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## Socio-economic Profile of a Marginalized Community of Southwest Bengal: A Graphic Overview

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### Abstract

*Lodhas, a marginalized community living predominantly in the forest fringe villages of Southwest Bengal, live depending on the forests gathering vegetable matter and hunting animals for years. Lesser known among the substantial tribal population of the state, Lodhas have lived a life of seclusion from the mainstream population manning a forest landscape and lateritic zone. Loss of forest cover and customary rights over forest use in the wake of colonialism have robbed the Lodhas of their main source of livelihood. They had to resort to criminality for bare survival. The Lodhas had been declared a Criminal Tribe in 1916 under the purview of the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871. Consequently, they were branded as inveterate criminals and placed out of the scope of ordinary law being cast into a life of isolation from the rest of the society. The Act had been repealed in 1952. Yet, the stigma of criminality haunts them to date. A brief overview of the life and living of the Lodhas in this paper reveal their distinct and rich culture flouting the conventional claims of 'wildness', 'savagery' and 'criminality' conferred on them.*

**KEYWORDS:** Forests; tribe; seclusion; village; culture; colonialism; criminality; criminal tribe; stigma; act; ecology; customary rights

### INTRODUCTION

The forests of Southwest Bengal, historically, the Jungle Mahals, most frequently occur as disjoined isolated blocks of varying sizes, intermingled with cultivated fields, fallow lands, and villages. Colonialism had projected the Jungle Mahals as a special space defined by a unique combination of tribal people and forest landscape. The forest space was less legible for the purpose of governance than the other spaces of colonial rule in Bengal. Forests were viewed as an 'impenetrable' landscape devoid of stable agrarian order much beyond the knowledge and control of administration. Forest perceived as 'wild' and its inmates 'savage' and 'backward' represented the 'other' in colonial modernity. Jungle Mahals epitomize a zone of segregation where the forest dwellers have lived in isolation for years. Jungle Mahals, with its unique combination of tribal people and forest landscape, has been central to historical discourse of eastern India for a long time. In 1769, George Vansittart, the first Resident at Midnapore to travel through the jungle areas wrote, 'the whole western part of this

district is overrun with jungle areas in which there are scattered some trifling villages interspersed with few cultivated fields.' In 1773, Edward Baber, the collector of Midnapore, provided the first detailed description of the Jungle Mahals and characterized it as a mountainous country overspread with thick woods, dominated by refractory zamindars and inhabited by 'rude and ungovernable' dwellers. In his Report on 'the condition of the Santhals in the Districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Midnapur and North Balasore' Mc Macalpin observed the Jungle Mahals to be 'an indefinite administrative area lying between Chotanagpur and the plains of Bengal.' According to O'Malley, Jungle Mahals was a term applied in the eighteenth century to 'the territory lying between Birbhum, Bankura, Midnapore and the hilly country of Chota Nagpur,' and 'in Midnapore the term applied to thanas Binpur, Garbeta, Gopiballavpur, Jhargram and Salboni.' The term 'Jungle-Mahals' was quite well known long before the English penetrated the area. The area which was known as the Jungle Mahals, at the time of Akbar, formed a part of Circar Goalpara. At the time of Murshid-Quli Khan, the area was transferred in 1722 to *Chakla* - Midnapur which was ceded to the East India Company in 1760. Between 1760 to 1805, though there had been no officially recognised administrative unit as Jungle Mahals, several jungle tracts in the districts of Birbhum, Burdwan, Bankura, Midnapur and Purulia were known as Jungle Mahals. In 1805 the district of Jungle Mahals had been constituted with parganas and mahals from the district of Birbhum, Burdwan and Midnapore. The administrative unit was dissolved in 1833 under Regulation XIII. With the creation of the South West Frontier Agency in 1833, the Jungle Mahals were placed in a special category of regions under the charge of individuals working with a local people, 'wild, imperfectly civilised and occasionally disturbed' in the hilly and jungle areas. The Lodhas of West Bengal, a marginalized community manning the forest fringe villages of this region, live either exclusively or in communion with other ethnic groups like the Santhals, Mundas, Bhumij, Oraon and Mahatos. The Lodhas have lived depending on a forest economy for long. Loss of customary rights over the forests in the wake of colonialism had robbed them of their main source of sustenance. They had to resort to criminality for bare survival. They were branded as hereditary criminals by the British under the Criminal Tribes Act in 1916. The brand of a criminal isolated them from their ethnic brethren and they receded into the forest interior. The Act had been repealed in 1952, yet the stigma of criminality has smote them to the present. They live in a state of utter dejection and crude adversity. This paper highlights their life, living and distinctive cultural traits that find expression in religious rites, rituals, ceremonies and festivals projecting a rich cultural heritage.

