



Exploring the Socio-Cultural Profile of the Lodha Tribe in Odisha: An Anthropological Analysis

Chandan Kumar Das

Research Scholar, Dept. of Anthropology, Central University of Odisha, Koraput, Odisha, India

Dr. B.K. Srinivas

Asst. Prof. & HoD I/c, Dept. of Anthropology, Central University of Odisha, Koraput, Odisha, India

Dr. Jayanta Kumar Nayak

Asst. Prof., Dept. of Anthropology, Central University of Odisha, Koraput, Odisha, India

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Abstract

The Lodha community, classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in eastern India, exhibits a distinct socio-cultural profile. Living in the forest fringe areas, the Lodha profoundly depends upon the forest resources to sustain their life. In colonial regime they were oppressed and designated as 'criminal tribe' and subsequently called 'denotified tribe' in post-colonial India. The Lodha have experienced substantial socio-economic changes in last few decades by the bureaucratic interference, process of assimilation often merged with poverty, illiteracy, and social stigma which impede their progress. Keeping in view of this, the present empirical study has been conducted in the Morada and Suliapada block of Mayurbhanj district to examine the socio-cultural account of the Lodha which can illustrate their clan organization, family structure, livelihoods, magico-religious practices, life-cycle rituals, political life, recent developments and contemporary challenges. The study has employed ethnographic and observation method, thereby data has been collected through interview and group discussions from the adult and elder members, the priest, and community heads of the villages. The study has found that the Lodha are facing problems like identity crisis, disruption of livelihoods, poor literacy, health complications, and globalization induced negative impact which hinders their socio-cultural and economical betterment. Further the study highlights the necessity of inclusive policies that uphold their cultural identity and advance sustainable way of life.

Keywords: Lodha Tribe, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), Denotified Tribe, Criminal Tribe, Assimilation and Dispossession.

1. Lodha Tribe at a Glance:

The Lodha, a well-recognized Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in eastern India who are predominately found in Odisha, West Bengal, and Jharkhand states. In Odisha, the Lodhas are primarily residing in the Mayurbhanj district. This indigenous community concentrated in the forest fringe areas of Morada and Suliapada blocks of Mayurbhanj which shares borders with West Midnapore district of West Bengal. Furthermore, their habitations are sparsely distributed in Kaptipada, Shamakhunta,

Badasahi, Udala, and Baripada Sadar blocks of Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. Traditionally the Lodhas are hunters and gatherers who mostly rely on the forest resources for their subsistence. They spend most of the time in the forest for collection of edible tubers, roots, fruits and nuts, and hunting small games like rats, rabbits, squirrels, and birds for their survival. During the colonial regime, notorious behaviour of the Lodhas subjected them to persecution as criminals. The Lodha was tagged as 'Criminal Tribe' by the British India due to their social behaviour and intolerable profession (Ota and Sahoo, 2010). They have been compelled to select this anti-social profession due to deprivation of their livelihoods as a consequence of British rule in India (Guha, 2016). However, in 1952, the Govt. of India mainstreamed the Lodha after independence. Being a small community, the population of Lodha tribe in Odisha was 7458 in 2001 which exceeds slowly to 9785 in 2011 (Census of India, 2001; 2011). In early phase of settlements, the Lodha were Mundari (Austro-Asiatic family) speakers. Now a days, they use a distorted version of dialect often mixed with Odia and Bengali (Chattopadhyay and Mohanty, 2022). Heterogeneous by nature, they are living in harmony with other tribal communities like the Santal, the Munda, the Kolha, and the Ho.

2. Objectives:

Present research aims to analyze the socio-cultural profile of the Lodha tribe in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, focusing on the etymology and ancestry, their historical background, social structure, economic activities, political life, rituals and religious practices, and contemporary challenges.

The study emphasizes the examination of socio-cultural heritage which in turn enable us deep understanding of the community. Further it also enhances comprehension of the necessary policies for the development and integration of Lodhas into mainstream society.

3. Methodology:

The study is cross-sectional and descriptive in nature. The universe of the study is Mayurbhanj district. Through purposive sampling Morada and Suliapada blocks of the Mayurbhanj district were considered for study due the predominant population of Lodhas in these blocks. Out of two blocks, eight villages of Morada block and five villages from Suliapada block were selected for data collection. Ethnographic and observation method has been employed to assess the socio-cultural account of the studied community. To collect the empirical data, interview and group discussions have been conducted among knowledgeable adult and elder members, the priest, and community heads of the Lodha inhabited villages.

