

Community Forest Rights in West Bengal

Emerging insights and pathways for Collaborative Action



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This report is an outcome of joint efforts of civil society organizations, grassroots leaders, academic experts, and government departments, alongside BRLF's team in West Bengal. The insights presented in the report are purely based on data emerging from the field engagement and does not represent or convey the voice or institutional stance of BRLF.

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Recommended Citation:

Paul, A., Basumatry, M., Kaity, S., Poddar, S., Khajanchi, D. 2025. Community Forest Rights in West Bengal. Emerging insights and pathways for Collaborative Action. BRLF Report. West Bengal.



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Acknowledgement

This report could not have taken shape without the involvement and support of many individuals and institutions. We owe our deepest thanks to the civil society organizations and field contributors who generously shared their time, experiences, and knowledge from the ground. Among them, the Centre for People's Forestry (CPF), Society for Direct Initiative for Social and Health Action (DISHA), and Uttarbanga Ban Jan Shramajibi Mancha (UBJSM) made especially significant contributions.

We also extend our appreciation to the Land & Revenue Department, Forest Department, Tribal Development Department, and the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development, Government of West Bengal, along with the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA), Press Information Bureau (PIB), Backward Class Welfare Department, Purulia, and the West Bengal Tribal Development Co-operative Corporation Ltd. (WBTDCC Ltd.). Their cooperation in sharing data and institutional perspectives provided a critical foundation for this report.

We are in deep gratitude to the Gram Sabhas and community leaders whose determination and resilience continue to inspire the pursuit of collective forest governance. We sincerely appreciate the contributions of the following organisations and individuals in shaping this report.

Organisations:

Uttarbanga Ban Jan Sramajibi Mancha (UBJSM)
Centre for People's Forestry (CPF)
Society for Direct Initiative for Social and (DISHA)
Sundarban Jana Sramajibi Mancha (SJSJ)
Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE)

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Mr. George Monippally, Forest Rights Activist
Mr. Nakul Chandra Mahto, Ajodhya, Bagmundi, Purulia

List of Abbreviations

BCW	Backward Classes Welfare Department
BDO	Block Development Officer
BLRO	Block Land & Land Reforms Officer
BRLF	Bharat Rural Livelihoods Foundation
CFR	Community Forest Rights
CPF	Community Partnership Forum
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DFO	Divisional Forest Officer
DISHA	Development Initiative for Social and Human Action
DLC	District Level Committee
FRA	Forest Rights Act
FRC	Forest Rights Committee
FSI	Forest Survey of India
GP	Gram Panchayat
GPS	Global Positioning System
IFR	Individual Forest Rights
MoTA	Ministry of Tribal Affairs
OTFD	Other Traditional Forest Dwellers
PIB	Press Information Bureau
RoR	Record of Rights
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SDLC	Sub-Divisional Level Committee
SDO	Sub-Divisional Officer
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
ST	Scheduled Tribes
TSU	Technical Support Unit
UBJSM	Uttarbanga Ban Jan Sharamjibi Mancha

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1. Introduction

The Forest Rights Act, 2006 ([Government of India, 2006](#)), provides a statutory framework and a governance architecture to recognise rights of tribal and forest dwelling communities and democratise forest governance through decentralisation and strengthening of participatory governance mechanisms. In West Bengal, the existing institutional, policy, governance architecture intersects with diverse ecologies and cultures—from the Himalayan foothills of Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri to the Sal forests of Jangalmahal—where livelihoods, cultural identity, and ecological stewardship are tightly interlinked.

While progress in Individual Forest Rights (IFR) is visible in West Bengal, the recognition of Community Forest Rights (CFR) has advanced at a slower pace. The state recorded 10,119 community claims and issued 686 titles (6.78%), compared with 44,444 IFR titles against 1,31,962 claims filed (33.68%) ([MoTA, 2025](#)). This contrast reflects not only the uneven pace of implementation but also the unfulfilled potential of CFRs to strengthen collective forest governance, enhanced ecological outcomes and sustainable livelihoods. A Gram Sabha member from West Bengal observes, *“We filed our CFR claim in 2017, but till today no one has come to measure our forest,”* illustrating the persistent information gap between community contexts, statutory entitlement and administrative governance and delivery system.

Against this context, BRLF undertook this exercise to consolidate verified data, validate findings through community voices, and curate institutional perspectives into a single evidence base. The purpose of this report is not evaluative in a critical sense, but constructive: to inform dialogue among government departments, civil society organisations, and community institutions, thereby enabling a transparent and process-driven approach to enhancing the forest governance ecosystem in the state. In doing so, the report seeks to strengthen reflections on key tenets of collaborative action to ensure that community forest rights evolve into lived realities of inclusive and responsive governance and sustainable development.



