

Land Rights Struggle of the Vantangiya Community in Gorakhpur Division (Uttar Pradesh): A Geographical Study

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ABSTRACT

The Vantangiya community of the Gorakhpur division in Uttar Pradesh represents a historically marginalized population shaped by colonial forest governance policies. Emerging under the British-era Taungya system, these communities played a crucial role in forest regeneration while being systematically denied land ownership rights. This study adopts a geographical perspective to examine the historical evolution, spatial distribution, and socio-economic transformation of Vantangiya settlements in the districts of Gorakhpur and Maharajganj. The research critically evaluates key policy interventions, including the Forest Conservation Act (1980), the Forest Rights Act (2006), and the Revenue Village Status Policy (2018), in addressing issues of land tenure and development. The findings indicate that although there have been partial improvements—particularly in terms of land title distribution and access to basic amenities—significant challenges persist. These include administrative dualism between forest and revenue authorities, gender disparities in land ownership, and continued dependence on insecure livelihood sources. The study concludes that the land rights struggle of the Vantangiya community extends beyond the question of legal ownership, encompassing broader dimensions of social identity, citizenship, and sustainable rural development. It emphasizes the need for an integrated policy framework that combines legal recognition, socio-economic empowerment, gender inclusion, and environmental sustainability to ensure long-term transformation.

Keywords: Vantangiya Community; Land Rights; Taungya System; Forest Rights Act, 2006; Rural Geography; Socio-Economic Transformation; Forest Governance

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Introduction

Land constitutes a fundamental resource that shapes livelihood patterns, social identity, and economic security, particularly in agrarian societies like India. The issue of land rights has historically been central to debates on social justice, equity, and rural development, as access to land determines both material well-being and socio-political inclusion.

In this context, the Vantangiya community of the Gorakhpur division in Uttar Pradesh presents a distinctive case of historical marginalization. Despite their active involvement in forest-based economic activities and significant contribution to

ecological regeneration, these communities remained excluded from formal land ownership rights. This paradox reflects a deeper structural imbalance within the governance of land and forest resources.

The origin of the Vantangiya community can be traced to the colonial Taungya system, introduced by the British administration as a forest management strategy. Under this system, forest-dependent populations were permitted to cultivate crops on forest land temporarily while assisting in plantation activities. However, these rights were purely

usufructuary in nature and did not extend to ownership, thereby institutionalizing a system of dependency and exclusion.

This structural inequity persisted even after India's independence. Although land reform policies and constitutional provisions aimed at promoting social justice were introduced, forest-dwelling communities like the Vantangiya remained largely outside the ambit of formal land tenure systems. Consequently, they continued to experience legal insecurity, socio-economic deprivation, and administrative invisibility for several decades.

The present study seeks to examine this historical trajectory and analyze the intersection of geography, policy, and socio-economic transformation in shaping the land rights struggle of the Vantangiya community. By adopting a geographical perspective, the study highlights how spatial location, environmental context, and institutional frameworks collectively influence patterns of marginalization and development.

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to examine the land rights struggle of the Vantangiya community in the Gorakhpur division of Uttar Pradesh from a geographical and socio-economic perspective. The specific objectives are as follows:

