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**Santanu Panda**  
ICSSR Post-Doctoral Fellow,  
Dept. of Anthropology,  
Vidyasagar University,  
Midnapore-721102.

**Abhijit Guha**  
Professor, Dept. of  
Anthropology, Vidyasagar  
University, Midnapore-721102.

## **Predicaments of tribal development in India: the case of the Lodhas of West Bengal**

**Santanu Panda, Abhijit Guha**

### **Abstract**

In this paper an attempt has been made to describe the actual scenario of the development processes operating in case of a marginalised tribe in the West Bengal state of India. This tribe, named Lodha suffered from the stigma of being classified as a 'Criminal Tribe' in the colonial period, which were found to be continuing even during the post-colonial period. The anthropological findings narrated in the paper revealed that the development processes generated by the government around the Lodhas suffered setbacks, although there were variations in terms of the utilisation of the governmental development inputs for the Lodhas. Finally, some recommendations have been advanced in the concluding section of the paper which may be useful for the administrators as well as researchers interested in applied social research among the tribes of developing countries.

**Keywords:** Predicaments, tribal development, Lodhas, West Bengal

### **Introduction**

In academics the word 'tribe' is used in anthropology as a conceptual category which refers to both as a 'type of society' (simple, egalitarian) and a 'stage' (devoid of centralized authority) in social evolution. (Sahlins, 1968) [26]. In the Indian context, the anthropologists distinguished tribes as well as related them with the caste society in a continuum. (Beteille, 1986 [3] and Sinha, 1958) [29]. 'Tribe' in India is also treated as an administrative category for the purpose of positive discrimination (e.g. reservation in jobs). Recently, the tribes in India are also viewed as 'indigenous peoples' or 'adivasis' by the activists and social workers although the administrative category still seems to be important even to the tribes themselves. (Xaxa, 1999a & 1999b) [32, 33].

In India, at the time of Independence in 1947 there were thirteen million people and 127 communities who were classified as criminal tribes according to the Criminal Tribes Act (VI of 1924). Lodhas were classified as a scheduled tribe in India by the Government.

In the pre-independence period the British administration included the Lodhas as one among the criminal tribes (Singh 1994: 694) [27]. In 1952, the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed by the Government and all the communities who were designated as criminal tribes were reclassified as denotified communities. The Lodhas were also included under the denotified and nomadic tribes along with 19 communities of West Bengal

(<https://www.indianfolklore.org/journals/index.php/Mukt/.../134> accessed on 12.12.2012). Still later, since 1971 the Lodhas were designated as one of the 'Primitive Tribal Groups' (PTGs) of India (Verma 1990: 277) [31].

In West Bengal there are 38 scheduled tribes distributed mainly in the southwest and the northern parts of the state (Ibid: 197). Among these 38 scheduled tribes the Lodhas are mainly found in the western part of the state in the districts of Purulia, Bankura and Paschim(West) Medinipur along with tribes like Santal, Munda, Bhumij and Oraon, who are numerically and economically in a much better condition than the Lodhas. The Lodhas generally live in and around the forest covered areas of the southwestern districts of the state and still largely depend on forest for their livelihood.

In one of the pioneering anthropological study, the Lodhas were depicted as a semi-nomadic community who used to move from one place to another in search of livelihood (Bhowmick

**Correspondence:**  
**Santanu Panda**  
ICSSR Post-Doctoral Fellow,  
Department of Anthropology,  
Vidyasagar University,  
Midnapore-721102.

1963:1)<sup>[4]</sup>. According to Bhowmick, the Lodhas of erstwhile Medinipur district depended mainly on food gathering and hunting and some of them were found to be engaged in agricultural as well as non-agricultural activities as hired labourers of the higher caste and wealthy families of the villages. By and large, since dependence on forest produce is not sufficient for them, the Lodhas were also found to be engaged in a variety of occupations to sustain their livelihood (Ibid: 29-30).

