

Changing Economic Dynamics of the Vantangiya Community of Gorakhpur Division: From Colonial Period to Revenue Status

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ABSTRACT

The Vantangiya community, formed under the British colonial forestry regime in eastern Uttar Pradesh, presents a compelling case of historical economic marginalisation and gradual socio-economic integration. Initially settled as bonded labourers tasked with regenerating forest plantations, they inhabited forest lands without formal rights, recognition, or access to resources. Denied both legal identity and socio-economic mobility, they remained invisible to the Indian state for decades. This research paper tracks the evolution of their economic condition from colonial-era exploitation to recent government recognition by analysing conditions in 23 Vantangiya villages located in Gorakhpur and Maharajganj districts. The study employs historical contextualization, fieldwork, and analytical tools, including a Socio-Economic Index (SEI), comparative phase analysis, and sectoral data, to examine how policies such as the Forest Rights Act (2006), political advocacy, and administrative reforms have influenced their changing status. Despite progress in areas such as housing, schooling, and employment schemes, structural gaps remain in land security, livelihood stability, and institutional accountability. This paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities for equitable rural development among forest-dependent communities.

Keywords: Vantangiya Community, Socio-Economic Status, Bonded Labour, Legal Inclusion, Revenue Status

INTRODUCTION

The Vantangiya community originated in the early 20th century as a result of the British colonial forestry department's adaptation of the Taungya system, borrowed from Burma (present-day Myanmar), as a cost-effective method to regenerate forest plantations, particularly those of the sal (*Shorea robusta*) tree. The term 'Vantangiya' combines the Hindi word 'van' (forest) and the Burmese word 'taungya' (upland shifting cultivation), reflecting the system's dual geographical and cultural roots. Under this method, small plots of approximately 0.2 hectares were temporarily allocated to families for cultivating saplings. In return, these families were required to perform a range of labour-intensive and often hazardous tasks, such as digging trenches, uprooting stumps, guarding plantations, and climbing tall trees to collect seeds and flowers, all

without compensation or legal recognition. Predominantly from Dalit and other marginalised caste groups, the Vantangiyas were brought in from surrounding districts and resettled in isolated forest zones. Though their work played a pivotal role in reviving forest landscapes, they had no property rights, wages, or civic entitlements, making them one of India's most invisible and structurally marginalised communities. Their settlements were excluded from census counts, political boundaries, and public governance frameworks, sowing the seeds of systemic exclusion that would persist for over a century (Lochan, 2013).

Study Area :

The current study encompasses all 23 Vantangiya villages within the Gorakhpur division. These villages are: Tinkonia-3, Rajahi Camp (Aazad Nagar), Khale Tola,

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Aambagh and Chilbilwa of Gorakhpur district and Baluahya, Hathiahwa, Nursery-24, Nursery-27, Nursery-28, Daulatpur, Bilaspur, Barhawa, Chetra, Beet, Usarhawa, Bhariwaisi, Khurrampur, Surpar, Anchalgah, Belloha Darra, Kandhpur Darra, and Tinkonia of Maharajganj district.

Objectives :

- To trace and analyse the historical and contemporary transformations in the economic structure of the Vantangiya community, from colonial-era forest labour to their partial integration into mainstream rural development frameworks post-2017.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of legal recognition (FRA 2006) and welfare interventions in improving socio-economic indicators within the Vantangiya settlements.

Understanding Transition of the Vantangiya Community- A Four-Phase Economic Transition Period:

The Vantangiyas' transformation can be understood through four economic phases- (1) Colonial Period- labour without rights, (2) Post-independence survival in forest marginality, (3) Rights-based mobilisation under the FRA, and (4) Welfare inclusion following revenue recognition. Importantly, these phases are not strictly linear; many older challenges persist into the current era. For instance, while pattas have been issued, incomplete land records and the absence of khatauni entries restrict access to agricultural credit. Youths continue to migrate seasonally due to a lack of skilled employment opportunities, and many households remain trapped in low-return labour cycles.