4. Etymology and Ancestry:

There are different opinions about the origin of the name 'Lodha'. According to Progyya Ghatak, an eminent folklorist, opines that the word 'Lodha' might have taken from the word '*Lubdhaka*', denoting a trapper or hunter (Ramakrishnan and Sahoo, 2024) pointing out a forest-based lifestyle since beginning. Another theory links with geographical origin of the name suggesting that the Lodha belongs to Ludhiyana district of Punjab. As per the name of the place of their origin, they have taken the name as 'Lodha' or 'Ludhi'. Again, another interesting belief suggests that the Lodhas adopted their name from the 'Lodh Tree' (*Symplocos racemosa*) because of its ethno-medicinal value and commercial usage, and this tree is found abundantly in northern India. Tracing the ancestry of Lodha was a

serious task for the anthropologists since decades, but few anthropologists like Herbert Risley (1892), W.W. Hunter, Ota and Sahoo (2010), gave their opinion on the origin of Lodhas.

5. Historical Background:

The Lodha was bound to adopt the unusual theft and robbery profession as a consequence of the Forest Right Act 1865 by the British India. The monopoly of the British rule restricted the Lodha to venture in to the forest for their livelihood and survival. The British government declared them as a 'Criminal Tribe' by reference of the Government Letter No-7022-23 on 20th May of 1916 as the Lodhas looked down in a state of suspicion in their habitations. This incriminatory law was abolished in post-colonial period in 1952 when the government of India thought to mainstream the Lodha (Ota and Sahoo, 2010). This community was listed in PVTG category apparently for their welfare and development after Independence.

6. Socio-Cultural Profile:

The Lodha is still thriving towards the development and modernity in the 21st century. Like neighbouring tribal groups such as the Santal, and the Munda, they have distinct socio-cultural profile. They have inherited their social life and cultural values as such which is an important matter of fact for understanding and generalization through an anthropological perspective.

6.1 Clan Organization

The clan is an important characteristic feature among the Lodha. Clan organization plays a pivotal role in the functioning of social institutions among the community. There are nine clans such as *Bhukta*, *Mallik*, *Katal*, *Nayak (or Naik)*, *Digar*, *Parmanik*, *Dandapat (or Bag)*, *Ari (or Ahiri)*, and *Bhuya (or Bhunia)* found among them. Each clan possess a totem, and the associated animal or plant or cosmic objects are regarded sacred by their own clan members. Marriage outside the clan is preferable which reflects the exogamous nature of clans among them. Every clan is patrilineal in nature signifying the initiation of girls in to their husband's clan. Members of each clan restricted the consumption or making harm to their totemic objects.

Members of *Bhukta* or *Bugta* clan are avoiding the collection and consumption of '*Chirka Alu*' (*Dioscorea alata*), members of *Mallik* clan do not harm the '*Makar*' a kind of shark in the water body, members of *Kotal* clan do not harm the grasshopper as well as observed ceremonial pollution in new moon day as they adopt grasshopper, and moon as totemic object, members of *Nayak* and *Bhuya* clan avoiding consumption of '*Sal fish*', members of *Digar* clan do not kill or harm the '*Porpoise*', members of *Paramanik* clan do not consume or kill the '*Manik*' a large bird found in forest, members of *Dandapat* clan do not kill the '*Tiger*', members of *Ahiri* clan do not consume '*Chanda Fish*' a silvery white circular fish. The Members of *Kotal* clan enjoys high social status among the others. These clan members are following strong kinship ties and ritual based obligations among themselves. A clan-based conservation strategy for flora and fauna has been observed in the Lodha mindset. This signifies Lodhas' strategic step towards biodiversity conservation and maintaining ecological balance in ignorance.

6.2 Family Structure

The Lodha families may be categorized into nuclear and extended type based on their family size and economic cooperation in the family. It is found that Lodha families are patrilineal and patriarchal in nature. Father is the head of the family and takes all the necessary and important decisions. In the absence of father, the mother or eldest brother of the family takes the responsibility. Division of labour is an important affair among the Lodha family. Duties and responsibilities are distributed after consultation of all the family members. The paternal uncle is highly respected and his advices are taken care of in the family.