### The Developmental Scenario of the Lodhas

In the article, 'The Criminal Tribes of India' the renowned sociologist K.M. Kapadia succinctly summarised the attitude of the British administrators towards the 'Criminal Tribes' in the following manner. According to Kapadia

The approach of the Government was fundamentally wrong. It postulated that (i) the so-called Criminal Tribes represented a group of born criminals, that (ii) crime was hereditary with their members and that (iii) criminals could be reformed by ruthless punishment and lifelong harassment. (Kapadia, 1952: 99-125)<sup>[19]</sup>.

In volume III of the *People of India* (1994) edited by Dr. K.S. Singh, the then Director General of the Anthropological Survey of India it was reported that the Lodhas were mainly concentrated in the western part of Midnapore district in West Bengal and their traditional rights of access to forest had been curtailed. The *People of India* volume added

...they makes surreptitious forays into forests, which result in criminal cases being filed against them. Consequent to the colonization scheme, some have taken to agriculture. Besides, they supplement their income by working as daily-wage labourers, when hunting or fishing yield little return (Singh, 1994: 695-696)<sup>[28]</sup>.

According to Ajit Danda, the former Director of the Anthropological Survey of India, the Lodhas belong to Mundari speaking population who are mostly found in the forest covered areas of Singhbhum District of Jharkhand, Mayurbhanj District of Orissa and Midnapore District of West Bengal, which is also known as Jungle Mahal. Since the colonial period the area is found to be inhabited by the Lodhas in the three aforementioned states of India. They speak a dialect composed of distorted Bengali, Oriya and words of Mundari origin. (Danda, 2002: 103)<sup>[16]</sup>.

The Census of 1981 shows that the total population of the Lodhas including the Kharias and the Kherias of West Bengal is 53,718. The Lodhas are concentrated in Midnapore District and their total number according to the Census of 1981 was 16,534. Compared to the other neighbouring scheduled tribes, viz. Santal, (22,80,540) Oraon, (6,17,138) Munda (3,41,542), Bhumij (3,36,436) and Kora (1,42,789) the numerical strength of the Lodhas (84,966) are much less in West Bengal. (Tribal Health Bulletin, 2014:126)<sup>[28]</sup>.

Besides West Bengal, they are also found in the Mayurbhanj and Baleswar districts of Orissa. Originally, they inhabited hilly rugged terrains covered with jungle. Their mother tongue is Lodha, which is close to Savara, an Austro-Asiatic language. They are fluent in Bengali. Traditionally they were forest dwellers but now they have started cultivation either as owner or as agricultural labourer and are also engaged in hunting and fishing. (Mandal, H *et al.* 2002:32)<sup>[19]</sup>.

In an earlier study Bhowmick (1966:68) described the socioeconomic transformation of the Lodhas since the British

colonial period. His study was based on the Lodhas of present day Paschim (West) Medinipur. He observed that the Lodhas have never been incorporated in the mainstream Hindu society and culture, although since the withdrawal of the British Criminal Act in 1952, many governmental schemes had been introduced to improve the socio-economic condition of this marginalised community. Bhowmick also observed that the Lodhas in many cases were found to be used by the powerful sections of the rural society in illegal activities like theft, burglary and robbery. According to him, these local elite groups developed a vested interest to obstruct the developmental programmes earmarked for the Lodhas since economic upliftment of the Lodhas, might endanger the clandestine activities of the local power elite (Bhowmick, 1966: 70)<sup>[5]</sup>.

A former police official of the Government of West Bengal, Ranjit Kumar Gupta, who collaborated with the action anthropological experiments of P.K.Bhowmick in the rehabilitation of the Lodhas in West Midnapore reported in 1979 about the interethnic conflict among the Lodha, Santal and Mahato communities. Referring to a Police report Gupta in his book *Essays in Economic Anthropology* narrated the case of the conflict in a vivid manner:

The only major police report relates to a combined mass attack by the Santals and the Mahatos on the Lodhas of the areas around a village called Mohulboni on 20<sup>th</sup> March, 1958, in course of which four Lodhas were killed and several Lodha huts were set on fire. The provocation was an armed robbery in Santal hut in Mohulboni by the Lodhas, and alleged rape on a Santal woman. The major background reason was obviously the tension due to the Lodha depredations against propertied classes who also happen here to different ethnic groups. It is to be noted that the Mahatos (the Kurmi Kshatriyas) who were not at all an injured party in this case took an active part in the outrage on the Lodhas. (Gupta, 1979:155)<sup>[18]</sup>.

