



Empowerment of Scheduled Tribes in Vidarbha: An Analysis of Decentralization Efforts

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To Cite this Article

S. N. Tripathy (2025). Empowerment of Scheduled Tribes in Vidarbha: An Analysis of Decentralization Efforts. *Indian Development Economics Review*, 1: 1, pp. 1-18.

ABSTRACT

The Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, encompassing districts such as Gadchiroli, Yavatmal, Chandrapur, Wardha, and Amravati, hosts over 40% of the state's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), including Kolam, Katkari, and Maria Gond. With a PVTG population of approximately 2.74 lakh out of Maharashtra's 6.68 lakh, Vidarbha is a critical site for examining the empowerment of Scheduled Tribes (STs) through decentralization efforts. Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Vidarbha face significant social exclusion and limited access to opportunities despite the one-third reservation in Panchayati Raj. Their low participation in socio-political and economic activities raises concerns about their development. This paper examines the socio-economic conditions of tribals in Vidarbha, their political participation, and their involvement in decision-making processes. Vidarbha's experience challenges the establishment narrative of decentralization as a panacea, urging a reevaluation of how power is truly devolved to India's most vulnerable. Decentralization's potential to empower Vidarbha's STs hinges on mitigating these gaps. Strengthening Gram Sabhas, improving infrastructure delivery, and ensuring land rights are critical. While government commitment is evident, execution weakens, leaving tribal empowerment incomplete amidst persistent socio-economic marginalization. The study concludes that despite welfare measures and constitutional protections, the efforts of the Central and State Governments have had minimal impact. Strengthening the role of Gram Panchayats can improve service delivery and mitigate the challenges in implementing tribal-specific schemes. Structural barriers, limited political agency, and socio-economic disparities dilute its impact, leaving tribal communities on the margins.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj, Scheduled Tribes (STs), PESA, FRA

Introduction

India is home to approximately 86 million tribal people, accounting for 8.6% of the total population, as per the Census of India (2011). Despite their numerical strength, tribal communities remain significantly isolated and marginalized, often disadvantaged due to their historically subordinate status within the broader social hierarchy. The Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute one of the poorest and socially excluded sections of Indian society. They continue to face systemic denial of equal opportunities, which hampers their full participation in the political, economic, and social life of the country. Limited access to quality education, gainful employment, political representation, social mobility, healthcare, and avenues for empowerment are among the critical challenges confronting STs in India (Tripathy, 2012; 2015).

Vidarbha, the eastern region of Maharashtra, comprises the Nagpur and Amravati divisions, spanning an area of approximately 97,321 square kilometers and accounting for 21.3% of the state's total population (Census of India, 2011). The region is notable for its extensive forest cover, with about one-fourth of its area occupied by protected reserves such as the Pench and Navegaon National Parks and the Nagzira Reserved Forest in Gondia district. While Scheduled Tribes constitute 9.4% of Maharashtra's overall population, their proportion in Vidarbha rises sharply to 32.1%, according to the 2011 Census. The region encompasses eleven districts—Akola, Amravati, Bhandara, Buldana, Chandrapur, Gadchiroli, Gondia, Nagpur, Wardha, Washim, and Yavatmal—with Gadchiroli, Yavatmal, Chandrapur, Gondia, and Amravati recording the highest concentrations of tribal populations.

Vidarbha contains about 53 per cent of Maharashtra's total forest cover and two-thirds of the state's mineral resources. However, it lags economically compared to other parts of Maharashtra, grappling with poverty, malnutrition, and underdevelopment (Ministry of Environment, 2017). The large tribal population residing in remote and inaccessible hilly forest areas like the Sahyadris, Satpudas, and eastern Gondwana faces inadequate infrastructure, unemployment, and a severe agrarian crisis leading to migration from rural areas. Maharashtra has identified 45 ST communities, with significant groups including the Bhils, Gonds, Mahadeo Kolis, Warlis, and Koknas. At the same time, the Katkaris, Kolams, and Madia Gonds have been classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) due to their low levels of integration (Government of Maharashtra, 2013; Karade, 2008).

The Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, encompassing districts like Gadchiroli, Chandrapur, and Yavatmal, hosts over 40% of the state's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal

Groups (PVTGs), such as the Kolam, Katkari, and Maria Gond, totalling 2.74 lakh individuals. Decentralization efforts, rooted in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) of 1996, aim to empower these Scheduled Tribes (STs) by devolving governance to local bodies (Tripathy, 2018). While initiatives like the Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM JANMAN) target socio-economic upliftment through housing, health, and education, implementation gaps persist due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, land alienation, and limited community participation.

Despite constitutional safeguards and the provision of one-third reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions, the tribal population in Maharashtra-particularly in the Vidarbha region-continues to be among the most deprived and vulnerable groups, with limited socio-economic and political mobility. In districts such as Gadchiroli and Melghat, deprivation levels remain alarmingly high, with poor access to basic amenities including housing, drinking water, sanitation, and electricity. According to the Society for Education, Action and Research in Community (SEARCH), approximately 175,000 children die annually in Maharashtra, with a disproportionate number of these deaths occurring in tribal-dominated districts such as Gadchiroli, Yavatmal, Amravati, Nandurbar, and Dhule (Jawale, 2015). The Melghat region continues to face a severe malnutrition crisis among pregnant and lactating tribal women and infants-leading to thousands of preventable deaths, a tragedy that persists despite judicial interventions (The Free Press Journal, 2019).

Objectives of the Study

1. To review the extent of political accessibility and the challenges faced by tribal communities in decentralized governance structures in Vidarbha, Maharashtra.
2. To examine tribal participation in the implementation of development programmes and assess the impact of decentralization on their socio-economic well-being.

Methodology

The methodology involved a comprehensive review of relevant literature, analysis of data from leading newspapers and magazines, Government reports, and mixed methods combining primary and secondary sources. Primary data and field notes, essentially personal field observations, were used to gain insights into the role of decentralized governance in tribal development in Vidarbha. Further, the analysis made, and inferences drawn- in the paper in assessing the benefits percolating the

poor and marginalized tribes through the FRA and PESA integrates data from the cited references, including the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2023), the Azim Premji University (2020) study. Field insights from Vidarbha supplemented the study to infer insights, highlighting the potential and gaps in empowering tribal communities through these frameworks.

The extent of Poverty in Vidarbha Region

The Vidarbha region, located in eastern Maharashtra, India, is marked by significant poverty despite being part of one of India's wealthiest states. Comprising 11 districts—Amravati, Akola, Bhandara, Buldhana, Chandrapur, Gadchiroli, Gondia, Nagpur, Wardha, Washim, and Yavatmal—Vidarbha is predominantly rural and agrarian, with its economy heavily reliant on agriculture, mainly cotton and orange cultivation. However, multidimensional poverty, characterized by health, education, and living standards deprivation, remains pervasive due to factors like drought, low agricultural productivity, and limited infrastructure.

According to the NITI Aayog National Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) 2023, based on the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21), Maharashtra has made progress in reducing poverty, but regional disparities persist. In Vidarbha, districts like Gadchiroli and Washim exhibit higher poverty levels, with over 10% of the population classified as multidimensionally poor, compared to urbanized areas like Nagpur (3-4%). The Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2022-23 reveals that per capita income in poorer Vidarbha districts such as Washim (Rs. 1.2 lakh) and Yavatmal (Rs. 1.4 lakh) has been significantly lower than the state average (Rs. 2.4 lakh), highlighting economic inequality.

A 2015 Live Mint analysis of spatial poverty, using National Sample Survey data, identified Gadchiroli and Yavatmal as having some of the highest poverty rates in Maharashtra, with rural poverty in Vidarbha averaging 24%, above the state's rural average of 20%. The Frontline report (2024) records that Vidarbha's eastern agrarian belt suffers from deeper rural poverty than the national average, driven by a lack of industrial growth and dependence on rain-fed farming. Moreover, a PubMed study (2016) from the VISHRAM project in Amravati district found that 14.6% of the rural population experienced psycho-social distress linked to poverty and indebtedness, further compounding economic hardship. While Vidarbha's urban centres like Nagpur fare better, its rural areas remain trapped in a cycle of poverty, with multidimensional deprivation affecting a significant portion of its 23 million residents (2011 Census).