Image 1: An ensemble of forest produce

2. Methodology

The methodological approach of this report is anchored in the principles of triangulation, combining official statistics, peer-reviewed and civil society literature, and ground-level documentation undertaken by BRLF and collaborating organisations. The intent of this report is to create a consolidated knowledge base that reflects both the macro-level patterns of CFR implementation in West Bengal and the micro-level lived realities of key stakeholders navigating the claim filing and management processes.

The authors followed an abductive approach to document and validate key experiences emerging from the ground. While the abductive approach scaffolded the journey of discovering the nuances of the institutional architecture and cultural geographies of forest governance, it also facilitated the process of iterative validation through triangulation of sources, data and analysis.

2.1. Sources of Secondary Data

Government Statistics:

Official data from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA FRA Status Report, March 2025), Press Information Bureau (PIB, July 2025), and the India State of Forest Report (FSI, 2021) were utilised to establish a state- and national-level baseline for CFR recognition. These sources provided quantitative indicators such as the number of claims filed, titles issued, and area recognised.

Academic Literature:

Scholarly analyses on forest governance, collective resource management, and the political economy of FRA implementation informed the report for understanding institutional drivers and process bottlenecks encountered by different stakeholders.

Citizen Reports:

Documentation reports from CSOs were reviewed to capture on-ground perspectives on claim facilitation, participatory mapping, and advocacy strategies.

2.2. Primary-Adjacent Field Documentation

While the report does not conduct fresh ethnography, it draws extensively on BRLF-supported field-level studies and micro-evidence, including dossiers, participatory maps, and district case notes from Purulia, Bankura, Alipurduar, and Paschim Bardhaman. Direct testimonies from Gram Sabha members, CSO facilitators, and district officials—collected during dialogues and review meetings are incorporated as qualitative evidence.

2.3. Analytical Framework

The analytical process followed a **three-step framework**:

- **Collation and Validation:** All secondary data sources were compiled and cross-checked against each other. Discrepancies (e.g., community vs. government-reported claim counts) were reconciled through corroboration from field-level records.
- **Analytical framing:** Data was organised into thematic clusters—recognition patterns, community preparedness, convergence mechanisms, verification and record integrity, and post-recognition governance. This structure informed the formulation of Lines of Inquiry.
- **Triangulation:** Quantitative statistics (e.g., claim-to-title ratios, RoR anomalies) were consistently paired with qualitative evidence (quotes, case vignettes) to ensure robustness and depth. This mixed-method triangulation enhanced both reliability and contextual richness.

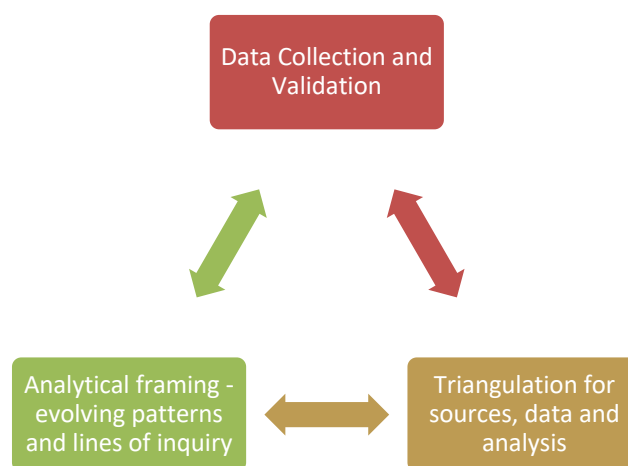


Figure 1: The iterative analytical process

2.4. Scope and Limitations

- **Scope:** The study encompasses evidence from June to July 2025, covering both North Bengal (Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri) and South Bengal (Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram, Paschim Bardhaman). It situates state-level findings within the national FRA trajectory to highlight comparative performance.
- **Limitations:** As a field engagement exercise, the study does not involve primary surveys or ethnographic immersion. Certain datasets, such as disaggregated district-level CFR categories, remain incomplete or inconsistently reported. The reliance on CSO documentation introduces the possibility of facilitation bias, although triangulation with official statistics mitigates this risk.
- **Strength:** The methodological strength lies in layering national statistics, state snapshots, and district-level micro-evidence, ensuring that conclusions reflect both macro policy dynamics and ground-level institutional realities.

3. Unveiling the embedded paradox

The trajectory of Community Forest Rights (CFR) implementation in West Bengal demonstrates a paradoxical mix: statutory clarity and community preparedness on one side, and uneven recognition, procedural inertia, and fragmented governance on the other. Rather than casting this as a “problem,” the secondary field-based engagement framework positions the discussion in terms of critical questions that must be pursued collaboratively by state institutions, civil society, and communities.

