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Violence and the Marginalized
The Lodhas of West Bengal

ABSTRACT: Adivasi or tribal communities in contemporary India are no strangers to violence. The incidence of violence within the tribal world requires a multifaceted analysis. While much of the contemporary violence arises out of contestations over resources, it may also arise from other factors like social prejudice. This paper proposes a typology of violence encountered in the world of Adivasis through the history of the Lodha community in the Indian state of West Bengal. Categorized as Criminal Tribe in 1916 during British colonial rule, Lodhas were vilified and victimized both by the colonial government and by the rural society at large. After Independence, the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed in 1952, and Lodhas were denominated as the Denotified Tribes or *vimukta jāti*. This did not, however, ameliorate their social marginalization or their material status and Lodhas continued to live a life of abject poverty even under progressive governments. Finally, the paper looks at the steps taken by the Lodha community to combat such stigmatization in recent years.

KEYWORDS: Lodha, Criminal Tribe, violence, Adivasi, Denotified Tribe

Introduction

Various forms of violence have historically been employed by dominant groups in society as well as the state to reduce, control, subjugate or even annihilate the marginalized in different social and political settings. As Sanskrit texts of the ancient past demonstrate, violence against ethnic communities, such as forest-dwellers in particular, has been committed by the state as it gradually extended its control over forests for the extension of agrarian settlements and access to resources. This process was intensified under successive regimes and under British colonial rule in the nineteenth century. It was further exacerbated after independence, particularly in the 1990s, directed by the neo-liberal slant of government policies. References to forest-dwellers, or 'tribes', invariably documented from the point of view of the state, describe them in pejorative terms. Sanskrit texts, for instance, stereotyped them as fearsome *rakshasa*s or demons or as lawless brigands who needed to be subdued, tamed and civilized (Parasher-Sen 1998: 173–192; Thapar 2001: 1–16). Similar stereotypes are reflected in British colonial representations of 'tribal people' which were largely influenced by prevailing notions among local ruling families during the initial stages of contact.[1]

While there is a rich academic literature outlining the atrocities perpetrated on Adivasi societies, such representations tend to portray subaltern groups in homogenous terms, blurring the sharp differences

[1] For instance, the term 'Chuar' meaning 'wild', 'thieving' and 'ill-mannered' was in vogue in the western part of Midnapur district in Bengal where it was a popular epithet of abuse used by the dominant Hinduized Sadgops, pastoralists who had migrated to the region from Burdwan. W. K. Firminger's celebrated *Fifth Report of the House of Commons* (1811) described the Adivasis of Chotanagpur as a "savage race, differing extremely in appearance, religion, language and manners, from the Hindu lowlanders of Hindustan". In a similar manner, a British magistrate of Ramgarh district described the Ho people of Singhbhum as "dreadful pests" whose "atrocious crimes" challenged the "civilized, reputable castes" and as "the lowest kinds of Hindoos" who, in their manners and customs, were "little removed from savages" (Ramgarsh Magistrate to Bayly, 30 June 1817, Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings 39 of 29 July 1817, West Bengal State Archives).

that can exist within them. What needs to be highlighted is that violence can also be committed by different Adivasi communities on groups located at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In the context of India's Northeast, B.G. Karlsson presents a multi-faceted analysis linking the local specificities and histories of ethnic conflicts within the wider environmental and socio-political contexts (Karlsson 2011). I employ a similar multifaceted lens to understand the complexities of the violence committed on Lodhas of south-west Bengal, a community formerly categorized as a "criminal tribe" under British colonial rule. Today Lodhas are to be found mainly in the west Midnapur district in West Bengal. There are also Lodha communities in the neighbouring states of Odisha (in Mayurbhanj district) and Jharkhand (in Singhbhum district). Despite the abolition of the category of 'criminal tribe' in 1952, the epistemic violence of such categorization continues to impact the mental landscape of the region. Lodhas today rank among the poorest Adivasi groups in Bengal, their poverty arising not only from systemic deprivation from access to resources, but also from their social stigmatization, directed both by upper-caste, dominant groups as well as by members of other marginalized communities, including Adivasis.

Both the colonial and the contemporary national discourse acknowledged Adivasis as victims of a continuous process violence, while simultaneously portraying them as a primitive, savage and volatile people incapable of charting their resistance without resorting to violence themselves. By projecting Adivasis as inherently irrational and, therefore, anti-modern, they were in general deemed unfit to plot their own course of development, which was to be provided by the 'rational' state through a programme of development and welfare policies. This infantilizing of Lodhas led to their victimization in the inter-ethnic struggles for land control during the 1960s and 1970s. It also underlaid the Lalgarh movement of 2008 in western Midnapur, which made visible the dismissal by the ruling Left Front government of Adivasi grievances against the tyrannies of local police and forest officials as a 'Maoist conspiracy'. Although the movement was largely propelled by Santals and Mahatos, it also saw the

participation of Lodhas and held out the hope of the earlier inter-ethnic rivalry being replaced by the joint resistance of local Adivasi communities acting in unison.