6.3 Economy and Livelihoods

The Lodhas are solely depending on the surrounding forest and forest-based produces for their subsistence. Collection of Minor Forest Produce (MFP), involving in traditional crafts making, and agriculture are the patterns of livelihood found among this community. Their economy is majorly bounded with collection of seasonal forest produces. Various forest-based produces such as flower and seeds of *Mohua* tree (*Madhuca longifolia*), leaves of *Sal* tree (*Shorea robusta*) and *Siali* tree (*Phanera vahlii*), leaves and fruits of Kendu tree (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), varieties of tubers, roots and herbs for medicinal purposes, seasonal fruits and nuts, forest honey, fire wood, varieties of edible mushrooms, and the silk cocoons are the part of their circular economy round the year. The Lodha prepares alcoholic beverages '*Mahuli*', and '*Handia*' by fermentation of the *Mohua* flower, and rice respectively which are culturally valued prior to consumption. Apart from forest-based livelihoods, traditional agriculture tied with customary rituals plays an important role sustaining their economy. It signifies their age old traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and cultural distinctiveness. Traditional varieties of paddy, millets, pulses, and vegetables have been cultivated for the consumption as well as for selling purposes. Currently most of the Lodha adults are engaging as agricultural labourer, daily wage labourer in neighbouring districts and states during dry seasons. Traditional craft and rope making is another livelihood choice among the Lodhas. Skilful preparation of rope and broom gives Lodha an additional income opportunity to their subsistence. Bamboo crafts and *Sabai* grass (*Eulaliopsis binata*) products made by the members of this community have good commercial values. A gender-based division of labour has been observed in the entire livelihood patterns of the Lodha. Light and small works are given to the females and grown-up girls while heavy works are allocated to the male counterparts.

6.4 Magico-religious Practices

The Lodhas follow a wealthy tradition of magico-religious practices implanted in their culture, and ecological settings. According to the Lodha, these practices are crucial in maintaining harmony between the supernatural world, nature, and among them. The magico-religious practices significantly reveal the traditional understanding of cosmic world, supernatural powers, illness, and misfortune. The Lodha believes in different gods and goddesses along with malevolent and benevolent spirits which reflects animistic and nature-based belief system. To get benefits and protection from the subtle world number of ceremonies and rituals are practiced throughout the year. These practices are guided and performed by '*Dehury*' (the priest) whose post is hereditary by nature. '*Chhatia*' (the assistant) is called during all the common ritualistic ceremonies to assist the '*Dehury*' in his work.

The Lodhas believe 'Bhagaban' as their supreme deity who is worshipped for the social wellbeing and prosperity. They worship mother earth as 'Basumata' to bring good fortune and better harvest. The deity of disease 'Sitala' is worshipped carefully during the outbreak of epidemics with a special sacrifice. Members of this community worshipping the 'Chandi', the deity of strength and courage before hunting with offerings of earthen horses and special sacrifices in 'Makar Sankranti'. Evil eyes, diseases, and witchcrafts are protected through various rituals in the house as well as in the forests that reflects the faith and trust in supernatural power among the Lodhas. Ritualistic ceremonies such as 'Sitala Puja' (for protection), 'Manasa Puja' (for successful seed sowing), 'Jathel' (to protect cattle), and 'Bandanapuja' (for good harvesting) are observed with a great excitement to appease the deities in day-to-day life. Despite these ceremonies, this community celebrates Hindu festivals with great joy in a brotherhood mindset.

6.5 Life-cycle Rituals

Life-cycle rituals are observed among the community members to mark important phases of social life such as birth, marriage and death. These rituals are followed to seek blessings and protection from the gods, goddesses, and ancestors. Fowl sacrifices have been prevalent among Lodhas for smooth delivery of the baby. Traditionally, an experienced woman called to serve as midwife during delivery. Bamboo shaft has been used to cut the umbilical cord and buried it inside the premises of the house. Birth pollution usually continues up to twenty-one days and the name giving ceremony 'Ekusia' is observed with a joy.

Marriage is an important part of Lodha's life. Monogamy is generally practiced with prevalence of bride-price in both cash and goods. Marriage by negotiation is the common practice among the Lodha. However, marriage by love and elopement are documented in some instances. Important ceremonies such as tying of turban, wearing iron bangles by bridegroom, return to the bride's home after eighth day of marriage are the common characteristics are found among the Lodha. Remarriage or widow marriage 'Sango' or 'Sango' is still prevalent.