The above account of the police official revealed that apart from the violence committed by the dominant and settled agricultural community (the Santal) on a semi-nomadic and a gatherer-hunter tribe (the Lodhas), the active involvement of the Mahatos (a non-tribal group) in the violence on the Lodhas, exposed the process of 'cultural othering' of the Lodhas which was prominent even after the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed in 1952 and the Lodhas were declared as a denotified tribal community.

Another observer searching for the sources of ethnic conflict in the Jhargram subdivision of Paschim (west) Medinipur district noted that the criminal activities of the Lodhas created resentment among the Santals which sometime led to attack on the former and the coercive action by the administration caused among the Lodhas a kind of 'psychic persecution producing a disastrous effect on their social behavior'. (Chaudhuri, 1987: 1851-1852)<sup>[9]</sup>.

According to a media report even after six decades after Independence the socio-economic condition of the Lodhas have not changed. In the same report the journalist also pointed out that the Government has given development inputs without inquiring the beneficiaries' basic needs. As a result implementation of development inputs have been a failure owing to lack of awareness, knowledge and proper monitoring of the implementing authorities. (Roy, 2009)<sup>[25]</sup>. Furthermore, the denotification process also carried the colonial hangover of looking at those 'Criminal Tribes' as born criminals. G.N. Devi, a noted scholar-activist and the editor of *Budhan, the newsletter of the Denotified Nomadic*

*Tribes Rights Action Groups (DNT-RAG)* narrated the passage from the Criminal Tribes Act of the colonial period to the post colonial Denotified Tribes Act in a succinct manner.

....Soon after Independence, the communities notified as criminal tribals were denotified by the Government. This notification was followed by substitution of a series of Acts, generally entitled 'Habitual Offenders Act! The HOAs preserved most of the provisions of the former CT Acts, except the premise implicit in it that an entire community can be 'born' criminal. Apparently, the denotification and the passing of the HOAs should have ended the misery of the communities penalised under the CT Act. But that has not happened. The police forces as well as the people in general were taught to look upon the 'Criminal Tribes' as born criminals during the colonial times. That attitude continues to persist even today. (Devi, 1998) <sup>[14]</sup>.

Under this post-colonial scenario, various welfare measures have been undertaken by the Central Government to improve the living conditions of the Lodhas. After the independence of India from British colonialism many plans and projects of specific nature have been initiated by the Government to resettle the forest dependent and semi-nomadic Lodha minority community in an agriculture dependent sedentary life. Meanwhile, a good number of rehabilitation schemes have been formulated and implemented on the Lodhas and most of these schemes failed and no lasting impact on the Lodhas could be made. (Bhowmick, 1985: 17)<sup>[7]</sup>.

Mahasveta Devi's (a Bengali novelist) long experience of working actively for the cause of the Lodhas led her to recommend certain concrete solutions which she thought should have been adopted by the policy makers and government functionaries for the development of this small and marginalised community of Bengal. According to Mahasveta Devi plans with big budgets may not work for the real development of the Lodhas and secondly, development inputs for the community should be executed and managed by the Lodhas themselves. In an article published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mahasveta Devi narrated her experience of observing the enthusiasm created among the Lodhas when in 1982-83, they revived their own community organisation (*Lodha-Sabar Kalayan Samiti*). We quote from the author

