

Role of Women in Vantangiya Settlements: From Colonial Period to Recent Times

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the evolving roles, struggles, and contributions of Vantangiya women in the Gorakhpur division, tracing their trajectory from the colonial period to the contemporary era. Grounded in ethnographic narratives, archival sources, oral testimonies, village-level surveys, and recent government reports, the study sheds light on how Vantangiya women have negotiated structural marginalisation, systemic labour exploitation, and shifting socio-economic contexts. Particular attention is given to their agency in shaping family structures, sustaining agricultural practices, and preserving community identity despite prolonged exclusion from mainstream development processes. The paper further explores how policy interventions, legal recognition, and grassroots mobilisation have gradually redefined their status, enabling women to emerge as active agents of resilience and transformation. By situating their lived experiences within broader historical and policy frameworks, this study highlights the indispensable role of Vantangiya women in sustaining both community survival and intergenerational continuity, while also underscoring their significance in contemporary debates on gender, forest rights, and inclusive rural development.

Key Words : Vantangiya community, Vantangiya women, Rural development

INTRODUCTION

The Vantangiya community of the Gorakhpur division in eastern Uttar Pradesh traces its origins to the colonial-era taungya system, a forestry plantation model introduced by the British in the late nineteenth century. This system combined afforestation with coerced agricultural labour and was designed to maximise state revenue from teak (*Tectona grandis*) and sal (*Shorea robusta*) plantations. Families recruited into this system were often marginalised peasants fleeing oppressive zamindari regimes or crushing agrarian indebtedness. Once settled in forest clearings, they were compelled to cultivate both subsistence crops and plantation saplings under strict supervision by forest officials. Historical narratives and colonial working plans foregrounded male labour as the backbone of the taungya system. However, ethnographic research, oral histories, and community memory reveal that women's

contributions were indispensable for both plantation survival and household reproduction. Vantangiya women combined physically demanding labour in the plantations with domestic responsibilities such as cooking, fuel wood collection, child-rearing, and care giving. They also became custodians of oral traditions, rituals, and community practices that preserved collective identity in conditions of prolonged exclusion. Despite their centrality, women's labour was systematically rendered invisible in colonial archives, echoing broader patterns of gendered erasure in histories of agrarian and forest labour (Agarwal, 1992; Guha, 1983). The neglect of Vantangiyas continued into the post-colonial era, as their villages were denied revenue status until as late as 2017. Without official recognition, they were excluded from welfare schemes, land rights, and infrastructural investments, leaving women especially vulnerable. Recent decades, however, have witnessed gradual shifts. Policy interventions such

as the Forest Rights Act (2006), MGNREGA, the Swachh Bharat Mission, and the recognition of revenue villages have created new avenues for women's inclusion. Vantangiya women today participate in self-help groups (SHGs), Panchayati Raj institutions, and grassroots education initiatives, reflecting a slow but significant transformation. This paper, therefore, situates women's roles within the longue durée of colonial forestry, state neglect, and contemporary development, highlighting their endurance, adaptability, and agency.

Objective:

To examine the evolving roles, struggles, and contributions of Vantangiya women in the Gorakhpur division from the colonial period to contemporary times.

Study Area:

The present study encompasses all 23 Vantangiya villages within the Gorakhpur division. These include Tinkonia-3, Rajahi Camp (Aazad Nagar), Khale Tola, Aambagh, and Chilbilwa of Gorakhpur district, along with Baluahiya, Hathiahwa, Nursery-24, Nursery-27, Nursery-28, Daulatpur, Belaspur, Barhawa, Chetara, Beet, Usarhawa, Bharivaisi, Khurrampur, Surpar, Achalagah, Belohadarra, Kandhpur Darra, and Tinkonia in Maharajganj district. These settlements, formerly under the jurisdiction of the forest department, were only accorded revenue status after 2017, marking a significant turning point in their socio-economic trajectory.

Vantangiya Women during the Colonial Period:

Forced Migration and Settlement:

Migration into taungya settlements was not voluntary but a product of colonial coercion and structural vulnerability. Families dispossessed by the zamindari system or escaping rural indebtedness were drawn into forestry projects with promises of subsistence and land use rights, only to face rigid state control. For women, this meant not only exposure to new and hostile ecologies but also rupture from kinship networks that had traditionally provided social and emotional support. Oral testimonies from older women recall the trauma of relocating into malaria-prone forests with little protection from disease, floods, or wild animals. However, women played a crucial role in reconstructing kinship ties and collective solidarity, enabling communities to endure and adapt in alien environments.