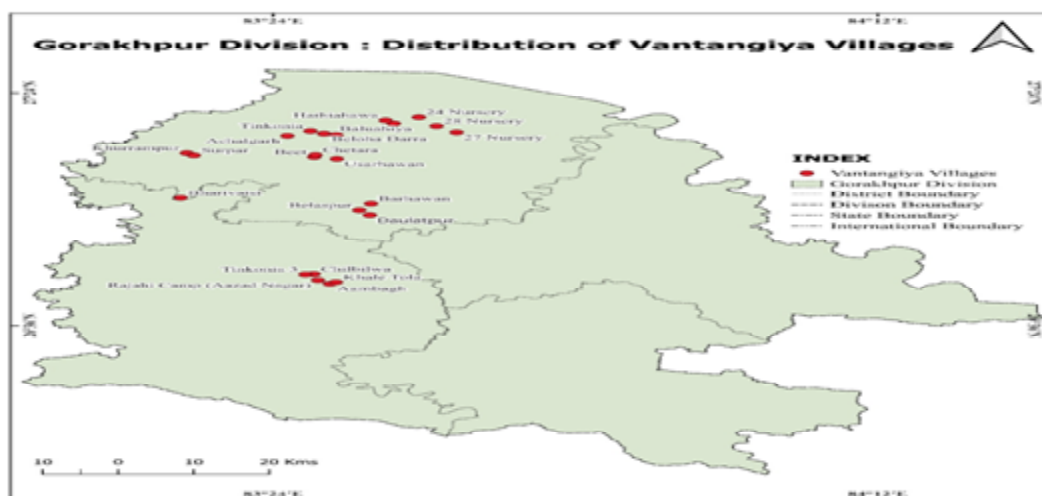
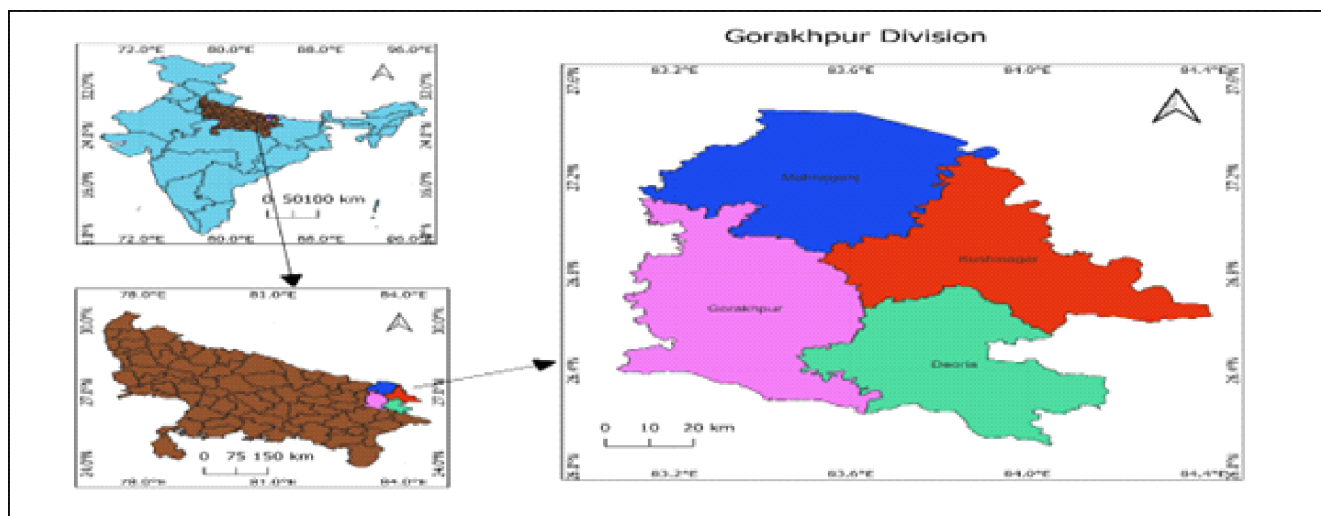
- To analyze the historical evolution of the Vantangiya community with reference to the colonial Taungya system and its long-term implications.
- To assess the socio-economic conditions of the community, including livelihood patterns, educational attainment, and healthcare accessibility.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of major policy interventions, particularly the Forest Conservation Act (1980), the Forest Rights Act (2006), and the Revenue Village Status Policy (2018), in addressing land rights issues.
- To analyze the relationship between land tenure and economic transformation, with special emphasis on agricultural practices and income

diversification.

Study Area

The present study is confined to the Gorakhpur division of northeastern Uttar Pradesh, encompassing the districts of Gorakhpur and Maharajganj. Geographically, the region lies within the Terai belt, a transitional ecological zone characterized by fertile alluvial plains, high groundwater levels, and dense forest cover. Its proximity to the Indo-Nepal international border further enhances its strategic and environmental significance. The study area is marked by a humid subtropical climate, with seasonal monsoon rainfall supporting both agricultural activities and forest ecosystems. The presence of extensive forest tracts has historically influenced settlement patterns, land use, and livelihood strategies in the region. A total of 23 Vantangiya villages have been selected for the present study, distributed across forest fringe zones of the two districts. These settlements originated under the colonial Taungya system and continue to exhibit a close relationship with surrounding forest landscapes. Their spatial location in interior and semi-isolated areas contributes to limited accessibility and developmental constraints. Although these villages were accorded revenue village status in 2018, enabling formal administrative recognition and access to certain government schemes, many settlements continue to face infrastructural deficiencies. Basic amenities such as secondary educational institutions, healthcare facilities, all-weather roads, and sanitation infrastructure remain inadequate or unevenly distributed.

