

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

The Lodha – Compelled to Abdicate Traditional Occupation Due to Indian Forest Act.

Suparna Sanyal Mukherjee

Secretary & Head Education. (Chairperson & Managing Director), Howrah Suparna (NGO), West Bengal, India

Abstract:

Unity in diversity is the basic concept of Indian traditional heritage. Every individual community have their own traditional feature in socio-economic and socio-cultural pattern of life. Scheduled tribes are one who have own identity in every respect. The Lodha a hunter-gatherer primitive tribe maintained their traditional method of livelihood, which was based on the forest. The British who were rulers of India since 1760, realised the immense potentiality of the Indian Forest, its flora, fauna and economic values, subsequently comprehended the tribal concomitance to the forest and forest acumen, put an embargo on collection of forest produce, even entry to the forest was forbidden, to establish absolute supremacy over the Indian Forests. The then British Government ushered the Indian Forest Act 1865, as amended in 1878, finally enacted in 1927, which still is in force.

The innocent, illiterate Lodha without having any knowledge regarding implementation of the Indian Forest Act and contents therein, were compelled to forego their own territorial niche and techno-economical adaptation as well as indigenous traditional method of sustaining livelihood. But having no knowledge of any other form of livelihood sustenance, entered into the forest for collection of minor forest produces, which could not be stopped since the procurement was for food. Repeated such actions identified them as Criminal Tribe by introducing Criminal Tribes Act 1871, repealed in 1952, though the stigma is a sore even today. Thus, Indian Forest Act and its legal approach compelled the Lodha to abdicate their forest based traditional way of sustaining livelihood.

The present sequel peered into Langamara village of Khagra Beat, Hijli Range of Kharagpur Forest Division in Paschim Medinipur, a District of West Bengal.

Keywords: *Collection, Economy, Forest Act, Livelihood, Occupation, Sustenance, Traditional.*

1. Introduction

The tribes are mirror of the Indian tradition. Every individual tribe have their own economic pattern, cultural performance, rites, rituals and customs, their traditional way of maintaining livelihood is unique, indigenous and exclusive. Economy and economic pattern of sustaining livelihood are two sides of the same coin.

The Lodha a primitive hunter-gatherer tribe, naturally residing deep inside the forests and its fringe for livelihood sustenance, developed their own tools and other essential articles for their traditional occupation. Thereby, creating a techno-economical identity for sustenance of livelihood. The very fact their principal occupation being hunting and gathering made them shift from one place to another to find enough and abundant.

The Indian Forest Act 1865, implemented by the British rulers imposing an embargo in entry and exit to and from the forest other than their authorised and thereby, categorically debarring forest accrual of the Lodha who visited the forest for procurement of food and essential daily livelihood materials.

The poor, innocent, illiterate Lodha had no idea or knowledge about enactment of the said Act and continued the same life style which was considered as impinging or poaching from the forest. The authority's ear marked these activities as clandestine, for further punitive action, termed these people as criminals and branded them as a Criminal Tribe, forming an Act in 1871 termed as the Criminal Tribes Act. The innocent Lodha for sheer life subsistence wore the stigma of being a Criminal till as late as 1952.

Due to the stigma they were avoided by their fellow neighbours, having no other known method of sustaining livelihood they were in a total dismay. Nevertheless, the dismal situation could not dissuade the Lodha from living; residing and free locomotion within the forest was forbidden, they were compelled to shelter themselves in the fringe of the forest, since they could not do away with their kinship with the forest. New methods were sought and life continued, but the traditional occupation was compulsorily shelved due to the advent of the Indian Forest Act.

The said of Act 1865 was amended in 1878, since the erstwhile Act was found to have lacunae. The amended Act had a few concessions for the forest dwellers which were found to be inadequate for their life subsistence; finally, in 1927 the Act was enacted and is still in force.

However, the Lodha a traditionally hunter-gatherer forest based tribe absolutely ignorant and unaware regarding the forest law, saw the forest doors closed on their face by the authorities, implementing the Indian Forest Act.

- Was implementation of the Indian Forest Act the reason for them to abdicate their traditional occupation?
- Were they compelled to surrender their traditional method of sustaining livelihood due to Indian Forest Act

Richard P. Tucker in his book "Forest History of India" 2014, highlighted the tension between the subsistence needs of the local population and the commercial needs of the colonial state, also pointed out the clash between the Forest Department which sought to preserve and manage forests with the Revenue Department which was driven by the need to expand agriculture and industry.

There was no research work on The Indian Forest Act and its impact on the Tribes till 2013. Dr. Suparna Sanyal Mukherjee in her awarded Ph. D Thesis in 2013, narrated that the Lodha appear to be a bewildered lot, they grew up in and around the forest and continues to have a good deal of dependence, are uncertain of what is on, or what may occur may in future. She also pointed out in her article "Predicaments of Forest Dwelling Tribes by Dint of Indian Forest Act", in Mainstream Weekly, VOL LIII No 25, New Delhi June 13, 2015, future of the forest dwelling tribes is uncertain due to the said Act. Prof. P. K. Bhowmik explained about the Lodha, of their Socio-cultural, Socio-economical, religious life in his book, The Lodhas of West Bengal, 1963.