The dynamic of violence is, therefore, connected to other contents of social life, such as "power, domination, imaginary, technology and sovereignty" (Musso 2020: 172). To understand the nature of violence arising out of the criminalizing of Lodhas, the article first traces the history of the Criminal Tribes Act; then, the second section discusses the incorporation of Lodhas within the Act's purview and explores their changing categorizations since the 19th century. The third section analyses the acts of violence committed on the community particularly in the second half of the 20th century. Finally, the chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the ways in which Lodhas have sought to organize themselves to counter such acts of violence.

The Criminal Tribes Act

The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 was the outcome of the deep suspicion that the British administration nurtured towards vagrancy and nomadic groups, their mobility deeming them a threat to settled agricultural production, difficult to control, police and tax, and their shifting loyalties to different patrons rendering them perennially disloyal and therefore 'dangerous'. As Meena Radhakrishna has shown, it was also fueled by an earlier bias, imported from the West, namely the well-established fear of the European gypsy whose lack of property was seen as a threat to established order (Radhakrishna 2000: 2554).

The idea of classifying criminal classes was formalized as a scientific exercise based on race in the mid-nineteenth century. However, it was not something entirely novel and had longer antecents as Mark Brown has shown. He argues that as early as 1816 the police in the Western Provinces identified perpetrators of robberies in the region as belonging to 'five distinct groups,' all of whom were the so-called 'notorious' 'tribes', all "more or less attached to a vagrant life", and who subsisted through robbery and by 'flesh of jackals,

lizards etc," (Brown 2001: 354). Poverty and vagrancy were thus seen as the attributes leading to criminality and crime itself was considered to be an inherited occupation. By the mid-19th century, the colonial government had consolidated the idea of professional criminality in communitarian terms, as a characteristic of entire communities and caste groups. In 1851, for instance, the colonial government had directed the British Resident at Hyderabad to investigate the link between dacoities and specific caste groups (Bhukya 2010: 123). In fact, the term 'criminal' tribe was used in the 1860s to indicate the sections of the indigenous population which failed to practise 'civilized' habits (Radhakrishna 2001: 4).[2]

It was in the background of the Habitual Criminals Act of 1869 under the English law that legislators in India deliberated on a similar enactment. In contemporary England, notions of criminality were located in scientific and social contexts and explained both as a genetic trait transmitted in families and in terms of drunkenness, poverty, rapid urbanization. In India, the colonial government embarked on a project of knowledge gathering, classification and taxonomy especially after 1857, and the category of Criminal Tribe arose out this necessity to know and control India as well as to legitimize colonial presence (Cohn 1996). Linking criminality with the institution of caste, J. F. Steven, the law member of the Viceroy's Council stated,

> Let us bear that in mind and grasp quickly what we mean here by professional criminals. We are dealing here with a tribe whose ancestors have *been criminals since the very dawn of time*, whose members are sworn by the laws of their caste to commit crime … for it is his vocation, his caste, I would go to the extent of saying his faith, to commit crimes. (cit. Piliavsky 2015: 326; emphasis added)

[2] Although notions of racial difference and distinct attributes of 'caste' and 'tribal' communities had been established by the mid-nineteenth century, Crispin Bates argues that these were still expressed in anecdotal or religious terms. 'Scientific' codifications were to be articulated only in the latter half of the century (Bates 1995: 238).

In this context, Anastasia Piliavsky argues that the stereotype of branding people as congenital criminals in colonial law had a longer history stretching beyond British colonialism. Citing Brahmanical texts, foreign travelers' accounts and Mughal documents, she argues that criminality as a profession and way of life was a social reality, though not a 'legitimate' part of the mainstream, in precolonial India. Refuting that it was a colonial construct,[3] she suggests that the archive of criminal tribe administration reveals that most initiatives to classify 'criminal tribes' came 'not from above but from field level officers and their native assistants' (Piliavsky (2015: 341). The sources she cites, however, represented the point of view of the dominant social groups or of the state. What Piliavsky overlooks is that there is no precolonial Indian equivalent of a 'criminal tribe' in any Indian language. For instance, despite references to dacoits and dacoity, 18th century Bengali literature did not link such crimes to any specific community or caste group, nor were there any indications of segregation in rural society based on criminality (Mukhopadhyay 2006: 182–183).

The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA), i.e. Regulation XXVII of 1871, clearly identified certain communities as 'habitual criminals', "addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences",[4] and aimed to reclaim and rehabilitate them. Part I of the CTA addressed communities that it categorized as 'hereditary criminals' subsisting through 'banditry and plundering expeditions' despite having 'legitimate' occupations such as pastoralism, hunting, cultivating, transportation, and trading'. The second part of the Act addressed a host of identities classified as 'deviant sexualities', usually referred to as 'eunuchs' by the colonial officials. Initially applied to North India, it was extended to the Bengal Presidency in 1876, and to the Madras

[3] For instance, Sanjay Nigam argues that the phrase 'criminal tribes' is a 'preposterous notion' which connoted objects without history (Nigam 1990b: 163), 'essential types' who helped in legitimizing the colonial discourse (Nigam 1990a: 257).