Thus, the study area represents a geographically sensitive and socio-economically vulnerable region, where the interaction between environment, policy, and human settlement patterns provides a critical framework for analyzing the land rights struggle of the Vantangiya community.



Methodology

The present study employs **Geographic Information System (GIS)** techniques to examine the spatial characteristics and distribution patterns of Vantangiya settlements in the Gorakhpur division of Uttar Pradesh. Spatial analysis was carried out using standard cartographic and geospatial tools, enabling a systematic understanding of the relationship between location, environment, and socio-economic conditions. The analysis incorporates thematic mapping, overlay analysis, and spatial distribution techniques. Additionally, spatial distribution mapping helped identify clustering patterns and the geographical concentration of settlements. The GIS-based findings reveal that a majority of Vantangiya

settlements are located in forest fringe zones and ecologically sensitive areas, particularly near the Indo-Nepal border. This spatial distribution contributes significantly to their geographical isolation, limited accessibility to infrastructure, and restricted integration into mainstream development processes.

Historical Background

The origin of the Vantangiya community can be traced back to the late nineteenth century during British colonial rule, when the **Taungya system** was introduced as a strategy for forest management and commercial exploitation. Under this system, local inhabitants were permitted to cultivate agricultural crops on forest land temporarily, alongside

plantation activities such as afforestation and maintenance of forest resources. However, these cultivation rights were strictly conditional and did not confer any form of land ownership. This arrangement resulted in a structural contradiction whereby the community contributed significantly to **forest regeneration and ecological development**, yet remained deprived of legal rights over the land they cultivated. The system thus institutionalized a pattern of “**productive inclusion but proprietary exclusion**,” where labor was utilized, but ownership was retained by the colonial state.

Following independence, despite the introduction of land reform policies and constitutional commitments to social justice, the condition of the Vantangiya community remained largely unchanged. Forest lands continued to be governed by the state, and these settlements were excluded from official revenue records, rendering them **administratively invisible and legally insecure**. The enactment of subsequent policies, particularly the **Forest Conservation Act (1980)**, further restricted the conversion of forest land into revenue land, thereby complicating the process of land rights recognition. Although the **Forest Rights Act (2006)** sought to address this historical injustice by granting land and usage rights to forest dwellers, its implementation has been uneven and limited in the study region. Thus, the historical evolution of the Vantangiya community reflects a long trajectory of marginalization rooted in colonial land-use policies and perpetuated by post-colonial administrative structures, highlighting the persistent gap between labor contribution and ownership rights.

Socio-Economic Structure:

The socio-economic structure of the Vantangiya community is shaped by historical marginalization, geographical isolation, and limited access to resources. It is characterized by low asset ownership, dependence on wage labor, and inadequate access to education and healthcare.

Demographic Profile:

The Vantangiya community in the Gorakhpur division of Uttar Pradesh comprises an estimated population of approximately **25,000 to**

30,000 individuals, distributed across **23 settlements** located primarily in the forest fringe areas of Gorakhpur and Maharajganj districts. These settlements exhibit a **clustered rural settlement pattern**, largely influenced by historical forest-based habitation under the Taungya system. The average household size is relatively high, reflecting traditional family structures and limited access to family planning and healthcare services.

The demographic composition of the community is characterized by a **young population structure**, with a significant proportion of children and working-age individuals. However, high dependency ratios are observed due to limited economic opportunities and seasonal employment patterns. In terms of social classification, the Vantangiya population is generally categorized under the **Other Backward Classes (OBC)**, with a heterogeneous caste composition including groups such as Nishad, Maurya, Yadav, and others. Despite this diversity, strong social cohesion and community-based cooperation remain key features of their demographic structure. Overall, the demographic profile reflects a **marginalized yet cohesive rural population**, shaped by historical exclusion, geographical isolation, and limited access to socio-economic resources.