Prof. A. K. Danda in his Article in ASI Journal, March, 2002, Vol – 51, No. 1, Page 103-111, under the heading of "Predicaments of Marginalised Community: The Lodha, observed that the Lodha on abolition of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1952, were not reimbursed with their Rights over the Forest, which they considered to be their own. The rehabilitation programmes designed by the Administration is not reaching to them, thereby development becoming not fruitful to the Lodha.

1.1. The Lodha

There are three primitive Tribes in West Bengal, Lodha is one of them. They are basically food gathering tribe living deep inside and fringe of the forests, mainly in the Western part of Paschim Medinipur District.

The term Lodha has derived from the Sanskrit word "Lubdhak", which means a trapper of fowls. According to Nesfield, the name Lodha or Ludhi has two different derivatives, one is Lodh, which means cold and the other means a cold Hopper. Many of them at times feel proud, in asserting themselves as Savar, a generic term used in ancient literature for forest dwelling communities. Actually they are a hunting-gathering community, hunting is totally banned, gathering continues. The principal economy of the Lodha revolved around hunting and gathering, which they have been doing for generations. But, at present their economy revolves around gathering only. They collect minor forest produces like edible roots, tubers, fruits, vegetables, leaves from the forest; also collect fuel and fodder for home consumption.

They are basically forest dependent, considering forest as their own domain and maintain a kith-an-keen relationship with the forest. They are daily visitors of the forest to feel fresh. But the forest Act has restricted their movement within the forest, where they developed their indigenous technological and territorial niche.

According to 2001 Census the total Tribal Population of the state is 7, 72,259 of which Lodha population is 84,966. In Paschim Medinipur total Lodha population is 60,136 i.e. 70.77%. Data was collected through participant observation; interview schedule was also followed for collection of detail information to complete the present study.

1.2. The Indian Forest Act

The Indian Forest Act VII of 1865 was codified for the first time in India for Law regarding administration of the Forests. According to historical background, the Forests of India was controlled by the then Rajas, Zamindars having Individual territories. The Forest was rich source of revenue; its Flora & Fauna contained immense value. Forest was pleasure to all, in their own way and interest. The Forest dwellers mainly Tribal extracted from the Forest for maintaining their livelihood, at the same time they maintained it properly.

In 1760, the East India Company took charge of the British India, the rules and regulations as formed by the erstwhile rulers were obliterated. The British realised the enormous potentiality of the forests and its various utility. Since, the earlier regulations were not in force, the Forest turned to be an anybody's privilege, the British felt for formation of rules and regulations regarding the Forest, which led to the formation of a Forest Act.

The local inhabitants specially the Tribes were more acquainted with the items for extraction from the forest. The British realising which, bounded the forest in legal framework, and made an Act in 1865 as Indian Forest Act 1865. It was the first attempt of a comprehensive Forest Law in India. In course of time, it was felt that the law had many lacunae. The then Government of India outlined the policy guidelines, shortly before this Act constituted in 1878 superseding the earlier of 1865. Thereby, providing a legal shape to the Act which remained in force till the advent of the Indian Forest Act 1927, which is in force still. The Indian Forest Act XVI of 1927 was intended to consolidate the law and control relating to the forest of the country and it was applicable in all parts of the country, which is in practice.

1.3. The Village Lengamara

Lengamara is a multi-ethnic village, where a different caste person resides with the Lodha. Total 75 Lodha households of the village of which 25 Lodha households were selected for present quest, since effect of the Act on the Lodha are same. However, out of 346

total village households 271 households are occupied by Mahato, Rana and Goyala. Total village population is 1730 of which 375 are the Lodha and 166 are studied Lodha population, which reveals 9.59% of the total village population.

The village is under Khagra Beat and Hijli Range of Kharagpur Forest Division, within the jurisdiction of Keshiari Police Station, situated deep inside the forest, 5 kms away from keshiari State Highway and far away from NH-6.

The houses of the village are scattered in a multi linear way, Muroam Roads lead to the houses, drinking water system is not available, and sanitation system is totally absent. Only one source of water is a pond, which fulfil every essential requirement of the villagers so far as source of water is concern. Lodha houses are situated from the left side of the chowtala (chock) along with caste people. 20 Lodha houses were built through Indira Awash Yojana Project on the right side of the Chowtala. Sitala Temple is situated in the middle of the village; Shiva and Kali Temple are in the North-East and South East corners of the village respectively. Rites, Rituals are performed within the village; they also take part in Hindu festivals with the Hindu caste peasants.

