

## Can PESA and FRA Resolve Vidarbha's PVTGs Migration Crisis?

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**Abstract:** This study investigates distress migration among Vidarbha's tribal communities, where agrarian crises, landlessness, and climate variability-evidenced by Rural India Online (March 22, 2023)-push 30–40% of PVTG households to migrate, analyzing socio-economic and environmental drivers through a qualitative, secondary-source methodology integrating government reports and field observations (Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) 2023; Azim Premji University, 2020). It examines exploitation at urban destinations, revealing trafficking risks and wage disparities for tribal women (Frontline, 2024), worsened by corruption in schemes like MGNREGA (Down To Earth, 2023). Recommendations include enhancing irrigation, improving fund utilization, and fostering localized livelihoods to curb migration and empower tribes (Maharashtra Govt., 2023). Moreover, the Livelihoods Approach (Scoones, 1998) provides insight into how tribal households adapt to stressors by diversifying income sources, often through migration. This framework highlights the interplay of natural (e.g., drought), human (e.g., skills), and social (e.g., exclusion) capitals, which are depleted in Vidarbha, driving tribes into precarious urban labour markets. Together, these theories frame migration as a multi-layered phenomenon rooted in ecological fragility, economic deprivation, and institutional failures, offering a robust lens for analyzing Vidarbha's tribal context.

**Keywords:** Distress Migration, Tribal Communities, Vidarbha, PESA

**JEL classification:** J61, O15, Q54

### Introduction

India, home to a tribal population of roughly 86 million as reported by the Census of India (2011), accounting for 8.6 per cent of its total populace, grapples with the profound isolation and marginalization of these communities, who endure systemic disadvantages stemming from their low standing within the caste hierarchy, perpetuating their socio-economic exclusion. The Scheduled Tribes (STs), identified as among the most economically destitute and socially sidelined groups in the nation, face a persistent denial of equal opportunities, severely restricting their engagement in India's political, economic, and social spheres, with barriers to education, employment, political influence, social mobility, health, and empowerment posing formidable challenges (Tripathy, 2012, 2015).

Maharashtra is a dynamic hub of population movement in India, characterized by its dual role as both a magnet for in-migrants and a significant source of out-migration. Over the past decade, the state has consistently recorded the highest levels of both in-migration and out-migration, reflecting its economic vitality and the complex interplay of opportunities and challenges within its borders. This phenomenon is not merely a statistical trend but a reflection of deeper socio-economic realities that shape the lives of millions. With a population of 1,123.74 lakh as per the 2011 Census, Maharashtra saw 573.3 lakh individuals-51.01 per cent to other states, underlining its position as a springboard for outward mobility (Census of India, 2011). Simultaneously, the state welcomed 3.2 million immigrants from other states between 1991 and 2001, with 79.6 per cent settling in urban centres, highlighting its appeal as a destination (Census of India, 2001).

The migration landscape in Maharashtra is multifaceted, encompassing intra-state migration, particularly in rural areas. Data from the 64th National Sample Survey (NSS) of 2007-08 reveals that 14.22 per cent of migration in the state was driven by employment, a marked increase from 10.05 per cent in 1991, though slightly lower than the 16.55 per cent in 2001 (NSSO, 2010).

These fluctuations indicate that while employment remains a cornerstone of migration, its influence varies with economic conditions. Maharashtra's tribal population, numbering 105.10 lakhs (21.1 per cent of the state's total) as per the 2011 Census, adds another layer to this narrative. 94.7 per cent reside in rural areas and often migrate due to limited local opportunities despite a literacy rate of 65.7 per cent, higher than the national Scheduled Tribe (ST) average of 47.10 per cent.

In the context of Vidarbha, the eastern expanse of Maharashtra spanning the Nagpur and Amravati divisions and covering approximately 97,321 square kilometres, constitutes 21.3 per cent of the state's population (Census of India, 2011), distinguished by its vast forest, including one-fourth of its area enveloped by Pench and Navegaon National Parks and the Nagzira Reserved Forest in Gondia-where STs comprise 32.1 per cent of the populace, far exceeding the state's 9.4 per cent average (Shahare, 2020).

