



A Historical Analysis of Livelihood Vulnerability among the Lodha Tribe in Orissa and West Bengal

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Abstract

The Lodha tribe, an indigenous community primarily residing in the states of Orissa (Odisha) and West Bengal, has historically faced significant livelihood vulnerabilities shaped by socio-economic marginalization, environmental changes, and policy neglect. This paper presents a historical analysis of the factors contributing to their livelihood insecurities, focusing on the interplay of colonial and post-colonial policies, land dispossession, and socio-cultural dynamics. By examining archival records, ethnographic studies, and contemporary reports, the study highlights the persistent challenges faced by the Lodhas in maintaining sustainable livelihoods. The research underscores the need for context-specific interventions that respect cultural identity while addressing economic vulnerabilities. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on tribal welfare and inclusive development in India.

Keywords: Lodha tribe, livelihood vulnerability, Orissa, West Bengal, tribal economy, historical analysis, socio-economic marginalization

Introduction

The Lodha tribe is one of the many Scheduled Tribes in India, with substantial populations primarily located in the eastern states of Orissa (officially Odisha) and West Bengal. Traditionally, the Lodhas have been forest dwellers, relying extensively on the natural resources available in their immediate environment for survival. Their livelihood practices have historically centered on shifting cultivation, collection of minor forest produce, hunting, and small-scale subsistence farming. This symbiotic relationship with the forest and land not only sustained their economy but also formed an integral part of their cultural identity and social organization.

However, over the course of history, particularly during the colonial era, the Lodhas experienced a profound disruption in their traditional ways of life. British colonial forest policies, aimed at resource extraction and revenue generation, led to the criminalization of many customary practices of forest-dependent communities. The introduction of restrictive forest laws such as the Indian Forest Act of 1878 and subsequent amendments severely curtailed the Lodhas' access to forest resources, leading to widespread displacement and loss of livelihood. The imposition of private land tenure systems and the expansion of commercial agriculture further alienated the Lodha community from their ancestral lands. This alienation was compounded by a lack of political representation and social marginalization, resulting in a cycle of poverty and vulnerability that has persisted into the post-independence period.

In both Orissa and West Bengal, the Lodhas have faced not only ecological and economic challenges but also social exclusion. The loss of traditional rights and limited access to government welfare schemes have intensified their economic hardships. Despite constitutional safeguards under the Scheduled Tribes category, many Lodhas remain excluded



from mainstream development processes, grappling with low literacy rates, inadequate health facilities, and limited employment opportunities.

This paper seeks to provide a historical appraisal of the livelihood vulnerabilities faced by the Lodha tribe by examining the socio-economic and political factors that have shaped their access to land, forest, and economic opportunities over time. The study emphasizes the significance of understanding the historical context — including colonial policies and post-independence governance — to grasp the contemporary challenges confronting the Lodha community. Such an understanding is essential for formulating effective and culturally sensitive development interventions that can enhance the resilience of the Lodhas while preserving their unique cultural heritage. Through this historical lens, the paper aims to contribute to the discourse on tribal welfare and inclusive development in India.

Objectives

- To trace the historical trajectory of livelihood practices among the Lodha tribe in Orissa and West Bengal.
- To analyze the impact of colonial and post-colonial policies on the Lodha's access to natural resources and land rights.
- To examine the socio-economic factors contributing to the current livelihood vulnerabilities of the Lodhas.
- To explore the role of cultural and environmental factors in shaping the Lodha community's adaptive strategies.
- To provide recommendations for sustainable livelihood interventions that align with the Lodha community's socio-cultural context.

Main Themes of the Study

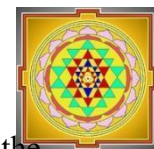
The Lodha tribe, historically recognized as forest dwellers, have long sustained themselves through a combination of shifting cultivation, forest foraging, hunting, and small-scale agriculture. These practices were intricately connected to their ecological surroundings and underpinned by a rich repository of traditional knowledge about the forest ecosystem, seasonal cycles, and resource management. The Lodhas' livelihoods were not only economic activities but also embedded in their social and cultural frameworks, governed by community norms that emphasized sustainable use and collective responsibility. Ethnographic studies and archival records from the pre-colonial and early colonial periods reveal that the Lodha economy was largely self-sufficient. Their shifting cultivation—locally referred to as 'podu' or 'jhum' cultivation—involved clearing small forest patches for crop production in rotation, allowing soil regeneration and forest regeneration cycles to sustain their agricultural productivity. Besides cultivating staples such as millets, pulses, and vegetables, the Lodhas depended heavily on non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as honey, fruits, tubers, and medicinal plants, which supplemented their diet and income. Communal sharing of resources and labor was a hallmark of their livelihood system. Decisions about resource use were often made collectively through village councils or traditional leadership structures, ensuring equitable distribution and preventing over-exploitation. This socio-economic organization



fostered social cohesion and mutual support, which were critical in managing risks associated with environmental fluctuations. The Lodhas' traditional livelihood practices were adapted to the ecological realities of their habitat, emphasizing resilience and sustainability. These indigenous strategies highlight the importance of understanding tribal economies in their historical and environmental context, as opposed to viewing them solely through the lens of poverty or backwardness.