3.1 Key lines of Inquiry

How can West Bengal bridge the evident distance between legal entitlements and on-ground practice, ensuring that the provisions of Forest Rights Act, 2006 are not merely notional but effectively operational at the level of Gram Sabhas and district administrations? This leads to a broader inquiry: what institutional arrangements, processes, systems, and convergence mechanisms will most reliably transform demonstrated community readiness into recognised CFR titles and sustained forest governance?

Further, West Bengal has nearly 13.5% of its geographical area under forests, and a large Scheduled Tribe population dependent on these resources for their livelihood ([FSL, 2019](#)), yet the statistical realisation of CFRs remains disproportionately low.

The report seeks to inquire into,

- I. How do forest cover and population dependency translate into administrative throughput?
- II. What could be critical elements of the pathways for collaboration between Government, CSOs, and Community Institutions?
- III. How can the governance architecture embed a collaborative culture across departments and key institutions

Institutional Functioning and Throughput

- **What prevents timely disposal of complete dossiers?** In Purulia, for instance, 20 Gram Sabhas with four complete dossiers submitted during 2021–22 have yet to see titles issued, largely because of irregular SDLC/DLC meetings and the absence of fixed timelines. The report dwells into possible mechanisms of institutionalisation with capacity to embed effectiveness in efficiency in operational handling of dossiers.
- **How can acknowledgement and tracking systems be made mandatory?** Field observation reveals that files are acknowledged but no queries or progress are recorded thereafter. This prompts a pressing inquiry on use of technology to ensure transparency in processes that can nurture accountability and empathy amongst key stakeholders: can serialised, claimant-facing digital IDs be introduced to create visibility for applicants and accountability for administrators? *“We filed our CFR claim in 2017, but till today no one has come to measure our forest”*

Verification and Record Integrity

- **To what extent do cadastral anomalies inhibit CFR recognition?** In Alipurduar’s Panijhora–Khuklung belt, ~800 Record-of-Rights (RoR) defects/ discrepancies were flagged during verification. Integrating technology-based reconciliation of cadastral data and participatory maps emerges as an important dimension of learning for West Bengal particularly from states like Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Odisha.
- **How should discrepancies between physical and digital records be resolved?** In Bankura (Sutan), physical IFR pattas exist but do not appear in digital systems, undermining access to credit

and schemes. The inquiry here focuses on institutional pathways that can clean legacy records while also updating digital platforms like BanglarBhumi or eBhuchitra (Digital land records portal, West Bengal; NIC, 2024).

Community Readiness and Civil Society Facilitation

- **Can procedural guarantees ensure demonstrated readiness within the system for responsiveness to emerging context?** In Paschim Bardhaman, a legally formed Gram Sabha with 465 signatories—including 221 women—and detailed applications (286 IFR, CFR claim of 367 ha) remains unacknowledged at SDLC, with the SDO citing lack of higher-level instruction.
- **What could be the role of CSOs within the convergence architecture for enhanced effectiveness and outreach of processes?** Organizations like UBJS (UBJS, 2025), CPF (CPF, 2025), and DISHA (DISHA, 2025) are facilitating system-ready claims.

Convergence and Governance Beyond Recognition

- **How can enhanced inter-departmental convergence be nurtured?** FRA requires collaboration between Forest, Land & Land Reforms, Tribal Development, and Panchayati Raj institutions. However, should convergence remain discretionary or should it become mandatory monitoring indicator through time-bound joint verification protocols and shared accountability dashboards.



Image 2: Women Showcasing Forest Produce

- **What can nurture the systemic shift from recognition of rights to effective institutional governance?** Even where CFR claims are recognised, communities often lack financial or institutional support for resource management and livelihood generation. The report dwells into the potential and promise of institutionalising post-recognition toolkits—bylaws, micro-plans, and access to schemes as embedded elements into the recognition process.

4. The policy and field panorama

The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 (Government of India, 2006), established a rights-based pathway for democratizing forest governance by vesting statutory authority in Gram Sabhas to recognise and exercise both Individual Forest Rights (IFR) and Community Forest Rights (CFR).

4.1 Policy frame and structural potential

In West Bengal, the salience of this policy frame is heightened by ecological and socio-cultural conditions: the Himalayan foothills of Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri and the sal-dominated Jangalmahal tracts of Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram, and Paschim Bardhaman host communities whose livelihoods, customary resource use, and cultural identity are tightly coupled with forests—making CFR operationalization simultaneously a legal imperative and a developmental one.

“We all agree the law is clear, but when it comes to convergence between departments, no one wants to take the first step.”

