



Preservation of Cultural Identity through livelihood: A study among the Lodha Tribe of Mayurbhanj district in Odisha

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Abstract

The livelihood of Lodhas is interdependent to the canopy of resources as available in the nearby habitual niche. The community has a potent relationship with the nature as for example they considered Mahua tree or Madhuca Indica as a benevolent resource of both medicinal and economical benefits. The study tried to examine this relation of Lodha in Morada and Suliapada block of Mayurbhanj district with the forest in mitigating their livelihood aspects. The Lodhas are found to be attached with their traditional approach of livelihood pattern like hunting of small animal and gathering of minor forest products like medicinal roots, leaves, firewood, honey etc. All these activities are fortified from the forest resources. They also gain some economical benefits by selling these products in the weekly market. The Lodhas are also good craftsmen as they are skilled in making products like leaf plate, bamboo baskets and ropes from sabai grass. The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 may be stated as a motivating scheme for the Lodhas in providing them access to the forests. Still various factors like deforestation, restricted access to core areas of forest and forest clearance for developmental works had disrupted their dependence. The study tried to find out the relation between the traditional livelihood practises and cultural identity of the Lodhas in the research area. It has also discussed the reason of disruption in this relationship. The study advocated improvement in sectors like education, skill development, awareness and providing proper marketisation is the needed for a holistic development. This could also help in enhancing their existing cultural identity.

Keywords: Lodha, Livelihood, Forest Resources, Traditional Method, Cultural Identity

1. Introduction:

Lodha is predominantly segmented as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) by the Government of India. It is one of the most socially and economically marginalized and culturally indifferent community in eastern India. The Lodha is historically residing in the forest belt of Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. For their livelihood primarily they depend on the minor forest produce (MFP), subsistence agriculture and traditional craft. These things

not only bring their livelihood, but also became an integral part of their cultural identity. Lodha's day-to-day activities are characterized by their rich oral tradition, animistic belief system and deep ecological knowledge passed through generation. Seasonal acceptance and forest-based occupations such as the collection of *Mahua* flowers, medicinal plants and fire wood, rope making and leaf plate and bowl preparing became the source of their economic and also became a part of their community ritually and practices. These sources also mark their ethnic identity and collective memory. At the time of colonial rule, the Lodha community were criminalized under the criminal Tribes Act 1871, which further creates socio-political alienation. This leads poverty landlessness, limited acres to health care and education. Their livelihood also affected by deforestation, bureaucratic restriction and commercial exploitation of natural resources. Now national legislation like the Forest Right Act or FRA of 2006 has strengthened their livelihood security and also promoting cultural preservation. The livelihood and identity among tribal communities like the Lodhas are deeply interconnected. Despite all other policies, their success depends on the recognition of cultural specificity and the restoration of traditional ecological relationship.

It is thus necessary to analyse the preservation of their livelihood not only for economic purpose but also for their sustainability of indigenous knowledge system. The study seeks to explore the critical relationship between livelihood and identity among the Lodha community in the Moradabad and Suliapada blocks of Mayurbhanj district in Odisha. It had made an exploration to highlight how livelihood of the Lodhas which is far from being a mere survival strategy serves for identity preservation and community resilience in the face of economic transformation.

2. Literature review:

The connection between livelihood and identity particularly among indigenous and tribal communities has been significant among the scholars of various disciplines. The study based on several themes of tribal livelihood identity, forest-based economies and the impact of state policies. Similarly in their studies Beteille (1998) and Xaxa (2005) emphasize on the preservation of social customs, institutions and the traditional occupations like shifting cultivation, hunting-gathering and forest-based crafts. On the other hand Karlsson (2004) indicates that modernization plays an important role in the loss of community autonomy and cultural fragmentation. He advocated that the term development must be balanced with cultural preservation, which is now widely accepted within right based development discourse. There is close relation between the indigenous communities and forests. Gadgil and Guha (1955) in their study discuss how the forest dwellers have the idea about ecological knowledge which provides them to sustain in the adverse condition. It is clearly known from their knowledge about the use of medicinal plants, non timber forest products and water management techniques. Lodhas are completely dependent on forest products. It not only sustains their livelihood, but also gives them the economic stability with the communal participation and knowledge transmission (Nair, 2007).

