

## **Identity and the Way of Life among the Layeks in the *Junglemahal* Region of West Bengal**

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### **ABSTRACT**

An ethnic group is a group of population with their own culture, language and territory. There is no worldwide accepted definition of the term “Indigenous People” but they have some unique characteristic features such as small population, own language, own cultural traditions, own land and specific geographical area and maintain their own identity. They are living in isolation or a cluster may be a part of the larger society or living in isolation. Since time immemorial many indigenous communities lived in the Junglemahal area of Bankura, Jhargram, Paschim Medinipur and Purulia district. They have their unique history and culture. They have their distinct way of life. The present paper focuses on the identity and the way of life of the Layek, a very little known community in Junglemahal area. The paper also highlights their population structure, education, occupational status, and other way of life including socio-economic aspects, socio-cultural aspects as well as socio-religious aspects. As they have a little historical background it is very important to know their present status.

**Key Words :** Ethnic Identity, Layek, Indigenous, Junglemahal, Culture

### **INTRODUCTION**

Indigenous communities have their unique ethnic identity. Ethnic identity describes the relationship that exists between an individual with his community where the individual believes he or she has originated from a common ancestor. The indigenous people also believe that they have a common characteristics and unique socio cultural experiences. It can exist at the individual, family, group or community level. In India the Indigenous people are known as tribes or ethnic people. They have a common cultural identity, common geographical region where they lived and share their own traditions and customs. Their cultural tradition bound with geographical region and they generally are regarded as the ethnic people of a territory or region.

There is no unique definition of the term indigenous or ethnic people in all over the world but they have certain

characteristic features which accepted worldwide by different academicians and researchers. Indigenous people or communities have their own territory where they lived time immemorial. They have strong connection with outside societies but also maintain their distinct culture. They practice their age old traditional subsistence economy. They have a distinctive culture and worldview which differs from dominant cultural pattern. They transmitted their tradition and customs orally to their future generations.

As we all know that the term culture is a broad phenomenon which encompasses with identity. Turner (1987) has pointed out in his article that any community's culture is always recognized with identity and difference. Alan Barnard (2006) has described in his writings that the term indigeneity is connected with identity and cultural difference. According to him it is the most important characteristic features to identify ethnic indigeneity.

The present work has been dealt with the situation and ethnic identity of a little known group of people which is known as Layek. They are not regarded any list of Scheduled community by the Indian constitution. They have their own culture and have their way of life. The Layak is a group of people which denotes as a country soldier. They mainly lived in different remote blocks of *Junglemahal* region of Jhargram, Paschim Medinipur and Bankura districts in the state of West Bengal. According to Chatterjee (1976) “the *Bagree Rajya* with its capital Garhbeta also lay in this jungle-tract, inhabited by some low-class Hindu tribes *viz.*, Bagdee, Layek, Lodha, Khaira, Majhi, Sabar etc., lived only on jungle-products.” According to Bhowmick (1963) the name Bhugta, Bhakta, Mallick, Kotal, Laik, Layek or Nayek, Digar, Paramanik, Dandapat or Bag, Ari or Ahari and Bhuiya or Bhunia are identified as totemistic clans of the Lodhas. He also noted that the term Nayak literally means a leader, but Laik or Layek denotes a country soldier. According to Chatterjee (1986), “...in 1806, the whole Bagri Pargana was in the vortex of a rebellion. The leader of this rebellion was Achal Singh whom the whole community of the aboriginal people *i.e.*, the Layeks of Bagri Pargana (Rajya) took as their ‘God-sent’ master. These Layeks were also the ancient occupants of the jungle lands”. In 1816 the rebellion was finally destroyed and the rebels were cruelly killed by the British Raj. Afterwards some other rebels including the fore-fathers of present day’s Layek people took shelter in the houses of various Caste/Community people living in and around the area which is at present called *Junglemahal*.

Since the last hundred years these group of people fight against their identity and rights. The present paper tries to focuses on the present scenario of the Layek’s including their way of life which comprises socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-religious aspects.

## METHODOLOGY

### Area, population and methods of the study:

The studied group of people lived in different blocks of Jhargram, Paschim Medinipur and Bankura districts of West Bengal state in India. Majority of their habitation falls under the *Junglemahal* region. Besides this they are also distributed in other districts such as Purulia, Bardhaman and Hooghly. The vast majority of the area covered by forest or *Jungle* in the above mentioned district is known as *Junglemahal* which cover almost

23 blocks and spread over 8000 sqkm. Many scheduled tribes and ethnic group of people lived here since time immemorial with their age old traditional culture and backward socio-economic conditions.