Stakeholder dialogues and administrative consultations captured in the secondary data indicate an explicit acknowledgement of CFR’s transformative potential at senior levels, alongside a measured recognition that convergence across departments must be strengthened for consistent field translation. As one official summarised, *“We all agree the law is clear, but when it comes to convergence between departments, no one wants to take the first step.”* Community

facilitators in Purulia echo this operational reality: *“The Gram Sabha has rights on paper, but every time we push, the process is slowed by new instructions.”* These voices together illustrate how the FRA has opened a statutory space for Gram Sabhas, while actualisation hinges on routine, predictable implementation practices.

The second pillar of the structural potential rests institutional and social contexts in communities. West Bengal’s dense Gram Panchayat network and long-standing traditions of collective land management in tribal belts provide a ready platform for CFR governance—particularly when supported by record integrity, capacity-building, and convergence with livelihood schemes. The Bansgora case (Paschim Bardhaman) offers a concrete illustration of community readiness to take on governance responsibilities, as one Gram Sabha elder noted: *“We are ready with maps and signatures; only the government’s stamp is missing.”*

“We are ready with maps and signatures; only the government’s stamp is missing.”

In short, the literature portrays West Bengal as a low-realization/high-potential state: national snapshots place it among weaker performers on CFR issuance, yet the ecological endowments and community institutions demonstrate the potential for scalable CFR governance is procedural challenges are addressed consistently.

4.1 Administrative positioning and convergence

The administrative reality of CFR implementation in West Bengal is described as layered: policy intent is visible at higher tiers, but the translation of intent into structured action at district and block levels remains challenged due to absence of appropriate mechanisms that nurture operational excellence. The literature underscores that progress depends on functional convergence among key departments—Forest, Tribal Development, Land & Land Reforms, and allied lines—within the statutory DLC/SDLC framework.

At the national level, the scale of implementation is significant: 2,11,609 community claims had been filed, and 1,21,705 community titles issued—yet this covers only about 0.8% of total forest land area recognised under FRA. In West Bengal, the latest official snapshot reports 10,119 community claims and 686 community titles covering ~572 acres. Read together with 44,444 IFR titles (~21,014 acres), this yields an IFR:CFR ratio of ~65:1, a comparative lens that many stakeholders use to explore why collective entitlements process differently from individual parcels.

“We all sit in the same meetings, but when it comes to verification, each department acts like it is someone else’s job.”

The institutional anchors are clear: the Tribal Development Department (nodal) and the Forest Department (substantive domain), with the Land & Land Reforms and other lines as enabling partners. However, role performance varies; district-level accounts point to siloed execution and irregular joint verification as key determinants of throughput. A district officer characterised the crux succinctly: *“We all sit in the same meetings, but when it comes to verification, each department acts like it is someone else’s job.”*

Comparative evidence aligns with this diagnosis: states that institutionalised empowered, cross-departmental district committees and routine convergence have reported greater CFR recognition. In West Bengal, inconsistent functionality of committees is observed; field narratives from Bankura and Alipurduar (2025) describe claims remaining in limbo owing to absent or delayed joint verifications. Additionally, field documentation from Bankura indicate willingness amongst communities and district level officials to recognise CSOs as knowledge partners. In dialogues with key state officials, digitisation reform appears as a strategic lever to reduce duplication and enable smoother inter-departmental workflows.

4.2 Institutional framework and data landscape

The state and national data pairing provides both scale and diagnostic contrast. Nationally, millions of hectares are potentially eligible for CFR; yet 0.8% area coverage by May 2025 indicates a cautious pace of community-level recognition. In West Bengal, the 10,119 claims / 686 titles / ~572 acres snapshot gives a quantitative floor to the discussion and supports a data-led framing of where the pipeline accumulates friction. The state-to-national juxtaposition also reveals opportunity space when read against West Bengal’s forest-fringe village density and forest cover—indicators the literature invokes to argue for structured acceleration of enhanced CFR implementation grounded in convergence and robust verification standards.

Digitization, records, and verification: the data backbone

Across all data sources analysed for this study, the “last-mile” constraints are informational: fragmented legacy records, partial digitization, and absent end-to-end tracking across Forest, Land & Land Reforms, and BCW lines. Senior land officials note that when older records impede scrutiny, fresh ground surveys are conducted and revised parcels are ingested into BanglarBhumi /eBhuchitra; nevertheless, backfilling

older settlements is time-consuming, prolonging otherwise lawful claims. Field notes show the user-side consequences: physical IFR pattas not mirrored digitally years after issuance, and isolated cases of unsigned pattas that reduce defensibility in downstream transactions.