However, deforestation and different forest policies have disrupted forest-based economies (Sarin et al., 2003) of the Lodhas. Forest Right Act, 2006 is considered as a landmark legislation that seeks to recognise the traditional rights of Scheduled Tribes and other forest dwellers over forest, land and resources. Studies by Sundar (2009) and Kashwan (2017) highlights how FRA offers opportunity to restore tribal autonomy, livelihood and sustainable governance. According to them FRA has been inconsistent

across the states. Despite of Odisha being procreative for tribal development through schemes such as Van Dhan Yojana and PVTG development schemes that aims to promote value addition of minor forest produce, has been delaying towards the recognition of Community Forest Rights (CFR) especially among PVTGs like the Lodhas.

Early ethnographers like Elwin (1943) had described the Lodhas as a forest dependent group with a unique cultural system and expressed dissatisfaction for being colonially classified as a criminal tribe. Pati & Dash (2002) and Panda (2012) highlighted the plight of the Lodhas of Odisha particularly in Mayurbhanj district by exploring their socio-economic marginality, low literacy levels and continued dependency on forest livelihoods. On the contrary working reports from SCSTRTI (2020) and OTDS (2021) had provide insights into Lodha development such as housing scheme, education initiatives and land distribution. But it has also highlighted the gap in community participation.

3. Objectives of the Study:

- To explore the various livelihood practices of the Lodha community
- To identify the relation of their livelihood and cultural identity
- To discuss the reason for disruption of this relation

4. Methodology:

The study based on both secondary data from various sources and primary data from field visits to Suliapada and Morada blocks of Mayurbhanj district. It comprises data as collected from the respondents through group discussions with Lodha household, local leaders, NGOs and other administrative officials.

5. Lodha and their Socio-Cultural Background:

Lodhas are one of the socially marginalised and historically stigmatised tribal communities in eastern India, primarily concentrated in the forest tracts of Mayurbhanj district of Odisha and parts of West Bengal. In Odisha they are recognised as a particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). This designation reflects their precarious demographic profile, limited access in literacy levels, economic instability and isolation from the main stream society. From their history we come to know that they were recognised as Criminal Tribes in the British colonial period. This label had devastating consequences subjecting the community to constant surveillance, forced resettlements and institutional discrimination. Even after independence the residual stigma continued to affect their social standing, access to land and integration into public field. In today's world, many of the Lodhas still inhabits in scattered forest edges and the margins of revenue villages. Their livelihood has also undergone a significant transformation due to deforestation and bureaucratic control. Some people of the Lodha community now engaged themselves in seasonal migration, non permanent works such as agricultural labourers, wage workers or minor forest produce collectors etc.

Socially Lodhas belongs to organised exogamous clans that determine their marriage alliances and inheritance practices. Though patrilineal by descent but rely on collective decision of clan leaders, particularly in matters of dispute, land use and rituals. Division of labour is observed by them, but only in forest-based collection where women play a central role. Culturally they are very vibrant which may be verified from their oral traditions like folk songs, proverbs and storytelling. They practice dances like *chhau* (as influenced by neighbouring communities) and seasonal festivals like *Mage Parab* or *Sarhul*. Rituals are

animistic with reverence for forest spirits, sacred groves, ancestral deities etc. The Mahua tree also plays an important role both in spiritual and economic concern of Lodha community. Lodha primarily depend on nature, so their religious beliefs are said to be called as nature centric, though some of them had adopted Hinduism in the course of time. Animistic cosmologies remain intact with the rituals performed by traditional priests or *Dehury*, who links the community to the spirit world.

