

Chapter-3

Situating Empowerment and Cooperation Below: The Success of Sustainable Forest Management

1 Introduction

The present chapter has 9 sections including the present one. Barring the 9th section which is the concluding one we have seven sections from 2 to 8. Section 2 profiles the forest villages in Jalpaiguri District. Section 3 looks at the field situation of empowerment through sustainable forest management practices and details the forest communities and institutional aspects of Joint Forest Management. Section 4 details different aspects of forestry operations and section 5 links them with the issues of livelihood, empowerment and eco-system degradation. Section 6 is devoted to the nature and extent of empowerment through cooperation from the above and section 7 introduces the opposite perspective of empowerment through cooperation from the below. Finally section 8 attempts to measure empowerment in terms of cooperation and resistance at the field level.

2. Forest Villages in Jalpaiguri District: A Brief Profile

Most of the studies on sustainable Forest Management in North Bengal concentrated in its first phase between early 90's to the early 2000. All the studies in or before 2000 in North Bengal reported about the gross failure of the programme in the region which has been stated in the previous chapter. The present chapter deals with the progress of SFM in Jalpaiguri District mainly in the Xth Plan period in its historical context while investigating the status of empowerment of the forest dwellers in the region. To understand the degree of success of sustainable forest management the Chapter goes beyond the participatory framework under JFM and focuses on the aspect of cooperation between forest department and forest

dwellers and its problems in the field situation. The study situates the issue of cooperation in the context of over all forest governance around forest eco-system in the forest villages of Jalpaiguri District. The status of empowerment through cooperation has been examined in terms of usufruct and revenue sharing, level and degree of participation in the forest protection as well as regeneration activities and overall livelihood development of the villagers under different schemes as initiated by the government. Instead of viewing empowerment merely as by product of the developmental process the study understands it as the process of active involvement of the villagers in transcending their present mode of living while describing disempowerment as the process of alienation emerging out from the praxis of collaboration between the villagers and the Department. Now before going to reveal the actual state of empowerment and practice of sustainable forest management the chapter presents a brief overview of the forest villages in North Bengal which we have dealt in detail later on Chapter-4.

The establishment of forest villages in the District primarily was started during the fire protection regime in order to solve the problem of labor scarcity before the colonial forest management. With the adoption of taungya system the forest villages became absolutely essential. The forest villages were comprised mainly of the tribal people some of them were indigenous like Mech, Toto, Rava, Garo, Tamang, Lepcha, Bhutia etc. and others were migrated from different parts of the country like Orao, Coal, Bheel, Munda, Khasia etc. According to the Working Plan of the Jalpaiguri Forest Division, 'the scheme of taungya sowing allowed the cultivations to settle in the reserved forests for the first time in 1902. By 1904 the establishment of forest villages became a regular policy and very large numbers of households were allowed to come in.'¹³ The Forest Department was heavily dependent upon those forest villagers for cultural operations, fire protection and

¹³ Seventh Working Plan for the Jalpaiguri Forest Division 1970-71 to 1989-90, Vol-I, Directorate of Forest, Govt. of West Bengal, Coochbehar, 1976, p-62

artificial regeneration as the villagers were found very useful particularly in the context of difficulty to get outside labor for those activities. Initially the villagers used to cultivate a large amount of land and there were no limit in livestock population per family but in 1912 rules were made which limited the cultivation to 5 acres and the cattle to one pair of plough bullocks and two milk cows for each household.¹⁴ Besides, land for cultivation and rearing livestock the villagers were being offered some concessions and facilities like limited access over usufructs, free grazing etc. in exchange of their service for the Department. Each household in the village had to sign an agreement in every year issued by the Department which was continued till 1966. Such kinds of agreement contained detail provisions of privileges and duties of the forest villagers while compelling them to provide free and compulsory labor for the Department and under no circumstances the villagers could violate the agreement.

However, against the backdrop of a historical movement by the forest villagers against the taungya system new rules were framed during 1969 and practice of establishing new villages were completely stopped. In this period the problem of unregistered villagers arose in an unprecedented scale due to the growing numbers of second and third generation settlers who were not recognized by the Department and consequently were deprived from activities and privileges offered by the Forest Department. The 1972 Wild life Act and 180 Forest Conservation Act put them further into miserable conditions as those choked their regular employment opportunities in the forestry operation. During 90's those villages were brought under the JFM Programme but the evaluation of the First Phase of the Programme indicated that it failed to uplift their livelihood condition to a significant level. According to the latest record there are 170 forest villages in the three districts of North Bengal including 76 villages in Jalpaiguri District (See

¹⁴ Ibid

Appendix IV) where the second phase of the Programme was introduced under Xth Plan period (See Table 10).