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**LIFE AND LIVING:**

The Lodhas live depending mainly on forests gathering vegetable matter and hunting animals over the years. In 1876, W.W. Hunter, in A Statistical Account of Bengal Vol. III, mentions the Lodhas as a caste who mainly subsisted by collecting and trading in jungle products in Midnapur. The Census report of 1901 mentions, 'snaring of birds' and collection of jungle products like cocoons, lac, resin and honey wax, to be their traditional occupation. The District Gazetteer of Midnapore in 1931 mentions them to be an 'aboriginal tribe'. The Census Report of 1951 calls them 'an aboriginal tribe of hunters' who live depending on forest products. The Lodhas have shown little deviation in economic pursuits even after seventy five years of independence. They live a life of severe hardship clinging to their traditional means of livelihood hunting and gathering food from the forest. Although Lodhas predominantly live in the forest fringe villages, some of them have migrated to eastern tracts of the district in search of livelihood. These villages support either agricultural economy or forest economy or a mixture of both. Lodhas live in small square huts whose thatch comes down to bamboo walls plastered with mud. Majority of the Lodha huts have small doors with or without planked shutters, but they are mostly devoid of windows. The huts are usually occupied by a nuclear family with each married son establishing his independent hut. The main source of water in a Lodha village is a natural water source like a stream or rivulet or a 'bund' or artificial reservoir, few tanks, wells and deep tube wells. Metal roads give way to mud roads which meet the Lodha villages stuck in their eternal search for a path to survival.

Village forms an integral part in the social life of the Lodhas. A Lodha caste council constituted by the village elders, including the *Mukhia*, *Kotal* and *Dehri* take care of village or community problems in a few Lodha villages to date. The Lodha caste council has all grown up male persons as its members. Cases are dealt with in accordance with age-old traditional norms. Lodhas believe that supernatural punishment befalls a person who breaks these norms. Disobedience of the mandate of the caste council is taken seriously. Public opinion is the most important factor in determining social norms wherever these caste councils are in existence. *Mukhia* or the village headman, *Dakua* or the village messenger and *Paramanik* or the village cook for the ceremonies are the most important members of a caste council. The caste council sits in response to a complaint lodged with the *Mukhia* who asks the *Dakua* to convene a meeting at the village shrine of goddess *Sitala* or at his own house. The *Mukhia* holds the highest position in the council and is unquestionably obeyed by others. His presence is a mark

of honor in every marriage ceremony. He raises subscriptions and acts as the treasurer during religious festivals in the village. The *Dakua* convenes the meeting of the caste council and plays an important role during a Lodha marriage. The ceremonial cook or the *Paramanik* cooks food during a religious or a marriage ceremony in the village. *Deheri* or the village priest, *Talia* or *Chharidar* ie., the assistant to the village priest, *Hantakar* or the official sacrificer, *Gunni* or the medicine man and *Byakra* or the shaman ie, the 'spirit possessed man', command high respect in the village and its caste council. With the introduction of the Panchayati Raj system, Lodhas have gradually associated themselves with village administration of the State through the panchayats. Presently, caste councils have lost their sway in most of the Lodha villages.