The advent of British colonial rule marked a profound disruption in the livelihood patterns of the Lodha tribe. Colonial forest policies, designed primarily to consolidate state control over forests and exploit timber and other resources, severely undermined the customary rights and practices of indigenous forest communities. The enactment of the Indian Forest Act of 1878 and subsequent legislations criminalized traditional activities such as shifting cultivation, grazing, hunting, and collection of minor forest produce—core components of the Lodhas' subsistence economy. These policies redefined forests as state property, imposing strict restrictions on access and use. The Lodhas were labeled as 'criminal tribes' under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, a stigmatizing classification that further marginalized them socially and economically. Forest officials aggressively enforced the new regulations, often evicting tribespeople from their traditional habitats, confiscating tools, and arresting those caught violating forest laws. Land alienation accelerated as colonial authorities introduced revenue systems and commercial agriculture, favoring private landownership and monoculture plantations. The Lodhas lost not only access to forest resources but also to agricultural lands that had been cultivated communally or under customary tenure systems. This dispossession disrupted their economic base and forced many to seek wage labor in plantations, mines, or urban centers, often under exploitative conditions. The colonial period thus represents a turning point wherein the Lodhas' traditional livelihood systems were systematically dismantled, leading to increased dependency, impoverishment, and social disintegration. The impact of these policies has had long-term repercussions, contributing to entrenched vulnerabilities that persist today.

India's independence in 1947 brought promises of social justice and tribal welfare, including constitutional recognition of Scheduled Tribes and provisions aimed at safeguarding their rights. However, the realities on the ground in Orissa and West Bengal have often fallen short of these ideals. Post-independence land reforms, forest management practices, and development initiatives did not adequately address the historical marginalization of the Lodha community. While legislation such as the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA) sought to rectify historical injustices by recognizing forest rights of tribal communities, implementation has been uneven and fraught with challenges. In many areas, the Lodhas continue to face difficulties in obtaining legal recognition of their land and forest claims due to bureaucratic hurdles, lack of awareness, and resistance from forest departments and other vested interests. Development programs aimed at tribal upliftment—such as poverty alleviation schemes, housing projects, and educational initiatives—have frequently been designed and implemented without adequate participation of the Lodha people. This has led to inappropriate or ineffective interventions that fail to align with the community's socio-cultural realities and needs. Additionally, the fragmentation of tribal lands and the encroachment of commercial activities continue to erode the resource base necessary for sustaining traditional livelihoods. This



continued exclusion exacerbates socio-economic inequalities and limits opportunities for the Lodha tribe to achieve sustainable development. The disconnect between policy intentions and implementation outcomes highlights the critical need for more inclusive, participatory approaches in tribal governance and resource management.

The cumulative impact of historical displacement, policy neglect, and socio-political marginalization has resulted in multi-dimensional poverty among the Lodha community. Economic deprivation is characterized not only by low income and unstable employment but also by limited access to education, healthcare, sanitation, and other essential services. These deficiencies have entrenched a cycle of poverty that is difficult to escape. Illiteracy rates among the Lodhas remain high compared to regional averages, restricting access to formal employment and perpetuating dependence on precarious informal sector jobs. Malnutrition and poor health outcomes are widespread due to inadequate healthcare infrastructure and traditional health practices that may not address all medical needs. Social stigma and discrimination compound their vulnerabilities. Often labeled as 'primitive' or 'backward,' Lodhas face social exclusion that limits their participation in community decision-making and access to public resources. Gender disparities within the community further intensify challenges; women often bear the brunt of economic hardship while having limited autonomy or access to education and healthcare. The loss of traditional livelihoods has pushed many Lodhas into seasonal migration or labor-intensive work in agriculture, construction, and unorganized sectors where exploitation is common. This precarious economic existence leaves them vulnerable to shocks such as crop failure, illness, or market fluctuations. Overall, the Lodha community's socio-economic vulnerabilities underscore the importance of targeted, holistic interventions that address not only income generation but also social inclusion, health, education, and empowerment.

Despite the severe challenges outlined above, the Lodha community has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. Their survival and continuity as a distinct social group testify to their ability to navigate changing socio-economic landscapes. One significant adaptive strategy has been livelihood diversification. Many Lodhas supplement traditional activities with wage labor, small trade, artisanal crafts, and participation in government-sponsored schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Migration to urban areas or industrial centers, although often a distress-driven choice, provides additional income sources for some families. Cultural revival and assertion have also played a role in community resilience. Efforts to preserve and promote traditional arts, festivals, and social institutions help reinforce identity and social cohesion, which are vital for collective action and advocacy. Engagement with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and participation in self-help groups have empowered some Lodha communities to claim rights, access services, and improve their socio-economic conditions. Awareness campaigns about forest rights and education have helped bridge gaps between traditional knowledge and modern governance. However, these adaptive strategies face limitations due to systemic barriers such as bureaucratic red tape, discrimination, resource scarcity, and infrastructural deficits. To enhance resilience effectively, supportive policies must recognize and bolster indigenous knowledge systems, provide adequate resource access, and promote inclusive governance.

Conclusion



The historical analysis of the livelihood vulnerabilities of the Lodha tribe in Orissa and West Bengal reveals the deep-rooted nature of their socio-economic marginalization. Colonial and post-colonial policies have played a significant role in disrupting traditional livelihoods and restricting access to critical resources. The ongoing challenges faced by the Lodhas underscore the necessity of policy interventions that are historically informed and culturally sensitive.

Sustainable development for the Lodha community requires recognition of their traditional knowledge systems, restoration of land and forest rights, and empowerment through education and health initiatives. Only through a holistic and participatory approach can the livelihood vulnerabilities of the Lodhas be effectively addressed, ensuring their social and economic inclusion.

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