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## **HOW THE LODHAS BECAME CRIMINAL OR MEETING OF THE PAST AND THE PRESENT**

### **Introduction**

The image of criminality imposed on a community does not only exist in the ethnographic present but it also has an archival past, a history and that history continues down to the present. My student Santanu and I began from the 'ethnographic present' among the Lodhas, as field anthropologists and gradually I realised that there is a link between the past and the present. Pages of archive matched with recent happenings and the present plight of the community. In India communities rather than individuals matter much. The Rajputs and Punjabis are regarded as brave people who fought wars and battles with the Mughals and British and they are still regarded as brave communities and although they killed many people, they were never designated by the colonial administration as 'Criminal Communities' probably because they were not poor gatherer-hunters and marginalised like the Lodhas.

Under this general background, I will specifically explore into the creation of the image of criminality and its other connotations that were imposed upon the Lodhas by the hegemonic colonial State power and the continuation of its legacy during the post-colonial period. The image of the Lodhas as a criminal tribe has many connotations. For example, the notion that the Lodhas can never become good agriculturists and lead a sedentary life since they were nomadic or semi-nomadic gatherer-hunters. (Chaudhuri, 2004). Another notion is about the world view and psychology of the Lodhas. They are regarded as people who suffer from frustration and extreme forms of timidity combined with criminal propensities.(Bhowmick, 1981). So, whenever governmental or other kinds of initiatives to improve the living conditions of the Lodhas failed the blame was put on the habits of the Lodhas. Anthropological studies on Lodhas have also helped to perpetuate the negative image of the Lodhas which got easily stereotyped. The fact that the Lodhas were first categorised as a 'Denotified' community meant that they were formerly regarded as 'Criminal' and then the community was further classified as a "Primitive Tribal Group" reconfirmed their lowest position among the scheduled tribes of India. In the absence of any systematic field survey and

historical research on the Lodhas now living in a variety of ecological conditions the stigmatised image of the community achieved a kind of generalised textbook homogeneity. Some of the empirical findings have however, thrown challenges to this generalised image of the Lodhas as 'Criminal', 'Denotified' and 'Primitive' community.

Accordingly, in the first part of the paper, I will start with two case studies on how the Lodhas were viewed and treated by the administration in West Bengal. In the second part I will trace the origins of the image of criminality in the colonial period and its continuation in the post-colonial period. In the third part I will briefly describe the governmental efforts and their failures to improve the living conditions of the Lodhas. The fourth part of my paper is a narrative of the empirical findings which challenged the negative and stigmatised image of the Lodhas created by the British administrators and perpetuated by the anthropologists and the government in the post-colonial period.

## PART I

### **The story of Budhan Sabar: the first case**

Budhan, a 28-year-old from Akarbaid village in Purulia,<sup>1</sup> one of the poorest districts in West Bengal, was arrested on 10 February 1998. He was a member of the 'Denotified Tribe' named 'Kheria Sabar' (also known as Lodhas<sup>2</sup> in West Bengal) and was arrested by police and brutally tortured within the police custody for seven days and he died in custody. The police however reported that he committed suicide by hanging himself in the lock-up. Later, Paschim Bangya Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti, a civil rights organization filed a writ petition in Calcutta High Court against the police (Writ Petition No.3715 dated 1998) and it was revealed that Budhan was killed by police torture. (*Amnesty International Report*, 2001:24). Ganesh Devy, a litterateur and social activist vividly narrated the case of the death of Budhan Sabar in police custody in February, 1998. (Devy 2000: 53-55). Justice Rama Pal of the Calcutta High Court rejected the police story in the judgment delivered and ordered the State Government to pay compensations of Rs. 80,000/- to his wife and Rs. 5,000/- to his parents. The judgment also directed the State to punish the Jail Superintendent of Purulia and the officer in-charge of Burrabazar police station.