Lodhas live in an endogamous society. They have exogamous totemic clans namely Bhakta, Mallik, Kotal, Laik, Layek, Nayek, Digar, Paramanik, Dandapat, Bag, Ari or Ahari, Bhuiya or Bhunia. Each clan has a totem name and strict taboos and restrictions are observed regarding them. The Layek, Bhuiya and Mallik observe the 'Sal fish' (*Ophiocephalus marulius*) as their totem. The Bhaktas regard 'Chirka alu', a kind of jungle yam, as their totem. The Kotalas regard the 'Moon' as their totem. The members of Digar clan have taken the 'Porpoise' as their totem. The Paramanik clan have chosen 'Manik', a kind of large bird, as their totem. The Dandapat consider the 'Tiger' to be their totem. The members of the Ari clan have taken the 'Chanda fish' (*Ambasisis ranga*) as their totem. The totemic objects are held with great respect and the clan members are barred from their consumption. Most of the Lodhas use their clan names as surnames. At times, the term 'Lodha' is used as a surname with the name of an individual. This is specifically common in Jhargram. Again, many Lodhas prefer to use the surname 'Savara' to identify themselves with the ancient forest-dwelling tribe mentioned in the epic Ramayana where *Rama* and *Lakshmana*, searching for Seeta had arrived in the hermitage of Sabari, a representative of a tribe of *Savaras*, who supposedly lived on the banks of the lake of Pampa, having their original home between the Ganges and the Vindhya, but compelled to leave their original home and find new ones elsewhere. Lodhas marry outside the clan. The marriageable age for girls is before puberty and for boys below twenty years. Levirate is permissible in Lodha society. Paying a bride price is customary. The bride price is received by the bride's mother before the marriage ceremony. The marriage ceremony consists of a series of rites and rituals and the bridegroom's sister's husband or *Sambar*, plays a leading role in it. There is no room for a brahmin priest in a Lodha marriage. A feast is given on the day of the marriage to which all the traditional village officials and

relatives are invited. Widow remarriage or marriage of a divorced woman is in vogue in the Lodha society. This is known as *Sanga* and no bride price is paid in it. A nominal amount is paid to the guardian of the widow or the divorced woman by the prospective groom in *Sanga* marriage. Lodha families are nuclear. A married man sets up his home with his wife either in his father's village or in the village of his wife's father. In a family, husband and wife have a significant mission to fulfill. They are partners in economic life and work jointly for survival. Major domestic activities are the exclusive domain of the wife. In agricultural areas, the wife sometimes goes to the field to work as a hired laborer in lieu of wages. Lodha society is patrilineal and parents' property, if any, is equally divided among the sons. The Lodhas have mortuary rites and observe a pollution period following death in the family. 'Sradh' is held to end the pollution. Invocation of the soul of the departed is ominous in the Lodha society. Offering to the manes is made on the day of *Chaitra Sankranti* every year and at the time of a wedding ceremony as seeking blessings of well-being from the ancestral spirits is highly customary among the lodhas.

A vast majority of the Lodhas live on the forest at present. They collect firewood for sale and a variety of edible roots and tubers for consumption. They collect dried branches of trees and prepare headloads of such bundles of faggots and carry them to nearby towns and villages for sale, each headload fetching them a maximum amount of hundred rupees. They collect silk, cotton and mahua flowers or fruits from the forest during spring or summer for sale to the local traders. Fishing is a crucial mode of subsistence for the Lodhas during the rains or autumn. Lodhas also catch tortoises for sale or for consumption. Hunting is a major source of livelihood for the Lodhas. Lodhas venture out for a hunt individually or in large groups. Lodhas might hunt occasionally or on consecutive days. Agriculture is an important occupation of the Lodhas living in the eastern zone of the district of West Midnapore. Although majority of the Lodhas are landless yet many among them subsist as agricultural laborers. Lodhas also supplement their income by collecting leaves of the Sal tree, drying them and selling articles of use like plates from these leaves. Tusser cocoon collection is an important avocation of the Lodhas of Nayagram, Gopiballavpur and Kesiari. Generally, the virgin forests of Sal and Asan trees are preferred for this type of cultivation. During summer months, a patch in the jungle is cleared, and a guard house (*Ghari-ghar*) is prepared with twigs and branches of the *Bhelwa* (*Semecarpus anacardium*) tree. According to Lodha belief, this tree has magical powers to counteract all evils which might destroy the tusser moths in their embryonic stage. A new earthen pot is placed in the hut with