1. Colonial Period (1920–1947): Labour

Without Rights: During British rule, the Vantangiyas lived under a regime of nearly total control by the forest department, which not only managed their labour but also regulated every aspect of their settlement. Forest lands were divided by officials or contractors into plots, assigned to individual male heads of families. These plots were not tenurial but conditional, tied to plantation obligations. Daily life was precarious and demanding. Families worked under harsh conditions, often suffering injuries and illnesses due to a lack of medical care (Gadgil

and Guha, 1993). Fatal accidents while collecting sal seeds from tall trees were common but frequently unreported, due to the absence of formal documentation and public health services. The community lived in temporary, makeshift huts built from leaves and bamboo deep in the forests, with no access to sanitation, potable water, or education. Most importantly, they were denied the right to settle permanently or benefit from the forest produce they helped cultivate and protect. Even gathering dead wood or fruit could lead to fines or imprisonment under colonial forest laws. The British state thus institutionalised a system of ecological and economic extraction that made labour essential but disposable, and the people who provided it legally invisible (Guha, 1989). The invisibility of the Vantangiyas, in both policy and social discourse, was central to the exploitation they faced, and it set the stage for the post-colonial neglect that followed.

2. Post-Independence Period (1947–2006):

Invisible Citizens: Following India's independence in 1947, hopes of social justice and economic reform were widespread, particularly among historically marginalised communities (Chambers, 1983). However, for the Vantangiyas, the transition from colonial rule to a democratic republic brought no meaningful improvement in their legal or economic status. Though the forest administration of the British Empire was dismantled on paper, its core operational structure- mainly the control exercised by the forest department- remained essentially unchanged. The laws governing forest land, such as the Indian Forest Act (1927), continued to be enforced with little reform, and the Vantangiyas continued to live under institutional neglect and administrative indifference. One of the significant failings of the post-independence period was the failure to reclassify Vantangiya settlements. Unlike regular rural habitations, which were included as revenue villages and became eligible for public welfare schemes, Vantangiya habitations were listed as forest villages. This classification excluded them from basic entitlements, such as ration cards, voter ID cards, land ownership rights, and

inclusion in government databases, including the 1951 and 1961 censuses. Without revenue village status, they were not mapped, recognised, or included in rural development plans. This exclusion had significant implications. Vantangiyas were denied access to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), which were introduced in India as a decentralised form of rural self-governance. Lacking voting rights meant they could not elect representatives or raise their demands at the local level. Their voice was absent from local decision-making, resource allocation, and development discussions. In effect, despite being born and raised in India, they lived as stateless people within their own country- unacknowledged by the state, unrepresented in politics, and unreached by social services.

Economically, the Vantangiyas had to rely on a vulnerable and unorganised mix of subsistence farming, seasonal migration, and forest-based occupations. The land they cultivated was not legally theirs, so they could not use it as collateral for loans or investment. Rain-fed agriculture, combined with limited access to fertilisers, irrigation, and tools, meant low productivity and high risk. During non-agricultural seasons, many migrated to urban areas, such as Mumbai, Ludhiana, and Delhi, to work as casual labourers, construction workers, or factory hands. This migration was driven not by opportunity but by necessity, often resulting in family disintegration and cycles of debt. The role of women was central to household survival. They collected firewood, tended livestock, cared for children, and in many cases, worked alongside men in agriculture or as domestic workers during migration. However, women's work remained unrecognised, unremunerated, and unsupported by any public programme. No targeted schemes were available for maternal health, girls' education, or women's empowerment during this period. Even the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), introduced in 1975, remained inaccessible due to its legal invisibility. Additionally, there was no public infrastructure. Roads did not connect these settlements, schools were either unavailable or severely understaffed,

and healthcare facilities were hours away, often inaccessible during emergencies. The absence of documentation also excluded Vantangiyas from programs like the Public Distribution System (PDS), old-age pensions, and employment initiatives.