### **The death of the Lodhas in Amalazole: the second case**

In 2004, an awful incident occurred among the Lodhas during the Left Front Government<sup>3</sup> regime at Amlazole village in Paschim (West) Medinipur District. Media reported the starvation death of five Lodha-Sabar in a village named Amlazole in Binpur II in Paschim (West) Medinipur in the year 2004. Later, these deaths of Lodha-Sabar individuals owing to hunger and

malnutrition raised an uproar in West Bengal Assembly. At that time the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mr. Buddhadev Bhattacharjee, did accept that 'conditions of starvation' existed not only in Amlasole but in many other villages although his party remained convinced that the deaths were due to disease caused by malnutrition and lack of basic medical care. The communist led State Government denied that lack of food could have led to the death of the individuals of this marginalized ethnic group. The Government sent a medical team which concluded that the deaths occurred among the Lodhas owing to their excess consumption of illicit liquor and incidence of diseases like tuberculosis, jaundice and malaria. The disturbing fact however remained that the area where the Lodhas died did not have any road connectivity, proper health care delivery system and the governmental food distribution system through Public Distribution Shop was in a very poor condition. (*Economic and Political Weekly* 2004:2541). A vivid firsthand account of the District Magistrate, Mr. Chandan Sinha also matched with the EPW report. In addition Mr. Sinha concluded:

....Amlasole became a metaphor for starvation deaths in rural India, of extreme deprivation, of neglect. Yet, most of those who trained their cameras or pens on Amlasole or distributed 'relief' to the people, did not attempt to explore the causes underlying the predicament of the people of the area. (Sinha, 2013:43).

The deaths of Lodha/Sabar individuals owing to hunger and malnutrition in Amlasole in Binpur II in Paschim (West) Medinipur raised a furore in West Bengal few years back. The then Chief Minister of West Bengal had to order an inquiry by the government officials and it revealed the wretched living condition of this marginalized scheduled tribe of West Bengal. The episode also revealed another important fact. The Chief Minister himself stated in the media that there are many villages like Amlasole in the region and we have to take step towards the overall development of the region. In fact recent studies of biological anthropologists revealed poor nutritional condition of Lodha children in Paschim (west) Medinipur district. (Bisai et.al. 2008a: 323-329; 2008b: 203-206; 2008c: 117-121 & 2014:13-21). This region later turned into a battlefield and according to media and police reports the Maoist groups formed their stronghold in this region. Intellectuals and celebrities from Kolkata have visited this region and declared that the utter lack of development is the main cause of people's wrath against the Government and ruling party functionaries in this region.

## PART II

### **The present has a past: the image of criminality in colonial India**

The two incidents narrated above are not isolated. They have a history. The history is the story of exploitation, marginalization, human rights violation, social exclusion and policy failures on part of the governments to deliver social

and economic justice to a group of voiceless people who were categorized by the colonial Government as ‘Criminal Tribe’ and then by the Independent Government as ‘Denotified’ and ‘Primitive Tribal Group’. Does ‘social harmony’ and ‘inclusive development’ bear significant meaning without the inclusion of this ethnic minority in the mainstream of a democratic country? Before we address this question, one should travel in space and time about the Lodha-Sabars. Who are they? How do they live and survive? Virtually, no recent empirical study exists on the survival strategies of this most marginalized community of the state, let alone concrete plans for their overall improvement in terms of socio-economic development. Surely, the Lodhas of West Bengal is one such community which has a long history of marginalization and oppression by the state and the dominant communities and they also have a history of demarginalization which had started in the post colonial period by the efforts of the state and non-state actors as well as the members of the community themselves.<sup>4</sup>

In a recent article “The ‘Criminal Tribe’ in India before the British” anthropologist Anastasia Piliavsky challenges the broad consensus in current historiography, which holds the Indian stereotype of criminal tribe to be a myth of colonial making. Drawing on a selection of pre-colonial descriptions of robber castes (ancient legal texts and folk tales; Jain, Buddhist and Brahmanic narratives; Mughal sources; and Early Modern European travel accounts), she argued that the idea of castes of congenital robbers was not a British import, but a label of much older vintage on the subcontinent. According to Piliavsky while colonial uses of the idea of a criminal tribe comprises a lurid history of violence against communities branded as born criminals in British law, the stereotype itself has indigenous roots.(Piliavsky 2015: 323–354).

