

## Skill-Based Education for the Lodha Tribes: Exploring Government Policies and Pathways for Formal and Informal Learning

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### **ABSTRACT:**

This study aims to explore the government plans and policies, need of skill-based education for Lodha tribes and provide suggestions to encourage both formal and informal education for upliftment of Lodhas. In West Bengal, despite available educational facilities, high illiteracy rates, low enrolment, and high dropout rates persist, with limited parental support contributing to the low educational engagement of Lodha children. This research aims to explore the government's initiatives and policies regarding skill-based education for the Lodhas, providing recommendations for promoting both formal and informal educational opportunities to uplift the community. Utilizing a mixed-method research design, primary data was collected over seven months from 15 villages with high Lodha populations through tools such as household censuses, structured questionnaires, participant observations, focus group discussions, and interviews. Findings reveal strong community interest in traditional and sustainable livelihoods, with 67.6% of respondents interested in Sal plate making, 58.7% in poultry farming, and 55.1% in agro-forestry. These sectors offer economic potential while supporting environmental sustainability, aligning with the Lodha community's cultural heritage and resource-based strengths. This study emphasizes the need for skill-based education to encourage diverse livelihood options and foster sustainable economic development among the Lodha tribes.

**Keywords:** *Lodha Tribes, Learning, Formal and Informal Learning*

### **INTRODUCTION:**

The population of Scheduled Tribes has increased from 6.7 crore in 1991 to 10.42 crore in 2011. This reflects both natural growth and possibly improvements in data collection methods. Despite the growth in numbers, the percentage of Scheduled Tribes in the total population increased only slightly from 8.08% in 1991 to 8.6% in 2011. Scheduled Tribes tend to reside in remote and often ecologically unsuitable regions. Their distribution across states is not uniform. Notably, states like Mizoram and Lakshadweep have a very high percentage of Scheduled Tribes, while states like Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Chandigarh, and Puducherry have no scheduled tribes. Among major states, Chhattisgarh has the largest proportion of Scheduled Tribes at 30.62%, followed by Jharkhand at 26.21%. The states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Jharkhand account for 71% of the Scheduled Tribe population (Census, 2011). In total, India has 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), distributed across various states and union territories. Notably, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh stand out with the highest number of PVTGs, boasting 13 and 12 groups respectively. Conversely, Manipur and Rajasthan have the lowest

count, each hosting only one PVTG. The Lodha tribes, a focus of this study, are primarily concentrated in Odisha and West Bengal regions. In the undivided district of Paschim Medinipur, there are 12 tribes, including Santal, Bhumij, Munda, Lodha/Kheria, and others, all categorized as Scheduled Tribes. The term 'Lodhas' refers to a small tribe, named after a piece of fish, with a total population of 108,707 in West Bengal and 9,785 in Odisha according to the 2011 census (Hansdah, 2018). The name 'Lodha' is thought to be derived from the Sanskrit word 'Lubdhaka,' meaning a trapper of fowl (Mallik, 2020). Indian tribes, based on physical features, can be broadly categorized as Negrito, proto-Australoid, and Mongoloid. Within the proto-Australoid group, tribes like Oraon, Munda, Santal, Birhor, Kol, Bhil, Lodha, and Savara are situated in the eastern and southern parts of India (Mallik, 2020). Lodha tribes specifically belong to the proto-Australoid group in the eastern part of Indian tribes (De and Kundu, 2015). They are believed to be from the Mundari group, and their language is a mix of broken Mundari, Bengali, Oriya, and Hindi. Despite assimilating into the Hindu fold, Lodhas retain distinct features (Bhowmick, 2015). The focus of my study is the Lodha tribes' population,

particularly the vulnerable group among them, in West Bengal. This vulnerable group is present in districts such as West Medinipur, Jhargram, Purulia, Bankura, and South 24 Parganas.