Table 10: Division wise Resume of Forest villages of West Bengal

Districts	Division	No. of forest Villages	No. of Regd. Family	Total permanent Population	Tribal Population	Area under possession of Forest Villages (ha)
Jalpaiguri	Jalpaiguri	21	433	5158	3888	943.60
	Wildlife -II	2	32	355	355	100.05
	BTR (E)	16	354	5582	3882	623.41
	BTR (W)	21	735	9230	7248	1078.76
	Coochbehar	12	290	5098	3861	685.00
	Baikunthapur	4	150	2061	1615	125.54
Total	6 Divisions	76	1994	27484	20849	3547.36
Darjeeling	Darjeeling	27	355	3418	2657	315.28
	Kurseong	22	416	4224	3538	243.03
	Kalimpong	29	801	6187	1542	495.71
	Wildlife-I	13	290	2779	1501	126.71
	Total	4 Divisions	91	1862	16608	9238
Coochbehar	COBSF	3	60	550	550	101.00
Total	11 Divisions	170	3916	44642	30637	4829.09

Source: West Bengal State Forest Report, 2005-06

3.1. Empowerment through SFM in the Field Situation

Most of the forest villages in the study area of the Jalpaiguri District established before independence as an offshoot of taungya System introduced by the British. The villages are mostly populated by the tribal communities like Rava, Orao, Munda, Bhutia, Nepaly with religious belonging of Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. The field study has been conducted in the seven forest villages of the District comprising four FPCs and three EDCs under the four largest forest divisions including three wildlife divisions (Table 11). A lot of experimentation has so far been made to promote sustainable forest management in those villages. As for example in the earlier years a number of forest villages were brought under the JFM together with the revenue villages though later they have been separated and exclusively forest village FPCs are formed. Further most of the FPCs comprising two or more than two forest villages earlier have been decomposed into village based FPCs in the later

period. Moreover, in a few specific cases the EDCs in the forest villages in the fringe of Protected Area have been transformed into FPCs in the late 90,s period. All those experimentation leads to instability in practices of JFM in those villages. Besides, four out of six divisions in the districts are wild-life divisions and fall under Protected Area of National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries where regular timber operation has been stopped by the Department following the Supreme Court Order. Consequently revenue or usufruct sharing from firewood and poles becomes a rare opportunity before the forest villagers which has been considered as the basis behind entire participatory exercise of forest protection under JFM in the State of west Bengal. However, despite those impeding factors the forest villages under Jalpaiguri Forest Division shows relatively better results than the other divisions in the District in which Reti Forest Village FPC has been awarded as the best FPC in North Bengal (excluding hills) during 2008. In this context the empowerment of the villagers in the field situation has been studied in its relation to sustainable forest protection, sustainable forestry and sustainable livelihood which together comes under the rubric of sustainable forest management.

Table 11: Brief Profile of the Villages under Study

Name of the Village	Division	JFMC	Communities	Religion	Total Population	Tribal Population	Area (ha)
Khuklung	Jalpaiguri	FPC	Rava, Adivasi	Christianity, Hindu	310	310	48
Gossainhat		FPC	Rava, Adivasi	Christianity, Hindu	345	325	65
Garo Basti	BTR (West) Wildlife	FPC	Rava, Adivasi, Nepali	Christianity, Hindu	1043	1043	80
Pani Jhora		FPC	Rava, Adivasi	Christianity, Hindu	202	202	35
Santra Bari	BTR (East) Wildlife	EDC	Nepali	Christianity, Hindu	660	280	10
Lepchakha		EDC	Nepali, Bhutia	Buddhist, Hindu	356	---	26
Andu Basti	Coochbehar (Wildlife)	EDC	Rava	Hindu	338	336	48

Source: Constructed from Field Work and Annual Reports of concerned divisions

3.2 Sustainable Forest Protection and Empowerment

JFM Programme has been introduced in those forest villages with an objective to protect forest and wildlife with the involvement of the forest communities while empowering them financially through usufruct sharing and administratively by involving them in the decision making process. Among the seven forest village FPC/EDC three forest villages FPC/EDC have been reconstituted in the later period and all the FPC/EDC have been brought under new JFMC Resolution in 2009. In the Jalpaiguri Forest Division the Khuklung and Gossainhat FPC have been formed during 2006 which were under Madhy Khuntimari FPC and Dakshin Khuntimari FPC respectively since 1992. Under Buxa Tiger Reserve (BTR)-West the trial and error process continued with the JFM committee at Garo Basti. Earlier in 1992 it was under Garo-Pampu EDC jointly with the Pampu Basti Forest Village and in 1996 it became Garo-Pampu FPC and after 1998 the FPC was divided into two FPCs and the new Garo Basti FPC has been evolved. At present Lepcha Kha forest village under BTR (East) is the only forest village which doesn't have independent EDC and remains under Buxa Duar EDC till date.

So far as the working of JFM committees are concerned all the villages experienced a defunct period marked by complete absence of the committee functioning in terms of General body/Executive Body meeting and patrolling activities. Villagers accused the Department for lacking initiative as the main reason behind the incident. Patrolling activities which were started soon after the formation of the committees gradually became slow down and now has been completely stopped altogether. It has been said by the villagers that when they raised certain issues regarding their security and compensation against injury or murder of the

villagers by the timber mafia during patrolling the Department put a stop into the whole exercise. The only positive thing in the forest protection activities is the establishment of a network of information by the Department with the help of the villagers. General Body Meeting or Executive Body Meeting held irregularly according to the wish of the concerned Beat Officer. The villagers hardly take part in the decision making process and even if any one talk to the meeting against the forest officials they were intentionally being excluded in the next meeting. The Department did not show any importance also to the suggestion made by the Panchayat member elected from the village. Usufruct sharing or revenue sharing is extremely irregular and average frequency of usufruct sharing is reported as twice in near about 20 years. Moreover in many cases villagers even don't know that how much percentage of total revenue or usufruct they are getting exactly from the Department. Micro-planning exercise has been taken place only in a few villages and following that only those villages could accumulate a handsome amount of fund. JFM support activities under FDA fund has been disbursed without any follow-up planning and consultation with the forest villagers. In short the over all performance and functioning of JFM is not consistent with its stated objectives and status of empowerment of the villagers is more or less disappointing except the fund accumulation under micro-plan exercise (See Table 12). Nevertheless it has been observed that in almost all the villages the exercise of JFM has been improved in terms of FDA funding in the developmental activities and revenue sharing in the Xth Plan period particularly in comparison with the earlier status in the IXth Plan. Against the backdrop the following section would deal with the specific experiences at the village level obtained from Focus Groups interviews together with the general experiences from the household survey in detail.