A recurrent administrative proposition—prominent in district leadership narratives—is a single, integrated FRA portal with tri-departmental access, serialised application IDs, and claimant-facing status dashboards (leveraging Bangla Sahayata Kendra kiosks for assisted filing). This is framed not as an exception but as consistent with the state’s digital-governance trajectory to reduce misplacement risk and institutionalise traceability. The logic is illustrated vividly by Bansgora (Paschim Bardhaman): a complete, high-quality dossier (465 signatories with 221 women; 286 IFRs; 367 ha CFR; GPS maps; FRA forms) that nonetheless has not received an official receipt—precisely the kind of procedural vacuum a serialised, transparent pipeline is designed to prevent.

The digitisation gap goes beyond convenience wherein record integrity underpins tenure credibility. Practitioners repeatedly warn that pattas issued without a complete records-update cycle (or without BLRO recording) create duplications and disputes. Field notes from Bankura elevate this from anecdote to pattern: dozens of households with physical pattas find no digital reflection even after appeals, constraining scheme access and credit. Officials confirm consistent ingestion of updated surveys into BanglarBhumi /eBhuchitra while emphasising the technical nature of reconciling legacy Alamat markers and forest–revenue map discordance—including cross-state lessons (e.g., acreage mismatches elsewhere) that encourage cautious, collaborative data hygiene.

A second informational bottleneck is absence of application tracking and claimant visibility. Official records with regards to the claims are at the risk of damage/ misplacement and claimants receive no periodic status updates. This operational challenge at both ends of the government system and the communities becomes a structural driver of attrition in community mobilisation for shared accountability of forest resources. Case documentation from Paschim Bardhaman and Purulia shows complete CFR dossiers lodged with all mandated authorities (SDO/SDLC, BDO, BLRO, DFO, BCW) that do not trigger timely verification or even formal receipts. Gram Sabha leaders describe this succinctly: *“We submitted everything, but there is not even a receipt.”*

4.3 District-level micro-evidence: pipeline dynamics

The literature’s most actionable insights emerge from district case material:

- **Purulia (Ajodhya–Baghmundi–Arsha corridor)**

Twenty fully constituted Gram Sabhas submitted four complete CFR dossiers (Ranga-Barelahar, Tarpania, Kalijhora, Bandhghutu–Baruajhara–Dulgubera) during 2021–2022; none has yet resulted in decisions on titles. Officials cite irregular SDLC/DLC meeting frequency and no fixed timeline, while files show acknowledgement without further movement. The pattern points to cadence (meeting calendars) and verification follow-through as key levers for operational efficiencies.

- **Alipurduar (Dooars)**

Thirty-five CFR claims submitted in 2025 (Uttarbanga Ban Jan Sharamjibi Mancha) are pending at SDLC; a rapid verification flagged ~800 RoR defects in the Panijhora–Khuklung belt—clarifying that data hygiene and cross-departmental validation are necessary to unlock throughput.

- **Paschim Bardhaman (Bansgora, Durgapur–Faridpur)**

A legally formed Gram Sabha with 465 signatories (including 221 women), 286 IFR applications, and a 367-hectare CFR claim reports that submissions have not yet been accepted at SDLC; the SDO cites lack of instruction on receiving the bundle. This illustrates a first-mile issue—intake and acknowledgement—which a serialised digital pipeline could normalize.

- **Bankura (Ranibandh block)**

A quorum-strong Gram Sabha held 11 June 2025, an FRC constituted, and resolutions filed/re-submitted in early July 2025 per protocol; the case awaits movement. Additionally, IFR pattas that exist physically but not digitally (e.g., Sutan) point to the records layer as a determinant of post-recognition services, including finance and scheme benefits.

Collectively, these cases illuminate a shared pipeline anatomy—intake, tracking, verification, calendared decision cycles, title issuance, and record-updation—within which a small number of friction points disproportionately shape outcomes.

Verification protocols and joint surveys

Where digitization is partial, joint verification becomes the fulcrum of due process. District guidance (e.g., Bankura) articulates a clear sequence: Gram Sabha resolution → submission to GP Pradhan/Range Officer/BLRO → joint verification and mapping (Range Officer + BLRO + Panchayat) → forwarding to higher committees. Communities have proactively requested pre-2005 maps, current village maps, and official FRA forms to standardize inputs and address discrepancies early. However, the literature documents cases with no initiated joint verification for extended periods, despite complete packets—reinforcing that time-bound work orders and serial tracking are implementation essentials rather than optional enhancements.

Mapping convergence (participatory ↔ cadastral)

District dialogues acknowledge that historical forest boundaries recorded through physical markers often diverge from contemporary cadastral sheets; reconciliation requires coordinated mapping and, where warranted, fresh surveys. Counter-examples illustrate the benefits of alignment: Alipurduar demonstrates that when participatory CFR maps and cadastral records are reconciled, routine administration accelerates. Further, Purulia dossiers (2021–2025; 20 Gram Sabhas; four complete CFR files with GPS-based resource maps) demonstrate that community-generated geospatial evidence can be rigorous—the challenge is workflow continuity from verification to final record-updation and acceptance of community-generated geospatial evidence in formal records of the government.

