



SUSTENANCE, STIGMA, AND SOVEREIGNTY: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF LODHA FOOD PRACTICES

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.250306017>

Abstract

The Lodha, known by their name as a PVTG (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group) community in India, has a distinct food culture, which is embedded within their traditional food habits. The Lodhas were declared 'criminal tribe' during the Colonial rule, which has left a long-lasting effect, and now the community is also experiencing systematised marginalisation, social exclusion, and economic deprivation. This paper is written after conducting a detailed sociological study on the social and cultural dimensions of the food habits of the Lodhas, post the secondary sources and reports obtained from government and academic literature. The study takes into consideration the applications of Structural Functionalism, Symbolic Interactionism, and Post-Colonial ideologies on the accommodation of the Lodhas to the great extent of ecological and social disruptions. The 'Livelihood economy' involving 'Hunting, Gathering, and Forest Resources' has long been the hub on which the social formation of 'Lodhas' took place, and it is defined to imbue 'togetherness, reciprocity, and a 'symbiotic' relation with 'Nature' to the Lodhas. Thus, it is inferred that, to enable 'Culture-bound' policy formation, it is essential to assign importance to the socio-cultural relevance of 'Traditional Food System' to establish systematised 'Restitution of Food-Sovereignty' of 'Lodhas' to 'Ecological Rights' and to 'Preserve and Protect' their distinct heritage against the constantly changing socio-economic spaces.

Keywords: *Lodha, Sustenance, Stigma, and Sovereignty*

Introduction

Food rarely exists simply as a biological necessity; it is also a powerful social marker, a storehouse of cultural memories, and a field of contention over politics. For the Lodha people, a PVTG (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group) who live predominantly in the Jungle Mahal regions of West Bengal, the way they eat is our lens to view their collective traumatic history, the social exclusion they continue to experience, and their ability to endure. As a tribe, the Lodha have eaten as a communal act with nature since time immemorial, a practice that helped to define their autonomy and shape their social order. Their relationship with nature was destroyed by colonial violence, when their way of life was made a crime against the law; their legacy continues today in the form of contemporary marginalization. This paper will explore the sociology of food for the Lodhas; as opposed to focusing on nutrition, we will examine the social realities of their way of eating. Using secondary data, along with the wealth of ethnography already available about the Lodha, this study will ask how the transition from hunting/gathering as their economic base to subsisting as agricultural laborers at risk has changed what they put into their food baskets. A three-part theoretical approach to the study will use Structural-Functionalism, Symbolic Interactionism, and Postcolonial Theory to break down how the Lodha food system works as a means to hold together internally while being a site of external oppression. The main thesis of this paper argues that the restoration of Lodha dignity is directly related to their ability to achieve Food Sovereignty – the ability to develop and control their own food and agricultural systems – as opposed to merely having access to food security, through state welfare.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive research design based on secondary sources. Data has been collated from Classic and contemporary studies on the Lodha tribe in West Bengal. Census data, various publications by the Cultural Research Institute (CRI), and reports on PVTGs by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Records regarding the implementation and repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act and its socio-economic fallout. The analysis interprets this data through sociological theories to bridge the gap between empirical observation and theoretical abstraction.

Historical Context: The Colonial Shadow and the Criminalization of Sustenance

In order to comprehend how the Lodhas eat today, we have to engage with the historical dislocation that resulted from the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871. The word 'Lodha' must have originated from Lubdhaka, a trapper or hunter thereby it indicates people whose very world view was related to hunting and collection of forest products. Before the colonial era, the economy of the Lodhas was of subsistence type and primarily depended on Chota Nagpur Plateau environment. The forest was not simply a resource but a home that brought tubers, roots, fruits, honey and game meat. The British colonial state, however, with its desire to ensure timber supply and settle nomadic populations in order to be able to tax them, had great suspicion against the mobile Lodha way of life. With the implementation of the CTA, and everyone being classified as born criminals, there were abysmal implications with forbearers long before they even thought of food security.