[4] Criminal Tribes Act 1871. https://www.indiacode.nic.in/repealedfileopen?rfilename=A1871-27.pdf (accessed on 25th February 2025).

Presidency in 1911. The 1911 Amendment provided for the maintenance of a register of habitual offenders with detailed information of their whereabouts. In Bengal, the initial focus was on communities like the Magheya Domes of Bihar and the Bedyas of eastern and central Bengal, who were believed to be involved in robbery and dacoity. The Lodhas of Bengal came to be included within the Act in 1916. In the next decade the Act went through several amendments which were finally incorporated into the Criminal Tribes Act of 1924. There was, of course, a degree of dissent within the colonial administration on criminalizing entire communities. In the run-up to the revised Act there was a debate on the issue in the Royal Society of Arts in which the Salvation Army Commissioner, Frederick de L. Booth Tucker, asserted that,

> Crime in most countries is committed by individuals, in India usually by tribes, communities and gangs, who are highly organized and trained in it from childhood as a profession… It is looked upon by these tribes very much as we regard the military profession, and is considered to be both honourable and lucrative. (Booth Tucker 1923: 159)

On the other hand, Sir Edward R. Henry, retired Inspector-General of Police in Bengal and former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, stated that it was not acceptable that an entire community should be registered as a criminal tribe even if a certain proportion of the tribe were criminal (Henry 1923: 163). However, P. Leo Faulkner of the Indian Police reiterated that the CTA was not punitive in nature, and that it was conceived in the interests of saving "criminal tribes from themselves; to reform and to declaim them, so far as is humanly possible" (Faulkner 1923: 449). Furthermore, he argued that according to the provisions of the CTA, only that part of a tribe which is "addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences" is declared a criminal tribe, which, had been done "in the case of certain gangs of the tribe of Lodhas in the district of Midnapur" (ibid).

Criminalizing the Lodhas

Lodhas reside mainly in the western Midnapur district located between the Chotanagpur plateau in the west and the fertile Gangetic basin of lower Bengal, a patchwork landscape interspersed with forests, dry uplands and wet lowlands. Since the early 19th century, the region witnessed a continuous process of migration of various agricultural groups such as Santal tribal cultivators, adept at clearing jungles, and Kurmi Mahato peasants who with their superior skills in settled cultivation enabled the extension of cultivation in the region, dislodging the older inhabitants, the Lodhas, in the process. The Mahatos, in particular, could gradually transform themselves into a substantial landholding class. Confronting the loss of control over land, the Lodhas had little recourse but to retreat deep into the jungle. They are among the least visible of the three ethnic groups, living in close proximity to the forests. To eke out a living they took to thieving and dacoity and came to be portrayed in official documents as a community of fugitive forest dwellers, nomadic wage labourers and traders in forest products. K. Sivaramakrishnan, however, points out that although the government classified them as 'hunter gatherers', incapable of charting their own course of development, Lodhas share an inter-generational self-image as cultivators with farming aspirations (Sivaramakrishnan 2000: 437). Hence, it is possible that rather than forest-dwellers, they had been cultivators in the past, who were subsequently degraded to the status of fugitive forest-dwellers and nomadic labourers.

Although the colonial government had embarked on the project to classify and categorize the different 'tribes and castes' of Bengal since the mid-19th century, there was no clear account of the Lodhas as a community in the colonial ethnography till the early 20th century when they were identified as a criminal tribe of Bengal in 1916. Lodhas do not feature in E.T. Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872) and merited only a sentence in H. H. Risley's *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891) which described them as a 'sub-tribe of the Bhumijs' (Risley 1891: 21). W. W. Hunter mentions Lodhas as a 'caste group

engaged chiefly in personal service' in the third volume of the *Statistical Account of Bengal* (Hunter 1876). The 1901 census noted them as a group allied with the Savaras and accustomed to collecting jungle products. Lodhas did not feature in the account of castes and tribes of Midnapur in the chapter on 'The People' in L.S.S. O' Malley's *Midnapur District Gazetteer* (O'Malley 1911: 151) but were mentioned in connection with crime in the district. It is doubtful if the colonial administration perceived them as a 'tribal' community that required its assistance and special provisions and in western Bengal it was the Santals who were represented as indigenes in need of governmental protection against the material exploitation of non-tribal outsiders and against cultural erasure (Sivaramakrishnan 1998: 27).