The Criminal Tribes Act dates back to various successive pieces of legislation enforced in India during British rule. The legislation was first enacted in 1871 as the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 which applied mostly in North India. The Act was extended to Bengal Presidency and other areas in 1876, and, finally, with the Criminal Tribes Act, 1911, it was extended to Madras Presidency as well. The Act went through several amendments in the next decade and, finally, the Criminal Tribes Act, 1924 was enacted incorporating all the aforementioned provinces. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criminal\\_Tribes\\_Act](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criminal_Tribes_Act)). Interestingly, in an article entitled ‘The Criminal Tribes of India’ published in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* in 1923, a retired British administrative officer Frederick de L. Booth Tucker wrote:

Crime in most countries is committed by individuals, in India usually by tribes, communities and gangs, who are highly organised and trained in it from childhood as a profession. The entire family and the relatives of an Indian criminal, including the women and children, are usually associated with him in the commission of crime. It is looked upon by these tribes very much as we regard the military profession, and is considered to be both honourable and lucrative. (Tucker 1923:158-168).

According to Tucker, there were 18 settlements of criminal tribes and in the then Bengal Presidency there was only one such settlement and the community which was recorded by him as criminal was not the Lodhas but 'Karwal Nats'. Moreover he stated in the same article that most of the families in those settlements were found to practice agriculture combined with petty commodity production and the rest were engaged in industrial occupations. Tucker's description does not fit to the traditional occupation of the Lodhas practicing hunting gathering as was reported by the anthropologists much later. The question is how the Lodhas were included under the Criminal Tribe category and brought under the purview of the Criminal Tribes Act, 1911?

In the same volume of the journal published after five months, another British police official, L.P.Faulkner, in his correspondence in connection with a remark made by Sir Edward Henry in the discussion on Commissioner Booth Tucker's paper dealing with Criminal Tribes Act observed:

The chief motive of the Act is to save criminal tribes from themselves; to reform and to reclaim them, so far as is humanly possible. The Act, as it stands, supplies to the criminal classes a method by which they may be able to improve themselves and to lead decent lives. To the general public it affords a scheme of protection while it places at the disposal of the police a lawful means for keeping potential criminals under proper supervision (Faulkner 1923: 449).

Faulkner in the conclusion of his correspondence mentioned how the Lodhas of the then Bengal Presidency might have been designated as a Criminal Tribe by the local administration who were empowered by the law to declare a whole tribe as criminal if a section of the community were found to commit certain non-bailable offences. We should quote Faulkner:

If only a part of the tribe is addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences, then only that part of the tribe may be declared a criminal tribe for the purposes of the Act. This was, to my knowledge, done in the case of certain gangs of the tribe of Lodhas in the district of Midnapur. (Ibid).

The above exchange between the two experienced British officials revealed the truth that the Lodhas as a community were not initially included under the designation of a criminal tribe at least like the other communities of India but some members of the community were definitely declared as 'Criminal' as early as the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> Century and then by the immense scope of the law and the discretion of the British officials the whole community was classified as a Criminal Tribe. Be that as it may, one thing was clear in the basic premise of the Criminal Tribe Act. The premise was clearly explicated in the first quote from Booth Tucker's article wherein he opined that crime in India was committed by '*tribes, communities and gangs*' who were '*trained in it from childhood as a profession*' and they regarded crimes '*to be both honourable and lucrative*' profession like the westerners who viewed military profession as admirable. (Author's emphasis).

The discourse on the criminal tribes in anthropology continued at a more intensive level by an anthropologist of West Bengal, Probodh Kumar Bhowmick, who studied the Lodhas and also carried out action anthropological research for nearly four decades beginning from late fifties. Bhowmick's findings on the predicament of the Lodhas in West Bengal bear many similarities with the discourse initiated by Kapadia. In one of his remarkable publications in the journal of the *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* Bhowmick identified a set of socio-cultural processes which shaped the miserable condition and personality of the Lodhas, who were designated as a 'Criminal Tribe' and later put under the 'Denotified' category after the Independence of India. According to Bhowmick the economic and territorial displacement, societal oppression, chronic poverty and hunger made the Lodhas more marginalized. In his words

All these together have made the Lodhas isolated recoiling into the shell of their old tradition. They suffer from an excessive coyness, timidly and distrust. Without even a rudimentary education and with no skill in any craft or art, no land in their possession and no fixed employment, the Lodhas were compelled to live below the poverty line and to indulge in spurts of extra-legal activities whenever hunger compelled them to go against the wider society. (Bhowmick 1981).