Despite of their cultural strengths, the community is facing several vulnerabilities such as, high drop outs in education, low access to health services and land alienation. The young generation are found to be stranded between modern opportunities and their cultural tradition. With this context it may be understood as their livelihood practices are not merely an economic strategy but have cultural lifelines through preserving tradition knowledge and asserting identity in this rapid changing world. A deeper understanding and approach are essential for regulating the policies and development programs that are both inclusive and culturally respectful.

6. Livelihood Patterns of Lodhas and their Cultural Significance:

The Lodhas mostly follows traditional form of livelihood sustaining activities which revolves around the nature and natural habitat they are confined with. It is both associated to their economical and cultural belief system. The association of their livelihood aspects its relevance to their culture has been discussed in the study.

6.1. Minor Forest Produce (MFP) Collection

Lodha one of the PVTGs of Odisha purely depends on minor forest produces for their livelihood. Minor forest produce collection constitutes a cornerstone of their life. They rely heavily on the seasonal availability of non-timber forest product both for their economic and livelihood stability. Key ingredient of forest products gathered by the Lodhas include *Mahua* flower and its seed, firewood, leaves of *sal* and *siali* for plate-making, medicinal roots, and herbs, wild tubers, fruits and honey. These resources are consumed and sold in the local market. Among these products, *Mahua*, holds a unique place in the life of a Lodha. Both women and children gather the *Mahua* flower early in the morning which is then dried in their house front or backyard. It is then fermented and traditional liquor is thus prepared from it. This quasi-alcoholic beverage is consumed in their rituals and social gatherings. The collection and use of *Mahua* not only related to economic activities, but it also reinforces their identity. The *Mahua* flowering period also coincides with their local festival, such as *chaita parab*. The *Mahua* liquor and *Mahua* garlands are offered to the ancestors and the local deities. Unique *Mahua Sal* and *Sial* leaves are also wildy used by the community. They skilful tie the leaves into eco-friendly plate and bowl. It is not gender or age specific as both women and children are engaged in this work. They gather together and sang folk songs during this process which shows their social solidarity. Apart from these they are also dependent on many herbs and use them as medicine. Certain herbs are used to treat fevers, wounds, digestive issues, snake bite and other ailments.

This dependency of Lodhas on forest is now under threat because of deforestation and modern approach for development. The decline of forest now forcing many Lodhas to engaged as wage labourer. As MFP collection is considered to be the pillar of Lodhas identity, initiatives like forest rights and fair market access is needed for their economic empowerment and also for preserving their cultural heritage.

6.2. Agriculture and Wage Labor

For the Lodhas of Odisha, agriculture forms the bedrock of their traditional livelihood system which is tied to their cultural identity and ecological knowledge. The staple crops cultivated by the Lodha include paddy, millets, pulses and a variety of seasonal vegetables. However, the sustainability of agriculture as a primary livelihood source is severely constrained by a range of structural and environmental challenges. A socio-economic survey conducted by SCSTRTI (2018) among Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in Odisha, including the Lodhas, revealed the following status of agricultural assets and productivity.

Indicator	Percentage / Value
➤ Households engaged in agriculture	: 76.4%
➤ Households with less than 1 acre of land	: 58.7%
➤ Households without irrigation facilities	: 83.5%
➤ Main crops cultivated	: Paddy (82%), Millets (46%), Pulses (33%)
➤ Use of improved seeds or fertilizers	: 17.9%
➤ Access to institutional agricultural credit	: 11.4%

Source: Field study

The above information gives an idea that Lodhas are migrated and undertaken employment in sectors such as building construction, bricks kiln, road building and tea plantation as wage labour. The traditional independent form of livelihood has taken the form of permanent and dependent job. The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO, 2019) and local micro-project data highlight the increasing dependence on wage labour among Lodhas.