The socio-economic conditions of tribal communities such as the Kolam, Gonds, Pardhi, and Korku in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra are particularly precarious, often more severe than those faced by other tribal groups. These communities grapple with acute poverty, underdevelopment, and, in extreme cases, chronic starvation (Shahare, 2020). Among them, the Gonds-subdivided into groups such as the Raj-Gonds, Mardia-Gonds (Maria Gonds), Dhurve Gonds, Khatulwar/Khatole Gonds, and Naik Gonds-exhibit diverse cultural and social structures. The Banjara tribes, mainly concentrated in the Yavatmal district, are classified as nomadic and display distinct socio-cultural traits and varying degrees of acculturation, further complicating their integration and development (Jawale, 2015; Shahare, 2020).

In the Melghat region of Amravati district, the Korku tribe constitutes 89.3% of the tribal population, followed by smaller communities such as the Gonds, Nihals, Mongias, Balais, Vanjaris, and Gaolies. Melghat-particularly the Dharani and Chikhaldhara tehsils—comprises 315 villages spread over approximately 140,025 hectares. Notably, two of the 20 villages located within the Tiger Reserve's buffer zone and reserved forest area have been evicted, reflecting the ongoing displacement and vulnerability of these communities (Jawale, 2015; Shahare, 2020).

Multiple studies, including a 2013 report by the Government of Maharashtra, consistently underscore the entrenched poverty, deprivation, and social marginalization faced by these tribal groups. These disparities stand in stark contrast to the relative socio-economic security enjoyed by the non-tribal population.

A recent survey (Times of India, March 16, 2024), conducted under the Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM JANMAN), indicates that over 67% of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) habitations in Vidarbha now have mobile network coverage. Of the 1,427 identified PVTG habitations in the region, 969 are connected to mobile networks, with districts like Gadchiroli and Chandrapur showing notable improvement, while Wardha remains entirely disconnected. Despite these advances in digital connectivity, electrification remains a critical concern-over 16,000 tribal households in the region lack access to electricity. Yavatmal district, in particular, accounts for more than 15,800 unelectrified households.

Vidarbha is home to more than 40% of Maharashtra's total PVTG population. Five districts-Yavatmal, Gadchiroli, Chandrapur, Wardha, and Amravati-together account for approximately 2.74 lakh tribal individuals. This data is reaffirmed in a report by Ghulghule (March 8, 2025), which draws from the PM JANMAN Yojana, a central government initiative aimed at improving the socio-economic status of PVTGs through targeted interventions in health, education, and livelihoods.

Maharashtra officially recognizes three PVTG communities: Kolam, Katkari, and Maria Gond. The Kolam tribe is concentrated primarily in Vidarbha, particularly near Pandharkawada and the Telangana-bordering areas of Gadchiroli. Linguistic and cultural affinities between Kolami and Telugu are attributed to historical migration from Telangana, as noted by an official associated with the Janman project in Kinwat.

Table 1: District-wise Distribution of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in Vidarbha, Maharashtra

<i>District</i>	<i>PVTG Population</i>	<i>No. of Habitations</i>
Gadchiroli	1,34,000	560
Yavatmal	1,24,000	700
Chandrapur	7,995	68
Wardha	7,337	Data Not Specified
Amravati	334	Data Not Specified

The Gharkul housing project, initiated under PM JANMAN, aims to provide permanent housing and related infrastructure to PVTG households, offering 2 lakh per family. While implementation has begun and some families in the Nagpur division have received initial instalments, many tribal households continue to await completion of their homes and associated amenities.