4.4 Aggregated bottlenecks: a systems view

A cross-reading of the compiled materials identifies **recurrent bottleneck families**:

- **Systemic.** Fragmented mandates and overlapping interfaces across Forest, Revenue, and Land Records produce inconsistent messaging and diffused accountability; verification lags where cadastral updates are pending and where management roles are interpreted conservatively.
- **Procedural.** Even with mobilised Gram Sabhas and complete dossiers, submissions can halt at SDLC/DLC on account of checklist interpretations or deferred joint surveys; applicants often lack status visibility for appeal or follow-up.
- **Political/Signaling.** Localised discouragements and prioritisation of other schemes can attenuate administrative attention, not as policy opposition but as competing bandwidth—a common public administration phenomenon that underscores the need for predictable cadences and transparent queues.

The IFR:CFR 65:1 ratio becomes a diagnostic lens rather than an indictment: it draws attention to where collective rights—which inherently require multi-agency verification and record reconciliation—encounter higher coordination costs than parcelled IFR.

Why paper-first systems falter (and what the literature suggests)

Three recurrent patterns help explain persistence of backlogs:

1. **Institutional silence.** Neither acceptance nor rejection—thus no appealable decision—leads to status limbo; lack of serial IDs and time-stamped acknowledgements remove the plausibility of an accountability trail.
2. **File-handling risk.** Without cross-departmental e-tracking, submissions are stalled invisibly; thus making the case for single-window dashboards to convert invisible queues into shared worklists across different stakeholders.
3. **Knowledge decay.** Extended delays erode collective memory and increase re-mobilisation costs, dampening community confidence over time—a social transaction cost that rarely appears in formal metrics but influences the pace and durability of reforms.

The Bangsora dossier functions as an archetype: despite meeting high standards of evidence (signatory matrices, gender inclusion, GPS maps, FRA forms), it has not advanced because entry-point protocols (acknowledgement and serial creation) are not uniformly enacted—an argument for systemic, not episodic, adoption of digital intake and tracking.

4.5 Constructive signals and emergent directions

The literature is notably constructive in tone, emphasising solutions already articulated by public officials and community actors:

- **Digital reform as foundational**

A dedicated FRA pipeline—integrated with BanglarBhumi /eBhuchitra enables structured intake, officer work-queues, claimant dashboards, and RoR hygiene drives (e.g., in clusters like Panijhora–Khuklung where ~800 anomalies were flagged).

This aligns with the state’s governance digitization trajectory and can be piloted in two demonstration clusters to refine protocols before broader scale-up.

- **Convergence that binds**

States that normalised district-level convergence report stronger CFR progress; West Bengal’s committees can move from formal to functional through standing periodic calendars, joint verification protocols, and public minutes, transforming meetings from events to process engines.

- **Leveraging CSO facilitation**

The literature repeatedly documents CSO roles (UBJSM (UBJSM, 2025), CPF (CPF, 2025), DISHA (DISHA, 2025)) in dossier quality, participatory mapping, and follow-through. Institutional recognition of CSOs as technical partners—while preserving Gram Sabha primacy—can stabilize pipeline quality without creating parallel systems.

- **Community-centered governance**

Voices across districts indicate communities perceive CFR as central to livelihood security and stewardship; centering community-led verification and grievance redress avoids over-centralisation and builds local accountability.

- **Administrative champions**

Reform-minded officials proposing Arabari-style institutionalisation and record-system hygiene provide near-term nodes for learning. The literature suggests orienting learning ledgers (quarterly, problem–solution–result notes) around such nodes to build momentum.

4.6 Synthesis: from statutory intent to routine practice

Three integrative insights emerge:

1. **Readiness vs. realization.** Communities and CSOs supply system-ready evidence—quorum Gram Sabhas, gender-inclusive resolutions, GPS maps; the decisive variables are cadence (regular SDLC/DLC), verification follow-through, and records synchronisation. When these three align, time-to-title shortens; when any one falters, backlogs accumulate.
2. **Collective rights entail coordination costs.** The IFR:CFR ratio is best read as a coordination diagnostic - collective claims require multi-agency verification and cadastral reconciliation;

building binding convergence and digital traceability can normalize those costs, converting a structural challenge into a managed routine.

3. **Constructive pathway exists.** The literature identifies feasible, state-compatible steps—serialised intake, joint verification SOPs, district calendars, RoR hygiene drives, and post-recognition toolkits—that reinforce each other. With these in place, West Bengal can translate high structural potential into scalable CFR governance models without adversarial framing.