Labour and Domestic Roles:

The trope of male-dominated plantation work fails to capture the reality of women's intensive participation. Women worked shoulder-to-shoulder with men in every stage of taungya cultivation: clearing land, sowing, weeding, harvesting, and guarding saplings. Beyond plantations, they bore the primary responsibility for sustaining households under conditions of deprivation—fetching water from distant sources, preparing food with limited supplies, caring for the sick, and raising children. With virtually no medical infrastructure, maternal mortality was high, as pregnant women were forced into strenuous plantation labour. Women thus carried a “double burden,” sustaining both the productive and reproductive spheres of taungya life (Moser, 1993).

Invisible Labour and Exploitation:

Colonial documentation systematically erased women's contributions, attributing productivity to male workers alone. However, women engaged in night watches to protect seedlings, reconstructed huts after forced relocations, and navigated seasonal food scarcity with ingenuity. Their unpaid, unacknowledged work was indispensable to the success of the taungya system, making them central yet invisible figures in colonial forestry.

Social Structure and Cultural Contributions:

Family and Kinship Patterns:

The patriarchal framework of taungya villages vested authority in elder males, who decided on land distribution, marriages, and disputes. However, household cohesion and intergenerational survival rested heavily on women's labour and knowledge. Women preserved agricultural practices, herbal medicine, and food processing techniques, passing them down across generations. They also sustained kinship bonds through care work and informal welfare networks, ensuring resilience during crises.

Rituals, Religion, and Oral Tradition:

Vantangiya women were custodians of culture and spirituality. They organised and led rituals dedicated to deities such as Vanaspati Mai, Baghaha Baba, and Sonari Devi, blending ecological reverence with community resilience. Folk songs and oral histories preserved memories of displacement and struggle, functioning as what James Scott (1990) calls “hidden transcripts” of resistance. In the absence of Brahmin priests, women

often assumed ritual authority, exercising forms of agency that subtly contested patriarchal structures while preserving community solidarity.

Women's Status and Everyday Hardships in Taungya Settlements:

Shelter, Health, and Social Exclusion:

Housing was precarious, built from bamboo, leaves, and mud, offering little protection against monsoon rains or winter cold. Women bore the brunt of water scarcity, as they were primarily responsible for fetching water. Recent survey data show that while 73% of Vantangiya households now rely on tubewells or handpumps, 26% depend on communal tanks, and 1% still lack access to safe drinking water. This legacy of infrastructural neglect continues to shape the burdens of women. Without recognition as revenue villages for most of the twentieth century, Vantangiya lacked access to schools, ration cards, and health facilities. For women, this meant compounded marginalisation as forest-dwellers, labourers, and caregivers.

Marriage, Dowry, and Caste Interactions:

Marriage patterns reflected both continuity and adaptation. Endogamy within the Vantangiya community was common, with dowry largely absent due to poverty. While this reduced financial burdens, it also limited women's opportunities for wider social integration. Early marriage was pervasive: recent data reveal that in several villages, 85–90% of marriages occur below the legal age, perpetuating cycles of illiteracy, early motherhood, and gendered vulnerability.

Folklore and Memory: Women's Voices:

Oral traditions preserved by women form a living archive of taungya history. Songs and laments articulate displacement, labour, and suffering, but also hope, resilience, and collective identity. These traditions not only narrate histories absent from colonial archives but also provide cultural continuity. As oral historian Portelli (1991) argues, such traditions preserve not only facts but also the meanings that communities attach to their struggles. In Vantangiya settlements, women's songs have functioned as tools of both survival and subtle resistance, ensuring the memory of exploitation remains alive.

Transformation in the Post-Independence and

Contemporary Era:

Transition to Revenue Villages and Policy Change:

A turning point came with the recognition of Vantangiya villages as revenue settlements in 2017–2018, after decades of mobilisation. This recognition enabled access to welfare schemes including MGNREGA, PM-KISAN, pensions, and housing programmes. For women, such inclusion brought unprecedented visibility in wage employment, financial assistance, and social protection. Programmes such as Ujjwala Yojana reduced the burden of fuel collection, while Swachh Bharat Mission increased household toilet access, enhancing dignity and health.

Education and Leadership:

The opening of schools in Vantangiya villages has enabled girls to access formal education, thereby breaking the intergenerational cycle of illiteracy. While dropout rates remain high, literacy among young women is slowly increasing. Self-help groups have further empowered women by enabling them to save, access microcredit, and start small businesses. Panchayat participation, though still constrained by patriarchy, has introduced new spaces for women's leadership, where they increasingly advocate for water, health, and education.