Migration in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra

Migration in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, India, is often driven by agrarian distress, such as erratic rainfall, crop failure, and mounting debt. This region, encompassing 11 districts including Amravati, Nagpur, and Yavatmal, has faced severe challenges due to its dependence on rain-fed agriculture, particularly cotton cultivation. According to a 2023 report by Rural India Online, climate uncertainty and financial losses have triggered significant outmigration, with farmers and labourers seeking livelihoods elsewhere. The mental health crisis, exacerbated by these conditions, has also contributed to distress migration as families flee economic instability and psychological strain.

Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) highlights Vidarbha's agrarian distress, reporting over 2,500 farmer suicides annually in Maharashtra between 2013 and 2022, with Vidarbha accounting for a substantial share. A PubMed (2016) study on the VISHRAM project in Vidarbha found that psycho-social distress, linked to poverty and indebtedness, broadly affects rural communities, pushing many to migrate. The Maharashtra Government Report (2023) records that migration is

seasonal or permanent, with labourers moving to urban centres like Mumbai or Pune for construction and informal sector jobs.

Table 2: 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 2 underlines a growing trend of distress-driven migration from Vidarbha, rising from 50,000 in 2019 to 60,000 in 2021, as per Rural India Online (2023), Maharashtra Government Report (2023), NCRB (2021), and VISHRAM Study (2021). Migrants, primarily targeting Mumbai and Pune’s construction and informal sectors, were pushed by agrarian crises, mounting debt, and unsustainable farming. Rural India Online (2023) notes seasonal migration in 2019, which, per Outlook India (2023), turned permanent due to inadequate farming compensation and financial distress. The Maharashtra Government Report (2023) recorded a dip to 45,000 in 2020, likely due to pandemic disruptions, before surging to 60,000 in 2021 (NCRB & VISHRAM). Economic desperation, exacerbated by unaddressed rural challenges, remains the core driver, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to curb this exodus and strengthen Vidarbha’s agrarian economy.

Table 3: PVTG Statistics and Funding in Vidarbha Districts (2020–2025)

<i>District</i>	<i>PVTG Population / Habitations</i>	<i>Literacy Rate / Female Literacy (%)</i>	<i>Funds (₹ Crore) / Sources</i>
Gadchiroli	1,34,000 / 560	Not Available / 28 (Assumed uniform per Azim Premji University, 2020)	45 / Times of India, March 8, 2025; PM JANMAN Survey, 2024; Azim Premji University, 2020
Yavatmal	1,24,000 / 700	Not Available / 28 (Assumed uniform per Azim Premji University, 2020)	38 / PM JANMAN Survey, 2024; Maharashtra Tribal Dept., 2024; Azim Premji University, 2020

<i>District</i>	<i>PVTG Population / Habitations</i>	<i>Literacy Rate / Female Literacy (%)</i>	<i>Funds (₹ Crore) / Sources</i>
Chandrapur	7,995 / 68	Not Available / 28 (Assumed uniform per Azim Premji University, 2020)	15 / Maharashtra Tribal Dept., 2024; Times of India, March 8, 2025; Azim Premji University, 2020
Wardha	7,337 / Not Available	Not Available / 28 (Assumed uniform per Azim Premji University, 2020)	Not Available / Maharashtra Tribal Dept., 2024; Azim Premji University, 2020
Amravati	334 / Not Available	Not Available / 28 (Assumed uniform per Azim Premji University, 2020)	Not Available / Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023; Azim Premji University, 2020
Maharashtra Average	Not Applicable / Not Applicable	Not Available / 64	Not Applicable / Census of India, 2011

Table 3 focuses on stark disparities among the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) communities across Vidarbha's districts. Gadchiroli and Yavatmal, which boast larger PVTG populations of 1,34,000 and 1,24,000, respectively, along with a higher number of habitations at 560 and 700, are allocated substantial development funds amounting to 45 crore and 38 crore. In contrast, despite having a significantly smaller PVTG population of 7,995 and only 68 habitations, Chandrapur receives a comparatively modest funding of 15 crore. Meanwhile, Wardha and Amravati, with their minimal PVTG populations of 7,337 and 334, respectively, lack funding allocations and data on habitations entirely. Moreover, the female literacy rate among PVTGs across these districts stands at a uniform 28%, as assumed by Azim Premji University (2020), which falls dramatically short of Maharashtra's state average of 64%, pointing to severe neglect of educational initiatives for these tribal groups. While funding distribution correlates closely with population size, it overlooks the needs of smaller districts like Wardha and Amravati, leaving them underserved.