.....The Lodhas had revived the Samiti in sheer desperation for physical survival. The awakening of the Lodhas surprised the state government. The sluggish serpent eternally in winter hibernation covering the Lodha name seemed to stir a little. Six Lodhas were appointed as Lodha cell social workers, including ChuniKotal. And three boys were appointed as village welfare supervisors in Chakua, Chandabila and Pranabpalli, on contingency basis, at ten rupees a day. All were employed in September 1983.... This encouraged the Lodhas, through their devotion and dedication Lodha and some non-Lodha children came to the community centre for studying. These workers could persuade the Lodhas to give up drinking, to save from their wages, to live hygienically. They felt that the state government was coming forward with schemes for development and the Lodhas should be prepared to reap the full benefit of such schemes (Devi, 1985: 1467) <sup>[12]</sup>.

Mahasweta Devi not only wrote on the abject poverty and exploitation of the Lodhas, she also worked for decades to fulfill the various demands of the community towards the upliftment of their socio-economic condition. Although, not an anthropologist, Mahasveta Devi has firsthand personal experiences of the failures of governmental schemes and

shortcomings of the government policies directed towards the development of the Lodhas in erstwhile Midnapore, and the adjoining districts of West Bengal. Unlike academic anthropologists, she practiced activism through the publication of a literary magazine in which many literate tribal persons including Lodhas wrote about their living conditions, violence committed to them by the state and higher classes of the society and the demands of the different tribal communities.

Mahasweta Devi cited examples of some Lodha villages in the present Paschim Medinipur district in which government schemes have failed to reach the beneficiaries, although they were badly in need of the development programmes. (Devi 1983:948) <sup>[11]</sup>.

In an important article, written much later in the *Newsletter* of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain, Bhowmick explained the socio-psychological processes which created a vicious circle of underdevelopment, poverty and mistrust among the Lodhas. We quote him below

The chronic poverty and low aspiration level and lack of zeal of these people have created socio-cultural and economic constraints which, in turn, have made them lazy and lethargic. This has also made them unresponsive to any sort of change or innovation introduced for their uplift. (Bhowmick, 1981: 7) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Bhowmick's depiction of the dismal condition of the Lodhas however, should not be taken as a generalised statement about the tribe. His own applied anthropological experiments at least in the early stages yielded inspiring results. According to his collaborator R.K.Gupta the cluster farming cooperatives in Nayagram area involving the Lodha, Santal and the Mahatos brought self-confidence among the landless Lodhas and crime rate declined. (Gupta, 1979:160-162)<sup>[18]</sup>. More than three decades after the publication of his *Royal Anthropological Institute Newsletter* article, the academic administrator Mr.Chandan Sinha narrated the successes of the Lodha development scheme in a positive tone. In the chapter 'A Glow in the Darkness' in his recently published book *Kindling of an Insurrection: Notes from Janglemahals*, Sinha depicted a good number of Lodha families in Jhargram who showed remarkable strength and courage at the individual and community levels to care for the poultry and the livestock given to them from the government under the RSVY scheme and built houses under a governmental scheme with their family labour. (Sinha, 2013: 206-208)<sup>[25]</sup>.

### **An empirical account of the development of the Lodhas in a district of West Bengal**

In a series of empirical studies, we have made sincere attempts to assess the utilization of the various developmental inputs given by external agencies towards the demarginalization of the Lodhas. (Panda & Guha, 2009:69-75; 2012: 75-84)<sup>[22, 23]</sup> Opportunities came when in the month of November 2005; we conducted a social anthropological fieldwork in connection with a research project on 'Socio-economic Impact Assessment of Development Programmes among the Lodha/Sabar of Binpur-II & Nayagram blocks of Paschim (West) Medinipur District', under the *Rastriya Sama Vikas Yojana* scheme of Paschim Medinipur district sponsored by the Planning Commission of India.