Livelihood Pattern:

The livelihood structure of the Vantangiya community in the Gorakhpur division is predominantly **agrarian in nature**, though it remains constrained by limited land ownership and insecure tenure. Agriculture serves as a primary source of subsistence, with crops such as paddy, wheat, pulses, and seasonal vegetables being cultivated on small and fragmented landholdings. However, due to partial or absent land rights, agricultural productivity remains low and largely subsistence-oriented. In addition to agriculture, a significant proportion of the population depends on **wage labor**, particularly under schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), as well as informal labor in nearby rural and semi-urban areas. Wage employment often serves as a supplementary income source, especially during the agricultural off-season, reflecting the seasonal nature

of livelihood opportunities. Another important component of the livelihood system is the collection and utilization of **forest produce**, including fuelwood, fodder, minor forest products, and occasionally timber-related activities. This dependence on forest resources highlights the close relationship between the community and its surrounding ecological environment.

Overall, the livelihood pattern of the Vantangiya community is characterized by **diversification under constraints**, where households combine agriculture, wage labor, and forest-based activities to sustain their livelihoods. However, the lack of secure land tenure, limited access to institutional credit, and inadequate market linkages continue to restrict economic advancement and perpetuate vulnerability.

Education and Health:

The status of education and healthcare among the Vantangiya community reflects the broader patterns of socio-economic marginalization and geographical isolation. While primary education facilities are available in a majority of settlements, access to secondary and higher education remains limited due to the absence of nearby institutions, poor transportation connectivity, and economic constraints. Literacy levels within the community show noticeable disparities, particularly along gender lines. Female literacy rates are significantly lower than male literacy, indicating the persistence of socio-cultural barriers, early marriage practices, and limited educational awareness. Although recent policy interventions have improved school enrollment at the primary level, dropout rates increase sharply at higher levels of education.

The healthcare infrastructure in Vantangiya settlements is inadequate and unevenly distributed. Only a limited number of villages have access to Anganwadi centers or primary health sub-centers, while advanced medical facilities are located at considerable distances. This lack of accessibility leads to delayed treatment, dependence on informal healthcare providers, and poor maternal and child health outcomes. Overall, the education and health scenario highlights a deficit in human development indicators, where improvements in basic access have

not yet translated into qualitative outcomes. Strengthening educational infrastructure, improving healthcare accessibility, and promoting awareness are essential for long-term socio-economic transformation.

Social Status:

The Vantangiya community in the Gorakhpur division is generally classified under the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category within the state's social stratification system. However, the community does not constitute a single homogeneous caste group; rather, it comprises individuals from diverse caste backgrounds such as Nishad, Maurya, Yadav, and other socially and economically backward groups. Despite this heterogeneous composition, the Vantangiya settlements exhibit a high degree of internal social cohesion and collective identity, shaped by shared historical experiences of marginalization, forest dependence, and exclusion from land rights. Community-level cooperation is evident in practices such as mutual labor exchange, social support networks, and collective participation in local decision-making processes.

At the same time, the community continues to face social marginalization and limited political representation, largely due to its historical invisibility in administrative records and geographical isolation in forest fringe areas. Although the recognition of these settlements as revenue villages has improved their formal inclusion in governance structures, their social status remains relatively low in comparison to other rural communities. Overall, the social structure of the Vantangiya community reflects a paradox of strong internal solidarity coupled with external **marginalization**, highlighting the need for inclusive policies that address both social identity and structural inequalities.

Socio-Economic Analysis:

The socio-economic analysis highlights moderate improvements in infrastructure and basic services after policy interventions, but structural challenges persist. Continued land insecurity, livelihood vulnerability, and limited human development indicators reflect an incomplete transformation of the community.