3. The Recognition Phase (2006–2017):

Towards Legal Inclusion: The enactment of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006; commonly referred to as the Forest Rights Act (FRA); marked a pivotal moment in India's forest governance and social justice framework. For the first time, the Indian legal system formally acknowledged the historical injustice committed against forest-dwelling communities, including the Vantangiyas, by providing them with a mechanism to claim rights over forest land they had been cultivating and inhabiting for generations. The FRA guaranteed both individual and community rights, such as rights over homestead land, agricultural land, minor forest produce, and grazing areas, thereby recognising forest dwellers not merely as encroachers but as legitimate custodians of forest landscapes (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights Act, 2006).

For the Vantangiyas, however, this legal recognition came with numerous practical and structural hurdles. The FRA required claimants to demonstrate continuous residence on forest land for at least 75 years before the Act, a condition challenging for most Vantangiya families to meet. Their settlements, established under the Taungya system by the forest department itself, were never formally mapped or included in government land records. As such, they lacked the documentary evidence, such as old ration cards, tax receipts, or land surveys, that other communities could use to file claims. The initial phase of implementation was marred by administrative inertia, lack of awareness among the community, and minimal outreach by government agencies. Many Vantangiyas were unaware of their rights under the FRA or the procedures to file claims. Furthermore, forest

officials, whose control over these lands was being challenged by the new law, were often reluctant to assist in processing claims. This created a bureaucratic bottleneck that delayed and discouraged legitimate claims.

It was only through persistent advocacy by political and civil society groups that the situation began to shift. Gorakhpur's Member of Parliament, Yogi Adityanath, emerged as a key figure in raising the issue both within legislative forums and at the administrative level. Civil society organisations, particularly those involved in forest rights, land justice, and tribal advocacy, played a vital role by mobilising the community, conducting training workshops, and facilitating the collection of oral testimonies, which were accepted under FRA rules instead of written records (Srivastava, 2012). Public Interest Litigations (PILs) and targeted petitions filed in courts helped amplify their demands and pressured the state machinery into conducting site-specific surveys and verification processes. By the late 2000s and early 2010s, visible signs of state outreach began to appear in several Vantangiya villages. Primary schools were opened in temporary bamboo structures or existing huts, and anganwadi centres were established to provide early childhood care. ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers began visiting for basic immunisation drives. However, these services were still sporadic and uneven across the region. One of the most significant gains during this phase was the distribution of land pattas (titles) to several families under the FRA. Yet, this too was a partial victory. While many received physical pattas recognising their occupation of land, these rights were not reflected in the official khatauni, the land records maintained by the revenue department. Without khatauni entries, the land remained technically under the jurisdiction of the forest department, preventing families from using the land as collateral for loans, constructing pucca (permanent) houses with government subsidies, or securing complete legal protection against eviction. Furthermore, the Vantangiyas' economic situation stayed unstable. Their livelihoods depended on subsistence farming,

daily wages, and seasonal migration. Although collecting forest produce was legally permitted under the FRA, practical obstacles persisted due to ongoing restrictions imposed by the forest department. Infrastructure, such as roads, electricity, and clean water, was still insufficient, and MGNREGA projects were unevenly implemented. Although they are legally recognised as traditional forest dwellers with rights and benefits, a significant gap remains between these legal rights and their actual on-the-ground implementation.

4. Mainstreaming and Economic Integration (2017–2025): Status of Inclusion:

The period between 2017 and 2025 represents a watershed moment in the socio-economic history of the Vantangiya community. After over a century of institutional neglect, legal ambiguity, and socio-political marginalisation, the Uttar Pradesh state government issued a landmark decision in December 2017. The 23 Vantangiya settlements, 18 in Maharajganj and 5 in Gorakhpur, were officially recognised as revenue villages. This decision was not merely administrative; it carried profound socio-political and economic implications (Government of Uttar Pradesh, Notification declaring 23 Vantangiya villages as revenue villages, Gorakhpur and Maharajganj District Administration, 2017). For the first time, Vantangiyas were brought under the formal governance framework of the Indian state, which made them eligible for constitutionally guaranteed services, development schemes, and local self-governance institutions. The reclassification from 'forest villages' to 'revenue villages' marked the end of their statelessness, enabling access to a wide range of welfare schemes. Families could now obtain ration cards, Aadhaar numbers, voter IDs, and enrol in government schools and health programmes. This change catalysed a series of developmental interventions, both from the government and non-governmental actors, that gradually began to reshape the economic landscape of these communities.