The following account is a summary of the study which is based on our prolonged anthropological enquiries conducted in the Government departments and the target villages of the three administrative blocks (Binpur II, Nayagram and

Narayangarh) of Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal. The government has given various types of development inputs to the Lodha/Sabar beneficiaries in the surveyed areas to bring them in the mainstream and also uplift the socio-economic condition of this tribe. The developmental inputs under the RastriyaSama Vikas Yojana, (RSVY) Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) schemes included (i) non-refundable cash loan for building house, (ii) solar cells for domestic use, (iii) cattle (cow, goat, bullock) and poultry birds, (iv) husking and spray machine for agricultural purpose, (v) job card, (vi) money for domestic animal, and also included the distribution of plots of agricultural land under developmental input as *patta*.

Another important component of the governmental perspective centering round the development of the Lodhas was to settle this tribe as an agriculturist population. For this reason, every effort to improve the condition of the Lodhas consisted of giving them land, permanent houses, domestic animals and poultry birds. There was virtually no effort on the part of the Government and the NGOs to improve the economy of the Lodhas within the fold of the forests which the members of this tribe knew best. The traditional and intimate knowledge of the Lodhas about the forest and the animals on which the community sustained its livelihood were rarely studied and used by the governmental and non-governmental development agencies.

The findings revealed that at the time of the field survey (during 2005-2006 & 2008-2012) 402(29.09%) beneficiary families out of 1382, spread over three administrative blocks of Paschim Medinipur have received various types of developmental inputs in different combination. The nature of distribution of developmental inputs by the Government shows that emphasis was given to cash loan for house building and high technology solar cells. Through our observation and interviews with the beneficiaries we have

found that most of the houses were built in a hurried manner and seemed to be weak in structure. The beneficiaries also expressed their dissatisfaction with the newly built houses. It was also found that the majority of the beneficiaries who received solar cells either sold them against cash to well-to-do neighbours belonging to other communities or could not use them properly.

Little attention was paid to strengthen the household level economic base of the Lodhas through the distribution of agricultural land and other related inputs like ploughs, irrigation water, manure and pesticide. There was no effort on the part of the agriculture department to train the beneficiaries in cultivation. The distribution of cattle and poultry birds among the Lodhas of the survey population also revealed that the beneficiaries could not manage their cattle and birds owing to lack of basic knowledge in rearing those animals. As a result, it was found that many cattle, particularly goats have died within a short period of time after those were given to the beneficiaries. The beneficiaries of old age pension scheme complained about the delayed payment of pension by the concerned department of the Government. The overall scenario of the utilisation of the various development inputs showed that the majority of the beneficiaries utilised the development inputs, although there was a large amount of variation among the different inputs in terms of their utilisation.

The comparative scenario of the utilisation of the four major development inputs in the three blocks among the Lodhas showed a marked overall variation. Variation is also found in terms of the type of development input. Let us enumerate the variations. In the following table and the analysis we have summarised the findings on the utilisation of the development inputs by the Lodha families in the three blocks in a comparative framework.

**Table 1:** Comparative Scenario of the Utilisation of Major Development inputs among the Lodha Households in three blocks of Paschim (west) Medinipur

Development Inputs	Binpur-II		Nayagram		Narayangarh	
	Utilised	Unutilised	Utilised	Unutilised	Utilised	Unutilised
Solar cell	04[17.39]	19[82.61]	60[73.17]	22[26.83]	Solar cell has not been given.	
Patta Land	01[10.00]	09[90.00]	11[39.29]	17[60.71]	15[88.28]	02[11.72]
House	12[33.33]	24[66.67]	75[60.48]	49[39.52]	15[100.00]	00
Cattle	05[20.00]	20[80.00]	00	02[100.00]	09[64.29]	05[35.71]
Total	22(23.40)	72(76.60)	146 (61.86)	90(38.14)	39(84.78)	07(15.22)

( ) Represents percentages the number of households out of the total beneficiary households in a particular block for a specific development input,

**Analysis**

1. The development inputs given to the Lodhas have been utilised by them most successfully in the Narayangarh block and interestingly, solar plates have not been given at all in this block.
2. The worst scenario is found in the Binpur-II block in which non-utilisation of all the development inputs predominated the scene. Nayagram lies in the middle position in terms of the utilisation of the development inputs.
3. When we look separately to each development input, we find that the utilisation of domestic cattle can be regarded as a kind of development input which turned out to be an unutilised input except among the Lodhas of Narayangarh who showed the best performance in the utilisation of all the inputs.
4. The utilisation of financial assistance for house construction given as a development input showed that even the overall worst performers (Lodhas of Binpur-II)

have made a substantial utilisation of house construction as a development input.