Lodhas were declared a criminal tribe under the Criminal Tribes Act in May 1916 along with a number of other communities including the Kaoras, Bagdis, Podes and Bhumijes. The colonial government explained their criminality as a consequence of their traditional livelihood and extreme poverty. Unlike in Europe, the notion of hereditary criminality in India interpreted crime as a profession passed on from one generation to another rather than as being genetically transmitted. The British colonial government in India explained hereditary criminality in communities as the outcome of poverty and unemployment which could be 'administratively managed' rather than that of genetic factors over which it had little control (Radhakrishna 2001: 5). The characteristics of each of these communities 'addicted to crime' (Daly 1916: Preface) and their modus operandi were noted in a handbook for police officers titled the *Manual of the Criminal Classes operating in Bengal* published in the same year, by F. C. Daly, the Deputy Inspector General of Police of Bengal.

Daly states that Lodhas were a branch of the Bhumij people, previously known as the 'Chuars' who had overrun Midnapur in the previous century and still clung to the "predatory instincts of their ancestors" and had been "for many years past … a thorn our side" (ibid.: 19). He cited police reports which showed that a number of Lodhas had been involved in robberies during the early years of the twentieth century. In 1902–3, 49 Lodhas were sent up for trial on specific charges of dacoity,

and all but four were convicted. In 1904, 44 out of 93 apprehended were convicted. The remaining 33 were put on trial with others in the Midnapore Lodha gang case of 1905 (ibid.: 17). However, what seems clear is that Lodha gangs had linkages outside their own community structure with receivers in the village who were usually better-off and belonged to the dominant communities. Such linkages were necessary for the disposal of the more valuable plunder, which was usually at very cheap rates or exchanged for food (Bhowmick 1963: 270).[5] They were also frequently hired to commit dacoity (Daly 1916: 19). Despite this, only Lodhas were selectively identified as a class of 'habitual criminals.' There were other marginal groups in the district whom the government identified as criminals. The Tuntias, for instance, were considered to be professional thieves and dacoits who had given up their traditional occupation of cultivating mulberry trees. Together with Lodhas they were held responsible for the dacoities in the western borders of the district but were not categorized as a criminal community (O'Malley 1911: 151).

It may be argued that the identification of Lodhas as a criminal tribe in 1916 was linked with the land settlement process which consolidated the landlordship of dominant communities like the Sadgops, Bhumij and Kurmi Mahatos and enabled their control over vast areas of isolated jungle tracts. Arun Mukherjee has shown that many Lodhas who were formerly employed as *paik*s and *ghatwal*s (i.e. frontier guards) by local zamindars lost their rights over their service tenures on being disbanded after the Permanent Settlement (Regulation XXII) of 1793 and had to take to thieving for a livelihood (Mukherjee 1995: 88). He argues that the crime statistics of the 1840s show a higher incidence of dacoity in districts where *paik*s and *ghatwal*s had been adversely affected (ibid.: 89). The zamindars, moreover, realized higher rents from rent-paying tenants and commenced on the extension of

[5] Mahasweta Devi has shown that the same nexus between socially prominent local controllers and Lodhas continued to operate in the 1980s. Lodhas, moreover, have a ready clientele among the non-Lodhas in the village who do not hesitate to buy their pilfered goods at low prices, while castigating them as a 'criminal tribe' (Devi 1983a: 949).

cultivation by clearing forests. Lodhas were thus forced to retreat further into the forests. At the same time, the Forest Acts passed by the colonial government in the second half of the nineteenth century restricted free access to and movement within the forests which now came to be controlled through a system of licenses and penalties, impacting upon the life of forest-dependent communities. Any infringement of the Forest Act was deemed a 'crime', further cementing the criminal status of Lodhas. Thus, when "forests became private property", as the anthropologist P.K. Bhowmick observes, "Lodhas were treated as criminals if they violated general restrictions" (Bhowmick 1963: 277).

After independence, the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed on 31 August 1952 on the recommendation of the All-India Criminal Tribes Inquiry Committee (1949) which deemed it to be inconsistent with the principles of equality and freedom enshrined in the Constitution.[6] The CTA was replaced by the Habitual Offenders Act of 1952 which was endorsed in nine states. Eighteen states, including West Bengal, opted not to endorse it and instead left matters of crime to the provisions of the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Police Act. The term 'Criminal Tribe' was substituted with De-notified Tribe or *vimukta jāti*.

The official categorization of Lodhas tended to shift between its 'caste' and 'tribe' status, a factor which was significant for development projects after independence. In the Census of 1951, Lodhas were classified as a Scheduled Caste together with Savaras. This, according to the Census Commissioner, was because of their reluctance to be registered as Lodha, and their preference to be called Savara (Bhowmick 1963: 6), which reflects their trauma at their social stigma on being criminalized as a community. Despite a shared experience of extreme poverty with other tribal groups, they were not classed in the same category and denied participation in schemes earmarked for the uplift of Scheduled Tribes. It was only in 1957 that they were identified as Scheduled Tribe by the Backward Classes Commission. The Dhebar

[6] For a discussion of post-independence categorizations and the politics of compensatory discrimination, see Gandee 2020: 71–97.