Table 12: JFM Activities in the Forest Villages under Study as on Nov, 2009

Items	Villages	Khuklung	Gossainhat	Garo basti	Panijhora	Santra Bari	Lepchakha	Andu Basti
Defunct period of JFM		1991-2003	No defunct period	2002-2007	1992-98	1990-98	1992-2009	2001-08
Usufruct/Revenue sharing		10 stack firewood in 2007 and Rs 9,522 in 2009	Rs, 1400 in 2007, Rs 7000 in 2008 and Rs, 38000 in 2009	Only Rs 90,000 in 2009	Twice till 2009 @25% of the total Revenue	None	None	None
Frequency of AGM		Once in a year since 2006	Once in a year	Once in a year	Once in three years	Once in two years	Twice	Only one meeting
Frequency of Patrolling		2 months in 1998	1992-93	2000-2002	1992-94	7-14 days/year	No Patrolling	Six months in 2001
Micro Planning		No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Total Fund under the JFMC's		Rs 9,522	Rs, 48,000	Rs 5, 00000	Rs. 1,65,000	Rs2,40,000	-----	Nothing
JFM support activities and village development under FDA		3 pumpset, one power tiller, Community Hall, Shop, Culvert, Kanchha Rasta etc.	Power tiller sewingmachines, 5 houses, 5 latrines, 1shop, community hall , culvert, kanchha rasta Electricity etc.	Piggary, Poltry , Cattle, 1 Bamboo Bridge and Electricity	1Pumpset, 1 solar light, 23 ponds, 9 houses, 8 Sanitation , Canal, Electricity etc.	Piggary, poltry, 2 km pipe line for water, 6 Water Resorvi or, 6 common Toilet, culvert, etc	6 bridges, 3 Solar Panel and 1 water reservoir with	1Tractor, 1Pumpset, Spray machine, whim machine, and 26 house repaired

Source: Field work

3.3 Meeting, Patrolling and Functioning of FPCs/EDCs

In Jalpaiguri Forest Division both the forest villages of Khuklung and Gossainhat were brought under JFM in 1991 through the formation of Madhya Khuntimari and Dakshin Khuntimar FPC. The FPCs comprising both the forest villages and the revenue villages in the forest fringe area divided the forest compartments for patrolling and protection activities. Dakshin Khuntimari FPC was functioning well as the Annual General Meetings were held regularly and the villagers of Gossainhat under the FPC started patrolling along with the revenue villagers which continued till

1997. The Khuklung Basti under the Madhya Khuntimari FPC, on the other, did not take part in patrolling for a single day as the Beat officer of the concerned FPC did not take any initiative for meeting, patrolling or functioning of the FPC at all. Instead a large tract of forests at Vanderkura under the Madhya Khuntimari FPC area was found to have been felled illicitly by the FPC member from the revenue village which led to banning of the FPC by the Department. Since 1988 it was a general demand by the forest villages to form separate FPCs for the forest villages on three common grounds. Firstly, the revenue villages could not be treated alike with the forest villages especially for forest protection activities as there is a gulf of difference in attitude towards forests among them. Secondly, under joint FPCs forest villagers were often held responsible for illicit felling by the revenue villagers in which basically they had no involvement. For instance Gossainhat forest village stopped patrolling because otherwise the blame of cutting forests would be upon the shoulders of the forest villagers. Thirdly, incorporation of revenue villages into the JFM produced a negative result as the forest villagers accused that earlier revenue villagers were fearful about the forest villagers and viewed them as the sole custodian of forests as they had no right to enter into forests. But with the JFM they got right to enter into forests and claimed equal rights with the forest villagers over the forests. Gradually their fearful attitude changed and they became courageous to cut down trees from the forests in the name of firewood collection for their household requirements. Consequently the selling of firewood to the timber merchants and local hotels, shops and industries became a regular fashion. The illicit felling and illegal trading in firewood and timber started shortly and further the revenue villagers were successful to involve some of the forest villagers in this illicit trade while offering more money than the available man-days in the forestry operation.

However, with the formation of Jalpaiguri FDA in 2006 the Department fulfilled their demand and new Khuklung FPC and Gossainhat FPC were formed in the

same year. , Soon after the formation of FPC villagers from Khuklung started patrolling in the forest compartments and seized a considerable portion of illicit timber from the area. But gradually they found that the Department was reluctant to catch timber thieves and many in cases despite informing the FD they could not send their staff to the spot rather showed their disgustful attitude to the villagers. As a result villagers lost their enthusiasm and gradually patrolling activities stopped altogether. But the experience of the Gossainhat was altogether different as when they were called for patrolling by the Department under the new JFM committee the villagers put certain conditions before the Department i.e. if any villagers would have been injured or murdered by the timber mafia the Department should take the responsibility and should provide adequate compensation and a clear agreement between the villagers and the Department should be made in this regard. The Department, however, could not agree to that agreement and the villagers did not participate in patrolling for a single day. So far as the meeting of the FPCs is concerned the Annual General Meeting has been held regularly once a year in both the Khuklung and Gossainhat FPCs though none of the Executive Committee Meetings (ECM) so far was held till November, 2009.