Education and Health Disparities Among Tribal Communities in Maharashtra

Education remains a critical area of concern for tribal communities in Maharashtra. Literacy rates among tribal males and females significantly lag the general population-

by approximately 20% and 41%, respectively. The situation is especially dire among tribal women. For instance, the literacy rates for Madia Gonds, Bhils, and Katkaris stand at a mere 23%, 21%, and 16%, respectively, compared to the state average of 69% (Government of Maharashtra, 2013). Moreover, the gross enrollment ratio for tribal children remains considerably low, accompanied by high dropout rates. These educational setbacks are largely driven by systemic challenges such as chronic poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and child labour, all of which severely limit access to and retention in formal education.

Health indicators for tribal populations are equally alarming. The prevalence of underweight children among tribal communities stands at 32.1%, compared to 19.2% among non-tribals. Infant Mortality Rates (IMRs) in tribal regions such as Melghat and Gadchiroli are approximately 60–70% higher than the state average (Maharashtra Human Development Report, 2012–2013b). Moreover, access to basic amenities remains highly inadequate. According to the Economic Survey of Maharashtra (2012–2013a), only 19.5% of households in Gadchiroli have access to tap water, compared to the state average of 63%. Similarly, only 27% of households have toilet facilities, in stark contrast to the state average of 53% (Government of Maharashtra, 2013).

The Health Facilities Index for tribal talukas further highlights the disparities, revealing substandard physical infrastructure and poorly functioning health services when compared to state benchmarks. These deficits underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to bridge the glaring gaps in both education and health among Maharashtra's tribal communities.

The socio-economic and health challenges faced by tribal communities in Vidarbha not only perpetuate cycles of poverty but also exacerbate their marginalization in the political landscape. Decentralized governance, established through the three-tier Panchayati Raj system, aimed to empower historically marginalized communities by enhancing their participation in local governance. The enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act and the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996 (PESA) was intended to facilitate more excellent representation of tribal voices in decision-making processes (Tripathy, 2018). Despite including over 660,000 elected members from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in rural and urban local bodies, the effective exercise of power remains a challenge, as many tribal representatives struggle to assert their influence due to existing socio-political dynamics (Mathew, 2013).

Table 4: Health and Socio-Economic Indicators of Tribal Communities in Vidarbha

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Tribal Communities (Vidarbha)</i>	<i>Maharashtra State Average</i>	<i>Source</i>
Prevalence of Underweight Children	32.1%	19.2%	Maharashtra Human Development Report, 2012-2013
Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)	32-37 per 1,000 live births	20 per 1,000 live births	Maharashtra Human Development Report, 2012-2013
Access to Tap Water (Gadchiroli)	19.5%	63%	Economic Survey of Maharashtra, 2012-2013
Households with Toilet Facilities	27%	53%	Government of Maharashtra, 2013
Health Facilities Index	Low (Inadequate infrastructure)	Moderate-High	Maharashtra Human Development Report, 2012-2013
Elected ST Representatives	Part of 660,000 (SC/ST total)	-	Mathew, G. (2013), "Panchayati Raj and Tribal Empowerment"
Effective Governance Participation	Limited (Qualitative)	Higher (Qualitative)	Mathew, G. (2013); PESA Implementation Insights

Table 4 provides a detailed and sobering presentation of data concerning the health indicators and socio-economic challenges confronting tribal communities in Vidarbha, Maharashtra, laying bare the extent of their struggles compared to other populations. Among the most striking findings is the severe malnutrition plaguing tribal children, with 32.1% classified as underweight—a staggering 67% higher than the rates observed among their non-tribal counterparts—revealing a deep-rooted crisis in nutritional security.

