



CONSULTATION ON FOREST RIGHTS ACT (FRA), 2006*

Date: July 20, 2025

ABSTRACT

The Forest Rights Act consultation, held on the first day of the annual Sela Parv in July 2025, united nearly 1,500 Van Gujjars and officials in Buddakhata, Uttarakhand to celebrate culture and address critical delays in land rights claims under the Forest Rights Act. Marked by cultural rituals, legal affirmations, and active dialogue, the event highlighted community resilience and fostered institutional.

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Introduction

On the first day of the annual Sela Parv, the Van Gujjar community gathered in large numbers to celebrate their traditions and to engage in dialogue on their rights. The presence of the Hon'ble Justice Manoj Kumar Tiwari of the Uttarakhand High Court, who was invited as the Chief Guest, added visibility to the gathering. What began as a cultural festival naturally evolved into an opportunity for consultation on the Forest Rights Act (FRA). For the nearly 1,500 participants, including women, men, and children, the day became both a celebration of culture and an affirmation of dignity.

This consultation also came at a significant moment for the community. In June 2025, an eviction notice was issued in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand, continuing a pattern of displacement pressures faced by the Van Gujjars. When challenged in court, the judiciary granted a stay on the eviction, a decision widely recognised as an affirmation of the community's rights and dignity. That intervention not only provided immediate relief but also marked a turning point, drawing greater institutional attention to the Van Gujjars' struggles. Against this backdrop, the presence of Justice Tiwari and other officials at Sela Parv gave the community much-needed visibility, reinforcing that their voices were being heard at higher levels and that cultural spaces could serve as powerful arenas for dialogue and accountability.

Objective

The consultation aimed to draw attention to the delays in processing land rights claims under the FRA and to create a platform where community members could share their experiences directly with administrative representatives. The broader purpose was to strengthen cultural pride and provide an opportunity for administrative representatives to learn about the Van Gujjar community, understand their way of life, and recognise the importance of their rights.

Activities and Discussion

The day was inaugurated in Buddakhata with Justice Manoj Kumar Tiwari as the Chief Guest. His presence drew an unprecedented gathering of nearly 1,500 Van Gujjars, marking the first time such a large-scale consultation was held during Sela Parv. This created an opportunity for the community to directly voice their concerns, including the delays in processing land rights claims, which were conveyed to the Chief Guest.

Community representatives and the Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan (VGTYS) team emphasised the need for administrative accountability. In response, an official order was issued the same day and forwarded to the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO).

These steps were initiated through the State-Level Committee (SLC) and were further reinforced by a separate letter submitted by the VGTYS. This process ensured that the demands raised during the consultation were formally documented and transmitted through the appropriate channels.

Between the 18th and 20th of October, preparations were made for the festival and related activities. The community initially set a target of planting 300 saplings. However, as discussions unfolded and attendance rose to nearly 1,500 people, it became clear that the designated area was too small. Consequently, the plantation site was expanded. Initially, the Forest Department showed limited enthusiasm, but once the community began preparing and decorating the area for the festival, officials became more engaged, bringing wires and poles for fencing and helping organize the plantation sites. This collaboration raised the plantation target to approximately 600-700 saplings.

The day also carried strong cultural and symbolic elements. Senior community members performed the churning of the *Mathani* and installation of the *Nedhi*, rituals that symbolised the revival of Sela Parv and reaffirmed pastoral traditions. On this occasion, Justice Tiwari released a booklet documenting the Van Gujjar way of life, their relationship with nature, and the indigenous *Gojri* buffalo.

The presence of the Tharu tribe of Uttarakhand added to the spirit of solidarity. Justice Tiwari acknowledged the Van Gujjars' contribution to ecological preservation and assured continued support through the State Legal Services Authority to protect their forest rights and provide legal assistance.



Justice Manoj Kumar Tiwari engaging in the Mathani ritual at Buddakhata, where Sela Parv celebration and dialogue on rights came together



VGTYs team member Meer Hamza is facilitating the dialogue

Later, officials from the Social Welfare Department joined the proceedings. In its correspondence, the VGTYs had specifically requested a dialogue on forest rights, focusing on the functioning of the District- and Sub-Divisional Level Committees (DLC and SDLC) to highlight persistent issues with the Forest Department. Both Chief Development Officers (CDOs), from Udham Singh Nagar and Nainital attended the session, along with the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) and Tehsildars. They shared their perspectives, while Tarun Joshi also facilitated the discussion. Although the Forest Department remained relatively passive during the exchange, other officials and community members actively contributed their views.

Each division- Terai Division, Terai East, Terai West, and Haridwar Division- displayed its own banner and organised its plantation blocks accordingly, reflecting the diversity and scale of participation across the region.

Reflections

The consultation during the first day of Sela Parv 2025 was a historic first, bringing together nearly 1,500 Van Gujjars with dignitaries and officials in Buddakhata. Even brief exchanges with Justice Tiwari made an impact, affirming that the community's concerns are being heard at higher levels.

The blending of consultation, cultural rituals, and collective plantation showed the community's strength in uniting tradition with advocacy. While challenges remain, especially with the Forest Department's limited engagement, the active participation of other officials and the solidarity of tribal and forest-dwelling communities have set a precedent.

As a VGTYs team member reflected, *"For us, this was one of the biggest moments during Sela Parv. The community was surprised, and very happy, to see such dignitaries present and to have their issues heard."*

This moment reaffirmed that cultural spaces can also be arenas of dialogue and accountability, and that the Van Gujjar community is shaping its future with dignity, resilience, and collective voice.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan (VGTYS) for organising the consultation, and the Van Gujjar community for their wholehearted participation. We thank Hon'ble Justice Manoj Kumar Tiwari and the attending officials whose presence lent weight to the discussions, and the Tharu tribe for their solidarity.

We also recognise the judiciary's recent intervention in granting a stay on eviction in Kumaon, which strengthened recognition of the community's rights and added momentum to this consultation.

This event was co-organised by VGTYS and Kalpavriksh.