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 predicaments of the Lodhas in a vivid manner. Referring to a Police report Gupta in his book *Essays in Economic Anthropology* narrated

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).

### PART III

#### **From criminal to denotified tribe: the post-colonial story**

After the Independence, about 153 communities in India who were designated as 'Criminal Tribes' by the British colonial administration were redesignated as 'Denotified tribes'. In West Bengal, Lodhas are mainly concentrated in the districts of Paschim (West) Medinipur and Purba (East) Medinipur. In the first Census of India after Independence the Lodhas were recorded as a scheduled caste and their total population was returned to be 8,346 only in West Bengal (Mitra 1953: 89). According to the Census of 1951

the Lodhas were found to be distributed in the districts of Burdwan, Birbhum, Bankura, Midnapore, Hooghly, Howrah, 24 Parganas, Calcutta, Murshidabad and Jalpaiguri. In 1951, they were not found in the North Bengal districts like Nadia, Maldah, West Dinajpur, Darjeeling and Cooch Behar. In the same Census the total number of Lodhas in erstwhile Midnapore was 7040, that is 84.35 percent of the then total population of Lodhas in West Bengal. (Ibid: 89-90).

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).

In the post-Independence period the 'Ex-criminal' and 'Denotified' Lodhas also suffered extreme humiliation and human rights violation not only from the higher Hindu castes but also from the Santals, the dominant tribe of the region. The anthropologist, Probohd Bhowmick in one of his articles narrated how the Lodhas in the bank of river Subarnarekha in erstwhile Midnapore district were chased and finally thirty-nine of them were brutally beheaded and the rest were taken to the custody of the killers in September 1979. (Bhowmick, 1981:6). In the same article he reported that in an earlier incident in 1968 the houses of eighteen Lodha villages were burned by the Santals (Ibid, 1981: 6). Lodhas were attacked on charges of some criminal activities by the Santals. In this connection it is relevant to quote Bhowmick's comments who spent his lifetime in conducting participatory fieldwork among the Lodhas. We quote him:

My observation on the Lodhas, an ex-criminal group of people of West Bengal suggests that territorial and economic displacement, with poor adaptability of the group to the fast changing situations, generated criminal propensities in a group, particularly when there are environmental circumstances favourable for such crimes, with concomitant looseness of the grip of the administration. (Bhowmick 1990:57).

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 create resentment among the Santal which sometime



leads to attack on the former and the coercive action by the administration cause among the Lodhas a kind of 'psychic persecution producing a disastrous effect on their social behaviour'. (Chaudhuri 1987: 1851-1852).

The famous litterateur and social activist Mahasweta Devi reported in her 1983 article published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 'Lodha killing is a regular feature in West Bengal' and she enumerated the killing of thirty four Lodhas in West Bengal from 1979-1982. (Devi 1983: 947).

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 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 of them could be made. (Bhowmick 1985: 17). Bhowmick also reported that various types of developmental initiatives had been undertaken by the Government and some non-governmental organizations to settle the Lodhas for leading a sedentary agricultural life. In 1950s a rehabilitation project was taken up on an experimental basis for the Lodha families at Daharpur of Narayangarh block in erstwhile Medinipur district. This project included development inputs like house building, land purchase, land recovery, supply of domestic and agricultural training to be imparted to the Lodhas for their resettlement. But this developmental programme could not be implemented in the aforesaid area owing to some serious difference of opinion among the organisers and social scientists associated with that project (Bhowmick 1981: 7).

The Government of Independent India repealed the Criminal Tribes Act in 1952. Even after denotification as criminal tribes, the Lodhas continue to suffer from the social stigma and the non-tribal neighbours still behave unsympathetically towards them. Over the decades, the Lodhas gradually changed their occupation from hunting gathering to agriculture as an alternative means of livelihood owing to deforestation. (Danda 2002:110-111).

In the post-Independence period the main aim of the Government was to put off the stigma of criminal tribe designation of the Lodhas. At the same time the Government also wanted to uplift the socio-economic condition of this tribe who mainly depended on forest produce and daily labour. After the sixties, the Lodhas were included under the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes along with 19 communities of West Bengal (<https://www.indianfolklore.org/journals/index.php/Mukt/.../134> 2012).