Socio-Economic Indicators:

Table 2
Socio-Economic Status of Vantangiya Settlements in Gorakhpur Division (2024)

Indicator	Percentage	Analytical Comment
Land Titled Households	40.20	Partially Accepted Under STAT
Primary School	86.30	Education Accessible, Quality Limited
Electricity	71.50	Improved After Revenue Village Status
Female Literacy	42.10	Socio-Cultural Constraints
Pucca Households (Pucca)	36.40	Gradual Improvement Trend
MGNREGA/Wage Dependence	78.60	Income Sources Limited, Seasonal Insecurity

Source: *Government of Uttar Pradesh (2018), Revenue Village Status Policy-2018, Revenue Department, Lucknow.*

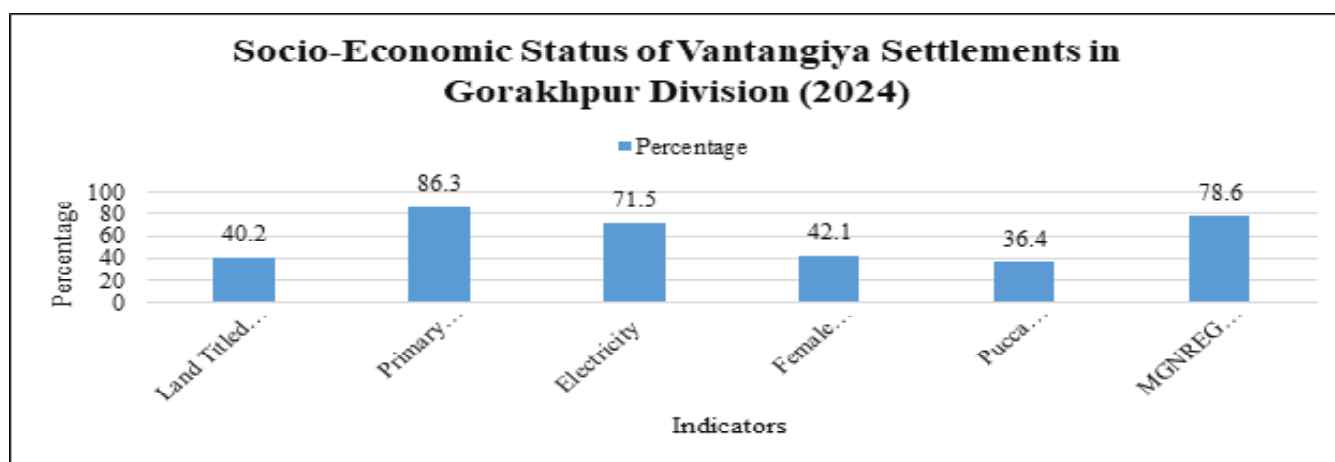


Figure 2: Distribution of Vantangiya Villages

Table 3:
Livelihood Structure of the Vantangiya Community

Livelihood Source	Percentage (%)	Nature of Employment	Analytical Remarks
Wage Labor (MGNREGA & others)	78.6	Seasonal / Casual	Primary source; reflects landlessness
Agriculture	15.0	Subsistence/Semi-commercial	Limited by small landholdings
Forest Produce	6.4	Supplementary	Indicates ecological dependence
Total	100.0	—	—

Source: *Based on field data and secondary sources.*

Statistical Analysis of Livelihood Structure

The statistical distribution of livelihood sources among the Vantangiya community reveals a highly skewed economic structure, with wage labor accounting for nearly four-fifths (78.6%) of total livelihood dependence. This dominance indicates a strong reliance on casual and government-supported employment, particularly under MGNREGA,

reflecting the limited availability of productive assets such as land. Agriculture contributes only 15.0%, suggesting that despite being an agrarian community, land tenure insecurity and fragmented holdings restrict agricultural productivity and income generation. The relatively low share highlights the transition from a land-based economy to a labor-dependent survival system. Forest-based activities

account for 6.4%, functioning primarily as a supplementary source of income. This indicates a continued but declining dependence on forest resources, shaped by regulatory restrictions and environmental constraints. From a statistical perspective, the distribution demonstrates:

- " High concentration index in wage labor (economic dependency)
- " Low diversification in high-value sectors
- " Marginal contribution of natural resources to income

The data clearly reflects a condition of economic vulnerability and structural imbalance, where livelihood security is contingent upon external employment opportunities rather than self-sustaining economic activities.

Policy Framework:

The policy framework governing the Vantangiya community is shaped by forest and land-related legislations, including the Forest Conservation Act (1980), Forest Rights Act (2006), and Revenue Village Status Policy (2018). While these policies aim to balance environmental conservation with social justice, their implementation has resulted in partial inclusion and continued tenure insecurity.