Among the Lodha studied population 20.48% Male children, Adult 28.31% and Aged 03.01%, where Female children are 16.86%, Adult and Aged are same as Male counterparts, out of 166 Nos. population which represents 51.80% Male and 48.19% are Female. Being a forest dependent tribe the Lodha maintain their livelihood and their degree of dependence on the forest is vested on oscillation of forest visit regular and occasionally. The following table unfold their forest collection especially the minor forest produces.

Category of collection	Male		Female	
	Total	%	Total	%
Regular visit to the Forest 1	08	04.82%	26	15.66%
Occasional visit to the Forest 2	34	20.48%	26	15.66%
Non-visitors 3	44	26.51%	28	16.87%
Total	86	51.81%	80	48.19%

Table 1 : Forest Collection (Minor Forest Produces)

It clearly indicates from the above table that, the situation prevailing regarding collection of minor forest produces by the Lodha, Male regular collector accounts 04.82% and Female 15.66%, while Male occasional collector exhibits 20.48% and Female 15.66%. But in case of those who never collect forest produces represents high in Male 26.51% and less in Female 16.87%.

However, clustering from the above table in respect of forest collection, women are a step ahead than the Men, unfolding the present day scenario of the Lodhas, concerning forest dependence, though they were traditionally a forest concomitant tribe and forest was their basic source of economic pursuit.

The traditional occupation of the Lodha was hunting and gathering, hunting being totally banned, gathering continues. They are maintaining their subsistence economic pattern of livelihood pursuing various other engagements than the forest. They engage themselves as daily labourer, per day labourer, agricultural labourer and other non-forest based engagements. The following table exhibit the details

Pattern of Occupation	Male		Female	
	Total	%	Total	%
Agricultural labourer-Non-Traditional	16	09.64%	10	06.02%
Per day labourer [†] -Non-Traditional	30	18.07%	18	10.84%
Forest collection - Traditional	05	03.01%	21	12.65%
Total	51	30.72%	49	29.52%

Table 2: Occupation Structure

The above table promptly elaborate the Lodha's present day employment pattern. Traditionally they were hunter-gatherer but after ban on hunting, they engaged themselves in gathering only, which represents 03.01% in Male and 12.65% in Female. In Non-Traditional occupation, they engage themselves as agricultural labourer 09.64% in Male, 06.02% in Female and per day labourer 18.07% Male and 10.84% in Female. However, it is quite obvious that those females, who are practising their traditional occupation, occasionally practice Non-Traditional occupation also. Thereby it is evident that woman is still more forest dependent than their male counterparts. It is conspicuous from table 2 that 28.91% total per day labourers are engaging themselves in works like construction, digging of Pond, canal, and factory work by the Males' while their Female counterparts engage themselves in Construction, digging and as housemaids in non-traditional occupation category. Nevertheless, the Lodha are abandoning themselves from their traditional way of sustaining livelihood, subsequently forest collection is no more attracting the Male as a profession,

2. Conclusion

The present day scenario of the Lengamara village is a video graphic condition of the Lodha. The Indian Forest Act 1865 and its subsequent amendments pushed the Lodha in today's platform. Debarred from practicing their traditional occupation, though gathering of minor forest produces still continue in a very diminutive measure, whereas non-traditional occupation other than forest based economic pursuit as agricultural labourer and per day labourer, which they are prosecuting now-a days in a fruitful manner, is seeing them through troubled waters, even though the Indian Forest Act compelled the Lodha to abdicate their traditional method of sustaining livelihood. Thus, they are in utter dismay regarding their future.

3. Note

1. Regular collector represents those who collect minor forest produces 15-30 days in a month.
2. Occasional collector denotes who collect 7-14 days in a month of minor forest produces.
3. None, one who never collects minor forest produces.
4. Per day labourer indicates who are engaged in construction, digging and various types of physical work non forest based economic pursuit not less than six months of the calendar year on a daily payment basis.

4. References

- i. Bhowmik, P.K. 1963/1994. The Lodhas of West Bengal. Bidisha: Rarh Sanskriti Sangrahalaya.
- ii. Danda, Ajit.K.1991. Tribal Economy in India Inter-India Publication.
- iii. Danda, Ajit.K.2002. Predicaments of Marginalized Community. The Lodha. Journal of ASI March VOI-51, No.1, Page – 103-111.
- iv. Raghaviah, I. 1956 – The Problems of Criminal Tribe. New Delhi.
- v. Sanyal Mukherjee, Suparna, 2013. Impact Indian Forest Act on the Tribes of Paschim Medinipur. Awarded Ph. D Thesis from Vidyasagar University, Paschim Medinipur.
- vi. Sanyal Mukherjee, Suparna, 2015. Predicaments of Forest Dwelling Tribes by Dint of Indian Forest Act. Mainstream Weekly, Vol-LIII No-25, New Delhi, June 13, 2015.
- vii. Tucker, Richard P. 2014, Forest History of India. Sage Publication.