The Lodha people, also known interchangeably as the Kharia tribe and collectively referred to as Sabar, take pride in calling themselves Savara, although it's important to note that Savaras are distinct from Lodhas. Historically, Lodhas were recognized as Scheduled Tribes throughout West Bengal, while Savaras held this status only in Purulia district until 1976 (Mallik, 2020). The Lodhas, identified as a Primitive Tribal Group and Criminal Tribes since 1871, share the designation of Scheduled Tribe with the Savaras in the states of West Bengal since October 1956. Both Lodha and Savara communities are considered forest-dwelling (Ghatak, 2013; Mallik, 2020). So, The Lodhas identify themselves as Sabars (Hansdah, 2018). In terms of physical attributes, they exhibit distinct characteristics, with their skin and hair displaying shades ranging from brown to dark brown. The Lodhas typically have medium-sized faces and noses that vary from medium to flat. Both males and females belonging to the Lodha community maintain an average height. (Mallik, 2020). The Lodha people feel pride in calling them as Savara, a generic group in ancient literature for forest-dwelling communities. But Savaras are different from Lodhas. Savaras are descendants of Kalketu, the hero of Mangal Kavyas (Bhowmick, 1985). They are basically snake charmer group of people of Bihar, Odisha, and Andhra Pradesh. But the Lodha community are one of the Criminal Tribes since 1871 under the Criminal Tribes Act. Both Lodha and Savara were designated as Scheduled Tribe (ST) in states of West Bengal in October 1956. Lodha tribe were ST throughout West Bengal but the Savaras were ST only in Purulia district till 1976. Lodhas are regarded as Primitive Tribal Group but the Savaras are only Scheduled Tribe community (Ghatak, 2015). The Lodhas belong to an Austro-Asiatic Group but they rarely have a characteristic of their own. The colour of their skin and hair are brown to dark brown. They have a medium face and medium to flat nose. Both male and female of the Lodhas have normal height. They normally possess good health. Of late some social workers went deep into the social, economic and cultural life of this Primitive Tribe.

If we talk about their educational status, the Lodha tribes face significant educational challenges, with notably lower educational conditions compared to other communities. The illiteracy rate is alarmingly high, reflecting very low literacy rates at various levels, coupled with low enrolment and a high dropout rate. Education is recognized as the key to development, yet several factors contribute to the community's struggle with enrolment and retention. Parents often provide less

encouragement, resulting in Lodha children lacking interest in school despite the availability of educational facilities. Instead, they engage in traditional informal learning within their community, acquiring skills such as collecting forest products, climbing, wrestling, fishing, making rope, and participating in folk songs and dances, following the traditions passed down by their elders (Mohapatra & Lambebo, 2020). Additionally, Lodha girls emulate household tasks similar to their mothers and grandmothers but do not pursue formal education at schools (Mohapatra & Lambebo, 2020). But they still are not going to school to receive formal education like the children in the Lodha community. For this reason, this paper aims to explore the government plans and policies need of skill-based education for Lodha tribes and provide suggestions to encourage both formal and informal education for upliftment of Lodhas.

### **METHODOLOGY:**

The researcher adopted a mixed-method research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches, to explore the Lodha communities in West Bengal. Primary data was collected through anthropological fieldwork over seven months, from February to September 2023, in the selected districts of Jhargram and West Medinipur. A total of fifteen villages were chosen based on location quotient analysis, which identified areas with higher concentrations of the Lodha population. Purposive sampling was employed to select 10 Lodha households, and from these households, a total of 52 individuals were purposefully included in the study. Data was gathered using various tools, including household censuses, structured questionnaires, participatory observation, focus group discussions, and a customized interview schedule. Data collection occurred at participants' homes and workplaces, with strict privacy maintained as only the researcher and participants were present during the sessions.

### **Findings:**

#### **Government Initiatives for Educating Lodha Tribes:**

Government initiatives for education in India encompass a wide range of programs and policies aimed at improving access to quality education across the country. Lodha tribes have also benefited from government initiatives aimed at improving their educational development. According to the Lodhas' opinion regarding the government facilities available for their educational development, these initiatives have helped to educate illiterate Lodha tribes. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), a centrally sponsored program for tribal development, has been successfully implemented among the Lodha tribes, serving as India's primary program for universalizing elementary education. Lodha children

between the ages of 6-14 years have shown the highest enrollment compared to other age groups, thanks to initiatives such as free and compulsory admission, attendance, and completion of elementary education. These efforts have effectively addressed universal access and retention goals, bridging gender and social category gaps in education, and enhancing learning levels among Lodha children. Additionally, initiatives like the mid-day meal scheme have been notably successful in addressing issues of malnutrition, hunger, and low school attendance among Lodha children, facilitating their retention in school until Class VIII. However, it is crucial for the Lodha tribes to continue focusing on enrollment and retention to maintain a secure educational system for their development, ensuring equitable access to quality education based on principles of equity and non-discrimination. It was also discovered that some Lodha students were enrolled in Ekalavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS). Although EMRS primarily targets tribal children, it was found that not properly taking benefits due to there is a low enrollment of Lodha tribes in these schools. Some children also stay at the Ashram for their studies. However, initiatives like the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme, which aims to provide residential schooling for girls from disadvantaged communities, including tribes, did not benefit any Lodha tribe students. Similarly, the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) scheme, which aims to improve secondary education accessibility and quality, faces challenges in the Lodha tribe community due to issues like early marriage contributing to low enrollment rates.