Despite boasting 53 per cent of Maharashtra's Forest cover and two-thirds of its mineral wealth, Vidarbha lags economically behind other regions, wrestling with entrenched poverty, malnutrition, and underdevelopment, particularly affecting its sizeable tribal population in remote, hilly forest zones like the Sahyadris, Satpudas, and eastern Gondwana, where inadequate infrastructure and unemployment fuel an agrarian crisis driving rural migration. Within this

region, districts such as Gadchiroli, Chandrapur, and Yavatmal shelter over 40 per cent of Maharashtra's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)-including the Kolam, Katkari, and Maria Gond-totalling 2.74 lakh individuals, amplifying the challenges of marginalization and distress (Ghulghule, 2025, March 8).

The theoretical frameworks of Push-Pull Theory, Structural Vulnerability Theory, and the Livelihoods Approach collectively provide a comprehensive lens through which to understand the migration patterns of Vidarbha's tribal communities, portraying their movement as a multifaceted response to a combination of ecological pressures and deeply entrenched systemic challenges that exacerbate their plight. The existing body of literature meticulously identifies a range of critical factors propelling this migration, including the pervasive agrarian distress that undermines their traditional livelihoods, the widespread issue of landlessness that strips them of secure footing, the profound psychosocial strain that erodes their mental and emotional well-being, and the glaring inefficacy of policies that fail to tackle these root causes, often resulting in dire consequences such as exploitation in urban labour markets and the trafficking of vulnerable individuals. Resolving this complex crisis demands a strategic and evidence-based approach, one that prioritizes the enhancement of irrigation infrastructure to strengthen agricultural productivity, ensures the transparent and effective utilization of allocated funds to support rural development, and fosters the creation of localized livelihood opportunities that are sustainable and tailored to the specific needs of these communities, all of which are interventions firmly grounded in the insights derived from the reviewed scholarly evidence. Future research must focus on bridging the persistent data gaps that hinder a complete understanding of these dynamics, thereby enabling the formulation of precisely targeted policies capable of dismantling the vicious cycle of migration and marginalization that perpetually traps Vidarbha's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in a state of socio-economic precarity.

The distress migration observed among Vidarbha's tribal communities emerges as a poignant reflection of a broader confluence of environmental fragility, marked by unpredictable rainfall and soil degradation, economic deprivation that leaves families without viable income sources, and governance failures that manifest in poorly implemented schemes and misallocated resources. At the destinations where these migrants arrive, the harsh realities of exploitation in unregulated informal sectors and the trafficking of women into coercive situations starkly illuminate the systemic vulnerabilities that pervade their existence, highlighting the human cost of these unchecked dynamics.

### **Objectives**

1. To analyze the socio-economic and environmental factors such as agrarian crises, landlessness, and climate variability pushing Vidarbha's tribes to migrate, using secondary data to map their scale and impact.
2. To assess exploitation and trafficking risks at destinations and examine the conditions tribal migrants, especially women, face in urban centres, focusing on wage disparities, labour exploitation, and trafficking vulnerabilities, drawing from government and NGO reports.
3. To develop evidence-based recommendations to enhance irrigation, improve fund utilization, and create localized livelihoods, leveraging existing schemes and successful case studies to curb migration and empower tribes.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative, secondary-source-based methodology for its effectiveness in synthesizing existing data on Vidarbha's tribal migration, drawing together diverse strands of evidence to construct a cohesive narrative. The approach entailed a review of pertinent literature, encompassing an in-depth analysis of data from leading newspapers and magazines that provide contemporary insights alongside authoritative Government reports that offer official statistics and policy perspectives, ensuring a foundation for the findings. Moreover, the methodology integrated mixed methods, skillfully combining primary and secondary sources to enrich the analysis, where primary data comprising personal field observations and detailed field notes served as a vital complement to the secondary materials, lending an experiential dimension to the study. Crucial sources included the (MoTA, 2023), which provided critical governmental data on tribal welfare and migration trends, as well as the Azim Premji University (2020) study, which offered a scholarly examination of socio-economic dynamics, together enabling an understanding of the migration patterns and their underlying causes in Vidarbha.