In the Buxa Tiger Reserve (West) the Garo basti forest village along with another forest village namely Pampu Basti together formed Garo-Pampu EDC though later on during 1996-97 they were converted into Garo-Pampu FPC and in 2006 it became Garo Basti FPC. However, until 1996 there was regular plantation work in the Division under forestry operation but after that it was stopped completely leading to massive unemployment among the villagers. It resulted in the engagement of the villagers in illicit felling of the timber. The trend increased highly during 1999-2000 when a gang of 200-300 people were involved in regular illicit felling from the forests. Consequently the EDC members decided and started patrolling since 2000 and it continued till 2002. More than a thousand cubic meters of timber had been seized and about hundred thieves were caught by the members

during that period. But the EDC members lost their interest in patrolling as the Forest officers were reluctant about those thieves and often released them without lodging any cases in the police station. Similarly it was found that a good number of villagers from nearby or adjacent FPC was involved in those activities and when those people were caught by them and produced before Beat Officer he used to say that they are the members of the neighbor Beat and he could not punish them while directing the EDC members to set them free. All these factors contributed to the loss of enthusiasm among the member and the patrolling was stopped completely. The Panijhora-Bania FPC, on the other hand, was formed in 1992 and soon after its inception the FPC continued patrolling up to two years but facing the problems of timber mafia and organized gang of criminals it appealed to the Department that the forest guard should be appointed for patrolling along with the forest villagers and finally the Department agreed to do it though in practice they never sent Forest guards with the patrolling team. As a result the villagers stopped the patrolling ultimately. The AGM took place regularly in the Garo Batsti FPC while it was most irregular in case of Panijhora-Bania FPC where it used to be held once in three years. On the contrary the ECM used to take place regularly in case of Panijhora and was most irregular in case of Garo Basti.

Under Buxa Tiger Reserve (East) Santra Bari EDC was formed in 1996. Since the beginning the committee was suffering from the lack of initiative by the Department .AGM on an average used to take place in alternative years and there was no regularity of Executive Committee meeting also. In terms of patrolling the villagers demanded an agreement with the Department for adequate compensation for the villagers if anyone killed or injured by the organized anti-poacher but the Department could not agree. Thereafter 4 to 5 villagers went for patrolling once a week rotation wise along with the forest staff in the nearby forest compartments. The other forest village-Lepchakha under the Division came under JFM in 1992 with formation of Buxaduar EDC. The committee, from the very beginning was

dysfunctional as no patrolling activities took place till date and in near about twenty years only two meetings of the Committee were held.

Andu Basti EDC under Coochbehar Forest division was formed in 2001. The villagers started patrolling with the initiative of the villagers prior to the formation of EDC in 1984 jointly with the FD headed by the forest guard because during that period the forest theft in the region increased to a great extent and some of the forest staff were reported to be involved in such illicit trade. The patrolling continued till 1990. After the introduction of JFM the theft again increased as the revenue villagers got free license to enter the forests while claiming the respective area under their custody. However under JFM the total area under patrolling earlier protected together by three closely neighboring villages were demarcated among the three villages equally where every village was responsible for protection of their respective area. This resulted in lack of enthusiasm among the villagers to take initiative for patrolling separately while each of the three villages dependent heavily on each other in everyday life due to having same ethno-cultural belonging. Further the villagers found that the Department was reluctant to catch the forest thieves and was not even interested in convening meetings. As a result after the formation in 2001 the EDC continued patrolling up to six months whereas only single meeting of EDC took place till November 2009. However, in all the forest villages of different divisions in the District, the FPCs and EDCs have been reconstituted as JFMCs in 2009 under the new Resolution of the Department. By the end of 2009 one general body meeting of each JFMCs was held except in the Andu Basti JFMC.

3.4 Usufruct Sharing, Micro-Planning and Fund Accumulation

In the Jalpaiguri Forest Division both the Khuklung and Gossainhat forest village were deprived of usufruct or revenue sharing till 2006. It was in 2007 the Khuklung Basti FPC received 10 stack of firewood as usufruct and got Rs 9522 as revenue from Gossainhat Eco-Park in 2009 following the opening of their bank account for the first

time. As in November, 2009 the FPC had Rs 9,522 which they planned to spend in the construction of local Church.

The experience of usufruct revenue sharing in the Gossainhat was relatively better than in the Khuklung FPC as it received the share of Rs 1400, Rs 7000 and Rs 38000 in the consecutive year of 2007, 2008 and 2009 from the firewood and Gossainhat Eco-Park. Now the committee has the balance of Rs 48,000 in its bank account. No micro-planning initiative so far has taken place in those villages. However, the problem with their usufruct/revenue sharing from Gossainhat Eco-park is that the park is located between the Khuklung and Gossainhat forest village and interestingly it has recently been decided by the Department that the 25% of the total income from Gossainhat Eco-park would be distributed equally among three FPCs namely Mela, Khuklung and Gossainhat and remaining 75% would go to the FD. It is indeed a gross violation of FPC Resolution according to which each of the FPC is entitled to get 25% of revenue or usufruct sharing.