As the no Census records have been available till now so, it could not be possible the exact figure of the Layek population. But according to the community members their estimated population is about more than 10 lakhs. Their main concentration is in the different blocks of Bankura district and Paschim Medinipur district. The Blocks are Saranga, Raipur, Simlapal, Kotolpur, Taldangra, Garhbeta-I, Garhbeta-II, Garhbeta-III, Salboni, Binpur-I etc. According to their folk belief said that they originated from the saliva of the sacred cow ‘*Kamdhenu*’. They told that they are the warriors group of people and born to protect the sacred cow ‘*Kamdhenu*’. The documentary evidences shows that they came from the Chota Nagpur region several years back as the hired soldiers of kings of Malla.

Total five villages have been selected for the study. These villages are located in Saranga, Simlapal, Taldangra, Garhbeta-I and Garhbeta-II blocks. Around 114 families have been studied during the study.

**Table 1 : Distribution of the studied families**

District	Block	Villages	Family Surveyed
Bankura	Sarenga	Kuldiha	23
	Simlapal	Pathordoba	15
	Taldangra	Saldaha	22
Paschim	Garhbeta- II	Adalia	28
Medinipur	Garhbeta- I	Kosthogora	26

Out of studied 114 families 60 families have been resided in Bankura district and 54 families have been resided in Paschim Medinipur district in the state of West Bengal.

### Basic amenities of the studies families:

This section deals with the basic amenities of the studied families. Basic amenities includes types of houses, sources of drinking water, type of fuel using for cooking, cooking place and presence or absence of electricity, toilet etc.

The Table 2 depicts the basic amenities of the studied families. The studied villages are multi-ethnic where several castes live side by side such as Goyala, Namasudra, Teli, Tanti, Sadgop, Bauri, Ruidas, and tribal

communities like Santal and Lodha. Total 87.72% houses are *Kuccha* houses which are made up of mud mixed with bamboo split. The wall is made either by bamboo split mixed with mud or mud. The roof is made either by tin, asbestos or straw. Floor is made by mud. Majority of the houses are single storied but few double storied houses are also found.

Table 2 : Basic Amenities of the Families	
Types of Amenities	No. of Family (n=114)
<b>Types of Houses</b>	
Kuchha	87.72
Semi-pucca	12.28
Pucca	0.00
<b>Source of Drinking Water</b>	
Tube Well	55.26
Tap Water	17.54
Well	27.19
River/Pond	0.00
<b>Type of Fuel Using for Cooking</b>	
Wood	67.54
Crop Residues	25.44
Others	7.02
<b>Cooking Place</b>	
Inside the house	83.33
Outside the house	16.67
<b>Electrification</b>	
Present	57.02
Absent	42.98

The families fetch their drinking water from tube well, tap water and well. No one is fetching their drinking water from river or any other sources. Total 55.26% families are using tube well as source of drinking water, which is most common source of water in the studied areas, another 27.19% and 17.54% families fetch their drinking water from well and tap water, respectively. The forest departments supply the tap water facilities for the studied villages and families.

They use wood and crop residues as mode of fuel for cooking. Total 67.54% families use wood, 25.44% families use crop residues and only 7.02% use other mode

of fuel for cooking. Majority of them have a separate place for kitchen which placed with inside their house (83.33%) and only 16.67% have not any separate kitchen place. They placed their hearth in the courtyard for cooking. There is not enough space in the house and in the living room. In the kitchen garden the family members grow little amount of vegetables for their own. Living room consists of mainly one windows and one door. Families don't have any separate toilet. For natures call the visited nearby forest or open lands. The approaching rode towards health centre, educational institution and market place is very poor in condition and made up of mud which is inaccessible during the rainy season. All the villages have primary level school but for higher study the students have to cover a long distance.

The study will be conducted on the basis of both primary and secondary data. In the context of primary data the villages will be selected in remote blocks of Jungle Mahal region where the families of the studied communities lived. Anthropological methods will be followed to collect the information. The basic information of the village and the people will be collected with the help of census and interview schedules. The socio-economic and socio-cultural profile of the people will be drawn using the interview schedules. The field-work was conducted in various phases in the year 2015 and 2016.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The studied people and their way of life:

The present study was conducted in 5 villages of Bankura and Paschim Medinipur districts. A total of 114 families have been covered during the study. Table 3 shows the distribution of total population on the basis of sex.

Among the total studied families 51.26% are males and 48.74% are females. So, the number of male percentage is high than the female population in the Layak community. The sex ratio is 951 among the community, which is very much good in respect of total Indian population.