Equally alarming is the infant mortality rate (IMR) in tribal regions such as Melghat and Gadchiroli, which soars 60-70% above the state average of 20, translating to a grim 32-37 deaths per 1,000 live births and underscoring the perilous conditions surrounding early childhood in these areas. The table above also exposes glaring deficiencies in basic infrastructure, with Gadchiroli's access to tap water at a mere 19.5% and toilet facilities at just 27%, which lag far behind state averages and reflect the profound neglect of essential services in tribal zones. Despite the presence of approximately 660,000 Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) members in local governance bodies, persistent governance gaps continue to stifle tribal influence, limiting their

ability to effect meaningful change within their communities. Further emphasizing the disparities obstructing tribal empowerment in Vidarbha, the table quantifies the alarming trends in health and socio-economic conditions, painting a comprehensive picture of systemic disadvantage. It also draws attention to the limited effectiveness of decentralized governance under the PESA, highlighting the urgent need for more robust and comprehensive interventions to resolve these entrenched inequities.

Table 5: Socio-Economic Conditions of Tribal Communities in Vidarbha (2020-2024)

Indicator	Tribal Communities in Vidarbha	Maharashtra State Average	Source
Population (Scheduled Tribes)	27.4 lakh (approx.)	1.05 crore (9.4% of total)	Census of India, 2011; Maharashtra Tribal Dept., 2024
Female Literacy Rate	28% (PVTGs in Vidarbha)	64%	Azim Premji University, "Empowering Tribal People," 2020; Census 2011
Access to Primary Health Centers	1.2 per 10,000 population	2.5 per 10,000 population	Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Annual Report 2023; Maharashtra Health Dept.
Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)	48 per 1,000 live births	19 per 1,000 live births	National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5), 2019-21
Households with Electricity	65%	95%	Maharashtra Economic Survey 2022-23
Gram Sabha Participation Rate	22% (active tribal participation)	45% (state rural average)	PESA Implementation Report, Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2023
Land Titles Granted (FRA)	12,500 (Gadchiroli, 2023)	3.2 lakh (state total)	Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Forest Rights Act Progress Report, 2023

PESA seeks to enhance tribal self-governance by empowering Gram Sabhas to manage resources and development projects. In Vidarbha, where forest-dependent tribes face displacement from mining and industrialization, this framework has struggled. Data from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2023) indicates only partial success, with 1.34 lakh PVTGs in Gadchiroli lacking secure land titles. The PM JANMAN scheme, offering 2 lakh per household for permanent housing, has seen slow progress. Of 719 sanctioned houses in Chandrapur are complete. Educational and health disparities also remain stark, with female literacy among PVTGs trailing the state average by 36%, per a 2020 Azim Premji University study.

Table 5 offers an illuminating overview of the key socio-economic challenges confronting tribal communities in Vidarbha, Maharashtra, shedding light on the

multifaceted hardships endured by these populations. The region's tribal inhabitants, encompassing Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) such as the Kolam and Gond, constitute a substantial portion of the state's Scheduled Tribes, with their presence most pronounced in districts like Gadchiroli and Yavatmal, where their struggles are particularly acute. Among the most glaring disparities is the female literacy rate among PVTGs, which languishes at less than half the state average, reflecting a profound educational divide that perpetuates cycles of disadvantage and limits opportunities for advancement. Healthcare access, too, remains woefully inadequate, with fewer primary health centres available to serve these communities and an infant mortality rate (IMR) that towers above the norm, signalling a critical failure to provide essential medical support to tribal populations. Tribal households are further burdened by severe infrastructure deficits, including persistent shortages of electricity, which compound their daily hardships and impede any meaningful improvement in living standards. The limited participation of these communities in Gram Sabhas under the PESA Act points to a troubling degree of political marginalization, effectively curtailing their influence over local governance and decision-making processes that directly impact their lives. Moreover, the sluggish implementation of FRA continues to obstruct the distribution of land titles, undermining tribal control over vital resources and bewildering their prospects for economic empowerment, thereby entrenching their socio-economic exclusion even further.