Commission's report of 1960 highlighted the inequalities in the pace of development between different Adivasi communities. To address the problem, a new category, the Primitive Tribal Group (PTG), consisting primarily of hunter-gatherers with negative population growth and low literacy, was introduced during the fourth Five Year Plan period (1969–1974). Lodhas, together with Totos of Jalpaiguri and Birhors of Purulia, were classified as PTG and later as PVTG when the PTGs were renamed as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in 2006. Although they were no longer criminal tribes in the official record since 1952, the stigma remained, marking their strained relations with Santal and Mahato neighbours.

A typology of violence

In this section I analyse the multi-dimensional forms of violence against Lodhas which emerged from the systemic set-up of interaction among different social groups and are manifested through political-economic oppression and social inequality. Focusing on three forms of inter-related violence—epistemic violence, structural violence and everyday forms of violence—I argue that epistemic violence lies at the root of the structural violence as well as their lived experience of everyday forms of violence.

The term epistemic violence was used by Gayatri C. Spivak in her celebrated essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak 1988), to refer to the systemic denial of agency to particular social groups to formulate their own epistemologies, i.e. a form of violence that is exercised in the production, circulation and recognition of knowledge, the signs, values and representations of their world, and in the unacknowledged exploitation of their epistemic resources and their objectification. It thus amounts to the imposition of dominant narratives that can lead to the erasure or devaluation of marginalized perspectives and the destruction of a subaltern group's ability to speak, to be heard and to the marginalization of their voices within the mainstream discourse. I analyse structural violence on the basis of the definition provided by

Johan Galtung (1969: 2000). Structural violence or institutional violence is embedded within political, economic, and social systems, limiting people's access to basic needs and rights. While in some extreme situations structural violence prevents victims from meeting their most basic human needs, everywhere it produces unequal life opportunities. Thus, structural violence sometimes manifests itself explicitly as political repression or overt obstruction to accessing goods and services, health disparities and economic inequality, but more often it occurs in more subtle ways. As Johan Galtung defines it, it is that which harms, "in the sense of insulting basic needs" (Galtung 2000: 106). I borrow the concept of everyday forms of violence from Philippe Bourgois who used it in the context of the Cold War in El Salvador to analyse how violence becomes embedded in daily interactions, shaping social relations and individual experiences, particularly among the poor and marginalized (Bourgois 2001).

Epistemic violence

The repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act could not erase the opprobrium which stigmatized the Lodhas. The colonial characterization lingered on in the minds of the rural population, their supposed criminality being a justification for the insults and attacks upon them. Such violence is manifested in everyday speech patterns and in the general forms of conduct of the dominant classes towards Lodhas. Even in the 21st century, a Lodha locality in Karengaberh village of Naraingarh in west Midnapur district is popularly known as '*chor-para*' (the neighbourhood of thieves).[7] Nalini Bera's Bengali novel, *Sabarcharit* (2005), on the life of Lodhas of western Midnapur well expresses the epistemic violence experienced by them. He describes the patron-client nexus between the local moneylender Dilleswar *mahajan* and Raibu Lodha, hired by him to commit acts of theft. Accusing Raibu of having stolen and feasted on his goat, a charge

[7] *Anandabazar Patrika,* 6 March 2004.

that Raibu vigorously denied, Dilleswar says, "Will people believe it even if you say this while submerged in water up to your neck? … Is there any believing people of your caste?" (Bera 2005: 37)[8] Such abuse is voiced not only by dominant castes of the locality, but by other marginalized communities as well. In another chapter, Bera portrays a group of Adivasi women from the Santal, Bhumij and Mahato communities, who venture in to the forest to collect firewood and leaves and grass:

> Jari's mother pushed her away with one hand, and with the other she picked up dry sticks and leaves, all the time abusing Lodhas to her heart's content.
> Thanks to the thieving Lodhas there is no way for us to get our hands on wood nearabout.
> You are right, Jari's mum, such a huge jungle, yet it has been picked clean! (ibid.: 44)

Pejorative slurs are used in casual conversations even by children at school to ridicule the Lodhas. The first Lodha woman graduate, Chuni Kotal, thus writes in the memoirs of her childhood days that her classmates taunted her with slurs like *kaminer jhi, katatir jhi, dhan bhanganir jhi* (Kotal 1992: 57).[9] Terminology which is derogatory to Lodhas is often normalized and used to express approbation or sympathy. We see this, for instance, when Chuni graduated from university. While she was lauded in all newspapers for her achievement, the reports mentioned that she came from an erstwhile criminal tribe, a reference which Chuni considered to be deeply offensive (Devi 1997: 160).

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[8] All translations from the original Bengali are mine.