Under the Pradhan Mantri/Mukhya Mantri Awas Yojana–Gramin, nearly 80% of households

received pucca homes, shifting from thatched, semi-permanent structures to concrete shelters. This not only improved living standards but also provided a sense of security and permanence—something the community had been denied for generations. Similarly, the Swachh Bharat Mission led to the construction of latrines in over 95% of households, significantly enhancing sanitation and reducing open defecation, especially among women and children.

Employment generation also saw a boost through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). While the act mandates 100 days of wage employment annually for rural households, Vantangiya families reported receiving between 60 and 80 days of work, often involving tasks such as pond desilting, pathway repair, afforestation, and trench digging. Although implementation gaps such as wage delays and job card irregularities remained, MGNREGA created a predictable income stream and reduced seasonal distress migration (Ministry of Rural Development, 2020, Annual report: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Government of India).

In terms of energy access, the Ujjwala Yojana provided LPG connections to approximately 70% of households. This reduced dependence on forest fuelwood and contributed to cleaner cooking environments, although refilling cylinders regularly remains financially challenging for many families. Under the Jal Jeevan Mission, approximately 60% of villages now have access to piped drinking water, marking a significant shift from earlier reliance on hand pumps or distant water sources.

Educational and nutritional inclusion also improved during this period. Mid-day meal schemes were activated, and primary schools were established or upgraded in nearly every settlement. These schools not only enrolled local children but also created employment opportunities for teaching and auxiliary staff. Functional anganwadi centres under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) began offering nutrition, immunisation, and early education for children under six, as well as

antenatal support for pregnant women.

One of the most transformative developments was the mobilisation of Vantangiya women into Self-Help Groups (SHGs). These SHGs, often supported by non-governmental organisations and linked to national rural livelihood missions, enabled women to access credit, participate in skill development, and generate supplementary income (Panda, 2015). Several women were trained in tailoring, leaf-plate making, and small-scale food processing. These micro-enterprises, though in their infancy, laid the foundation for economic diversification beyond subsistence farming and wage labour.

Notably, the new revenue status also allowed the Vantangiyas to participate in local governance. For the first time, community members contested and won elections to the Gram Panchayats, thereby enabling representation in village-level planning and decision-making. This inclusion into the democratic process marked a psychological shift from being “outsiders” in their land to being legitimate stakeholders in rural governance. In sum, the period from 2017 to 2025 represents a critical phase of mainstreaming and economic integration for the Vantangiyas. Through targeted development interventions, institutional recognition, and grassroots mobilisation, they began transitioning from a historically marginalised forest labour caste to active participants in the rural economy. While implementation gaps and bureaucratic inertia remain, the foundation has been laid for long-term socio-economic upliftment. The Vantangiyas are no longer invisible—they are, slowly but steadily, becoming visible citizens in both statistical records and social reality (Vantangiya Vikas Samiti, Community demands and status reports, 2018).

Gender Dynamics and Women’s Economic Empowerment:

Throughout the socio-economic transition of the Vantangiya community, women have consistently occupied a central, though often undervalued, position in sustaining both household economies and broader community resilience. From the colonial Taungya period to the present, Vantangiya women have made significant

Table 1 : Allocation of Patta Land to Vantangiya Families

District	Vantangiya Families	Residential Land (ha)	Agricultural Land (ha)	Revenue Village Status
Maharajganj	3,798	128.36	1,488.76	18 villages
Gorakhpur	504	24.97	202.80	5 villages

Source: Allocation of Patta Land, May 2011, District Officials.