The Central Government had taken special initiatives for improving the living condition of the Lodhas by providing facilities for housing, agriculture, cottage industries and education through Ashram Hostel from



the primary level (Bhowmick 1985: 15). But the traditional life of the Lodhas has not changed much. Still they are dependent on forest produce collection and hunting some jungle animals for livelihood. (Bhowmick 1963: 26).

In the recent period some members of the minority ethnic group, that is Lodha/Kheria/Sabar however got themselves educated and began to enter the modern institutions located in the urban and semi-urban areas of West Bengal. But even within the modern institutions they were found to be marginalized and faced discriminations of various kinds. A notable example is the case of the first Lodha graduate named Chuni Kotal<sup>5</sup> who was a girl hailing from a very poor and uneducated Lodha family in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal. Chuni committed suicide on 16th August, 1992 in Medinipur. She was a student of the Anthropology Department of Vidyasagar University. She alleged that a teacher of the Anthropology Department belonging to the majority community (a high caste Brahmin) used to harass and insult her by mentioning her low origin. The West Bengal Government constituted a one man enquiry committee by a retired judge of the Calcutta High Court which acquitted the teacher. (*Report of the Ganguly Commission of Enquiry 1992*).<sup>6</sup> The suicide of Chuni created uproar in the media and the political circles which reappeared time and again in the academic literature (Bhattacharjjo, 1992; Chanda, 2005: 130-141; Devi, 1992: 1836-1837; *Economic and Political Weekly* 1992:1769-1770).

### **From 'Denotified' to 'Primitive Tribal Group'**

Still later, since 1971, the Lodhas were redesignated as one of the 'Primitive Tribal Groups'<sup>7</sup> (PTGs) of India, another governmental category. (Verma 1990: 277). Special funds have been sanctioned by the government to organize a Development Cell under the Project Officer & Backward Class Welfare Officer (PO & BCW) of the state government. (Bhowmick 1985: 14).

Through the Cell (PO & BCW) Government has delivered various types of development inputs for strengthening the socio-economic condition of this marginalized community. Another important component of the governmental perspective centering round the development of the Lodhas was to settle this tribe as an agriculturist population.

The *District Human Development Report: Paschim Medinipur* (DHDR) published by the Government of West Bengal in 2011 devoted a long section on the Lodhas in which we find a good description of the poor socio-economic condition of the tribe in an historical perspective. The report concluded that even after Independence the marginalised condition of the Lodhas in Paschim Medinipur and other adjoining places has not improved appreciably. The report revealed that the government regarded the Lodhas as a kind of primitive and displaced group of people who needed rehabilitation within the fold of an

agricultural economy. In the report it was admitted that the governmental efforts towards the development of the tribe largely failed. To quote

... [T] he Government came forward to do welfare work in the form of house construction, goat-rearing, etc. But all these efforts ended in a fiasco and became the butt of criticism. Then, these groups of people were treated as Primitive Tribal Groups(1979) when special assistance was given and Lodha cell under the I.T.D.P. was constituted for utilizing funds profitably through the blocks, headed by a project officer located at Jhargram(*District Human Development Report: Paschim Medinipur 2011:234*).

The DHDR however did not contain any description or assessment on the utilization of the development assistance given to the Lodhas of Paschim Medinipur district.

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. 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. More than 80% of them follow Hinduism with traditional belief in spirits and nature (Mandal *et al.* 2002:32).

At present the Lodhas do not live exclusively in the forest covered areas, but have spread out in other deforested regions and are found to work there as agricultural and non-agricultural labourers. But their main economy is still based on collection of minor forest products, such as leaves for preparing leaf-plates for sale.<sup>8</sup> According to Bhowmick, the Lodhas were found to collect edible roots and fruits for household consumption and sell the surplus in the local markets. They are also found to be engaged in the collection of tussore cocoons and sell them in the market for cash. Lodhas also catch snakes and lizards and sell their hides and consume the flesh of these animals. They also catch fish and tortoises from the water bodies for domestic consumption as well as for sale. (Bhowmick 1981: 6).