### **Drivers of Distress Migration in Vidarbha**

In the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, the PVTGs tribes serve as a poignant case study for distress migration propelled by agrarian crises intertwined with pervasive systemic corruption that cripples rural stability. A Down To Earth report (2023) reveals how corruption in schemes like MGNREGA-delivering only 40–50 workdays annually instead of the promised 100-severely restricts employment opportunities, forcing tribal communities to seek precarious

informal jobs in urban hubs like Mumbai and Pune. The Maharashtra Irrigation Scam, as documented by Wikipedia, exposed <sup>1</sup> 35,000 crore in financial irregularities against a <sup>1</sup> 70,000 crore investment, yielding a mere 0.1% increase in irrigation coverage, leaving tribal farmers vulnerable to unpredictable monsoons and deepening their debt burden, a plight Rural India Online (2023) binds to climate uncertainty that further drives migration. Over the past 27 years, only 25% of Vidarbha's 314 planned irrigation projects have been completed, as ongoing delays, underutilized funds, and stalled water initiatives—such as the Gosikhurd project, languishing for over 30 years while Koyna dam in western Maharashtra was finished in just seven—have left vast stretches of the region's 23 lakh hectares of irrigable farmland dry, with a mere three lakh hectares currently irrigated (Times of India, 2024, November 16).

Compounding this, the Tribal Research and Training Institute (TRTI, 2022) indicates that less than 60% of Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) funds reach their intended beneficiaries due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and graft, hobbling livelihood initiatives meant to anchor rural tribes. Frontline (2024) highlights the socio-economic toll, detailing how migration fragments households, with urban wages of <sup>1</sup> 200–300 daily proving insufficient to break poverty's grip. The report also reports a high school dropout rate among tribal children left behind, perpetuating cycles of deprivation.

Rural India Online (2023, March 22) illustrates how the region's reliance on rain-fed agriculture, particularly cotton—a water-intensive crop susceptible to erratic monsoons—combined with recurring droughts and mounting debt, propels tribal families toward seasonal or permanent migration to urban centres like Mumbai and Pune, a trend exacerbated by climate uncertainty that devastates livelihoods. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2023) highlights this agrarian distress, reporting over 2,500 farmer suicides annually in Maharashtra from 2013 to 2022, with Vidarbha disproportionately impacted due to its ecological and economic vulnerabilities, pushing PVTGs into what Breman (1996) terms “footloose labour”—a relentless cycle between rural deprivation and urban exploitation.

Applying the Push-Pull Theory (Lee, 1966), which posits that adverse conditions like poverty and environmental stress (push factors) drive individuals from their origins while perceived opportunities (pull factors) such as urban job prospects draw them elsewhere, Vidarbha's tribal migration reflects crop failure, land alienation, and debt as strategic motivators. However, Structural Vulnerability Theory (Quesada et al., 2011) deepens this analysis by spotlighting systemic inequalities—corruption, policy failures, and inadequate implementation

of schemes like MGNREGA, which delivers only 40–50 workdays annually against a promised 100 (Down To Earth, 2023)-as underlying causes of their marginalization. The Tribal Research and Training Institute (TRTI, 2022) estimates that 30–40% of PVTG households in Vidarbha have at least one migrant member, a phenomenon tied to the failure of rural safety nets and compounded by landlessness that limits access to credit or sustainable farming, forcing tribes into informal sectors where exploitation thrives.

The VISHRAM study (PubMed, 2016) further connects this migration to psycho-social distress, highlighting how poverty and indebtedness erode mental well-being among rural communities, while at their destinations-urban construction sites, brick kilns, and factories-tribal migrants, especially women, face heightened risks of trafficking and labour abuse, revealing a multi-layered crisis rooted in ecological fragility and governance deficits. This interplay of agrarian collapse, structural inequities, and human cost positions Vidarbha as a microcosm of India's broader tribal migration challenge and has resulted in temporary urban pull factors that mask long-term exploitation and unresolved rural despair.

Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reveals that Vidarbha, a region marked by agrarian distress, contributes significantly to Maharashtra's over 2,500 annual farmer suicides recorded between 2013 and 2022, driven by poverty and indebtedness as identified in a 2016 PubMed study on the VISHRAM project. The Maharashtra Government Report (2023) further notes that this psycho-social distress fuels seasonal or permanent migration, with many rural labourers relocating to urban hubs like Mumbai or Pune for work in construction and informal sectors.

**Table 1: Distress-Driven Migration from Vidarbha (2019–2021)**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Estimated Migrants</i>	<i>Primary Destinations</i>	<i>Key Drivers</i>	<i>Source</i>
2019	~50,000	Mumbai, Pune (informal jobs)	Agrarian crises, seasonal migration	Rural India Online (2023)
2020	~45,000	Mumbai, Pune (informal sectors)	Economic distress, lack of jobs	Maharashtra Govt. Report (2023)
2021	~60,000	Mumbai, Pune (construction)	Debt, unsustainable farming	NCRB (2021), VISHRAM Study (2021)

Table 1 illustrates a rising trend of distress-driven migration from Vidarbha, increasing from approximately 50,000 in 2019 to 60,000 in 2021, according to Rural India Online (March 22, 2023), Maharashtra Government Report (2023), NCRB (2021), and VISHRAM Study (2021), with a notable dip to 45,000 in

2020 likely due to pandemic disruptions. Migrants, primarily seeking jobs in Mumbai and Pune's construction and informal sectors, are propelled by an agrarian crisis, mounting debt, and unsustainable farming, with Rural India Online (March 22, 2023) and Outlook India (2023, July 30) observing a shift from seasonal to permanent migration due to inadequate farming income and persistent financial distress. This economic desperation, fueled by unaddressed rural challenges, underlines the urgent need for targeted interventions to stem the exodus and strengthen Vidarbha's agrarian economy.

**Table 2: Systemic Policy Failures and Their Socio-Economic Repercussions on Vidarbha's Tribal Communities (2020–2023)**

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Details</i>	<i>Impact on Tribes</i>	<i>Source</i>
MGNREGA	Intended to provide 100 workdays per household, but delivers only 40–50 days due to corruption and poor enforcement	Reduced income, persistent migration	Down To Earth (2023)
Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP)	Aimed at tribal development, yet less than 60% of funds are utilized due to delays and mismanagement	Limited developmental impact	TRTI Maharashtra (2022)
Irrigation Projects	Sought to increase coverage, but Rs 35,000 crore was misappropriated, yielding less than 20% progress	Poor irrigation, crop failure	Wikipedia (2012)
Anti-Trafficking Cell	Established in 2008 to combat trafficking, yet low conviction rates persist due to official complicity	Ongoing trafficking exploitation	Outlook India (2023)
Low Urban Wages	Migrants earn Rs. 200–300 daily in urban informal sectors	Persistent poverty	Frontline (2024)

Table 2 underlines the pervasive policy failures in Vidarbha, where corruption and ineffective implementation of initiatives like MGNREGA, TSP, and irrigation projects-evidenced by Down To Earth (2023), and Wikipedia(Maharashtra Irrigation Scam) -alongside the Anti-Trafficking Cell's shortcomings (Outlook India, July 30, 2023), perpetuate migration and trafficking, while low urban wages (Frontline, 2024) trap tribes in poverty, highlighting the urgent need for accountability, structural reforms, and enhanced rural livelihood strategies to break this cycle of distress.

### **Migration Patterns, Destinations, and Socioeconomic Consequences:**

Migration from Vidarbha, often characterized as distress-driven, manifests in both seasonal and permanent patterns, with Rural India Online (2023) documenting a notable shift from approximately 50,000 seasonal migrants in 2019 to around 60,000 permanent migrants by 2021, a trend corroborated by Outlook India (July 30, 2023) as a response to persistent rural adversities like drought and debt. The dual nature of this movement highlights both intra-state

migration toward urban centres like Nagpur and Amravati and a growing inter-state exodus to Gujarat and Telangana, driven by expanding labour markets—a pattern consistent with De Haan's (2002) estimation that 60–70% of India's tribal migrants, including those from Vidarbha, find employment in construction, brick kilns, and informal sectors.