Table 2 : Phases of Changing Economic Dynamics of Vantangiya Community

Phase	Defining Features	Status of Rights	Major Challenges
Colonial	Forced forest labour, no citizenship	Minimal	Exploitation, invisibility
Post-Independence	Marginal farming, migratory labour, persistent exclusion	Minimums but Challenging	Administrative exclusion, no land title
FRA Impact	Rights-based claims, limited welfare access	Partial (incomplete)	Procedural delays, a gap in documentation
Integration	Revenue status, welfare access, and new opportunities	Substantial, but with gaps	Complete title transfer, sustainable livelihoods

Source: Different Working Plans of Vantangiya Forest.

contributions as unpaid labourers in forest plantations, subsistence farming, fuelwood collection, livestock care, and wage labour. Their role, while historically embedded in informal and invisible workspaces, has gradually gained visibility with the advent of development schemes and the inclusion of rights-based approaches in recent years. In the current phase of mainstreaming, government programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) have opened new avenues for women's direct participation in structured, wage-based employment. Women have engaged in various public works, including road repair, pond desilting, and afforestation drives, often contributing to household incomes in ways previously unseen. The social visibility gained through working in public spaces has also begun to challenge traditional gender norms, although disparities in wages, worksite facilities, and access to leadership roles persist. Perhaps more transformative has been the rise of women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in several Vantangiya villages. These groups have emerged as grassroots mechanisms for savings, access to credit, and collective enterprise. Supported by NGOs, government livelihood missions, or rural development blocks, SHGs have ventured into small businesses such as leaf-plate making (using sal leaves), tailoring units, papad/pickle production, and even group farming on leased land. In some cases, SHG members have received training in financial literacy, digital transactions, and marketing skills that were previously inaccessible to them. However, the progress of SHGs is uneven and geographically varied. In more connected villages, such as Khurrampur and Rajahi Camp (Aazad Nagar), SHGs are more active and better linked with block-level institutions. In contrast, in remote or forest-

locked villages like Nursery 24 or Baluahiya, mobilisation remains weak. Limited market access, lack of working capital, inadequate training, and poor support from institutional agencies remain significant bottlenecks. Additionally, SHGs often face difficulties in scaling up due to low demand, a lack of branding, and limited exposure to competitive rural enterprise networks. Despite these challenges, the empowerment of Vantangiya women must not be viewed as a secondary outcome or mere byproduct of broader development. Instead, it should be acknowledged as a foundational pillar of socio-economic transformation. Women's participation in the public sphere, whether in SHG management, school monitoring committees, or health campaigns, signals an ongoing social shift from isolation to agency. Their enhanced decision-making roles within households, as well as an increasing presence in Gram Sabha meetings and panchayat activities, underscore the gendered dimensions of inclusion. Nevertheless, for these gains to be sustained and expanded, institutional backing is critical. This includes consistent capacity-building support, formal registration of SHGs under NRLM, provision of seed funding, assured linkages to bank credit, and integration with digital literacy initiatives. Moreover, specific attention must be paid to addressing barriers like gender-based mobility constraints, patriarchal resistance, and care burdens, which continue to hinder full participation.

Challenges:

While the period following the 2017 recognition of Vantangiya villages as revenue settlements has ushered in substantial progress, it is essential to acknowledge that many of the structural and institutional problems that have historically hindered their development persist in modified

forms. These challenges are not merely residual issues from the past but reflect deeper, systemic barriers that require urgent and sustained policy attention if the gains of recent years are to be consolidated and expanded.

Land tenure insecurity:

Although land pattas have been distributed to many households under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), these documents often lack formal registration in the khatauni (land ownership register). As a result, the legal ownership of land technically remains under the control of the forest department, which continues to exercise significant administrative power over these settlements. This incomplete devolution of rights hinders residents from leveraging their land for institutional credit, undertaking permanent construction, or exercising full autonomy over agricultural decisions. In some cases, forest officials have delayed or blocked infrastructure projects, citing jurisdictional conflicts, which has created an ambiguous governance environment.