the cocoons stored in it. Generally, tusser moths come out in the month of June, reproduce and lay eggs which are spread profusely on Asan and Sal trees. These cocoons are collected and boiled by the Lodhas and sold to the traders. This has been a profitable economic pursuit, yet the Lodhas are unfortunate as the trade has lost its fervor because of restrictions imposed over the years upon the use and exploitation of the forests. Lodhas live a life of crude adversity, and they engage themselves in multiple economic pursuits to meet the necessities of life.

## RELIGION

Religion is all pervasive in Lodha life. It acts as an opiate to dull the pain produced by extreme adversity. Living in the serene placidity of an emerald wilderness, Lodhas have religious norms which have evolved round nature. *Baram* is the tutelary deity of the Lodhas. *Baram*, the deity of the woods, is thought to be residing in a sacred grove. When the Lodhas move into the forest to cut wood they select a virgin grove, place a vessel of water at its bottom and worship *Baram* with heartfelt devotion. They proceed to cut wood after the lapse of an entire day after such worship. *Baram* is the deity of the woods, and the Lodhas perceive him to be possessed of great powers. The sacred groves of *Baram* are kept separate although the forest is being gradually cleared up. *Baram* has been the major deity of these people from the days of the remote past. Writing in the first decade of the preceding century, Ananga Mohan Mukherji, the Deputy Superintendent of Police, Criminal Investigation Department, records, 'Lodhas worship the forest god 'Baram' with the sacrifice of white fowls in the month of *Bhadra* prior to entering the jungle to procure a good supply of jungle produce.'<sup>1</sup> The Lodhas hold him with veneration till date. Being the chief deity of the woods, he is believed to appear in human form with long hair covering his body, holding a small ax in his hand. He is believed to ride a tiger or an elephant.<sup>2</sup> *Baram* is worshiped by the *Deheri* and *Talia* on the last day of the month of *Chaitra* (March-April) i.e., on *Chaitra Sankranti* and on the last day of the month of *Paus* (December - January) i.e., on *Makar Sankranti*. No festival can commence unless *Baram* has been invoked. Earthen elephants and horses are offered at the foot of his abode. He is propitiated with animal sacrifice, sweet meat and gruel made from milk, rice and sugar. Lodhas also worship *Chandi*, the goddess of the forest, who is supposed to protect the Lodhas from the attack of wild animals. She is worshipped as *Jai Chandi* in Pitalkanthi, *Bhaluka Chandi* in Kukai, *Baram Chandi* in Ma-Manasa and *Bhairabi* in Dahijuri. Lion is believed to be her favorite conveyance. *Chandi* generally resides in a tree amid the forest or by a solitary tree in the outskirts of the village. She is worshiped

on the day of *Chaitra Sankranti*, *Makar Sankranti* and occasionally during the *Jathel* festival celebrated in the month of *Ashar* (June - July) or *Kartik* (October - November). She is propitiated with earthen horses and elephants and animal sacrifice and sweetmeats. *Sitala* is the chief deity of the Lodhas. *Sitala* had her origin as savior from the virile disease of pox but 'later she graduated to an elevated position of the presiding village mother, the destroyer of all ills and evils'.<sup>3</sup> The deity resides in the shrine which is locally called the *Than* or *Maro*. *Sitala* is believed to have six sisters named after six epidemic diseases. When *Sitala* is worshiped all her sisters are invoked and prayed. She is propitiated with uncooked rice, sweets, fruits, milk and animal sacrifice. *Sitala* is generally worshiped in the month of *Chaitra* (March-April), *Vaishak* (April-May) and sometimes in the month of *Magh* (January - February) twice or thrice a year. Lodhas perform 'Chang' dance with their *changals* and invoke the goddess with utmost devotion. The worship is performed for three to five days. The ceremonial worship ends with the worship of *Yugini* at the outskirts of the village.