Employment Category	Percentage
Dependent solely on agriculture	29.6%
Agriculture + wage labor (mixed livelihood)	52.1%
Solely dependent on wage labor	18.3%
Average annual migration days per worker	84 days/year

Source: NSSO, India

Agriculture and wage labour provides both resilience and risk. Despite all of these things the Lodhas continue to practice collective farming rituals like *Muthi* (group showing) and preserved handloom seeds which signified cultural continuity. So far Lodha’s livelihood activities of both agriculture and wage labour are not opposing forces but interconnected aspects of their survival as in this modern world the preservation of identity and economic survival is necessary in a greater context.

6.3. Craft and Rope Making

Among the Lodha tribe of Mayurbhanj, traditional crafts such as rope-making, broom-making and the preparation of bamboo and *sabai* grass products serve as more than just

auxiliary income-generating activities. These are the prime factory of cultural knowledge, artisans’ skill and community flexibility. Traditionally Lotha people engage themselves with the household object making out of forest-based materials such as sabai grass, bamboo, tree barks, fibers. They also use these items as local barter.

Especially, rope-making and basket making has been a gender base skill passed down through generations. Women members of this community often prepare the fibres into ropes and twine, while male member cooperate in the collection in the collection of raw materials from the forest. Making of brooms from date palm and wild grass and weaving different shape of baskets and fencing panels, shows the community's ecological adaptation and depth knowledge of the forest landscape. The tools and techniques used are simple and efficient adapted from the indigenous understanding of material properties and sustainability.

Use of sabai grass became more in those days in the areas of Mayurbhanj. It also holds a significant potential for economic upliftment. In past they made sabai grass produces for local market and traders, particularly in areas like Suliapada and Morada blocks. But now-a-days the crafts are somehow declining due to several factors such as:

- ❖ Diminished access to forest resources due to stricter forest regulations.
- ❖ Lack of organized market linkages and fair pricing.
- ❖ Competition from factory-made synthetic alternatives.
- ❖ Absence of design innovation and skill up-gradation support.
- ❖ Declining interest of younger generations in traditional occupations.

Despite these challenges, these artisanal practices continue to serve as identity markers, representing not only the manual dexterity of the Lodhas but also their implantation to the local ecology and social memory. In spite of the income source, Lodha members still continue these activities during agricultural leisurely hour and also in community gathering, which shows their cultural integrity.

Date from field survey shows:

Craft Activity	% of Lodha Households Involved	Primary Material Used	Season of Activity
Rope-making (Sabai/Bark fiber)	32.5%	Sabai grass, bark fiber	Post-harvest (Nov-Feb)
Broom-making	27.8%	Date palm leaves, wild grass	Throughout the year
Bamboo craft	18.4%	Bamboo, cane	Monsoon and post-monsoon
Forest fiber collection	42.7%	Roots, bark, climbers	Pre-monsoon

Source: Compiled by authors from field study

In comparison to their cultural significance, the economy returns from their craft activities remain modest. These craft items are often featured particularly in community events, festival and household rituals, which correlates a link between their livelihood practices and cultural heritage: several NGOs and Government agencies like the SCSTRTI take interest to revive their traditional crafts through training, design inputs etc. which support their sustenance.

Rope-making and craft making among the Lodhas community indicates their traditional knowledge in which they can preserve their identity in the face of socio-economic position. The continuity of these practices although in diminished forms, reveals the community's adaptive strategies to maintain cultural self cultural affection while doing the changing livelihood realities.

7. Disruption of Traditional Livelihoods:

The past livelihood practices of the Lodha community in Mayurbhanj have undergone a significant change in the past few decades. These disruptions not only affect the economic factor, but also deeply the socio-cultural and the very foundation of Lodha identity, communal fellow feeling and the intergenerational knowledge transmission. In those days the member of lodha community depend on the mixed livelihood community which includes shifting cultivation, rain-fed agriculture, forest-based produces, rope and broom making, hunting and fishing etc. These activities are now-a-days limited in seasonal rhythm, ecological knowledge and ritual practices. However, the influence of external pressure from ecological, legal, political and economical means has deeply undermined their integration and progressive livelihood ways.