The Table 4 depicts the educational level of the studied population. The literacy rate of the studied people

Table 3: Total studied population on the basis of sex						
Districts	Males	%	Females	%	Total	%
Bankura	143	51.07	137	48.93	280	100.00
Paschim Medinipur	122	51.48	115	48.52	237	100.00
Total	265	51.26	252	48.74	517	100.00

**Table 4 : Literacy status of the studied population**

Types	Males	%	Females	%	Total	%
Illiterate	126	47.55	152	60.32	278	53.77
Literate	139	52.45	100	39.68	239	46.23
Total	265	100.00	252	100.00	517	100.00

is 46.23%. Literacy rate of the males are higher than the females. Very few of them have been found to completed their Madhyamik examination and continue higher studies

The Table 5 depicts that the occupational status of the studied families. Majority of the male workers have engaged in labour work (70.14%) and female workers have engaged in collection of Minor Forest Products (55.14%). They were traditionally food gatherers and skillful hunters. Their fore-fathers worked as hired soldiers of *Malla* Kingdom. But today they have left their traditional occupation and accepted all types of modern occupational pursuits. Presently they are engaged in various occupations like cultivation, tilling soil, labourer including agricultural labour and collection of Minor Forest Products. They collected different forest items in various seasons. Mainly women folk are engaged in this type of occupation. They collect Minor Forest Products such as Sal (*Shorea robusta*) leaves, fire wood, honey, Mushroom (*Chattu*), wild potato, different fruits, etc. The annual family income of the studied population is very low comprising to other nearby caste and communities.

There are no sub-groups or sub-castes among the Layek community. They have different totemistic as well as eponymous clans, which are exogamous in nature. Marriage between the same clan is strictly prohibited. During the study total 6 clans have been identified. These are totemistic in nature. The clan names are as follows *Salrishi* (Fish), *Sandilya* or *Teskona* (Small bird), *Kachima* (Tortoise), *Latur* (Fish), *Bakrishi* (Small Bird) and *Gulgorishi* (Small Fish).

They have their own customs and rituals during the birth, marriage and death ceremonies. Now a day the delivery have take place in local health centre or nearby hospitals. But earlier it took place in house premises with the help of *Dai ma* or midwives. A separate room is

selected for childbirth. The male members are not allowed to enter the room during delivery. During the pregnancy period the pregnant woman generally stays in the house premises and follows some taboo or restriction. The *Sadh Bhakon* ceremony is observed on 5th or 7th month of the pregnancy period by the family members. The ASHA worker of the local Public Health Centre can also performs the role of midwife but the distance of PHC is very far so, they prefer to take help from *Daima*. The umbilical cord is cut with the bamboo splits by the midwife and bury in front of the door where the child is born. Five days after childbirth a ritual is organised called *Panchuta*. A pollution period of 9 or 21 days is observed among them. After pollution period, purification ceremony is held where the *Napit* (barber) shaves the child by cutting his/her hair and nail. The name-giving ceremony is organised by the family members after 21 days. Generally the name giving ceremony is done by the local Brahmin. The first rice feeding ritual is done after the six months for a boy child and after five month for girl child. The eldest maternal uncle feeds the baby. A feast is offered to the invited relatives and the community members. All the relatives offer gifts to the baby.

There are three types of marriages have been observed among them viz; *Sammandhi Biha* or arranged marriage, *Paliya Biha* or love marriage and *Sanga Biha* or widow remarriage which are mainly endogamous in nature. The average age of marriage is very low in case of girl. The middleman locally called *Ghatak* who negotiates the marriage. In earlier times they had a system of bride price but now-a-days they take dowry. In the system of dowry they prefer to take money and cloths. Except in the months of *Chaitra* (March -April), *Bhadra* (August - September), *Kartik* (October - November), and *Pous* (December - January) marriage

**Table 5 : Occupational status**

Categories	Agriculture	Labour work	Business	Collection MFP	Service	Total
Male	15 (10.42)	101 (70.14)	5(3.47)	19 (13.19)	4 (2.78)	144(100)
Female	0(0)	46(42.99)	2(1.87)	59(55.14)	0(0)	107(100)
Total	15(5.98)	147(58.57)	7(2.79)	78(31.08)	4(1.59)	251(100)

Note: Figures within parenthesis denotes percentage

can be held throughout the year. During their marriage they follow the rituals like *Pakka -Dekha*, *Nannimukh*, *Gai Haldi*, *Ashirbad* etc. As they don't have their own community priest, the *Goswami-Bamun* conducts the whole marriage ritual. They have the custom of *Sindurdan*. In this rite the bridegroom smear the vermilion on the forehead of the bride with an iron made *Janti*. In the *Chadnatola*, a fire is set with *Sal (Shorea robusta)* wood where the bride and bridegroom move around the fire for seven times. On the next day morning the new couple return to the bridegroom's house where several rites and games are performed. On the next day a feast is organised by the bridegrooms where all the relatives are invited. The *Sanga* marriage or widow re-marriage is practised by the members of Layek community. After death of one of the spouse they can marry another time with the permission of the local village council. No ritual or rites are attached with this marriage type.