5. Key elements of Collaborative pathways

Each insight discussed in this section is tied to patterns surfaced in the state snapshot, district micro-evidence, and stakeholder narratives. The aim is to move from “what happened” to “what the patterns mean,”.

Recognition equity as a coordination signal, not a performance verdict

West Bengal’s IFR:CFR ratio of ~65:1 (44,444 IFR titles vs. 686 community titles; ~21,014.27 acres IFR vs. ~572.03 acres community) is often read as an outcome gap. An analytical reading sees it as a coordination signal: collective rights (CFR/CR) carry higher verification and inter-departmental synchronization costs than parcelled IFRs. Therefore, the ratio spotlights where coordination frictions concentrate, rather than indicting any single department. In short, the data is telling us where the “work of convergence” actually lives in the pipeline.

Readiness–throughput paradox: evidence shows communities are “pipeline-ready”

Across multiple districts, Gram Sabhas exhibit strong procedural compliance (full quorum, gender-inclusive resolutions, complete dossiers with GPS maps), yet dossiers stall post-submission. In Purulia, 20 Gram Sabhas filed four complete CFR dossiers (2021–2022); none has yet translated into titles, with irregular SDLC/DLC calendars cited by officials. The insight is that throughput hinges on calendared decision cycles and verification follow-through as much as community readiness.

First-mile frictions dominate: intake and acknowledgement determine everything downstream

The Bansgora (Paschim Bardhaman) case—465 signatories (221 women), 286 IFR applications, 367 ha CFR—illustrates a first-mile blockage: a complete, lawful submission not accepted at SDLC pending higher instruction. This is not a matter of “absence of evidence,” but of entry-point friction. Intake friction is thus the earliest point of divergence between legal entitlement, embedded accountability in roles and administrative trajectory.

Verification is the fulcrum: alignment of participatory and cadastral maps predicts disposal

Where participatory evidence and cadastral records converge, time-to-disposal shortens; where they diverge, joint verification becomes decisive. Alipurduar’s Panijhora–Khuklung belt surfaced ~800 RoR defects, demonstrating that data hygiene—not just intent—governs pace. Conversely, districts that reconcile maps earlier in the pipeline show faster progression. This suggests that “verification output and process quality” is the main predictor of disposal among claims with comparable community readiness.

Records integrity is foundational: pattas without updated entries erode downstream value

Field notes document physical pattas without digital reflection, constraining credit access and welfare linkages; practitioners' concise heuristic, "a patta without record is as good as void", is analytically correct. Tenure credibility is a records property as much as a legal one. Without timely RoR updates and synchronised ledgers even recognised rights may under-perform for beneficiaries.

The administrative median is willing; execution varies by "convergence maturity"

Interviews indicate acknowledgement of statutory CFR across official tiers and openness to collaboration. Variation arises not from absence of mandate but from differential "convergence maturity"—i.e., how routinely departments co-schedule verification, share data, and close records. Where this maturity is higher, recognition progresses; where lower, cases circle without closure.

Digitisation is an enabler when coupled with workflow discipline

Officials and CSOs repeatedly propose an FRA-specific digital pipeline with tri-departmental access. The evidence suggests digitisation works best when paired with workflow discipline: calendars, task queues, and co-signed verification artifacts. Digital rails without cadence create transparent queues that still do not move; cadence without rails keeps movement opaque. The pairing addresses both problems.

Community evidence is strong and gender-inclusive; the binding constraint is institutional continuity

Bansgora's 465 signatories (221 women), Purulia's 20 Gram Sabhas, and Bankura's quorum meeting point to high-quality, gender-inclusive community processes. The dossier quality—resolutions, GIS maps, FRA forms—indicates robust evidentiary capacity. The binding constraint is the continuity of institutional steps (acknowledge → verify → calendar → record), not the quality of community inputs.

Evidence of "institutional silence" explains attrition better than rejection does

Across cases, the more common pattern is neither acceptance nor rejection, thus no appealable decision and no progress signal to applicants. This institutional silence predicts community attrition better than explicit denial, because time erodes collective memory and imposes re-mobilisation costs. The pipeline loses momentum not to opposition but to invisibility.

CSO facilitation is a pipeline multiplier when role-clarity is formalised

The report shows CSOs raise dossier quality and sustain follow-up, often functioning as a bridge between communities and administration. Their contribution plays an effective role when roles are formalised without displacing Gram Sabha primacy. Role-clarity converts goodwill into throughput.