Shifting Social Horizons:

Women's economic contributions are diversifying. In addition to agriculture, livestock rearing now provides

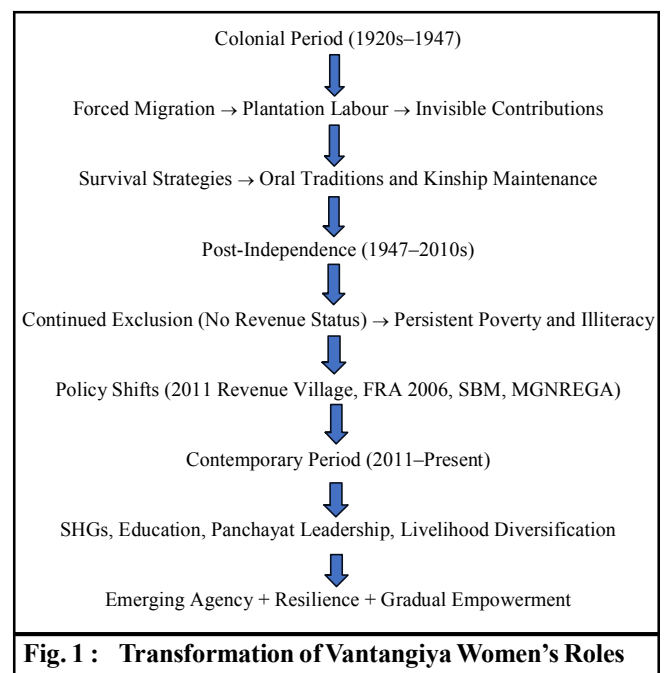
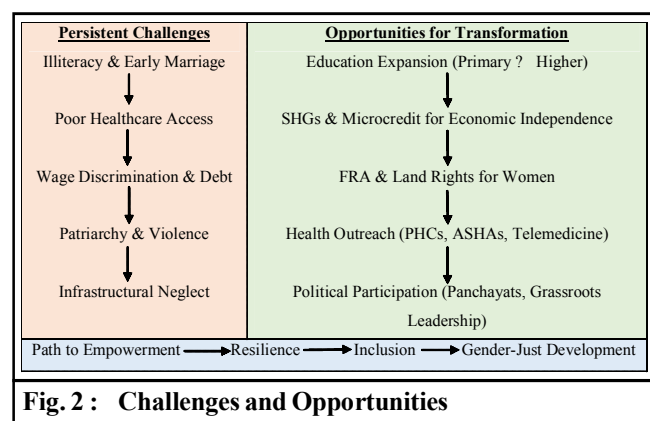


Fig. 1 : Transformation of Vantangiya Women's Roles

income for 57% of households, often managed by women. MGNREGA has given them access to wage labour and community projects. Women entrepreneurs within SHGs engage in tailoring, leaf-plate making, and dairy cooperatives, gradually reshaping gender roles. By entering public spaces and decision-making forums, women are transforming from invisible labourers into recognised contributors and leaders.

Persistent Challenges:

Despite progress, persistent challenges remain. Educational attainment is fragile; 45–75% of women in several villages remain illiterate, while only 1% reach higher education¹. Early marriage continues to curtail opportunities. Occupational structures remain skewed, with 92% of women engaged in informal, low-paid work and only 2.6% in formal employment². Expenditure surveys reveal that 61.52% of households spend as much or more than they earn², sustaining debt cycles that disproportionately affect women. Healthcare access remains deeply uneven, while villages near urban centres report 100% access to PHCs within three kilometres, only 33% of remote villages enjoy similar coverage⁴. Domestic violence, wage discrimination, and patriarchal restrictions further undermine women's agency. Welfare schemes are inconsistently implemented, with bureaucratic hurdles frequently delaying the delivery of benefits. These challenges underscore the disparity between formal policy recognition and the lived realities on the ground.



Conclusion:

From silent and invisible workers during the colonial taungya regime to emerging leaders in contemporary village governance, Vantangiya women exemplify resilience and adaptability. They have preserved ecological knowledge, oral traditions, and social bonds across generations of exclusion, and today they are increasingly active in education, SHGs, and Panchayats. However, empowerment remains partial, constrained by patriarchy, poverty, and structural neglect. For inclusive rural development in Gorakhpur's forest margins, women's experiences must be at the centre. Gender-just implementation of the Forest Rights Act, improved healthcare outreach, expansion of secondary education for girls, livelihood diversification, and institutional support for SHGs are crucial. Recognising and supporting Vantangiya women's contributions is not only vital for the upliftment of their community but also for building inclusive models of rural development in India.

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¹Data collected by the author during the field survey of the study area and measured by the Educational Index.

²Data collected by the author during the field survey of the study area and measured by the Economic Index.

³Data collected by the author during the field survey of the study area and measured by the Health Index.

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