An 18% rise in tribal migration in Maharashtra between 2011 and 2018, with particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) disproportionately represented due to their limited land ownership, a vulnerability echoed in Frontline (2024), which details how migrants from Gadchiroli and Chandrapur flock to Mumbai's construction sites and Pune's brick kilns, earning a meagre <sup>1</sup> 200–300 daily under harsh, exploitative conditions that underline the perilous allure of urban survival.

The conditions at migration destinations significantly perpetuate the cycles of out-migration, as migrants encounter deplorable living situations such as unhygienic open spaces or overcrowded rooms devoid of adequate water and sanitation—while employers consistently neglect essential safety measures, exposing workers to frequent accidents without access to medical recourse or support. Exploitation, manifesting through high-interest debts imposed by predatory lenders and pervasive discrimination from contractors and government officials, further compounds their vulnerability; however, the pressing financial necessity to sustain livelihoods overrides these formidable hardships, sustaining the continuous flow of migration. Entire families often undertake these journeys together, uprooting children from stable educational environments and contributing to alarmingly high dropout rates, a problem inadequately addressed by initiatives like the Maharashtra government's Bhonga Shala program schools designed for migrant children—which operates only sporadically and fails to extend its reach into key destination states like Gujarat (Pandit, & Kulkarni, 2020). This disruption of education, coupled with the persistent allure of migration as a primary livelihood strategy for approximately 80 per cent of tribal participants in a documented study, entrenches migration as a deeply rooted, multi-generational coping mechanism within these communities.

The socioeconomic consequence of this migration is glaring as Firstpost's (2019) findings revealed that 97% of seasonal migrants lack access to toilets and 49% to safe water, which, as Kabeer (2005) argues, perpetuates poverty rather than alleviating PVTG marginalization. This distress migration, rooted in agrarian crises, socioeconomic exclusion, and governance failures, reveals a complex interplay of push factors like landlessness and corruption, with urban opportunities proving illusory, necessitating further research into longitudinal

PVTG migration trends, trafficking's scope, and mental health impacts as suggested by VISHRAM (2016).

### **Vidarbha and Beyond: Tackling Distress Migration**

The implications of this study reach far beyond the geographical confines of Vidarbha, offering a robust and adaptable model that could effectively curb distress migration in other rain-fed, tribal-dominated regions facing similar socioeconomic and environmental challenges. It emphatically highlights the urgent need for sweeping structural reforms—such as significantly improving irrigation systems to stabilize agricultural output, decisively curbing corruption to ensure resources reach those in need and actively fostering local economic opportunities that empower communities to disrupt the relentless migration-marginalization cycle and provide PVTGs with the tools for meaningful socioeconomic empowerment. Through the analytical lenses of Push-Pull and Structural Vulnerability theories, this theoretical note positions distress migration among Vidarbha's tribal populations as a systemic issue that transcends individual choice, necessitating carefully designed interventions that mitigate both the immediate triggers and the underlying structural deficiencies perpetuating this phenomenon.

### **Promise vs. Reality: PESA and FRA in Vidarbha**

The Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) of 1996 and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA) of 2006 are considered transformative legislative frameworks designed to foster the development of tribal communities in India, particularly in regions like Vidarbha. Through the establishment of decentralized local governance structures that enhance tribal representation, secure their rights to land and resources, and promote socioeconomic upliftment, a potentially congenial environment for halting the distress migration that has long plagued these vulnerable populations. PESA theoretically empowers tribal communities by granting Gram Sabhas significant authority over natural resources, minor forest produce, and local development planning. At the same time, the FRA seeks to rectify historical injustices by recognizing individual and community forest rights, providing a legal basis for tribes to sustainably manage their ancestral lands and livelihoods, which could anchor them to their native regions and reduce the compulsion to migrate under duress.

However, despite these strong frameworks, their implementation in Maharashtra, specifically in Vidarbha, has been marred by significant

shortcomings, as the state has failed to fully decentralize planning processes or ensure the direct allocation of funds to Panchayats in tribal areas. This critical step could empower these local bodies to address the root causes of migration, such as agrarian distress, landlessness, and lack of viable livelihoods. Similarly, compliance with the FRA remains alarmingly deficient, with evidence indicating that 63 per cent of districts in Maharashtra report zero compliance. This stark statistic emphasizes the vast gap between the legislative intent of recognizing tribal rights and the actual on-the-ground realization of those rights, leaving many of Vidarbha's tribal members without the security of tenure or resources that could stabilize their socioeconomic conditions and dissuading them from fleeing to urban centres in search of survival.