Lodhas feel that nature is pervaded and crowded with spiritual beings. They try to placate the supernatural spirits like *Yugini* with sacrifice and offerings. *Yugini* is the most dreaded of all spirits. She is one of the maids of goddess *Sitala*. It is believed that when *Sitala* is displeased, epidemic diseases like smallpox and cholera take a huge toll of life and *Yugini* retains the soul of the deceased. She is believed to 'relish the corpses of her victims being ever thirsty of human blood'. She is propitiated with elaborate worship and animal sacrifice on the last day of worship of goddess *Sitala*. *Kundra*, *Chirguni*, *Pretasani*, *Kalpurus*, *Baghoa* and *Gomua* are also believed to be vicious spirits. The souls of men and women who die an unnatural or accidental death are supposed to take the form of these spirits. They are placated with sacrifice of black goats, fowls and pigs. Some Lodhas are believed to possess occult power to counteract or exorcize evil spirits. They supposedly fight evil spirits and are known as *Gunni* or *Ojha*, the *Dain* or witch and the *Byakra* or shaman. The main function of the *Gunni* or *Ojha* is to cure diseases with the help of medicinal herbs. When required they apply magical spell to drive away evil spirits supposed to cause harm to the victim. Lodhas strongly believe in the evil influence of the so-called *Dains* or witches who can be both male and female. When 'discovered', they are seriously assaulted or excommunicated from the society. They are hated and feared throughout the Lodha society. Lodhas often wear amulets to avert the 'evil influence' of a witch. Every Lodha village has a shaman or *Byakra* - the spirit possessed man, who pass into trance while chanting the names of spirits and deities. They claim to cure people possessed by evil spirits. They



are said to get possessed by spirits and are seen to foretell impending incidents in the state of possession. The shaman runs from one place to another in the state of possession and he regains consciousness on being whipped by the Bailiff or a strong man by a whip made of Sabai grass. Shamans are thought to be specially favored by deities like *Sitala* and *Chandi*, yet they remain under systematic training from a preceptor prior to the initiation as the shaman of the village. Shamans are held in high esteem in the Lodha society. Magico-religious activities of Lodha life are directed towards the cure of diseases and removal of hurdles of life. With time, many, among the Lodhas have drifted away from these age-old traditional practices and have embraced modern methods of treatment yet they mostly believe in the efficacy of such practices.

### PERFORMING ARTS

*Chang*, an endangered folk art of Subarnarekha basin, forms the major form of traditional dance and music of the Lodhas. *Chang* is a unique expression of rhythm of life transformed into resonance by the flash of fleeting feet and measured beat of the *Changal* or the *Baikundali*. The *Changal* is made of a circular piece of wood of about one and a quarter foot in diameter, covered on the top with goat skin fixed on the rim with bamboo pegs. It is baked on fire to get it strung to a tune. *Chang* mostly centers around a chosen theme from the epic Ramayana or Mahabharata. *Chang* is performed by the male folk of the community. They dance in a great circle to the accompaniment of *Changals*. Although this is mainly performed on a day of festival, yet Lodhas arrange for a dance whenever they are in the best of their spirits in proximity to the shrine of Goddess *Sitala* or their tutelary deity *Baram*. They sing songs to invoke the deities at the time of worship. They also sing *baromashi* songs which depict the changes in mood and yearnings of a mythical hero or heroine during the changing seasons of a year. Lodhas feel proud in asserting themselves as *Savaras* claiming that they are the descendants of King *Visvabasu* - who once reigned over the jungle tract of the Savara country of *Nilachal* in Orissa. Many *Chang* songs centers round pensive mood of the departed pair *Lalita*, the daughter of *Visvabasu* and *Vidyapati*, the brahmin minister of King *Indradyumna*, who deserted *Lalita* assertively stealing *Nilmadhab*, the legendary deity of the *Savaras*. *Chang* is the spontaneous manifestation of some of life's finest sentiments through music and dance. This superb form of folk art has been losing its traditional fervor in recent years under the pressure of urbanization and cultural aggression. The Lodha youth should preserve this rich specimen of oral culture with relentless effort.