In the BTR (W) during the formation of the Garo-pampu EDC the Department promised about 100% sharing of NTFP and 25% revenue sharing from the firewood but the EDC got nothing till 1988. Consequently the members of the EDC closed the Rajabhat Khawa Depot for two days and gave deputation to the Ranger in the same year. After their movement 125 pile fire woods was sanctioned for that EDC but given the worst quality of firewood villagers refused to take it. In 2006 the same EDC was converted to FPC to bring it under FDA but nothing positive happened in terms of revenue sharing. However, in 2009 the FPC got Rs. 90,000 as 25% of its share from the sale of fire wood.

The experience of micro-planning was not at all good. With the fund under the Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) Rs 27 lakhs were sanctioned for village microplanning. With the assistance from a Kolkata based NGO namely IBRAD the FPC introduced micro-planning in the village. The rule was that every household

who wished to come under the plan had to submit Rs, 3125 i.e. 25% of the total money i.e. Rs. 12,500 which they were entitled to get under the micro-plan. They distributed almost Rs 12 lakhs 85, 000 among the villagers. But unfortunately during the visit of World Bank monitoring team one member of the FPC was found to have been involved in the illicit felling and consequently the remaining fund of almost 15 lakhs rupees had been withdrawn by the Department. However, the committee member observed that the money under micro-plan had not been utilized according to the plan they had submitted before committee instead it was spent for some other purposes like marriage, dowry, tour and travel etc. Only a few villagers spent it properly. The only positive thing is that a good amount of fund of Rs 3 lakhs plus was generated from 25% contribution of the villagers by the EDC which remains still unused. In total now the JFMC has a good amount of fund of about Rs 5 lakhs .

In the Panijhora FPC under the same Division of BTR (W) it was told by the Department that the Committee was entitled to get 15% share of firewood whereas according to the FPC Resolution it was actually 25%. Nevertheless the villager got the 15% share merely two times in near about twenty years. Under the Micro-Plan sponsored by the Integrated Tribal Development project (ITDP) most of the initiatives taken by the villagers failed due to the absence of follow-up activities. The only positive thing in the micro –plan was the consolidation of a good amount of community fund from the 25% contribution from the villagers selected under the Plan. An amount of Rs. 1 Lakhs 65 thousands was generated and fixed up in the Bank. The interest from the money used to be withdrawn every December on the eve of Christmas Day celebration as most of the villagers belonged to Christianity. However, in 2008 the Department opposed the utilization of interest on religious occasion and since then it has been stopped.

The Santra Bari EDC in the BTR (E) did not get sharing of firewood and pole except in 1988 when it received merely 15 stacks of firewood as 15% sharing of usufruct whereas in case of EDC the 100% sharing of firewood has been stipulated by

the EDC Resolution of the Department. In the year of 1999 when there was a habitual delay by the Department to release money under micro-planning activities the villagers' gheraoed the Ranger for 24 hours and became successful to get the money. The micro-planning process became helpful indeed for the villagers to make their plan a success. Some of them spent it on piggery or poultry, others used it for the development of their agriculture and a few of them bought sewing machine under the plan. Moreover from the contribution of 25% under Micro-plan the EDC generated a good amount of fund of Rs 2 Lakhs 40 thousand a portion of which they are planning to invest as additional expenditure at the household level for electrification under FDA fund.

The Lepchakha EDC in the same Division of BTR (E) did not receive any sharing from usufruct or revenue from the Department. Though Micro-plan activities took place in the village most of the villagers remained outside the process as they could not submit 25% of the amount before the Committee they wanted to receive under the Plan.

Andu basti EDC under Coochbehar Division was found as the worst example in terms of usufruct sharing. Till date no usufruct or revenue sharing took place. The EDC currently has no fund and no micro-planning activities have taken place till date as reported by the villagers.

3.5. JFM Support Activities and Development through FDA

Developmental activities and JFM support activities have been started properly in all the Divisions after 2006 with the fund from FDA. A number of initiatives has been taken by the Department to support the villagers in order to reduce their dependence on forests while making their livelihood conditions better than that of the earlier. Two kinds of support have been provided by the Department in this regard; one is to develop the infrastructural conditions of the villages by constructing Kanchha Rasta, culverts, Bridges, canals, community toilets, water reservoirs etc and

the other is to fulfill the necessities of the community by providing pump set, power-tiller, swing machine, construction of community hall etc. The most important development in this regard is the electrification of the villages under the Fund. As on November, 2009 the three villages of Gossainhat (Jalpaiguri) Garo Basti and Panijhora (BTR (W)) got the connection and the remaining villages are yet to be connected within 2010 according to the plan by the Department. Andu Basti under Coochbehar Forest Division, however, has already been connected by electricity in 2007 with the initiative of the Gram Panchayat. So far as the development activities are concerned the performance of Jalpaiguri Forest Division is found to be the best, the performance of the BTR (W) is the moderate and those of the Coochbehar Forest Division and BTR (E) are the worst.

