

**INCONSTANT ECONOMIC SITUATION OF THE  
LODHA : A HUNTER GATHERER PRIMITIVE TRIBE OF  
WEST BENGAL**

**Dr. Suparna Sanyal Mukherjee**

**ABSTRACT**

India is enriched with all geographical definitions. Forest is one amongst them. Tribes are aboriginal, their individual traditional methods of sustaining livelihood identify their socio-economic condition and cultural heritage. The then ruler realizing the immense commercial potentiality of Indian Forest, amalgamated with better knowledge of the tribal community in the regard, ushered the Indian Forest Act in 1865 to establish absolute supremacy and control over the forest.

The Lodha were indigenes, innocent, illiterate, hunter-gatherer tribe and forest was their principal source of sustaining livelihood and domain. By dint of the Act without knowing any implications they were totally dislodged from the forest, which could not stop them from forest collections, since the forest was their basic source of sustaining livelihood. Repeated such actions identified them law offenders and restrained them by the Criminal Tribes Act 1871, though it was repealed in 1952, still the stigma to be fester even today. Thus, the ignorance of law and never ending dependence of the forest compelled them in inconstant economic pursuit at present day. The quest was quenched at Lengamara, a Lodha village under Khagra Beat, Hijli Range of Kharagpur Forest Division revealing facts and figures iterated in the sequel.

**Keywords: Collection, Dependence, Economy, Forest, Forest Act, Inconstant, Livelihood, Sustenance.**

**Introduction :**

Economy and economic situation are inseparable part of human life. Tribes are aboriginal, they have their own economic pursuit. The Lodha a hunter gatherer tribe reside deep inside the forests and its fringe. Being a primitive and hunter gatherer tribe in West Bengal, they are mostly found in the District of Paschim Medinipur and Purulia. In the forest clad areas of Paschim Medinipur the Lodha are habitating in almost all parts. Among the forty tribal groups of West Bengal the Lodha is one.

Indian flora, fauna, along with its various people, exhibit rich source of natural and individual identity, with all geographical set up, one of the many is the “Forest”, which is the immense source of natural resources. The Lodha who were a habitat in the forest, thus it was their one and only source of maintaining livelihood.

The British took charge of India and gradually realized the Indian Forests and its rich sources of economic value. The Lodha who were totally dependent on the forest for sustaining livelihood were better acquainted by the then British Govt. who for gains advented an Act “The Indian Forest Act 1865”. In 1878 which was amended and was the first legal framework, in 21<sup>st</sup> September, 1927 was finally enacted.

The Lodha were totally dislodged by dint of the Act 1865 from the forest, by way of an embargo on entering and collecting from the forest, which could not dissuade them from doing so, since the forest provided them with the provision of livelihood. Thereby, making them law offenders. Repeated such actions were snubbed by implementation of Criminal Tribes Act in 1871. The stigma of which though officially withdrawn in 1952, continues to be a sore even today. The Act debarred all except the authorized for collection from the forest, putting an embargo on collection of forest produce of any kind, even entry and exist to and from the forest were restricted.

The Lodha are innocent, illiterate fellow citizens of us. They were absolutely ignorant regarding the Indian Forest Act and its legal approach, since inception. After independence our Hon’ble Government through its governance formed rules and regulations for each and every citizen of

India. But the Lodha are mostly unaware and unexposed to the outer world, which does not debar them from enjoying the status of being bonafide citizen. However, has ignorance of law change the economic pattern of livelihood in the Lodha ? Was it the Indian Forest Act compelling them in inconstant economic situation ?

The situation was peered into at Lengamara a Lodha village under Khagra Beat and Hijli Range of Kharagpur Forest Division. 75 households are residing there, along with caste people, of which Twenty five Lodha households was taken up for present sequel.

Richard P. Tucker in his book “Forest History of India” 2014, highlited 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, narated 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 Meanstream Weekly, VOL LIII No 25, New Delhi June 13, 2015, future of the forest dwelling tribes are uncertain due to the said Act. In her another article The Lodha – Compelled to Abdicate Traditional Occupation Due to Indian Forest Act. *The International Journal Of Humanities & Social Studies*, Vol-3 Issue-11, Nov-2015, clearly mention that Indian Forest Act and its legal approach compelled the Lodha to abdicate their forest based traditional way of sustaining livelihood.

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.

