families**

- **Support to families of tiger victims**, especially widows, through counseling, financial aid, and livelihood skill training (tailoring, food processing, etc.).
- Legal and administrative advocacy for **compensation** and **recognition** of victim families.
- Community awareness about safe zones, permit processes, and emergency measures during forest access.

#### **C. Human Trafficking & Safe Migration**

- Addressing the **growing risk of human trafficking**, especially among vulnerable adolescent girls and single women.
- Organizing awareness campaigns and collaborating with anti-trafficking networks.
- Counselling and skill training for **migrated and returned workers**, including safe migration protocols.

#### **D. Domestic Violence and Women Empowerment**

- Identification and support for **victims of domestic violence** through local action groups.
- Facilitating **legal counselling, mediation**, and linkage with government welfare schemes.
- Formation of SHGs and women's collectives for economic and social empowerment.

### **E. Migrant Workers' Support and Reintegration**

- Conducting surveys and documentation of **migrant workers**, particularly those returning post-COVID or post-cyclones.
- Helping workers access social security benefits (ration, pension, MGNREGA).
- Skill upgrading and reintegration into local economy through livelihood training.

### **F. Sustainable Livelihoods & NTFP-Based Economy**

- Promoting **sustainable harvesting** of minor forest produce (honey, crabs, medicinal herbs).
- Establishment of SHG-led **processing units** for honey bottling, crab fattening, dried fish, and natural craft items.
- Facilitation of **value chain development** and **market access** through eco-labeling, exhibitions, and FPO linkages.

### **G. Climate Resilience and Disaster Preparedness**

- Awareness and training on **climate-adaptive practices** like salt-tolerant farming, mangrove restoration, and safe housing.
- Engagement in policy-level advocacy on embankments, water management, and cyclone shelters.
- Community participation in **early warning systems**, disaster kits, and rescue protocol orientation.

## **4. Key Programmes and Activities**

Sundarban Jana Sramajibi Mancha (SJSJM) has a rich history of initiatives aimed at empowering forest-dependent communities in the Sundarbans. Below are some of their past activities:

### **Public Hearing on Forest Rights Act Implementation (January 31, 2016)**

- Venue: Dakhin Uttar Danga Primary School, Bagbagan, Rangabelia, Gosaba Island, Sundarbans.
- Participants: Over 200 local residents from various islands, including Shamsbernagar, Gosaba, Saatjaliya, Kultali, Bali, and Kumirmari, along with more than 100 representatives from mass organizations across India.
- Objective: Address the non-implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 and the challenges faced by forest-dependent communities

The hearing provided a platform for community members to present 22 oral and written submissions detailing issues such as harassment by forest officials, arbitrary permit systems, and violations of their rights under the FRA. The panel included notable figures like social activist **Medha Patkar**, **Supreme Court lawyer Adv. Sanjay Parikh**, and **Professor Nandini Sundar** from Delhi School of Economics.

### **Advocacy for Honey Collectors**

SJSM has actively supported honey collectors in the Sundarbans, advocating for fair pricing and rights over minor forest produce. Traditionally, honey collectors received minimal compensation for their labor-intensive and hazardous work. SJSM's interventions have facilitated better market access, enabling collectors to sell honey at improved rates, thereby enhancing their livelihoods and promoting sustainable harvesting practices.

### **Recent Activities on FRA and other issues:**

#### **A. Workshop on FRA and Livelihood Challenges**

- Dates: 22–23 June 2024
- Venue: Pakhiralaya village, Gosaba Block, South 24 Parganas
- Participants: Over 40 forest-dependent members and activists
- Objective: Raise awareness about FRA 2006, explore sustainable livelihoods through forest-based resources (fish, crab, honey, medicinal plants), and address implementation gaps.

#### **Key Issues Discussed:**

- Sustainable harvesting of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP)
- Permit issues in Tiger Reserve and along the Bangladesh border
- Women's safety and access rights
- Formation of a regional advocacy network

Outcome: Commitment to protect forest rights and promote sustainable development for forest-dependent people.