The problems before the developmental activities as reported by most of the FPCs/EDCs in almost all the Divisions were that the decisions regarding JFM support activities and developmental activities were used to be taken by the concerned Beat or Range officer arbitrarily without any consultation with the villagers. This resulted in spending of money for useless purpose without fulfilling the actual need of the villagers. As for example the Khuklung Basti FPC under Jalapiguri forest Division has been given three pump sets and one power tiller whereas the irrigation system of the village is quite good due to three dams like Patinala, Siltong-I and Siltong-II. On the contrary the villagers demanded a watch tower (taung) to protect their agriculture from the elephant attack and construction of paucca Rasta along with bridges to avoid inaccessibility with the outer world during rainy season which were never fulfilled by the Department. The similar type of experiences has also been faced by the Andu Basti in the Coochbehar Forest Division where the Department does not accept the village Resolution for community development but imposes its own preferences to release the FDA fund in the current financial year. As for example the DFO said that there was a fund for construction of culverts, kanchha rasta and community toilet but villagers argued for making an arrangement of

irrigation system by digging new canals from the nearby river to the village. Consequently the DFO withdrew the amount of RS 18500 and spent it in another village. Another example is from Gossainhat forest village under Jalapiguri Forest Division where the villagers demanded pump sets but they were provided power tiller and swing machines. Against these arbitrary practices villagers often refused to take assistance from the Department. For instance, Garo Basti under BTR (W) Division refused the construction of a watch tower to curb elephant attack while they demanded at least four watch towers surrounding the village.

Against all those bad experiences, the Department has been relatively cooperative and has used to take care about the villagers decision. In terms of JFM support activities villagers got sewing machines, four pump sets and one power tiller. Besides, 8 number of sanitation, 9 houses have been constructed along with the repairing of another 8 houses. Additionally construction of two Kancha Rasta, a new canal, reforming of old two canals and electric fencing and construction of high drain and four watch towers to curb elephant attack took place. A number of villagers also got individual land entitlement under FRA, 2006. But without the Dag and Khatian number in the land title the villagers expresses their doubt that whether they would get loan facilities from the bank while using the title deed. Besides, Santrabari EDC under BTR (E) Division reported that they are more or less successful to compel the Department to carry forward the developmental activities according to their preferences. After 2006 under FDA fund two watch towers along with search lights to protect themselves from elephant attack, 6 Reservoirs for drinking water, 6 community latrines and 6 community bathrooms have been obtained from the Department

4.1. Sustainable Forestry and Empowerment

Forestry operation takes place regularly in the Reserved Forests of Jalpaiguri Division while it is a rare event in the Protected Areas of Buxa Tiger Reserve (East) and (West)

and the Coochbehar Forest Division. The forestry operation refers to the entire process of silvicultural practices which includes regeneration, weeding, thinning, cleaning, and clear felling coups (CFC) etc. Regeneration means the renewal of forest crops either naturally or artificially. Weeding implies removal of all unwanted plants that interfere or tend to interfere with the growth of the favored species. Cleaning involves the removal or topping of inferior growth and thinning is a kind of felling made in an immature stand for the purpose of improving the growth and form of the trees that remain without permanently breaking the Canopy. CFC has been defined as the clear cutting of a selected tract of forests. The purpose behind the entire silvicultural process of forestry operation is to maintain the forests in its ideal condition in order to satisfy the desires of the beneficiaries, the present as well as future generations.

4.2. Wider Spacing System in Plantation

However, the field study has raised certain serious question about the purpose of the forestry operation under the sustainable forest management regime. Villagers told that certain fundamental changes brought about in the entire system started aftermath of the sustainable forest management practices since 90's. They argued that in the earlier system Sal and miscellaneous species have been planted with a spacing of 2 meters X 2 meters whereas afforestation schemes with the assistance from World Bank since 90's prescribed Sal plantation with a spacing system of 3 meters X 3 meters where the gap between the two rows and within the row has been increased to one meter. However, the plantation under Forest Development Agency (FDA) has retained the spacing between two rows as 3 meters though the spacing within the row has been reduced to 2 meters like the earlier system. In case of miscellaneous species like Chilaune, Chkrasi, Champ, Chalta, Bahera, Panisaj, Pakasaj, Gukul, Lali etc. both the World Bank and FDA followed the same formula of spacing about 3 meters between and within rows. As a result of increasing the gap of one meter if a sapling dies the gap between and within the rows becomes 6

meters which leaves the possibility of relatively open canopy cover instead of dense forests. It becomes detrimental to the forest health because when the tree canopy is open there is little humus on the forest floor and therefore, rain strikes the almost bare soil with full fury and brings about soil erosion, which leads to denudation. (Sagreiya, 2000:57)

4.3. The Problem of Seedling Plantation

Further, the earlier system of plantation was - seed sowing whereas under the schemes of World Bank and FDA it becomes seedling plantation. The villagers said that the Department argued for seedling plantation in all miscellaneous species for it being cost effective as the cost is higher in the seed sowing method due to requirement of more seeds but Department could not make any proper infrastructure even for that method. At present in the most cases there is no field based nurseries and seedling has been taken to the plantation sites from far away and due to transportation through the rough and uneven road a good quantity of seedling has either been damaged or dead which affected the forests because damage seedlings died soon after plantation and the gap between the two seedlings in between or within rows would have increased further. Moreover due to seedling plantation the thinning operation becomes a rare event which was used to take place regularly after every five years during seed sowing process (miscellaneous species) because under the process the normal gap between two seeds within a row was from 6 inches to 12 inches and thinning operation was conducted with an interval of every five years until the gap between the growing plants within a row has been increased to 2 metres. But in this seedling plantation the spacing of 3 meters is being maintained from the very beginning and therefore thinning is not required which deprives the villagers not only of the benefit of getting firewood from the thinning operation but it has also reduced man-days required for such operation. However, observing the harmful effect of seedling plantation on forest health in a