[9] The word *jhi* means daughter, but usually it is used as a derogatory term for maids. *Kaminer jhi* means the daughter of a *kamin* or a wage labourer; the terms *katatir jhi* and *dhan bhanganir jhi* indicate the daughter of someone who husks paddy. These slurs reveal the disdain of upwardly mobile affluent rural classes towards those who perform manual labour. For a discussion of Chuni Kotal's life and writings see Devi 1992: 1836–1837; Das Gupta 2025: 523–545.

Prejudices arising from assumptions of criminality did not only exist within the general population but are rife even within the government and among lawmakers responsible for repealing the Act. Sarah Gandee cites the example of the lawmaker Deshbandhu Gupta who justified placing restrictions against the movement of the "criminal-tribe people" in course of the debate on repeal of the CTA in December 1948 as "they are a source of danger to other law-abiding citizens" (Gandee 2020: 75). B.R. Ambedkar had also opposed the extension of adult suffrage to criminal tribes on the grounds that their criminal ways prevented them from exercising their vote responsibly (ibid.: 80). Furthermore, welfare measures such as those proposed by the Planning Commission for the 'denotified' communities, were invariably expressed in the language of 'reform' of such communities from their 'criminal' ways (ibid.: 88). Prejudices also prevent Lodhas from participating in government welfare schemes alongside the mainstream population. Some Lodhas who had initially been inducted into the Food for Work programme of the Left Front government were forced to leave due to the legacy of the deep-rooted stigma.

Structural violence

As stated earlier, structural violence is a form of direct and indirect violence produced by systems, practices, policies, or norms adopted by institutions, structures, organizations, or groups which threaten the well-being, identity and freedom of Lodhas. It is manifested politically through inter-ethnic rivalries and socially through low access to education and health services.

The antagonism between Santals and Lodhas was especially noteworthy in the period between the 1960s–1980s. Prabodh Kumar Bhowmick, who conducted the first major ethnographic research on Lodhas in the early 1960s, remarked on the class hatred and antagonism arising from the antipathy between them and neighbouring communities, leading to inter-ethnic conflicts (Bhowmick 1983: 29). Writing some fifteen years later, Sivaramakrishnan noted similar contempt

with which the landowning groups like Mahatos and Adivasi communities like Santals regarded Lodhas (Sivaramakrishnan 1998: 29–30). This hatred was expressed in a series of attacks on the Lodhas since the 1960s. In the 1960s, the attacks or *gira* took the form of 'traditional' assaults by Santals and Mahatos and involved giving advance intimation of the date and time of the attack by tying a knot on the bark of a branch of a *sal* tree. These confrontations were accompanied by the beating of drums. Lodha villages were set on fire, and many were killed (Bhowmick 1981: 6). Such attacks have been explained in terms of a "value-ridden social incompatibility" and an expression of Santal resentment against the "criminal activities of the Lodhas in the form of burglary, robbery, mugging, etc." (Chaudhuri 1987: 1851). Lodhas tended to be blamed for all armed robbery in the locality, although they lacked generally lacked the organization necessary for well-planned crimes (Devi 1997: 168). These were not, moreover, serious crimes like homicide to warrant such brutal reactions. Hence, we also need to look at the land question to understand this bitter antagonism, a factor which became pronounced in the 1970s.

The nature of the attacks on Lodhas changed after the Left Front's victory in the 1977 West Bengal state elections. In 1978, the Left Front government implemented the West Bengal Land Reforms Act of 1971 and instituted land reforms. This involved the redistribution of land appropriated from large landholders in the form of land titles to landless households and the tenancy registration programme called Operation Barga. However, the land redistribution schemes did little to meliorate the condition of the Lodhas.[10] Although the

[10] Although land reforms helped many Lodha households gain landownership, many landless Lodha households did not receive land titles. Those who did receive land titles often lacked actual control over the land. Furthermore, as Santanu Panda and Abhijit Guha point out, the distributed land parcels were usually of inferior quality, and in some instances, were not cultivable at all (Panda and Guha 2013: 79). In 2011, the West Bengal government introduced the *Nijo-Griha--Nijo-Bhumi* (NGNB) [My Home, My Land] scheme, with the aim of distributing homestead plots to landless agricultural labourers, rural artisans, and fishermen. Around 86 percent of identified landless Lodha households received title deeds, and the remaining 14 percent were allocated plots in uninhabited government

government did not succeed in appropriating significant amount of land from large landholders owing to legal problems, the reforms nevertheless upset entrenched land-holding groups in Midnapur. Angered by the attempts of the Lodhas to cultivate the redistributed land, the rich landholders or *jotedar*s instigated other tribal groups like Santals and Koras to attack and kill Lodha cultivators. In 1979, 18 Lodhas were killed in the village of Patina alone (Devi 1983a: 947, 949). These deaths were met with indifference from the political parties and the local police who did little other than setting up temporary relief camps for the affected families. Commenting on the event, an eyewitness wrote, "I have seen in 1979, the water of the Subernarekha river reddened by the blood of slaughtered Lodhas. The blood that day was my ancestors' blood" (Nayek 1998: 73). The killings did not stop in 1979. A series of killings occurred in 1982. For instance, in January 1982, six Lodhas were killed and four maimed in the village of Gonua, two were killed at Jhargram, Nunnuni and Gerya in February 1982, one in Shakpara village in March 1982, one in Khejurkuti in June 1982, six in the three villages of Saro, Baghjhanpa and Chakua in July 1982 (Devi 1983a: 949).