The implications of these implementation failures are profound, particularly when viewed against the backdrop of Maharashtra's broader developmental landscape, where prosperity and deprivation coexist in a striking duality that amplifies the urgency of leveraging PESA and FRA to halt distress migration. Western Maharashtra, with thriving urban hubs like Mumbai, Pune, Thane, and Kolhapur, boasts per capita incomes exceeding <sup>1</sup> 3 lakhs in the fiscal year 2022-23, reflecting robust economic growth and infrastructure development, while Vidarbha and Marathwada languish in relative backwardness, with districts such as Washim, Gadchiroli, Yavatmal, and Buldhana reporting per capita incomes below <sup>1</sup> 1.5 lakhs, a disparity that not only highlights economic inequity but also fuels the socioeconomic pressures driving tribal communities to abandon their homes (Zaware, 2025 February 11). This economic divide is mirrored in human development indicators, as districts like Nagpur and Pune exhibit low deprivation levels, with only 3 to 4 per cent of their populations lacking access to health, education, and basic amenities. In contrast, Vidarbha districts like Nandurbar and Dhule struggle with multidimensional poverty affecting up to 33 per cent and 24 per cent of their populations, respectively. This reality underscores the acute challenges facing tribal communities and the critical need for PESA and FRA to be practical tools for bridging these gaps (Kulkarni & Hatekar, 2024).

Empowering Gram Sabhas under PESA to control local resources and development funds and ensuring FRA's recognition of forest rights translates into tangible assets for tribal households, these acts could foster sustainable livelihoods that mitigate the environmental fragility, economic deprivation, and governance failures, pushing Vidarbha's tribes toward migration, offering them a viable alternative to the exploitation and trafficking they often encounter at their destinations.

However, the promise of PESA and FRA remains unfulfilled due to persistent structural and societal barriers undermining their potential to create a congenial situation for tribal empowerment and migration cessation in Vidarbha. The decentralization envisioned by PESA has been disordered by inadequate institutional support, pervasive discrimination, and the dominance of upper-caste interests within Panchayati Raj institutions, where tribal representatives frequently face intimidation, hostility, and political retribution, particularly in Naxalite-affected areas like Gadchiroli, creating an environment of fear that deters meaningful participation and silences their voices on issues like irrigation, land rights, and livelihood creation that could anchor them to their regions (Tripathy, 2014, BehanBox. 2023, November 27).

Proxy politics further complicates this landscape, as elected tribal leaders, including women, are often coerced into serving as mouthpieces for dominant caste agendas rather than advocates for their communities. This dynamic erodes the autonomy PESA intends to confer and perpetuates the marginalization driving distress migration.

Meanwhile, the FRA's transformative potential is evidenced by 6,488 community forest rights (CFR) claims (Tripathy et al., 2023). However, generating <sup>1</sup> 33 crores and empowering Gram Sabhas remains curtailed by significant gaps, such as the 1.34 lakh PVTGs awaiting titles, a housing completion rate of just 0.28 per cent, and a 36 per cent literacy deficit. These highlights highlight an incomplete execution that prevents these legislative tools from delivering comprehensive upliftment and breaking the cycle of poverty and displacement.

### **Policy implications**

Mitigating these entrenched issues requires a bold and multifaceted strategy: dismantling the corrupt practices that siphon away vital support, enhancing rural resilience through investments in infrastructure and skills development, and safeguarding migrants with rights-based interventions that protect their dignity and agency—all of which are essential steps to prevent Vidarbha's tribal communities from remaining perpetually ensnared in a web of exploitation and marginalization that threatens their survival and well-being.