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## CRIMINALITY

The lodhas had been declared a Criminal Tribe in the year 1916 under the purview of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA). The CTA or the Act xxvii of 1871 declared that 'if the local government has reason to believe that any tribe, gang or class of persons is addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offenses, it may report the case to the Governor General in Council, and may request his permission to declare such tribe, gang or class to be a criminal tribe. The report shall state the reasons why such tribe, gang or class of persons is addicted to the systematic commission of nonbailable offences and as far as possible, the nature and the circumstances of the offences ...'<sup>4</sup> it was accepted that with these tribes crime was a hereditary trait or at least was habitual.<sup>5</sup> James Fitzjames Stephen, the Legal Member of the Governor General's Council, in advocating the bill which became the CTA of 1871, expressed that criminal tribe means a 'tribe whose ancestors were criminals from time immemorial, who are themselves destined by the usages of caste to commit crime, and whose descendants will be offenders against the law...'<sup>6</sup> It was felt by the British administrators that, as the caste system structured Indian society by organizing and assigning people into specific social and economic functions by their caste identity, likewise it would assign criminal behavior to its members. The Act of 1871 was amended by Act II of 1897. The passage of Act II of 1897 introduced the first major change in this law. It amended a section of the words 'tribe', 'gang' and 'class' to include 'any portion or members of a tribe, gang or class'. It also granted the local governments the right to establish a separate reformatory settlement for children under eighteen of parents specified as members of a criminal tribe. A new section reinforced the penalty for violation of the rules enforcing restricted movement of the members of the tribe. Hereafter, punishment for first conviction was one year, for second two years and thereafter three years, in addition to being liable to a harsh whipping. Further revisions were made by the Act III of 1911. The burden imposed by the original legislation on the local governments to provide settlement and livelihood for people identified as criminal tribes was removed, thus facilitating the extension of the law to many more groups. Instead of necessitating the assumption of the financial costs of creating special settlements, this amendment simply required criminal tribes to be kept under observation in their usual place of residence. The practice of taking fingerprints, a relatively new technique, was applied to criminal tribes and a register containing details of the person considered criminal was to be maintained with the authorities. The provisions of the Act were highly scattered and varied in different parts of the British controlled territories. The British Government brought a central legislation in

the year 1924 to consolidate the numerous provisions of the CTA. In 1947 modifications were made toning down the severity of the provisions of the Act. The Act was finally repealed in 1952.

The Lodhas of Midnapore had shown 'criminal propensities' from the second half of the nineteenth century. 'The criminality of the Lodhas has been traced in the years 1869 - 90, but their activity became particularly noticeable from 1892.' <sup>7</sup> File No : P3R-8-7-8, 1904, West Bengal State Archives, reveals that there had been an 'increase in dacoities in the Burdwan division due to Lodhas in the jungle tracts.' <sup>8</sup> In the beginning of the twentieth century the Lodhas proved to be highly troublesome in Midnapore. Reportedly, they armed themselves with swords, Lathis, and axes and carried off whatever they could lay their hands on. They caused injury and even death on resistance. They often took refuge in the jungle after the commission of a dacoity. They carried stones with them and used to fling them to keep off villagers during commission of dacoity. The modus operandi of the crime was 'simple and primitive in nature', committed without any preconceived plan, 'except in the case of a few habitual criminals of the tribe who acted in a planned manner.' <sup>9</sup> Lodhas committed robbery in a group of at least four persons on a highway, in a marketplace, a residence or a shop. On collection of a heavy booty, the Lodhas passed on the articles to receivers who were well to do persons of the village. The modus operandi had continued unabated over the decades. The houses attacked were cleared of all property, the inmates, at times, received injuries and in some cases the injuries resulted in death. Often more than one house was attacked, and not only houses, but shops on the road or boats in the canal were also targeted. In case of burglary, pilfering and theft, Lodhas went in batches or singly according to the risk involved. Lodhas were also often accused of petty offences like lifting fowl or goat or stealing wood from the jungle. The Lodhas were declared a criminal tribe on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1916. A Crime Register of the Lodhas was opened on 8th September 1916 in accordance with the provisions of Section iv of the CTA, 1911. In the said register, names of the Lodhas committing systematic crimes were entered and they were to be treated according to the provisions of the CTA. The field of operation of the Lodhas stretched across a wide area under the jurisdiction of the police stations of Danton, Debra, Gopiballavpur, Jhargram, Kesiari, Kharagpur, Midnapore, Naraingarh, Nayagram, Salboni, Sabang, Potashpur, Chakradharpur and Mayurbhanj. Their criminality was also traced in Assam where some of these people had migrated to work as tea garden labourers.<sup>10</sup> The Lodhas operated individually or as members of gangs when veteran Lodha