few cases the Jalpaiguri Forest Division and BTR (W) Division have introduced a mixed mode of plantation especially for dominant species like Sal. In this method seed sowing method has been followed additionally with the seedling plantation with a spacing of 3 meters in case of World Bank plantation and 2 meters in case of FDA plantation within the row whereas in case of miscellaneous species the process of exclusive seedling plantation has remained same. Keeping this mixed mode in mind the villagers argued that earlier seedling plantation was the complementary and seed sowing was the main method but now the whole thing becomes reverse where seedling plantation has become the main method and only in case of dominant species like Sal seed sowing method has been followed additionally.

4.4. Species Choice and Denial of Villagers Preference

The problem persists in respect to species choice also. Whereas in FDA plantation under National Afforestation Programme it is stipulated that villagers would participate in every steps of its implementation but in practice Forest Department has never used to seek their suggestion regarding species choice instead they even planted exotic species like Teak which the villagers of Coochbehar Division opposed since long as it increased the temperature of the ground which led to the death of other natural species growing at the bottom of Teak and discarded all the possibilities of intercropping.

4.5. Hector Based Wage System and Problem of Maintenance

Another problem related with the present system of plantation is the changes in the mode of wage payments. Villagers said that the earlier system of payment in forestry operation was daily wage system under the master role but World Bank and FDA plantation introduced hector based system where wages are paid per hector for plantation. As for example under FDA plantation the total labor cost per hector is Rs 9000 and for normal plantation under Working Plan it becomes Rs 11500.

Interestingly this Rs 9000/Ha or Rs 11500/ha covered everything including cleaning, burning, seedling plantation and even the salary of Rs 1000/month for Choukidar appointed to protect new plantation from livestock grazing at least for a couple of months. The contractual system of plantation has even been extended to the CFC where the wages have been given in terms of cubic meter felled by the worker. The problem is that there is a great difference between officially decided man-days for plantation/ha and practically required man-days for plantation/ha and Beat officer or Ranger used to direct the villagers that they have to do the work with the available wages as it has been decided by the senior officials. Villagers argued that whereas for Sal plantation there is required minimum 16 man-days/ha the Department officially decided to do it within 10 man-days/ha which is impractical and could never be happened on the ground. There are two fold consequences of the system. Either the forest villagers have to work in lower wages even far below than the minimum wage as stipulated by the Minimum wage Act or keeping the minimum wage intact the Department has to cut down the number of thinning, cleaning or even plantation work required to maintain the forest health. Gossainhat forest village under the Jalpaiguri Forest Division is the ideal for both the example. In 2007 the village got Rs 14000 in total @ 9000/ha including the cleaning and burning process prior to and associated with the plantation. But from that amount of rupees they had to spend Rs 8000 for eight months to the Daily Labor (DL) appointed by the Mandal as directed by the Department to protect seedlings from the livestock @ Rs 1000/month and remaining Rs 6000 was distributed among the labor from the village @ Rs 40/Day/labor. Consequently they became irritated and decided not to engage with further FDA plantation in the coming years. The other example from the village is that to keep minimum wage intact the money for five times cleaning has been spent in the three times and the Department is well aware about the fact and consequent detrimental effects on the forest health but did nothing to alter the situation. As a result in the absence of adequate cleaning a Sal –plantation in July 2009 has been destroyed due to growing of weeds and harmful Orchids.

4.6. Intercropping Experiment

Further since 1992, the Minor Forest Division (MFP) of the Department started intercropping of the Citronella with the help of the forest villagers in the Jalpaiguri District. The agreement with the villagers was that they could sell the citronella grass to the Department @ Rs 0.80/Kg after the final harvesting. Villagers became encouraged as the selling of the grass was profitable and Rs 4000-5000/family became average income from the harvesting in a single site. But the problem began as the Department changed the variety of Citronella crops after few years. Former it was Bengal variety having very long grasses and therefore a big quantity of grass the villagers used to get after the harvesting. But since 1997-1998 the MFP Division started to plant Assam varieties having very small length of the grass which dropped down the salable quantity of grasses and thereby reducing profit of the villagers from the selling of the product. Consequently they lost their interest in citronella. Though after that the Department introduced Rs 2000/ha for citronella intercropping but considering actual man-days for intercropping/ha the villagers of Gossainhat found lower wages than the minimum wage and decided not to take part in intercropping whereas the villagers from Khuklung decided to intercrop despite having lower wages.

Last but not the least is the grievance of the villagers regarding considerable deterioration in the supervision system by the Forest Department in forestry operation including cleaning, burning, plantation, thinning and felling. Now days they hardly visited the site and spent considerable time with the process of forestry operation. Moreover they are lacking knowledge about the forestry than the earlier and sometimes even don't know the season of plantation and often asked the villager about the name of a particular tree. The Department never used to seat with the villagers to discuss all the things related to forests and forestry and takes decisions arbitrarily about all the matters and expected to follow it by the villagers. To save the forests there is urgent needs to increase the level of interaction between them but the Department continued to show their autocratic mentality and does not

even treat the villagers like man instead treating them species lower than the animal which undermines the participatory process from within.