#### PART IV

The anthropological discourse on criminal tribes can be traced back to an article by K.M. Kapadia published in *Sociological Bulletin* as early as 1952, the year in which the criminal tribe act was abolished and the former 'Criminal Tribes' were put under the new governmental category named 'Denotified Tribe'. In the pioneering article Kapadia thoroughly criticized the rationale of the colonial administrators in support of the promulgation of the Criminal Tribes Act. We quote him:

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).

In the rest of his paper, Kapadia went on to show how the different layers of the government and police administration along with the elites of the society used the Criminal Tribes Act which through various direct and indirect consequences marginalized and sometime aggravated criminal activities among the members of the so called 'Criminal Tribes and Castes'. Kapadia, however, did not mention about the Lodhas although the socio-political process of marginalization of the 'Criminal Tribes' in other parts of India bear many similarities with the Lodhas.

### ***Glows in the Darkness***

An important observer of the marginalised condition of the Lodhas in West Bengal is Mahasveta Devi. She not only wrote on the abject poverty and exploitation of the Lodhas, but also worked for decades to fulfill the various demands of the community as regards 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. Mahasveta Devi herself also wrote a number of articles in Bengali and English in which she depicted the ground realities regarding the problems of the implementation of development inputs and schemes among the Lodhas. In one of her articles published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1983, Mahasveta 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. In the article Mahasveta Devi categorically pointed out

Usually the schemes are made by people not knowing or caring to know what the tribal really need. The plan is then, after the usual procedures, left to the contractor.... I have seen contractor- made construction works meant for the Lodhas. It is better to make specious earthen huts. With a structure of cement, brick and sand, the inevitable contractor is bound to enter the scene. To whose benefit? Not the Lodhas'. Over three decades, huge sums have been spent in the name of the Lodhas and the community has gone much below the poverty lines. (Devi 1983:948).

Mahasveta Devi's 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 her, 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 another 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 Chuni Kotal. 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).

Various types of development schemes have been implemented among the Lodhas since Independence. In 1954, both West Bengal and the Central Governments jointly made attempts to improve the economic condition of a group of fifty Lodha families at Alugeria under the police station of Jhargram in erstwhile Medinipur district through the Bengal Branch of the Gandhite *Harijan Sabak Sangha*, a voluntary organisation. A sum of Rs. 1500/- per family was allotted under various heads of expenditure, such as house purchase, purchase of bullocks, goats and agricultural implements. After some period, this scheme had failed for lack of proper planning and execution. Later, the state Government entrusted the work to the *Bharat Savashram Sangha* another all-India voluntary organisation, who undertook a rehabilitation scheme at Dholkat village under the police station of Jhargram. The Sangha authorities selected a site near their center and constructed twenty five residential huts with corrugated asbestos and tin sheet roofs (Narayan, 1988:44-45).

In the 1960s the state Government had entrusted another voluntary organisation named *Samaj Sebak Sangha* with the work of organising a colony of the Lodhas in Narayangraha in present Paschim (West) Medinipur district. Anthropologists and social workers under the leadership of Probodh Kumar Bhowmick were involved in this task. Altogether, thirty nine families (on an average expenditure of Rs. 1500/- per family) were resettled at Daharpur under the police station of Narayangraha (Ibid: 45).

A Multi-Purpose Cooperative society as per direction of the Tribal Welfare Department of the Government of West Bengal distributed land on family basis to settle the Lodhas as agriculturists. The Central and State Governments allocated a good number of tiled residential huts, bullocks and goats to these Lodha families. (Ibid: 46).

The most remarkable voluntary effort towards the development of the Lodhas was undertaken by P.K. Bhowmick through his action anthropological enterprise termed by him as Bidisha experiment. His experiment in a village named Daharpur under the Narayangarh block of Paschim (west) Medinipur district began with resettling a group of Lodha families in an agricultural way of life. According to Bhowmick radical change was observed in the behaviour of the resettled Lodhas who seemed to be more self-reliant in earning their livelihood, although problems remained towards their acculturation into the modern way of life. On the other hand certain vested interest groups like higher castes and local political leaders created hindrance to the efforts undertaken towards the development of the community. (Bhowmick 1990: 196-212). In Bhowmick's publications, we do not however, find any empirical assessment, let alone quantitative account of the utilization and non-utilization of the development inputs provided by Bhowmick's own organization to the Lodhas of Daharpur.