Delayed and substandard implementation of infrastructure projects:

Particularly in rural areas, such as roads, school buildings, and water supply systems. While many villages have been linked to all-weather roads and new schools that have been constructed on paper, field surveys and oral testimonies reveal that these facilities are often non-functional, half-built, or lacking essential services such as electricity, teachers, or drinking water. This disconnect between sanctioned infrastructure and actual usability not only undermines public confidence but also restricts mobility, education, and access to markets. Seasonal migration remains a persistent coping mechanism for many Vantangiya households. Fragmented landholdings, lack of irrigated plots, and the absence of secondary or tertiary employment opportunities in the villages compel youths and working-age men to migrate temporarily to cities like Mumbai, Delhi, or Ludhiana in search of informal wage labour. This migration, while economically necessary, disrupts family structures, affects school attendance among children, and increases the vulnerability of women and older people who are left behind.

Policy Recommendations:

In light of these ongoing challenges, this study proposes a set of targeted policy recommendations aimed at accelerating full socio-economic integration-

- 1. Digitisation and Updating of Land Records:** Accelerate the formal entry of FRA patta holders into the revenue department's khatauni system to ensure complete land tenure security. This should be linked with GIS-based land mapping and community awareness drives.
- 2. Full Enforcement of MGNREGA Guarantees-** Ensure that all eligible households receive the legally guaranteed 100 days of employment per year. Enhance the transparency of worksite selection, the timeliness of wage payments, and grievance redressal mechanisms, particularly for female workers.
- 3. Support for Forest-Based Microenterprises-** Promote small-scale industries rooted in local ecology, such as sal-leaf plate making, honey collection, medicinal herb processing, and bamboo crafts. These should be linked to value chains and provided with marketing support through SHGs or cooperatives.
- 4. Formal Integration of SHGs into Rural Credit Systems-** Connect women's Self-Help Groups to formal banking channels and provide access to low-interest working capital loans. Ensure timely registration under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) and continuous skill training to sustain micro-entrepreneurship.
- 5. Strengthen Infrastructure Delivery-** Implement quality control mechanisms and third-party audits for rural roads, schools, and health centres- Prioritise community monitoring tools such as social audits and participatory village planning (Gram Sabha-based budgeting).
- 6. Political Inclusion and Decentralised Governance-** Encourage regular and meaningful participation of Vantangiyas in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Train local elected representatives from the community in governance, budgeting, and administrative processes to ensure that community voices are reflected in development decisions.

7. Dedicated Administrative Cell for Vantangiya Welfare-

Establish a dedicated nodal unit at the district or division level for monitoring the implementation of schemes in Vantangiya villages. This cell can act as a single-window platform for grievance redressal, scheme coordination, and beneficiary feedback.

These recommendations aim not only to fill the gaps in service delivery but also to establish a participatory and rights-based framework for the community's future. Ensuring institutional support for women's empowerment, completing the unfinished agenda of land reform, and promoting sustainable livelihood pathways will be essential to convert symbolic recognition into substantive socio-economic transformation.

Conclusion:

The Vantangiya community's journey from stateless forest labourers under colonial rule to emerging rural citizens with legal rights highlights systemic neglect and resilience. Over the course of a century, they faced exploitation, exclusion, and invisibility, yet continued to assert their rights through collective action. Their story demonstrates that true transformation necessitates legal recognition, political commitment, effective policy, and community participation, with marginalised groups being viewed as active agents of change. Their inclusion through the Forest Rights Act, recognition, welfare schemes, and SHGs demonstrates progress; however, ongoing issues such as tenure insecurity, underemployment, poor infrastructure, and disparities indicate that integration is a continuous process. Additionally, their case reflects India's broader challenge: reconciling environmental conservation with the rights of forest communities, emphasising the need for development models that balance ecological health and human dignity.

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