Empowering Tribal households: Decentralization in Vidarbha

Decentralization is vital for uplifting tribal communities in Vidarbha by empowering local governance to address their unique needs. It ensures benefits like healthcare, education, and economic opportunities percolate to remote tribes, reducing dependency on centralized systems often disconnected from ground realities. Devolving power, tribes gain agency over resources and decision-making, fostering sustainable development rooted in their traditions.

India supports this constitutionally through the 73rd Amendment, which enables panchayati Raj institutions, and the PESA Act, 1996, tailored for tribal areas. PESA mandates tribal self-governance, control over natural resources, and preservation of cultural identity in Scheduled Areas like Vidarbha. Moreover, Article 243M strengthens local bodies, ensuring decentralization succeeds by aligning governance with tribal aspirations, though effective implementation remains key to bridging gaps in these regions.

The FRA of 2006, which recognizes individual forest rights (IFR) and community forest rights (CFR) to vest forestland rights with forest-dwelling communities, empowers gram sabhas to manage forest resources and potentially transform the socio-economic conditions of marginalized tribal households, while the PESA Act of 1996 enhances tribal self-governance by granting gram sabhas authority to oversee resources and development projects in Scheduled Areas, thereby complementing the FRA's decentralization objectives aimed at uplifting these communities (Tripathy, 2018).

In Vidarbha, a region encompassing 28% of Maharashtra's tribal population and 53% of its forest cover, this framework becomes crucial for analyzing decentralization's impact, especially given the persistent challenges of displacement from mining, widespread poverty, and inadequate infrastructure that continue to afflict its tribal inhabitants, underlining the need for effective implementation to realize the intended benefits.

A key metric of empowerment is political participation. PESA mandates Gram Sabhas as the primary decision-making body in Scheduled Areas. However, their efficacy in Vidarbha is questionable. Research on tribal governance in Odisha, a comparable context, indicates that low literacy and exclusion from mainstream politics hinder ST representatives' effectiveness, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization (Rout & Patnaik, 2014, Tripathy, 2018). Similar challenges persist in Vidarbha, with literacy rates among PVTGs lagging the state average. The reservation of seats for STs in Panchayats has increased representation, but decision-making power often rests with non-tribal elites or bureaucratic intermediaries. This raises doubts about whether decentralization truly amplifies tribal voices or merely integrates them into a system that prioritizes dominant interests.

Table 6: Socio-Economic Impact and Implementation Gaps of CFR in Vidarbha

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Source</i>
Forestland under CFR (Acres)	2,000,000	EPW, Vol. LV, No. 18 (2020)
Income from Kendu Leaf (₹)	33 Crore	Gram Sabha Federations, 2018
Villages Asserting NTFP Rights	>1,500	Field Insights, Vidarbha Note
PVTGs in Gadchiroli	1.34 Lakh	Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023
PM JANMAN Houses Completed	2/719 (0.28%, Chandrapur)	Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023
Female Literacy Gap (PVTGs)	-36% vs. State Avg.	Azim Premji University, 2020
CFR Claims Pending/Rejected	Lower in Vidarbha vs. Others	Qualitative Data, Sahoo (2020)

The recognition of CFR in Vidarbha has transferred approximately 2 million acres of forestland to gram sabhas, yielding a substantial ₹33 crore from kendu leaf sales in 2017-18 alone and enabling over 1,500 villages to assert rights over non-timber forest products (NTFP) by opting out of the Maharashtra Forest Department's regime, thus showcasing significant economic empowerment and reduced reliance on external agencies, which aligns with PESA's self-governance framework and underlines decentralization's potential to uplift tribal communities.

However, despite these successes, persistent implementation gaps reveal that 1.34 lakh Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) members in Gadchiroli remain without secure land titles, the PM JANMAN scheme has completed only 2 of 719 sanctioned houses in Chandrapur (a mere 0.28% completion rate), and a stark 36% female literacy gap among PVTGs compared to the state average persists, collectively highlighting how weak infrastructure delivery and incomplete FRA reach undermine PESA's development mandate, leaving socio-economic marginalization unaddressed even as CFR claims in Vidarbha face fewer rejections than elsewhere (Table 6).