### **The Lodha**

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

The term Lodha 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 Happer. 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 hunting-gathering community though hunting is totally banned only gathering continues. The principal economy of the Lodha revolves around hunting and gathering, which they have been doing for generations. But, at present their economy revolves only around gathering. 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. Everyday they visit forest to feel fresh. But the Forest Act has restricted their movement within the forest, where they developed their own 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.

**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 kings, Zamindars and ruled by Individual kingdom. The Forest was rich sources of revenue, its Flora & Fauna contained immense value. Forest was pleasure to its residents. 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 Indian 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 a anybody's privilege, thereby, the British felt for formation of the rules and regulations of the Forest, as laid down in the Forest Act.

The local inhabitants specially the Tribes were more acquainted for extraction from the forest. The British were realising which, bounded the forest in legal framework, 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 has 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 till date. The Indian Forest Act XVI of 1927 was intended to consolidate the law and control relating to the forest law of the country and it was applicable in all parts of the country, which is in practice still now.

**The village Lengamara :**

Lengamara is a multi-ethnic village, where different caste people 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 multilinear way, Mauram Roads lead to the houses, drinking water system is not available, sanitation system is totally absent. Only one source of water is a pond, which fulfill every essential requirements of the villagers so far as source of water is concern. Lodha houses are situated from the left side of the chowtala (chock) alongwith 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 degree of dependence on the forest.

**Table – 1 : Degree of Dependence on the Forest**

Category of Dependence	Male		Female	
	Total	%	Total	%
Regular <sup>1</sup> visit in the forest	08	04.83%	26	15.66%
Occasionally <sup>2</sup> visit in the forest	34	20.48%	26	15.66%
Non-visitors <sup>3</sup>	44	26.51%	28	16.87%
Total	86	51.81%	80	48.19%

<sup>1</sup> Regular visitors denote those who visit forest for collection 15 to 30 days in a month.

<sup>2</sup> Occasional visitors exhibit 7 to 15 days visit in the forest for oscillation.

<sup>3</sup> Non-visitors are those who never visit the forest for collection

**Table – 1** clearly indicates the forest dependence of the Lodha at present. The Male forest regular visitors accounts to 04.82%, occasional visitors 20.48% and non-visitors 26.51% where Female regular visitors represent 15.66%, occasional visitors are same as regular visitors and non-visitors are 16.87%. Nevertheless, non-forest visitors account high in Men 26.51% than the Women that is 16.87% which reveals women are still forest dependent for collections, since the Lodha are strictly and solely forest concomitant tribe secede themselves by 43.38% non-dependent on the forests at present. Partially dependence exhibit 36.14% where total dependence covers only 20.48%. thereby, degree of dependence on the forest of the Lodha are gradually descending.

The Lodha are maintaining their subsistence economic pattern of livelihood by way of various other means than the forest. Economic importance of the forest has rescinded due to impact of the Indian Forest Act. They engage themselves in daily labourer, per day agricultural labourer and other engagements which are not forest based. The following table unfold the details about the situation.

**Table – 2 Economic Parameters**

Category of work	Male		Female	
	Total	%	Total	%
Agricultural labourer	16	09.64%	10	06.02%
Per day labourer <sup>4</sup>	30	18.07%	18	10.84%
Forest collection	05	03.01%	21	12.65%
Total	51	30.72%	49	29.52%

It is conspicuous from Table 2, that the Lodha engage themselves as Agricultural labourer 15.66% of which 09.64% are Male and 06.02% are Female. In the case of per day labourer 18.07% are Male and 10.84% are Female which indicates 28.91% total per day labourer engaging themselves in construction, digging of Pond, Canal, Factory work, specially by the Male while their Female counterpart engage them in construction, digging and housemaid. Forest

<sup>4</sup> Per day labourer indicates who are engaged in construction, digging and various types of physical work without forest based economic pursuit not less than six months of the calendar year on a daily payment basis.

collection, mainly the minor-forest produces is performed by the women which is 12.65% and 03.01% only by the Men. Nevertheless, it is quite evident that economic concomitant over the forest by the Lodha are generally precipitating.

### Conclusion

Traversing through the iterated filed study and the facts enlightened through figures the life subsistence situation of the Lodha through their economic pursuit becomes luminous, needless to say that the Indian Forest Act of 1865 was the launching pad for the situation these tribe are in on date. Thereby, clearly indicating that the inconstant economic situation of the Lodha, a hunter gatherer primitive tribe of West Bengal is solely vested on the Indian Forest Act 1865 as amended.

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