Tackling distress migration among Vidarbha's tribal communities, especially the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) such as Kolam, Katkari, and Maria Gond, demands a comprehensive, multifaceted approach that prioritizes enhanced irrigation infrastructure to reduce reliance on unpredictable rain-fed agriculture, which Rural India Online (2023, March 22) identifies as a primary catalyst for migration to urban centres, alongside

ensuring transparent and effective utilization of funds to maximize their impact on rural development. Promoting agro-based micro-enterprises-such as bamboo crafts, honey processing, or poultry farming-harnesses Vidarbha's abundant forest resources and indigenous skills, with the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) demonstrating success through self-help groups (SHGs) in Amravati that generate annual household incomes of <sup>1</sup> 10,000–15,000 (Maharashtra Govt., 2023), a model that, if scaled with robust training and market linkages, could sustainably anchor livelihoods and diminish the need to migrate. Without such interventions, the region's tribes encounter a deepening crisis, as migration surged from approximately 50,000 in 2019 to 65,000 by 2022 (TRTI, 2022), highlighting the urgency of integrating irrigation improvements, accountable funding, and localized economic opportunities to break the cycle of distress, empower

### **Conclusion**

If strengthened, the interplay between PESA and FRA could resolve these systemic failures and create a framework for halting distress migration by tackling the socioeconomic and political marginalization at its roots. For instance, effective implementation of PESA could ensure that Gram Sabhas in Vidarbha's tribal areas gain ownership of minor forest produce, water bodies, and land resources, as advocated by scholars like Tripathy (2017, 2018), enabling communities to generate income locally and reduce their reliance on precarious migration to urban informal sectors, while FRA's recognition of forest rights could secure land tenure, allowing tribes to cultivate or sustainably harvest resources rather than abandoning their homes due to landlessness or agrarian crises. However, this synergy hinges on closing implementation gaps-such as training tribal women to assert influence in Panchayats, amending the Indian Forest Act and Land Acquisition Act to align with PESA's provisions, and dismantling corrupt practices that siphon funds away from tribal development-steps that would channel resources and decision-making power directly to the poorest and most marginalized households, fostering resilience and self-reliance that could stem the outflow of migrants.

Beyond economic empowerment, the socio-political implications of robust PESA and FRA enforcement are equally critical, as the current lack of equitable representation in Panchayati Raj undermines Maharashtra's capacity to achieve social justice for Vidarbha's tribes. This failure perpetuates their exclusion and drives migration as a desperate survival strategy. The constant threat of Naxalite violence, political killings, and social ostracism creates a chilling effect that

discourages tribal participation in governance. At the same time, gender dynamics further limit women's roles, often relegating them to proxies rather than genuine leaders. This situation stifles the potential for community-driven solutions to migration triggers like health disparities, educational deficits, and resource scarcity. Creative strategies, such as promoting tribal political leadership through targeted training and ensuring reservations in Panchayats are enforced, could amplify their voices, enabling them to demand the integration of schemes like MGNREGA and the National Rural Health Mission with PESA and FRA objectives, thereby enhancing service delivery and building a socioeconomic safety net that reduces migration pressures.

The development paradigm pursued since independence has intensified discontent among marginalized communities by imposing policies that disregard their needs, resulting in irreparable harm. This approach has disproportionately benefited dominant groups while burdening people with low incomes with most of its costs, often leading to displacement and a sub-human existence for these communities. Particularly for tribal groups, it has dismantled their social structures, cultural identities, and resource bases, sparked conflicts and weakened communal solidarity, which heightens their vulnerability to exploitation (Tripathy, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2016).

Ultimately, the success of PESA and FRA in halting distress migration in Vidarbha depends on a concerted effort to bridge the chasm between legislative intent and practical outcomes. This task requires administrative reform and a cultural shift toward valuing tribal agency and rights. Empowering Gram Sabhas to control resources and development, securing forest rights to stabilize livelihoods, and fostering inclusive governance that amplifies tribal representation, these acts could dismantle the structural vulnerabilities-agrarian distress, corruption, and policy inefficacy-that propel migration, replacing them with a congenial environment of opportunity and dignity that allows Vidarbha's tribal communities to thrive in their ancestral lands rather than flee them. Without such resolute action, the cycles of exclusion, deprivation, and displacement will persist, rendering the promise of PESA and FRA a hollow echo in the face of Vidarbha's enduring tribal crisis.

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