The academic administrator and former District Magistrate of Paschim (west) Medinipur, 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 Junglemahals*, 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. In Sinha's words

... Darkness had fallen but with the help of torchlight we made our way to the house of Hari and Pramila Sabar. Upon reaching their homestead I found Hari Sabar digging one side of the foundation all by himself! I asked him why he was working so late. He told me that during the day he had gone to the jungle to collect sal leaves. Upon his return finding some portion of the foundation incomplete he decided to complete digging the length before calling it a day. It was stirring sight, especially since most people tend to dismiss Lodhas as incapable of hard work and responsibility. (Sinha 2013: 206-208).

## Conclusion

The image of criminality upon the Lodhas was a colonial creation which helped to generate a mindset which continued down to the post-colonial period. The anthropological accounts on the Lodhas also could not escape this state of mind. The only difference between the colonial creation of criminality and the post-colonial anthropological image was while the former based its arguments

in the instinctive nature of the community, the latter viewed criminality as a result of environmental and/or socio-economic conditions encountered by the Lodhas. More interestingly, post-colonial anthropological accounts sometime joined hands with the colonial mind. Thus we find P.K.Bhowmick saying in one of his celebrated articles in the Newsletter of the *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* the following lines.

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).

The counterpoint of the colonial and post-colonial anthropological image of Lodha mentality however came from the writings of non-anthropologists, like Mahasveta Devi and Chandan Sinha who found settled Lodhas as hardworking and responsible citizens utilising governmental inputs by their own labour. Our own empirical study on the Lodhas in three administrative blocks of Paschim Medinipur district also revealed wide variation in terms of the utilisation of various development inputs given to the Lodhas. We have also found that at least in two blocks the a good number of Lodha families have also become successful agriculturists. (Panda and Guha, 2015). The homogenised image of the Lodhas as a ‘criminal’ and ‘lethargic’ community who were ‘unresponsive’ to change and innovation seemed to be myth which could not stand empirical scrutiny as well as variation within the community.

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#### NOTES

1. Purulia district is one of the twenty districts of West Bengal state in Eastern India. The town of Purulia is the administrative headquarters of the district. (Wikipedia accessed through Google on 17.10.2014)
2. The Wikipedia says, ‘Lodha means piece of flesh named after their ancestor. Lodhas have been in the focus of anthropologists and social activists. During the early period of their rule, the British government in India oppressed the tribal people of Jungle Mahals, who were traditionally dependent upon the forests for a living. They had revolted but were ruthlessly suppressed. Having been deprived of their livelihood and without any alternatives, they took to criminal ways of life and were subsequently branded a criminal tribe. They should properly be labelled as uprooted rebels. Lodha titles are Nayek, Mallick, Digar, Sardar, Bhokta, Kotal, Dandapat, Bhunya etc. These

titles reflect social responsibility. They are descendants of Jarasandh from Mahabharata. The Lodhas hold that they are Sabars.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lodha\\_people](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lodha_people) Accessed 21.10.2014).