Death brings sorrowfulness into the family. Generally, two conventional methods of disposal of the dead i.e. cremation and burial has been observed in the Lodha community depending upon the age and the nature of death. It is found that unmarried, suicidal, still birth bodies are buried. Kinsmen and family members observed death pollution up to ten days. Special feast is arranged in the purification ceremony to gratify the departed soul and later served to the community members. The Lodha believes life after death which reflects through ancestral worship in the last day of 'Chaitra'.

6.6 Political Organization

The traditional political organization of the Lodha was simple and worked accordingly to the social structure with customary framework. Old established villages possessed traditional village council to resolve the disputes among individuals, families and villages. Administrations of the justice, permission for marriage, imposing fine on mischievous work, attending religious ceremonies were some of the judicial powers of the village council. In addition to this, breaching of taboos, adultery, theft, illicit love, witchcraft and sorcery were attracts punishments through the village council. Experienced and knowledgeable elderly village members were to be the members of village council. A secular person has been chosen as the head of the village council called 'Pradhan' who

presides over all the matter that came to village council. An assistant has been chosen called 'Dakua' who helps the 'Pradhan' in the matters under the jurisdiction of village council. But the modern bureaucratic system forced the Lodha to choose police station and courts over the traditional village council to resolve their disputes. This signifies the degeneration and disintegration of customary framework with advent of administrative rule in the Lodha areas.

6.7 Food Practices

The study has found a distinct food culture among the Lodhas which reflects a forest-based dependency oriented with traditional makeover. Rice is the staple food for this community that is consumed with seasonal vegetables and varieties of leafy greens in the backyard. Members of this community are fond of non-vegetarian foods like meats of chicken, goats, pigs, game animals like rabbits, mouse, squirrels, along with fishes. They prepare pancakes using rice flour, jaggery, and sometimes meat is used to prepare it. Edible roots and tubers, fruits, nuts, berries, flowers, and varieties of mushrooms are consumed in dry months from August to October. In summer, mango, *mohua*, jackfruit, and tamarind are the most consumable food items. 'Handia' (rice beer), and 'Mahuli' (fermented beverage from *mohua* flower) are two important country liquor used in different ceremonial offerings prior to consumption by the community members irrespective of gender. Country cigar 'Bidi' prepared from *Kendu* leaves (*Diospyros melanoxylon*) and tobacco leaves (*Nicotiana tabacum*) are found to be used by the Lodha adults.

7. Development Scenario:

The establishment of Lodha Development Agency (LDA) ensures livelihood transformation for this indigenous community. District administration has played substantial role to strengthen this community by implementing different beneficial schemes time to time. Forest Right Act 2006 guarantees land rights inside the forest which gives access the Lodhas to collect seasonal minor forest produces. It is found that globalization has both positive and negative impacts towards this primitive tribe. They are losing strong community bonding with neighbouring community, clansmen and often with family members. It is observed that customary practices and moral values are diminishing day by day.

8. Contemporary Challenges:

Since decades, the Lodha has been confronting numerous challenges rooted from historical marginalization and deprivation towards surrounding resources. First and foremost is the identity crisis which puts the Lodha in a stigmatized condition since colonial era that obstacles social cohesion and solidarity among them. Welfare and development schemes are lacking institutional coordination due to the stereotype thinking among the executive officials. Secondly, limited or restricted access to the forest, lacking of organized market, monopoly of the middleman, climatic and anthropogenic factors, loss of interest among the youth are reasons towards disruption of their livelihoods.

Third is the scenario of low literacy and early marriage which significantly increases number of dropouts that strives towards loss of traditional knowledge. Fourth one is the health complications among the community members. Loss of ethno-medicinal knowledge, social and geographical isolation, shyness, and institutional failure are

pushing the Lodha towards a weaker community living with chronic disease and ailments. Lastly, the consequence of globalization disrupted both tangible and intangible cultures due to migration, and cultural assimilation by contact of neighbouring culture.

9. Conclusion:

Living with a distinctive way of life, the Lodhas reflect a unique socio-cultural profile that balances the customary practices and modernity. No doubt, the government is trying its best to uplift the social and economic status of the Lodha but somewhere the coordination is being lacking. Social stigma rooted from historical marginalization, and identity crises are main reason towards development. Preserving the culture of Lodha is need of the hour while talking about the development. The study suggests more sustainable and culture oriented inclusive policies that may strengthen the socio-cultural and economic status of the Lodha tribe.

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