criminals planned, assembled and operated jointly and distributed the booties among themselves. A gang operated over a wide area and sometimes their area of operation covered a few police stations extending over more than a district. The Lodhas were cast into a life of gloom and frustration having been declared criminal under the CTA. The police took serious note of every movement of the registered members of the tribe. The officer-in-charge of a police station was competent to pay domiciliary visits at regular intervals to verify the presence of the registered members at home. A Special Staff was appointed for their surveillance in the district of Midnapore. The life and liberty of the registered members of the tribe were at stake as they became an object of regular surveillance and policing by the administration. Inclusion of a few members of the tribe in the Crime Register and conviction of the Lodhas in cases involving theft and dacoity confirmed the image of the Lodhas as habitual criminals in the village psyche. The brand of criminality segregated the Lodhas from the mainstream of the population and shoved them into a life of perpetual poverty and dejection.

## CONCLUSION

The 'criminality' of the Lodhas had been traced earlier but their activity became particularly noticeable from the last decade of the twentieth century. It had its origin in the harsh ecological history of the Jungle Mahals. Agricultural expansion and commercialisation of forest resources, in the wake of colonialism, deprived the Lodhas of their traditional means of livelihood. Subsequently, they were seen to live on the proceeds of criminal activities. They had not shifted to the agricultural economy as an alternative means of livelihood. Instead, they had continued to draw sustenance from the forests clinging to their traditional economy. The Lodhas could not shift to an agricultural economy as the agrarian order in southwest Bengal had been highly destabilized by the Tenancy Act of 1885 and the settlement operations in the initial phase of the twentieth century. Breakdown of the Mandali system, loss of 'zamindari paternalism' and conflict over ownership and customary rights on land had limited the scope of the agricultural economy which failed to be an accommodative alternative to the traditional economy of the Lodhas. Customary rights had been thwarted on land as well as in the forests in the wake of colonialism in southwest Bengal. The Lodhas had no alternative than to resort to 'criminal activities' for survival. Consequently, they were branded as criminals. Geographic conditions have drawn an apparent line that marks a contrast between eastern and western tracts of Midnapore. The lateritic tracts of West Midnapore are a zone of rainfed agriculture dependent on meagre

monsoon crop and degraded forest resources. Post-colonial development strategies have failed to affect the Lodhas of this region significantly. They live in sharp contrast to the Lodhas of the alluvial tracts of East Midnapore. The Lodhas of western Midnapore have been spectators to the development of their eastern counterparts who live relatively better, cultivating a fertile tract and responding to the development endeavors extended towards them by the State. The Lodhas of West Midnapore live near the forests depending significantly on its resource base. The Lodhas, segregated from the mainstream of the population by physical, cultural and territorial peculiarities, had been dislocated further by the CTA. They have lived with the identity of a 'criminal' which had subsumed their basic potentialities over the years. The CTA had been revoked in 1952. The brand of criminality imposed on the Lodhas has outlived colonialism. The stigma of criminality plagues them even today. Abject poverty, coupled with the stigma of criminality, has hindered the all-round development of the tribe. Effective development strategies and cooperation of the mainstream society would bring the Lodhas to the sphere of development in future and give them a significant place in the history of development of the State.

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