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Q6(c)

Discuss the contribution of P.K. Bhowmick in decriminalising the status of the Lodha tribe.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Anthropology GS 2 · 15 marks · Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization

1.1 Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization-Prehistoric (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Neolithic-Chalcolithic), Protohistoric (Indus Civilization). Pre-Harappan, Harappan and post-Harappan cultures. Contributions of the tribal cultures to Indian civilization.

Core demand of the question

- State who the Lodha are and how they were criminalised
- Describe **P. K. Bhowmick's** fieldwork, advocacy and institutional work
- Show what decriminalisation meant legally and socially
- Be honest about incomplete rehabilitation

Revision summary

Lodhas of south-west Bengal were notified under the **Criminal Tribes Act** and later denotified, remaining a PVTG.

P. K. Bhowmick's ethnography showed crime statistics as a product of land and forest loss plus police labelling.

He combined research with cooperatives, education and state advocacy.

Decriminalisation is legal repeal plus social destigmatisation; the second is unfinished.

He stands in the Indian tradition that refused racial criminal types.

Introduction

P. K. Bhowmick of Calcutta University spent decades with the **Lodha** (also Lodha-Savara) of western Bengal's jungle mahals. He showed that their "criminality" was a **colonial label**, not a racial trait, and he worked to dismantle that status in law and in the village.

Body

Criminalisation

The **Criminal Tribes Act, 1871** (amended 1911, 1924) notified communities as hereditary criminals, with roll-call, restricted movement and police stigma. Lodhas of Midnapore-Jhargram, forest-edge people with hunting, gathering and later wage work, were so notified. **After Independence the Act** was repealed (1952) and groups became **Denotified Tribes (DNTs)**. Stigma, police suspicion and poverty continued. Lodhas are listed as **PVTG** in West Bengal - vulnerability after criminalisation, not a primitive essence.

Bhowmick's contribution

Bhowmick's ethnography (The Lodhas of West Bengal and later papers) reconstructed Lodha economy, kinship and the **history of notification**. He argued that theft and dacoity statistics were produced by **land loss, forest closure and police expectation**, a labelling loop. He combined **participant fieldwork** with **applied anthropology**: cooperatives, education, settlement, and representation to the state. He helped make the Lodha a subject of **welfare anthropology** rather than of the thana.

- **Decriminalising status meant:** (1) insisting legally that Lodhas are citizens and a Scheduled Tribe/PVTG, not a crime caste; (2) changing police and neighbour practice; (3) building **livelihood alternatives** so that survival did not confirm the stereotype. Bhowmick's students and the **Lodha** development literature in Bengal follow that programme.

Limits

Denotification did not end encounter killings, bonded work or school dropout. **Xaxa's wider DNT point applies: without land and dignity, a repealed Act still lives in the file. Bhowmick did not "save" a people by himself; he reframed** them for the university and the secretariat. That reframing is the anthropological contribution: from **criminal tribe** to **dispossessed forest people**.

Place him with **S. C. Roy** (who humanised Mundas) and against Risley's typed criminality. Ghurye's assimilation is not Bhowmick's path; Bhowmick sought **specific rehabilitation**, closer to Elwin's protection without isolation as romance.

Flow diagram

Criminal Tribes Act -> Lodha stigma
 Bhowmick fieldwork -> DNT PVTG welfare
 DNT PVTG welfare -> Incomplete dignity

Conclusion

- **Bhowmick decriminalised the Lodha in knowledge and in advocacy:** he replaced a hereditary crime type with a history of forest dispossession and a PVTG welfare claim. Law had already repealed the **Criminal Tribes Act**; he worked on the stigma that survived the repeal.

Facts & figures

Criminal Tribes Act 1871

Colonial law notifying communities as hereditary criminals; repealed in 1952; groups reclassified as denotified.

Lodha PVTG

The Lodha of West Bengal are on the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group list.

P. K. Bhowmick

Calcutta University anthropologist; long-term Lodha ethnography and applied rehabilitation work.

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