So, by criminalizing the tribe, they were criminalizing their traditional food-gathering activities. The forest was an off-limits space, hunting — formerly an honourable and obligatory activity — became transformed into poaching or theft. As a result the Lodhas were pushed to the periphery of settled agrarian society in which they had no land or knowledge of agriculture that the dominant caste-Hindu peasantry could put to use. They were deprived of their forest larder and expelled from the village economy by their criminal taint, so that the Lodhas were forced into a round of chronic hunger and economic destitution. Though the Act was ultimately repealed in 1952 and the community "denotified," a stigma has persisted, leading to a unique sociological construction where, as Holt writes, the Lodha food identity is "built upon an unusual tension between an idealized ancestral past of forest bounty and a contemporary present of scarcity and shame."

Structural-Functionalism: Food as the Nucleus of Social Cohesion

Looking at the Lodha diet and food customs with reference to Structural-Functionalism, on lines of Émile Durkheim's as well as A.R. Radcliffe-Brown's traditions and methods adds that food is the cementing medium of tribal social organisation. In the traditional Lodha worldview, food acquisition was never an individualistic pursuit but a collective enterprise that reinforced kinship ties and maintained social equilibrium. Community hunt - today reduced by law and loss of forest, but a potent symbol of this unity. But when a hunt was successful, the sharing out of meat was not determined by market forces, but rather by custom and law. Certain shares were designated for the particular clans (gotras), for the religious leaders, and for senior citizens too, to ensure that the biological survival of the group was filtered through social responsibility.

This commensality leaves the quotidian behind and moves into a sacred zone. According to the theory of functionalism, rituals regenerate collective feeling in a society by providing condensation symbols and for Lodhas it centres on food offerings. Among these rites the Varam puja (or Sitala) was performed with sacrifice and worshipped with sacred meals, offered to protect men turned out of their homes by an epidemic. These rituals serve as forms of community solidarity, physical reminder to both the body and soul that eating together is a boundary and identity expression. The exclusivity of their food—such as specific roots, tubers and meats that are not consumed by adjacent castes—serves to demarcate a boundary. Through these eating practices the Lodhas not only replicate their social structure, but also differentiate themselves from 'the others', thereby maintaining a sense of tribal identity despite external factors of assimilation. The purpose of food, then, is to supply communion and reciprocity so that the person would never dissolve into "solitude" but would always find in the clan a corrective to isolation by consummating together the forest's generosity.

Symbolic Interactionism: Food as Symbol and Stigma

While functionalism explains cohesion, Symbolic Interactionism allows a more fine-grained analysis of the meanings ascribed to Lodha food practices both by the community themselves and by greater society. From an interactionist perspective, food is a symbol with which status, identity, and stigma are conveyed. To the Lodha, consumption of forest produce is imbued with the symbolic meaning of autonomy. The forest is seen as a good parent providing without condition, versus the market economy in which one must buy food with money they often do not possess. An ability to identify edible roots or track small game is a performance of 'Lodha-ness,' a skill set passed down through the generations that makes up a core component of their self-concept.

In interactions with the dominant caste-Hindu society, these same symbols are inverted. Items that would be described as "unclean" or "taboo" by the purity-pollution standards of the Hindu caste hierarchy regularly form part of the Lodhas' daily diet. The consumption of particular small animals, reptiles, or roots is weaponized by dominant society to reinforce the social ostracism of the Lodhas. Food, in this interactional dynamic, is a source of stigma. 'Civilized' society constructs the Lodha diet as 'savage' or 'primitive' to justify their exclusion from communal dining, village wells, and social gatherings. This externally imposed labeling places the Lodha in a "dramaturgical" conflict, where he/she may hide their traditional foodways in mixed company to avoid ridicule, leading to a fracturing of the self. Of course, this interaction is further complicated by the stigma of the "criminal tribe": a Lodha returning with wood or food from the forest is often viewed by state authorities and neighbors not as a forager, but as a thief. Every meal consumed by the Lodha represents a negotiation of identity, of resistance, and of survival in a hostile social ecology.