Forest Conservation Act (1980):

The Forest Conservation Act (1980) was enacted to regulate the diversion of forest land for non-forest purposes and to ensure environmental protection through centralized control over forest resources. While the Act played a crucial role in conserving forest ecosystems, it had unintended consequences for forest-dependent communities such as the Vantangiyas.

Under this legislation, the conversion of forest land into revenue land was strictly restricted without prior approval from the central government, thereby limiting the possibility of granting legal land ownership to communities residing within forest areas. As a result, Vantangiya settlements continued to be classified as encroachments on forest land, despite their long-standing historical presence.

This legal framework contributed to the persistence of tenure insecurity, as residents lacked formal recognition of their land rights. Consequently, they were excluded from development schemes,

institutional credit systems, and long-term agricultural investments.

Thus, while the Forest Conservation Act (1980) achieved its objective of environmental conservation, it simultaneously reinforced the structural marginalization of forest-dwelling communities by prioritizing ecological protection over livelihood security.

Forest Rights Act (2006):

The Forest Rights Act (2006), formally known as the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, was enacted to address the historical injustice faced by forest-dependent communities by recognizing their individual and community rights over forest land and resources. The Act provides for the allocation of land titles, rights to habitation, and access to minor forest produce, thereby aiming to integrate forest dwellers into the formal legal and development framework. In the context of the Vantangiya community, the Act marked a significant policy shift by acknowledging their long-standing dependence on forest land and their role in forest conservation.

However, the implementation of the Act in the Gorakhpur and Maharajganj districts has been partial and uneven. Although a substantial number of claims were filed, only approximately 40 percent of claims have been approved, leaving a majority of households without formal land tenure. The low approval rate can be attributed to factors such as lack of documentary evidence, administrative delays, and limited coordination between implementing agencies. As a result, while the Forest Rights Act (2006) represents a progressive legal framework aimed at ensuring tenurial security and socio-economic inclusion, its limited implementation has constrained its effectiveness in bringing about comprehensive transformation in Vantangiya settlements.

Revenue Village Status Policy (2018):

The Revenue Village Status Policy (2018) implemented by the Government of Uttar Pradesh marked a significant administrative intervention aimed at integrating Vantangiya settlements into the formal governance framework. Under this policy, 23 Vantangiya settlements in Gorakhpur and Maharajganj districts were officially recognized as

revenue villages, thereby granting them access to basic civic amenities and institutional mechanisms of rural development.

This policy facilitated notable improvements in infrastructure and service delivery, including electrification, road connectivity, housing under government schemes, access to ration cards, and participation in Panchayati Raj institutions. As a result, the Vantangiya community experienced a transition from administrative invisibility to partial inclusion within the rural development system. However, despite these advancements, the policy did not fully resolve the core issue of land ownership and tenure security. Thus, the Revenue Village Status Policy (2018) represents an important step toward socio-economic integration, but its impact remains partial and transitional, as it addresses administrative recognition without fully ensuring land tenure security.

Conclusion:

The land rights struggle of the Vantangiya community in the Gorakhpur division reflects deep-rooted structural inequalities embedded within India's development and governance framework. Historically shaped by colonial forest policies and perpetuated by post-independence administrative arrangements, the community has remained marginalized despite its significant contribution to forest regeneration and ecological sustainability.

Recent policy interventions, particularly the Forest Rights Act (2006) and the Revenue Village Status Policy (2018), have initiated a process of transformation by improving access to basic infrastructure, administrative recognition, and partial land tenure security. However, the pace and extent of change remain uneven, with persistent challenges such as incomplete land rights distribution, administrative dualism, gender inequality, and limited access to quality education and healthcare.

The findings of this study emphasize that land rights must be understood not merely as legal entitlements, but as a foundation for social identity,

economic security, and human dignity. The absence of secure land tenure continues to restrict livelihood opportunities, investment behavior, and long-term socio-economic mobility.

Therefore, achieving meaningful empowerment of the Vantangiya community requires a holistic and integrated policy approach that combines legal recognition, socio-economic development, gender inclusion, and environmental sustainability. Strengthening institutional coordination, ensuring full implementation of land rights legislation, and promoting community participation in development processes are essential steps toward bridging the gap between policy intent and ground realities. In conclusion, the Vantangiya case highlights the need to reconcile development, environmental governance, and social justice, thereby offering valuable insights for inclusive and sustainable rural development in forest fringe regions.

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