

**Book Review**

***Society, Culture and Indigenous Worldview of Lodha  
Sabar People***

**Prahlad Kumar Bhakta**

Translated from the Bengali original *Lodha Sabar Jatir Samaj Jibon*  
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Most students in West Bengal's colleges and universities have heard of Chuni Kotal, and several West Bengal campuses periodically have graffiti commemorating her and Rohith Vemula's deaths. However, few non-Sabar people know much about the community from which Chuni Kotal hailed. The late Prahlad Kumar Bhakta's book is therefore a milestone for the community; it is possibly one of the first extensive auto-ethnographic studies written by a Lodha Sabar author. Vidyasagar University has worked on researching, translating and publishing Adivasi and folk literature, orature and culture of Bengal for many years now, and Bhakta's book is a notable outcome of the project on "Translation, Documentation and Conservation of Tribal Folk Literature and Cultural Texts of West Bengal."

Auto-ethnography is not an easy academic genre with which to work. The author is part of the community and has access to aspects of the community's life to which non-Lodha researchers might not have access. The author is therefore both the researcher and the inside informant, as it were. This places a great deal of pressure on the writer, for the social sciences demand critical and objective distance from one's subject matter. This tension is quite evident in Bhakta's writing, as he balances the celebration of writers, social workers, leaders, mythic characters and historical figures from the Sabar community with a clear-sighted analysis, supported by exhaustive data, of the factors that lead to the marginalization and continuing impoverishment of the community during the colonial and post-colonial period.

The book will provide rich context for students and lay readers of literature of or about the "Denotified Tribes" (DNTs). Bhakta gives an account, combining historiography with storytelling, not only of how Sanskritisation and regional conflicts led to the gradual decline of the power of the Sabar rulers of Eastern India, but also how their fierce resistance to British rule led to them being tagged as one of the so-called "Criminal Tribes" of India. Bhakta juxtaposes the belief that the

ire of deities such as Shiva and Chandi was behind the community's suffering, with the account of how the systemic socio-economic neglect of the community by successive regimes led to the community spiraling into debt traps and "criminal" activities. His sensitive account of how this perpetuates the stigma of criminality and subsequent victimization in the lives of many innocent Lodha Sabars provides much-needed frame for understanding DNT writing such as *Budhan*, Dakxin Bajrange Chhara's powerful play about the death in police custody of Budhan Sabar, arbitrarily arrested for a crime he did not commit, and the protests by the community, civil society and the writer Mahasweta Devi that prevented the police from burying the case.

The book has a staggering amount of detail that indicates the intensive fieldwork done by Bhakta. The reader not only learns about the different ways in which the Lodha Sabar people eke out a living, including seasonal activities and collaborations with other communities, but also learns which local trains and railways stations are used by various villagers during these activities. The impact of these activities on the families is also documented, including the tensions around expenditure on "nesha" or addictive substances by householders and the seasonal cycles of borrowing money. The fascinating descriptions of the hunting, foraging, sericulture and other work done by the Lodha Sabars of different areas help us understand the intimate relationship of these communities to their ecosystems and the way in which they impact the land and its resources.

Prahlad Kumar Bhakta documents the changes coming over the community as it negotiates its relationship with other tribes such as the Santhals as well as non-tribal communities. He notes both the hostility faced by his community from them as well as the increasing support from more progressive members of the Santhal community and West Bengal's civil society. He acknowledges the contribution of noted Lodha Sabar individuals in many fields, ranging from the cultural to the educational, and the way in which the community's life is gradually changing as it negotiates postcolonial modernity. At the same time, he speaks in a critical tone of the general resistance among many Sabar individuals to the demands for greater 'productivity' in work – something that one might read against the grain as resistance to the demands of capitalist regimes. Bhakta's description of the various traditional activities of the community indicates that the members of the community work extremely hard when required, but refuse to fall into the capitalist trap of relentless productivity. The poverty of the Lodha Sabars is not because of their indolence, but the systemic oppression they have faced, and the continuing exploitation by moneylenders and employers.

Perhaps one of the most detailed studies of cultural change in the Lodha Sabar community is in the area of religion. Bhakta argues that many major Sabar deities were appropriated into the Hindu pantheon, and the Hinduized forms were subsequently imposed upon the Sabars. Bhakta shows how there were internal conflicts among the Sabars about the acceptance of Hinduism. The many overlaps

between Hinduism and the Sabars' religion are traced meticulously by Bhakta, for example, the appropriation of Jagannath by Hindu Kings, and the way in which various rituals in the worship of Jagannath compulsorily require the presence of Sabar participants. The extensive spread of Vaishnavism among the Lodha Sabars is highlighted by Bhakta, and he provides many examples of the ways in which archetypes such as Rama and Krishna feature in the Lodha cultural imagination.

Bhakta devotes an entire chapter to the songs of the Lodha Sabars. There are songs which are secular in nature, and others, such as the Vaishnavite songs, which deal with religious subjects. The songs are testimony to both the persistent indigenous culture of the community and the changes they are facing. There are songs of love, loss, pain and longing, and these help to bring alive the everyday struggles of the community. Bhakta documents the performative traditions of the Lodha Sabars, as well as various cultural and religious rituals, taking care to describe the role played by Lodha Sabar women in them. Apart from songs, Bhakta describes the material culture of the Sabars, the unique nature of their places of dwelling, the implements and objects made and used by the community, and the use of particular objects in their ceremonies and festivals.

Bhakta's book is an important resource – and his final contribution before his passing away – to the understanding of the indigenous tribes of Bengal, especially the severely marginalized so-called “Primitive” and “Denotified” tribes. The book was his labour of love for his community, and provides an excellent example of how auto-ethnographic work can be done from within disempowered communities, creating not only a body of work that records dying traditions and practices, and which can be used by future researchers, but also provides the data and vision statements that will help in effective and sensitized policy making for Adivasi and DNT communities.