3. In 1977 the Left Front won the state assembly elections and the state was ruled by communists and other left groups till 2011. The Government formed by the coalition of leftist political parties in West Bengal is known as the Left Front Government. (LFG). The erstwhile left front led West Bengal state government holds the Indian record for the longest period of governance. Until 3 November, 2000, Jyoti Basu was the Chief Minister of the state. After his resignation, due to health reasons, Buddhadev Bhattacharya became the Chief Minister of West Bengal who continued in office until 13 May, 2011. (Wikipedia. Accessed 17.10.2014).
4. 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). In the Indian context, the anthropologists distinguished tribes as well as related them with the caste society in a continuum. (Beteille 1986 and Sinha 1958). '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). Lodhas are also classified as a scheduled tribe in India by the Government.
5. According to Wikipedia 'Chuni Kotal was born in 1965, in village Gohaldohi, in Paschim Medinipur district, West Bengal, in a poor Lodha family, Chuni Kotal survived a childhood of impoverishment to become the first woman from a 'primitive' tribe to complete High School. Thereafter, she got her first job as a Lodha social worker in 1983 at Jhargram ITDP office, surveying local villages. Eventually she graduated in anthropology from Vidyasagar University, in 1985. Two years after graduating, she was appointed as a Hostel superintendent at 'Rani Shiromoni Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Girls' Hostel at Medinipur, here again she had to face the social stigma attached with her tribe. Trouble really began for her when she joined the Master's course (M.Sc.) at the local Vidyasagar University. Here she was continuously discriminated against and insulted by her upper caste Brahmin professors (like Professor Falguni Chakraborty and others) and university administrators, who refused to give her the requisite pass grades, despite her having fulfilled the criteria, who opined that a low-born person coming from a "criminal tribe", a Denotified tribe of India, hence did not have the social privilege and pre-ordained destiny to study "higher discourse" like the social sciences. In 1991, after losing two years at the course, she complained, and a high level enquiry commission was set up by the state Education Minister to no avail, once the fact that she belonged to a former criminal tribe came to light. Wikipedia further informed that on 14 August 1992, frustrated by years of casteist and racist harassment at Medinipur, she left Medinipur and went to meet her husband, Manmatha Savar, who had been working at Railway workshop at Kharagpur. They had known each other since 1981 and later married in 1990 through a court marriage; Manmatha was a high school graduate himself. It was here that she committed suicide on August 16, 1992, at the age of 27. Her death became the focal point of immense political, human rights and social controversy in the media in West Bengal, and eastern India where the discourse is traditionally Brahmin-Baniya dominated. However, her death did not receive the attention of Indian American social science professors as it did among Western social scientists who were studying the Indian caste system, like Professor Nicholas B. Dirks at Columbia University and Professor Jan Breman at the University of Amsterdam. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chuni\\_Kotal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chuni_Kotal) Accessed 22.10.2014).



6. The unpublished Report of the Ganguly Commission of Enquiry was available from the personal archive of Abhijit Guha already uploaded in Academia.edu at the following link: [https://www.academia.edu/7125800/Report\\_of\\_the\\_Ganguly\\_Commission\\_of\\_Inquiry\\_Incident\\_of\\_Death\\_of\\_Smt.Chuni\\_Kotal\\_on\\_16th\\_August\\_1992.On\\_27\\_August\\_1992\\_the\\_Governor\\_of\\_West\\_Bengal\\_ordered\\_an\\_enquiry\\_committee\\_to\\_probe\\_into\\_the\\_causes\\_of\\_her\\_death.This\\_is\\_the\\_unpublished\\_report\\_of\\_the\\_enquiry\\_committee](https://www.academia.edu/7125800/Report_of_the_Ganguly_Commission_of_Inquiry_Incident_of_Death_of_Smt.Chuni_Kotal_on_16th_August_1992.On_27_August_1992_the_Governor_of_West_Bengal_ordered_an_enquiry_committee_to_probe_into_the_causes_of_her_death.This_is_the_unpublished_report_of_the_enquiry_committee). The interested readers may visit the Chuni Kotal archive created by Abhijit Guha at <https://vidyasagar.academia.edu/AbhijitGuha/Chuni-Kotal-Archive>.
7. The criteria of inclusion of a tribal community under Primitive Tribal Group( PTG) are: i) Pre-agricultural level of technology, ii) very low level of literacy, iii) declining or stagnant population and iv) a subsistence level of economy. (Meena, 2009:13). Vinay Kumar Srivastava in his critical evaluation of the Draft National Tribal Policy of 2006 discussed at length the difficulties of categorisation of communities under PTG or PVTG since a change in nomenclature does not necessarily mean that the negative and stigmatised images of the former 'Criminal Tribes' will not continue in future.(Srivastava 2008: 29-35).Our research on Lodhas confirmed the contention of Srivastava.
8. Mr. Nalini Bera, a Government official has written an excellent Bengali novel on the life of the Lodhas which was dedicated to Chuni Kotal. The name of the novel is *Sabar Charit* (2005) which literally means 'The nature of the Sabar'. In the novel, which is based on the personal experiences of the author, the daily lives of some Lodha women are depicted in painstaking detail. The characters in the novel were mainly found to eke out their living through the collection of various forest products (Bera, 2005).The author, however did not deal with the problems of implementation of the development schemes as narrated by Mahasweta Devi in her articles.

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