7.1 Key Drivers of Livelihood Disruption

Factor	Impact on Lodha Livelihoods and Identity
Deforestation and Plantation for business purpose	Deflation access to forest has limited the availability of foods, medicinal plants and craft items
Protected Areas and Legal Restrictions	Shrinking on accessing forest produces, which have criminalized traditional gathering
Encroachment and Land Alienation	Made limited agricultural land holding
Industrial Projects and Infrastructure Expansion	Environmental degradation: fragmentation of community placement
Collapse of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) Economy	Few and loss of income from forest produces due to low price, monopoly of middlemen and more harvesting in comparing the necessity
Climate Variability and Rainfall Uncertainty	Limitation and failure in rainfed agriculture, seasonal migration and unwilling labour

Source: Compiled by authors from Field data

In this way, the Lodha tribal community has faced a forced transition and culturally grounded livelihood to limited, wage labour and found often under exploitation and insecure condition. This has a profound consequence such as:

- **Migration and family separation:** Seasonal migration, construction work and urban centers disrupt family like, which also affects children's education and cultural emotions.
- **Despoliation of Traditional knowledge:** The decreasing practices like herbal medicine, forest produces, rope mating and indigenous agriculture have led a generation gap in transmitting the knowledge.

- **Dependency on external sources:** In spite of depending the forest and land, Lodha member also deeply depends on Government schemes which are often inconsistent and poorly fulfilled or difficult to access.
- **Mislaying the identity:** - Past livelihood economic, but covered with full of rituals, festivals and kinship practices. Now this has taken a type of erosion of communal identity.

It has been studied by the SCSTRTI (2018) that because of the restrictions under forest protection laws and commercial encroachment, 67% of lodha household shifted to daily, while less than 25% still do agriculture as their livelihood. Forest collection, which was once the backbone of their sustenance now dropped to below 15%.

7.2 Consequences for Identity Preservation

The attrition of traditional livelihood threatens not only the economic situation of the Lodhas, but also their cultural survival. In the past livelihood practices have functional as living expressions of identity through the agriculture, the forest ecology, gender discrimination and the making of crafts, tools and food habits, with the erosion of these systems, the younger generation grow up without or with a little knowledge of tribal values, customs and the way of life. Sarcastically, the Lodhas are classified as one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTGs) by the Govt. of India these intend their protection such as forest, conservation laws, reallocation for development and the badly implemented rehabilitation programs which have contributed to their economic marginalization and cultural disintegration.

8. Conclusion:

Lodha livelihood is far more than the system of economic survival. They are the living embodies of cultural identity, spirituality, tradition, ecological balance and social integrity. Their way of agriculture, collecting medicinal herbs, turning sabai grass into rope, weaving bamboo basket and many daily use things show their ancestral knowledge and legacy of generation. This shows their cultural expresses. Their communal work, agricultural festivals and forest rituals have part of a larger worldview in which in which livelihood is connected with meaning dignity and belonging. However now their life style is thread with a lot of adoptive systems. Deforestation, industrial encroachment and the commoditisation of natural resources have slowly eroded the lodha subsistence laws on forest access and the commercial plantations have created a gap between the tribe from territorial. Land alienation has also left lodha families landless and confined to poor and productive polts in many areas. So, preserving lodha identity is not just about the economic restoration, but finding worldview, integrating cultural memory and restoring community agencies. It is true the empowerment lies not in assimilation, but in the affiliation of identity. They should be nurtured with root heritage, environmentally sustainable and socially communally inclusive from the story of lodha people it is found that livelihood is not just earning or living, but preserving a way of being. Protecting and preserving these traditional systems is not an act of justice, but an act of vision. In doing the preservation, we uphold the rights of tribal communities and also owners the balance with nature and cultural plurality.

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