Since 2004, the land question has become further complicated with the establishment of tourist resorts in western Midnapur. While tourism can offer economic opportunities and development for the region, it also raises concerns about the potential displacement and cultural disruption of the Lodhas. Many of these resorts have come in lands which are nominally held by Lodha households who rarely benefit from the development of this sector (Chatterjee 2025). Most of the employees are recruited from outside the region and Lodhas, when employed, are vulnerable to exploitation in low-wage jobs with poor working conditions. Tourism development, moreover, puts pressure

lands. However, there were several limitations to the programme, such as the exclusion of some equally eligible landless households, the non-utilization of land, the failure to augment livelihood because of small plot sizes, the inequitable distribution of community development inputs, the prevalence of corruption, and the presence of intermediaries (Biswas and Pal 2024: 12).

on natural resources and ecosystems, impacting the environment in which the Lodha people live and depend upon.

The identification of the Lodhas with criminal antecedents also led to everyday discrimination in terms of access to education, health resources and jobs. Lodhas have generally been portrayed as being loath to send their children to school. Even a sympathetic anthropologist like P.K. Bhowmick states that they are "neither interested nor in a position to avail of the present educational facilities" (Bhowmick 1983: 32). The aversion of Lodhas to schooling can be explained by factors such as poverty, the teachers' disinterest in teaching Lodha children and the daily humiliations that they faced for their 'criminal' background. In her autobiographical essay, Chuni Kotal wrote about the discrimination and segregation that she encountered in her primary school where the Lodhas were made to sit separately from other pupils. The teachers were unwilling to instruct Lodha children, and their classmates bullied them. Chuni writes,

> Our teacher did not like our coming to school. He never checked our work; he did so very unwillingly if we went up to him. If any of *their* children made any mistakes, he gently patted their heads. If *we* made mistakes, we received unbearable lashes of the whip. He'd say, you came to school to be respectable, and you can't do your lessons!
>
> …
>
> When we went outside leaving our books in the classroom, they [the children] ripped them apart. If we complained to the teacher he'd beat us. The other children were thus emboldened to commit more wrongdoings. If a [Lodha] child somehow managed to clear the second grade he could never attend the third grade. After being retained in the same class for a number of years he would be forced to drop out and would be seen taking other people's cattle to graze. If we wore ragged clothes to school the teacher would put a stick in the hole, tearing it to shreds … He'd say, this is a school, not a field for grazing the cattle. You cannot wear what you please. Seeing this the other kids would laugh out loud. (Kotal 1992: 44–45)

Upper caste teachers in the tribal areas of West Bengal often showed a strong aversion to educating the tribal poor (Devi 1983a: 948). The

writer and social activist Mahasweta Devi was often requested by Lodha parents to arrange for a Santal or a Lodha teacher for their village schools on the grounds that "the upper-caste teachers hate our boys. They ask the children to water or hoe the garden or take care of the vegetable patch" (ibid.). Others explained that the reason for children dropping out was the widespread belief that because of the stigma of criminality, their "boys, even after going to school for years and obtaining certificates will not get jobs" (Devi 1983b: 998).

Another form of structural violence which continues to persist in this marginalized region is the lack of employment with its inevitable corollary of unemployment, starvation and malnutrition. In 2004, the death of five Lodha Shabars in the village of Amlashole created a public uproar (Chatterjee 2022). The issue came up for discussion not only in the state legislative assembly, but also in the Rajya Sabha. The area lacked road connectivity and proper health care delivery system, and the governmental food public distribution system was in a very poor state (Guha 2016: 73). Despite the public outcry conditions remain abysmal till date. In November 2018, seven members of the Shabar community reportedly died due to hunger and malnutrition in Purnapani village under the Lalgarh block of Jhargram district (Chatterjee 2025). Functional water supply, rural electrification and health centres are still lacking in the Lodha Shabar villages. Employment is scarce and even the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has been halted, prompting the youth to migrate in search of employment.