Benefits, Gaps, and Recommendations for FRA and PESA in Vidarbha

The synergy between the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) of 1996 has fostered decentralization in Vidarbha, a region with 28% of Maharashtra's tribal population and 53% of its forest cover. Vidarbha's 6,488 recognized community forest rights (CFR) claims, covering 1.985 million acres, represent 73% of Maharashtra's CFR area, aligning with PESA's goal of empowering gram sabhas to manage local resources. In Mendha Lekha, CFR boundaries spanning 1,800 hectares mirror traditional gram sabha limits, reinforcing community control over forests, which were historically denied under colonial and post-independence policies like the Indian Forest Act of 1927.

This framework yields economic benefits, notably ₹33 crore from kendu leaf sales in 2017-18, as over 1,500 villages leverage CFR rights to manage non-timber forest products (NTFP), bypassing the restrictive Maharashtra Forest Department. With an average CFR area of 445.53 acres—surpassing state (386.31 acres) and national (115.62 acres) averages—these rights secure land access, reducing displacement risks from mining and industrialization. This stability and NTFP income support tribal households facing poverty, agrarian distress, and limited infrastructure, enabling investments in education and health.

However, challenges persist. In Gadchiroli, 1.34 lakh Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) members lack secure land titles, undermining PESA's self-governance promise. The PM JANMAN scheme's 0.28% housing completion rate in Chandrapur and a 36% female literacy gap among PVTGs highlight implementation gaps. Maharashtra's weak PESA execution, bypassing gram sabhas in mining leases (48 approved from 2011–2014), and 63% of districts reporting zero FRA compliance exacerbate vulnerabilities, limiting the transformative potential of these laws despite their role in advancing tribal representation and socio-economic upliftment.

Conclusion

Democratic decentralization has brought only limited empowerment to the disadvantaged tribal communities of the Vidarbha region. While a small segment has benefited from political developments, the majority continue to be marginalized, as the system has failed to ensure the efficient and equitable delivery of essential services.

The FRA and PESA frameworks in Vidarbha highlight the transformative potential of democratic decentralization. This is evident in the approval of 6,488 Community Forest Resource (CFR) claims, generating 33 crore in value and empowering gram sabhas. However, significant gaps remain in their implementation. These include 1.34 lakh Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) without land titles, a mere 0.28% housing completion rate, and a 36% literacy deficit among tribals. Such shortcomings underscore the partial and uneven execution of these policies, which continues to hinder holistic tribal development. Strengthening the synergy between FRA and PESA could help mitigate socio-economic marginalization, but real progress hinges on addressing these persistent implementation failures to ensure that the poorest and most marginalized tribal households in Vidarbha receive their due benefits.

The state's failure to implement constitutionally mandated reservations in Panchayati Raj institutions further weakens efforts to achieve social justice and equitable development for tribal communities. This calls for tribal citizens to assert their constitutional rights and engage more actively in the political process.

To that end, innovative strategies must be formulated to promote tribal political leadership, particularly to strengthen human rights and local control over resources. Specific attention should be paid to building the leadership capacity of tribal women in Panchayats, enabling them to play a central role in the planning and management of funds and functions at the grassroots level.

Furthermore, urgent amendments to the Indian Forest Act and the Land Acquisition Act are imperative to empower Gram Sabhas in PESA areas with ownership rights over minor forest produce, water bodies, and land resources (Tripathy, 2017, 2018). Such reforms are vital for fostering genuine tribal autonomy and sustainable development.

These amendments should also foster positive attitudes towards women's participation in decision-making processes and empower new tribal leadership within Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Further, the socio-economic conditions of tribal communities in Vidarbha are marked by stark disparities, with profound implications for their participation in decentralized governance. Their systemic challenges range from educational and health disparities to political marginalization. They prioritize the need for comprehensive interventions to empower these communities and ensure their voices are heard in the decision-making processes that impact their lives. Without resolving these fundamental issues, the potential for meaningful progress in the socio-economic conditions of tribal populations remains limited, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and deprivation that have persisted for generations.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests: NIL

Funding: NIL

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