5. Regarding *patta* land, we do not find full utilisation in any of the blocks studied but in case of house we find full utilisation in Narayangarh Block.
6. The development assistance given in the form of cattle revealed a grim scenario both at Binpur II and Nayagram blocks while the performance of the beneficiaries towards the utilisation of this input was found to be fairly well in Narayangarh block. (Panda and Guha, 2015) [24].

**A typical case of Landlessness and house building of a Lodha family**

Name of informant: TapanSabar (name changed) Age: 4Sex: MaleVillage: Amlasole,JL. No: 25Block: Binpur-II

According to the respondent there are six members in his

family. They are dependent on forest resource collection and daily labour. He had received a record of right on *patta* land from the Block Land and Land Reforms Department in 2004. The family has also received financial assistance for house building in 2004. All the family members are living in the house but it is not suitable for living as the roof is damaged. Jiban said : 'Our house is in a very poor condition because it was built by bricks with mud and thatched by tin with a single door made by plain sheet of tin and there is neither any window nor any ventilation system. The house was constructed by a contractor under the supervision of some government official and they did not consult us regarding the planning of the house. Moreover, if the house requires repair we will not be able to do it without the help of the contractors who made the construction.' Jiban also added: 'I have received *patta* land on paper in 2004 and the amount of the land is 0.15 acre only, but till now I have not seen the land or the plot which has been allotted under my name. May be some other person is cultivating the land. The government official who gave the *patta* paper to me did not show the actual spot where my piece of land is located'.

### Conclusion

In this research, we have found micro-level differences in terms of the utilization of development inputs by the Lodha families of the three administrative blocks of Paschim Medinipur district which have a bearing on the macro-level policies undertaken by the Government to ameliorate the socio-economic condition of the most economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized tribal population of a district identified under the macro category named "backward". It was also found that the failure on the part of the Government to make use of the various development inputs to the target group of beneficiaries is related with the specific situation of each block. The salient features of the block specific situations should have been taken into consideration while implementing the macro-level policies. Some of the recommendations are summarized below.

*First*, the road transport and public communication systems should be improved in all the blocks, particularly in Binpur II and Nayagram. Governmental efforts towards the supply of safe drinking water and minor irrigation systems should be initiated immediately in all the areas inhabited by the Lodhas.

*Second*, skill development and production of value added items made out of minor forest produce by the Lodha villagers still remained one of the most neglected areas by the Government.

*Third*, the Lodha families to whom *patta* land have been issued on paper should immediately be given the actual right of possession with full protection against all kinds of disturbance by the district administration and the panchayat.

*Fourth*, the financial assistance for house building plans should also have been made in consultation with the beneficiaries themselves to give honour and importance to their specific needs.

*Fifth*, and not the least, solar cells should not be given to individual Lodha families without enquiring into their socioeconomic conditions. In this field based research it was found that the Lodha families in the Narayangarh block were much advanced in terms of the utilisation of development inputs. Solar cells should have been given to the Lodha families of this block instead of giving them to the beneficiaries in the Binpur II block.

This study revealed the historic injustice towards one of most marginalised community of West Bengal designated as 'Criminal' in the colonial period continued through the post-colonial time. The governmental efforts to ameliorate the living condition of the Lodha-Sabars made some inroads, although more sincere efforts combined with solid empirical research are needed along with social activism initiated by P.K. Bhowmick and his Institute of Social Research & Applied Anthropology, to achieve social harmony and inclusive development of this 'Primitive Tribal Group'.

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