They generally cremate the dead body. They have a different cremation ground which is totally separated from other communities' cremation ground. They carry their dead body with a *Choutal*, which is made up of bamboo. A *Tulsi (Ocimum sanctum)* tree and a mud structure are prepared by the elder male members of the family which they carry to the cremation ground. The sons of the deceased person and other male members of the family carry the dead body to the cremation ground. Members of the other community do not participate in the funeral procession. The eldest son set fire three times on the face of the deceased person. They keep the corpse with head directed towards north. Before touching fire the eldest son smear some *Ghee* on the face of the deceased person. After set fire on the face of the corpse he never looks back. After the cremation they go to the nearby water sources for bathing where the eldest son bury the mud structure and plant the *Tulsi (Ocimum sanctum)* tree for the peace of the deceased soul and return home. A pollution period of 12 days observed among them. The *Sradha* ceremony is performed on 13<sup>th</sup> day after death by the local Brahmin. In that day a feast is organised by the deceased's son.

They profess Hinduism as their religion. Local Brahmin, who known as *Goswami* serves as their priest. They observe different religious ceremonies like *Monosa*, *Bhairab*, *Harikara*, *Sitala*, *Dashhara* and also participated in *Durga Puja*, *Kali Puja* and *Saraswati Puja*. Along with they also observe certain indigenous festival such as *Sikar Festival/Bon Puja*. In

these ceremonies and festival they offer fowls with certain colour to their deities.

**Table 6 : Annual religious ceremonies**

Name of the Festival	Time
Monosa Puja	May-June
Bhairab Puja	January - February
Harikara Puja	December- January
Sitala Puja	June - July
Bhairab Sannacini Puja	July-August
Sikar Festival/Bon Puja	January - February

There is a *Monosa Than* (shrine) in each family, which is worshiped by the head of the family members. *Bhairab Puja* occurs in the day of *Makar Sankantri*. A separate sacred place is present near the house premises where this worship is done by the family members. This place consists of different trees with some terracotta cult like elephant, horse etc., smeared with vermilion. A red colour fowl is sacrificed in that place during the worship. In the day of *Paus Sankantri* in the month of *Paus* (December- January) *Harikara Puja* festival is observed in every household. The family members performed this ritual because on that day they eat new rice, which is grown in their agricultural field. *Bhairab Sannacini Puja* is a village festival. The local priest performed the whole worship. The essential ingredients of this worship include *Hanria* (Rice-beer), Fowl, *Ganja*, flower and some rice. A red colour fowl is sacrificed during this ritual. Only male members of the family can participate in this ritual.

After the day of *Makar Sankantri* in the month of *Magh* (January - February) the Layek males enter into the nearest forest for ceremonial hunting. Before entering into the forest they worship the forest God called '*Bonodebata*' with sacrificing a red colour fowl. An aged Layek male perform the whole ritual. After pleasing the forest God they enter into the forest for hunting. This *Puja* is called *Bon Puja/Sikar* festival.

**Summary and conclusion:**

The earlier studies and records proved that they lived in the *Junglemahal* region and took part in different movements against British Raj. They mainly lived in forested tracts of Bankura and Paschim Medinipur region. Few of them are also found in the districts of Purulia, Hooghly and Bardhaman.

The studied villages are situated far away from

urban centres and they lack basic infrastructural facilities like educational institution, health centres, market, bank etc. The village roads are *Kachha*. Majority of them lives in *Kachha* houses. All the houses do not have sanitation facility and about half of the families do not have electricity at home. Since they reside near the forest, they collect Minor Forest Products for their survival. Most of the men and women are working as labour and few of them are engaged in cultivation and collection of minor forest produces. The annual income of majority of the families is very low. Their poor economic condition affects their daily life, food habits, children's education and other spheres of life. They have their own rites and rituals related to the birth, marriage and death, but those are influenced by Hindu tradition. They profess Hinduism as religion. They worship Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Since the time immemorial these people lived in the forested region of the studied district, they have their own life, own culture and own way of life. During the age of

globalization and assimilation they can hold a separate ethnic identity which they brought from their forefathers.

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