#### **B. State-Level Consultation on FRA – Kolkata**

- Dates: 7–8 September 2024
- Venue: Seva Kendra, Tangra, Kolkata
- Participants: Over 80 from North Bengal, Jungle Mahal, Sundarbans

- Organizers: SJSM; Coordinated by Pabitra Mandal (Secretary), Abhijit Kundu (Vice-President), Sirsendu Dutta, Sukesh Ghosh

### **Day 1 Highlights:**

- Inaugural Speaker: Shri Purnendu Basu, Former Minister of Agriculture, WB
- Keynote: Shri Naba Dutta, General Secretary, Nagarik Mancha
- Discussions on:
  - ✓ Gram Sabha's role in FRA claim process
  - ✓ Administrative hurdles and resistance
  - ✓ Region-specific panel discussions

### **Day 2 Highlights:**

- Capacity Building for Gram Sabha members on how to submit claims
- Roadmap for FRA implementation
- Formation of State-Level Preparatory Committee with Pabitra Mandal as Convenor

### **Outcome:**

- Formation of State Committee (WBJSM) and Advisory Board
- Roadmap for awareness, training, and capacity-building

### **C. Extended General Meeting on FRA and Livelihoods**

- Dates: 8–9 February 2025
- Venue: Pather Sathi, Canning, South 24 Parganas
- Participants: Around 50 community leaders from Kultali, Gosaba, Canning, Hingalgunj

### **Special Guests:**

- Subhash Chandra Acharyya (Ex Jt Director, Sundarban Development Board)
- Shambhu Saha (Sundarban Matsyajibi Raksha Committee)
- Gobinda Das (Matsyabibi Joutha Sangram Samiti)
- Jayanta Basu (Journalist, Sundarban Specialist)

### **Themes Discussed:**

- Water and forest-dependent livelihoods
- Legal and ecological challenges
- Recommendations for policy advocacy

### **D. Key Policy Advocacy Recommendations**

Outlined during Canning Meeting, February 2025:

**I. Forest Rights Act Implementation:**

- Recognize traditional fishing/crab/honey-gathering rights
- Mandate Gram Sabha formation in Sundarban villages
- Clarify forest boundaries and rights
- Simplify FRA guidelines for Sundarbans context

**II. Livelihood Security:**

- Timely issue of Boat License Certificates (BLCs)
- Restoration of creeks and rivers
- Hatcheries for saltwater fish
- Include rivers in Ganga Action Plan

**III. Social Justice & Human Rights:**

- Prevent abuse and harassment by forest officials
- Legal representation of fisherfolk in policy forums
- Full compensation for wildlife attack victims
- Old age pension and housing for fishermen
- Financial support during fishing bans
- Use of mechanized boats for safety

**IV. Environmental Safeguards:**

- Regulate tourism
- Stop mangrove destruction
- Ban trawl fishing within 12 nautical miles
- Construct climate-resilient embankments

**V. Administrative Reforms:**

- Grievance redressal mechanisms
- Clarify mobile phone policy in core areas
- Rename Canning Station to Matla Station

**E. Cultural Revival and Empowerment Programme****Highlights:**

- Felicitations of traditional performers
- Showcase of Banbibi Pala and Sundarbani folk songs
- Cultural wing launched to connect riverine villages through heritage

Objective: To revive and empower traditional culture rooted in resilience, shared beliefs, and unity (Hindu-Muslim harmony around Bonbibi and Dakshin Roy narratives).

## **5. Vision Ahead**

SJSM envisions a Sundarbans where traditional communities thrive with dignity, protected rights, and sustainable livelihoods. It seeks to:

- Expand Gram Sabha formation and FRA claims
- Train communities on legal literacy and ecological conservation
- Build cultural resilience through theatre and folklore
- Strengthen advocacy for marginalized voices at the policy level