District "convergence maturity" explains inter-district variation

Comparative evidence (e.g., Purulia vs. Alipurduar) suggests that differences in routine joint verification, records hygiene, and committee calendars explain inter-district variation more than differences in community motivation. Where rapid RoR defect scans and regular SDLC/DLCs occur, cases move; where they do not, similar dossiers can stall.

The “data backbone” matters: without it, even the best policy cannot compound

Stakeholder interviews across districts converge on a practical insight: policy intent composes benefits only when the data backbone is intact—i.e., updated RoR, aligned maps, ingested surveys, and end-to-end tracking. Where this backbone is strong, verification is faster and post-recognition services attach; where weak, transaction costs rise for everyone.

Lived-experience quotes validate the systems diagnosis

Three quotes—“*no one wants to take the first step,*” “*slowed by new instructions,*” and “*we are ready with maps and signatures*”—triangulate the narrative: policy acceptance exists, process drift accumulates, community readiness is high. Qualitative testimony, here, functions as validation data for the systems diagnosis built from quantitative snapshots and case logs.

National–state juxtaposition clarifies opportunity rather than deficit

West Bengal’s 10,119 claims / 686 titles / ~572 acres places it in the middle of a national distribution where area coverage is still emerging. The insight is that WB’s potential is underutilised but not anomalous; the state is aligned with a broader national pattern where CFR area recognition lags IFR—again pointing back to coordination mechanics rather than intent.

A constructive coalition already exists; the system needs “binding glue”

The report depicts three aligned actors—communities (readiness), CSOs (facilitation), and administration (policy acceptance, emerging openness). The missing piece is binding glue: regular calendars, joint survey SOPs, serialised intake, and records closure. The insight is optimistic: the coalition is in place; making convergence routine is the shift that turns episodic progress into systemic progress.

6. Way Forward

The analysis of secondary evidence, supplemented by grounded insights from field-level interactions, reveals that the recognition and operationalization of Community Forest Rights (CFRs) in West Bengal remains a journey both complex and unfinished. Over fifteen years since the enactment of the Forest Rights Act (2006), the state continues to grapple with uneven progress. While the recognition of Individual Forest Rights (IFRs) has advanced, CFRs — the cornerstone for collective stewardship of forest resources — remain significantly under-realised. This asymmetry is not unique to West Bengal but reflects a national pattern where institutional preparedness often outpaces procedural throughput, and where policy intent requires more consistent translation into practice.

The emerging evidence underscores two parallel realities. On one hand, there exists a strong reservoir of community readiness, institutional awareness, and accumulated grassroots experience. Gram Sabhas in multiple districts, including Purulia and Alipurduar, have demonstrated capacity to submit claims and engage with forest governance. Civil society organizations, too, have played a catalytic role in sustaining awareness and supporting claim-making processes. On the other hand, the momentum is frequently slowed by procedural inconsistencies, administrative bottlenecks, and variable inter-departmental coordination. This juxtaposition highlights that the challenge is not of legal legitimacy but of ensuring operational coherence across levels of governance.

Going forward, a balanced pathway lies in weaving together these strengths and addressing the recurring constraints through systemic reinforcement rather than fragmented interventions. Strengthening the regularity and transparency of institutional processes such as District Level Committee (DLC) reviews, enhancing convergence between the Forest, Revenue, and Tribal Welfare Departments, and fostering collaborative platforms that include civil society, academia, and local communities are all opportunities illuminated by the evidence. Moreover, a sustained investment in building community capacity — particularly in record-keeping, mapping, and claim preparation — can further reduce the asymmetry between community readiness and administrative recognition.

Equally critical is the cultivation of a knowledge ecosystem where learnings from pioneering Gram Sabhas and successful CFR settlements are systematically documented, disseminated, and adapted across regions. Such peer-to-peer exchanges, supported by data-driven monitoring systems, would not only enhance policy responsiveness but also reinforce community confidence. The report demonstrates that CFR is not merely a matter of land rights; it is intrinsically linked to sustainable forest governance, livelihood security, and the broader goals of climate resilience. Aligning CFR processes with national commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and international frameworks on biodiversity and climate change further strengthens the case for accelerated action.

In conclusion, the future of CFR realisation in West Bengal will depend on how effectively emerging strengths are institutionalised and how constructively the recurring constraints are addressed collaboratively. Rather than viewing the current state as a deficit, it may be more productive to consider it as a transitional phase — one in which existing readiness and evidence can be harnessed to accelerate systemic transformation. The way forward is about deepening the credibility, inclusiveness, and efficiency of existing mandates. By situating CFR within a broader development and ecological framework, stakeholders — from government departments to Gram Sabhas — can together chart a path where forest rights are not only legally recognised but also socially realised and ecologically sustained.

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Image 3: Nurturing Inter-generational resilience through CFR