Postcolonial Theory: Epistemic Violence and the colonization of Diet

The Lodha food system is embedded with structural violence, and postcolonial theory is the critical tool to dissect it. What postcolonial discourse focuses on is the "epistemic violence" perpetrated by colonial and postcolonial regimes on indigenous

knowledge systems. The colonial forest laws were more than just restrictions on the freedom of movement. They effectively challenged the validity of the Lodha community's understanding of the forest ecosystem. What was declared "destructive" about shifting and hunting is, in fact, a colonial discourse to establish superiority of timber over tribals' food. Thus, the postcolonial regime continues to look at the tribals' food systems and evaluate it to be inferior and "backward" and, therefore, require transformation along more standardised food systems.

The postcolonial lens is critical of the present welfare systems, such as the Public Distribution System, which provides rice and wheat to the tribals. Although such steps are necessary to prevent starvation, they also, unceremoniously, result in the decline of the traditional cuisine. In other words, by flooding the tribals' household with cheap carbs, the government is producing a dependent people, which upstages the wide array of proteins and nutrients present in the forest cuisine. This is not just a case of food politics but also politics by other means. This is, after all, the colonization of tribals' cuisine. The Lodhas are reduced to passive beneficiaries of government largesse. Meanwhile, their status as active producers and collectors of their food is negated. Moreover, the deprivation of access to the forest, owing to harsh and robust wildlife protection laws, such as the Wildlife Protection Act, could also be termed "green colonialism," by which the ecological rights of indigenous people are surrendered to the so-called "conservation" agenda, which reimagines the forest as a pristine wilderness untouched by human presence.

The Contemporary Crisis: Acculturation and Economic Depravity

The reports and documents of the government regarding the Lodha community show the precarious situation that they are in right now. Ecological degradation and economic marginalization have led to a disappearance of their traditional food sources. Commercial logging and single-species (often eucalyptus) plantations that have taken over the Jungle Mahal forests do not sustain the undergrowth of the tubers and other medicinal plants that Lodhas relied upon. The community's casual labor market participation as an agricultural and construction worker has economic consequences. The cash economic transaction that they now depend on is a concern as their food is based on the economic transaction and food accessibility is based on the irregular income they receive. This has resulted in a chronic food crisis for the community.

This crisis is closely followed with a change in culture. Younger Lodha's generation is influenced by the mainstream of society and schooling system. Hence, growing distance or disaffection from the traditional food ways of their Heritage. There is a growing pattern of "Sanskritization", where Lodha's, for social recognition, mimic the food practices of higher caste and so, drop their own traditional foods which are rich in nutrients. Loss of this food heritage includes the disappearing knowledge about indigenous wild plants. Particularly the wild yams, leafy vegetables, and mushrooms, dying with the older generation. The consequent diet is poorer, composed of mainly rice, salt and potatoes, which is deficient of the rich micronutrients previously available from the forests. Thus, this change has resulted in high rates of malnourishment, stunting, and anemia, especially among Lodhas children, a cruel irony for a community residing in one of the most biodiverse places in India.

Conclusion: Towards Food Sovereignty

Although subjected to analysis, the Lodhas' food ways are to this day considered social facts, which comprise "food, history, social arrangements, and struggles over identity." The "criminal tribe" of the colonial era and, today, the PVTG of the Indian State food of the food "has a history of systematic erosion.". The postcolonial view critiques the state-centric models of development, which divested them of their self governance. Obviously, the 'Food Security' which guarantees only the availability of calories, paradigm shift and focal point must be on 'Food Sovereignty'." This is because "food sovereignty is the sustainable and self-determined control of the food systems of the community." This demands the restoration of their rights to the ecology by ensuring the legal efficacy of the Forest Rights Act (2006) so that they are able to access the community forest resources. The socio-cultural value of the traditional food system needs to be understood so that their indigenous knowledge is also affirmed to be legal and eco-sustainable. There is a demand to evolve a policy towards the cultivation of traditional foods and the protection of the remaining forests, which are sources of wild foods cultivated by the Lodhas. The government will finally provide succour to the Lodhas' people affected by malnutrition and, importantly, restore the dignity and heritage of a people who have suffered marginalization for so long when their right to their traditional food is formally granted. The political plate of the Lodhas needs to be reclaimed so that they are a living culturally identifiable people.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: *Dr. Ramesh Chandra Mondal:* Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No

Declaration: Not Applicable

Competing Interest: No

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