Everyday forms of violence

Together with organized attacks, the Lodhas also have to encounter the everyday harassment by the police and insidious forms of everyday violence and tyranny—petty brutalities, discriminations, humiliations, demands for gifts and bribes by the local police, forest officers and administrative officers. The situation did not appear to improve substantially even in the closing years of the 20th century as is evidenced

by the local Lodha leader, Srikanta Nayak's speech at the Lodha-Shabar Utsav held in 1998. He stated that,

> The condition of the Lodhas in Sabang Block is very poor. At present atrocities are committed on the Lodhas. They are forced to live in the jungle for days at an end because on 1 September 1997 the police falsely accused two Lodha and one Adivasi of theft and took them in custody where they were beaten to death. Their children now have to survive by begging. They have no opportunity to live freely. (Nayak 1998: 73)

Complaints lodged with the police and the local administration are usually ignored. Lodhas could not file reports against illegal occupation of their agricultural allotments, meeting with only "treachery, cheating and harassment" (Dandapat 1998: 76). Alf Gunvald Nilson has discussed the continuous harassment of the Bhils in western India at the hands of the police, the forest officials and the administration (Nilson 2018: 29–58). While this is a common experience for most Adivasis in rural India, what makes the situation worse for Lodhas is that such harassments are conducted in collusion with the dominant local communities as well as other tribal groups who, through their better awareness and political organization, could monopolize the welfare schemes of the government. Lodha holdings were at times acquired by local goons in the name of political parties, against whom the police, already politicized, refused to take steps. This happened, for instance, in Bagayun village where the holdings of a disabled Lodha women who had let out her land to a sharecropper was acquired by him through the simple expedient of planting the flag of the ruling Communist Party of India CPI(M) (Dandapat 1998: 75).

Conclusion

As a result of such forms of psychological persecution, Lodhas developed a tendency to shun mainstream society or display no interest in acquiring education or vocational skill. During the period under discussion, very few of them were willing to do manual work for

other communities as a form of non-participation. The outcome was the silencing of the Lodhas in the mainstream narratives where their visibility was expressed only in terms of their supposed criminality. In much the same manner in which Blackness and Black identity was produced, as Frantz Fanon had shown in *White Skins, Black Masks* (1952), Adivasis too experience feelings of dependency and inadequacy in their confrontation with the privileged classes.

The local elite groups had a vested interest in obstructing the development schemes earmarked for Lodha welfare as the economic upliftment of Lodhas threatened the clandestine activities of the local power elite. The latter use Lodhas to serve their own interests, instigating them to commit robberies and acting as receivers of stolen goods, as in British colonial times. The Integrated Tribal Development Programme of the state of West Bengal remained a defunct organization, stirred only into action in the last two decades of the twentieth century thanks to the efforts of Mahasweta Devi. She pointed out that the government's development initiatives were often undertaken without considering people's needs and rights and failed to reach the intended beneficiaries:

> 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 line. (Devi 1983a: 948)

Despite the widespread poverty and starvation, political leaders and government or panchayat officials rarely visit the villages, and the people are largely unaware of the welfare schemes earmarked for the development of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). On November 15, 2023, the Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM-JANMAN) aimed at the socio-economic development of 75 PVGT communities

across India and promised to provide essential facilities such as clean drinking water, housing, better access to education, healthcare, road and telecom connectivity, electrification of unserved households and sustainable livelihood opportunities within a three-year period. However, the programme has not been fully implemented. Criticizing governmental apathy, Dr. Pulin Bihari Baske, All India and Bengal State Secretary of Adivasi Adhikar Mancha [Adivasi Rights Forum], stated that despite the Central government's initial announcement of an allocation of Rs 24,104 crore for the socio-economic development of 75 PVTG communities, only Rs 5,000 crore was released in each of the previous financial years (Chatterjee 2025).

Unlike Santals, till the 1980s Lodhas showed little political interest or ambition and had limited participation in the political process (Chaudhuri 1987: 1851). Nor did they produce any popular leader who could chart their grievances through political channels. It was only in the 1980s that the Lodhas revived their community organization, the Lodha-Sabar Kalayan Samiti [Lodha-Sabar Welfare Society] which attempted to create awareness and development inputs for the community. In 1986, the Adim Jati Aikya Parishad [Association for the Unity of Primitive Tribes] was established, which saw the participation of a number of Lodhas and Kherias of Midnapur, including Chuni Kotal and Prahlad Kumar Bhakta, the first Lodha university graduate. Like other educated Lodha youths, Bhakta was deeply involved with the regeneration of the community and had established 'Bipasha,' a hostel for Lodha students in 1978 soon after his graduation.

The situation showed signs of improvement in the initial years of the present century—the outcome of the relentless efforts of P.K. Bhowmick, who, together with academic research, established the non-governmental organization Bidisha to promote Lodha welfare, and Mahasweta Devi who, through her writings and activism, drew attention to their plight and contributed significantly towards sensitizing public opinion. At the same time, there have been efforts by Lodhas to form associations and seek redressal for the violence committed against them by acting in unison. While rural tensions persist, there are hopes of forging a unity among different Adivasi and Dalit groups

through their shared histories of oppression. Yet, the truth remains that the Lodha story was publicized only though another act of violence, when Chuni Kotal, unable to continue her lifelong battle against social stigmatization chose to end her life on 16 April 1992.

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