Additionally, school-going Lodha children have been recipients of various types of scholarships, showcasing the range of scholarship opportunities available for tribal students in West Bengal. It was observed that the Kanyashree scholarship had the highest

receipt among Lodha students, signifying a crucial support mechanism. This scheme, exclusively for unmarried girls in classes VIII to XII, plays a significant role in aiding their education. Another notable scholarship, Sikhyashree, had the second-highest reception among Lodha students. Sekhas're targets SC/ST students in classes V to VIII, providing an annual amount of 800/-. Despite eligibility, barriers such as low enrolment in classes IX-XII among Lodha students and insufficient documentation like caste certificates, birth certificates, Aadhar cards, and bank passbooks hindered access to pre-matric and post-matric scholarships, resulting in lower receipt. Conversely, merit-based scholarships such as the Rajiv Gandhi National Scholarship, Vivekananda Scholarship, Merit-cum-Means Scholarship, and Nabanya, which are based on academic performance, did not benefit any eligible candidates due to the low enrolment rate in higher education.

Skill-based education is vital for the Lodha tribes of West Bengal as it enables economic empowerment through access to better employment opportunities and income generation beyond traditional activities. Diversifying livelihoods reduces vulnerability to economic uncertainties while preserving cultural identity and heritage. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern skills, education programs foster socio-economic development, empower individuals, and promote sustainable practices. Ultimately, skill-based education enhances the overall well-being and resilience of the Lodha tribes, ensuring a brighter future for their communities. So, the findings of the study regarding identify the need of skill based education for the Lodha tribes of West Bengal are presented in the following tables.

**Table –1 Need of Lodha tribes to work in different sectors**

Sl. No	Primary sector	Responses N(%)	Secondary sector	Responses %	Tertiary sector	Responses %
1.	Agro-forestry	230 (55.1)	Food Production	116(27.8)	Online Courses (ICT)	132(31.6)
2.	Organic farming	67(16.0)	Handcraft	172(41.2)	Digital Marketing	88(21.1)
3.	Timber wood farming	101(24.2)	Poultry Feed production	110(26.3)	Social Media consulting	81(19.4)
4.	Paper Making	88(21.1)	Fertilizer production	109(26.1)	Designing and Animation	75(17.9)
5.	Sal plate making	282(67.6)	Stationary product	55(13.1)	Mechanical and IT	92(22.0)
6.	Biri Making	255(61.1)	Cosmetic Production	62(14.8)	Beautician	110(26.3)
7.	Liquor making	20(4.7)	Health and Sanitation production	125(29.9)	Tourism	71(17.0)

8.	Herbal Medicine	22(5.2)	Boutique Manufacturing	130(31.1)		
9.	Furniture making	101(24.2)				
10.	Flower shop	52(12.4)				
11.	Agarbati Making	152(36.4)				
12.	Poultry Farming	245(58.7)				
13.	Dairy Farming	24(5.7)				
14.	Sheep Farming	15(3.5)				
15.	Agricultural Farming	262(62.8)				

\* 0-14 age are not included of willing to employment opportunities (Minimum age for working at 14 years old).

The above table-1 presents data on the distribution of responses across different sectors, categorized into primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors. The highest percentage of willingness to work among the Lodha tribes is observed in Sal plate making, with 67.6% of respondents expressing interest in this activity. This indicates a strong inclination towards engaging in traditional craftsmanship and possibly reflects the cultural significance and economic viability of Sal plate making within the community. The second-highest percentage of willingness to work among the Lodha tribes is seen in poultry farming, with 58.7% of respondents expressing interest in this sector. This suggests a significant inclination towards poultry rearing as a potential livelihood option within the community. Poultry farming offers various benefits such as relatively low investment costs, quick returns, and flexibility in scale, making it an attractive choice for individuals looking to engage in animal husbandry. Following closely behind is agro-forestry, with 55.1% of respondents willing to work in this sector. Agro-forestry involves integrating trees and shrubs into agricultural landscapes, providing multiple benefits such as soil conservation, biodiversity conservation, and additional income streams through timber, fruit, and medicinal plant cultivation.

Additionally, Sal plate making aligns with the community's eco-friendly ethos, as Sal leaves are biodegradable and sourced sustainably from forests. Furthermore, the high percentage suggests that there is existing knowledge and skill within the community, facilitating easy adoption and success in this occupation. Moreover, the high percentages of willingness to work in poultry farming and agro-forestry among the Lodha tribes indicate a strong desire to explore diverse livelihood opportunities that capitalize on the community's strengths, resources, and cultural heritage. These sectors not only offer potential economic benefits but also contribute to environmental sustainability and resilience, reflecting a holistic approach to livelihood development within the community.

## **CONCLUSIONS:**

This paper advocates for skill-based education, including vocational courses and training in agriculture, non-agriculture, technology, and communication skills. These initiatives aim to stimulate interest among the community, addressing their economic constraints. The paper also suggests creating employment opportunities through skill-based education. Consequently, individuals will have the chance to specialize in specific areas aligned with current demands, thereby improving their education and fostering economic development through enhanced employment opportunities.

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