5.1. Sustainable Livelihood and Empowerment

Sustainable forest management integrates two main interdependent goals –‘well being of the forest’ and ‘well being of the people’. Sustainability rests on the principle that we must meet the needs (livelihood as basic need) of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Therefore, sustainability of both natural and human resources is of prime importance. The term 'sustainable livelihood' was first used as a development concept in the early 1990s where it has been defined as a livelihood comprises people, their capabilities and their means of living, including food, income and assets. Tangible assets are resources and stores, and intangible assets are claims and access.¹⁵

5.2. Basic Problems of Livelihood

The livelihood condition of the forest villages in the region is not at all good enough. There are certain basic problems of livelihood of the forest villagers that are as common as those of the revenue villages (See Table 13). The villagers lack certain basic civic amenities as well as infrastructural facilities which are essential for their development. Most of the villagers are illiterate though the new generations are increasingly getting educated. The main problem of their education is the distance of high schools from villages. Hence for secondary education the students have to cover a long distance maximum of which is not metalled (Kanchha Rasta) and remain inaccessible during rainy seasons. Secondly, a large number of villagers fail to afford the cost of education at the secondary level. The primary education system is also ineffective as most of the primary schools are having single teacher with inadequate infrastructure. However, the situation has improved a little after the formation of

¹⁵ http://www.ibradindia.org/research_sustainablelivelihood.php Accessed on 23/03/10

SSKs and ICDS centres. Apart from that most of the villages are malaria prone and villagers are often suffering from peptic diseases. The treatment facilities are lacking except the annual health camp by NGOs together with the Department in a few villages. The nearby health centres having inadequate infrastructure which hardly can provide medical facilities.

Table 13: Basic Problems of Livelihood

Villages	Electricity	Distance from High School	Distance from Bus Stop	Distance from Hospital	Irrigation Facilities	Vaccination of the Livestock	Land Title under FRA until 2009	Average Man Days/year, (2008-09)	
								Forestry Operation	NREGA (100days)
Khuklung	No	5.5 km	3.5 km	5.5 km	Yes	Irregular	No	90-100	80-100
Gossainhat	No	2.5 km	2.5 km	18 km	Inadequate	Irregular	No	150-200	80-100
Andu Basti	Yes	1.5 km	1.5km	10 km	No	Occasional	No	14-25	45-60
Garu Basti	Yes	5 km	2 km	16 km	No	Regular	No	20-30	14-21
Pani Jhora	Yes	4 km	0 km	14 km	Yet to take place	Regular	Yes	0-10	21-42
Santra Bari	No	10 km	5 km	31 km	No	Regular	No	7-10	14-21
Lepchakha	No	13 km	6 km	37 km	No	Irregular	No	1-7	14-21

Source: Field work

Besides, the villagers are deprived of any proper communication facilities of both the roadways and railways. In most cases nearby bus-stop and rail station are remaining far from the village. Until recently the villages have no electricity and in 2009 few villages got the electricity connection under FDA fund. Although after having the connection the villagers are doubtful about to pay the bill in the stipulated time frame due to absence of regular income from forestry operation (See Table 14) and due to non availability of hundred days work (See Table 15). The inadequate irrigation facilities combined with lack of knowledge/training and inability to bear the cost of modern technique contributes in the low production of agricultural crops in their relatively fertile land. The rearing of livestock also becomes

a problem as those are used to be infected frequently from the diseases of the wild animals. The vaccination process by the Department is not regular in all the villages. Further the meager quantum of individual assistances like compensation against elephant attack, construction and repairing of house by the Forest Department and sharing under microplanning left the forest villagers in the margin (See Table 16). The role of Panchayats is not satisfactory at all. Panchayats often are not allowed to take any land based activities due to absence of land entitlement of the villagers. The benefits from other schemes under Panchayat has been distributed according to the party line and even in some cases dominant groups within party capture most of the share of fund under developmental schemes. Moreover after the recent economic survey in 2007 most of the villagers have been left out from BPL list and brought under APL category which deprives them further from benefits under different schemes of the panchayat system. The land title distribution under FRA, 06 is going very slow and villagers are doubtful about the benefits of the land title as there is no mentioning of *Dag* and *Khatian* number in that certificate. The problem of unemployment is also a big problem before livelihood. It is only under the Jalpaiguri Division situated in the Reserved Forests the plantation activities and other allied activities of forestry operation is taking place regularly. But the remaining other Divisions under Protected Area Framework are far behind to secure hand some employment opportunities before the villagers. The same thing happened in the 100 Days Programme under NREGA where except Jalpaiguri Division the other Divisions failed miserably to keep the commitment under the programme. All those factors combined together have compelled villagers to seek job opportunities in outer states of Punjab, Hariyana, Delhi, Mumbai, kerala etc. However, their burning problems of livelihood as stated above created the space for resistance and with the emergence of leadership under organizations like NBFWJCU or NFFPFW the resistance turned into a long standing movement which made a deep impact on the everyday living of the people in the forest villages what will be dealt in detail in the following chapters.

Table 14: Man days From Forestry Operation, 2008-09 (financial year)

Range		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	zero	21	30.0	30.0	30.0
	1 to 50	31	44.3	44.3	74.3
	51 to 100	9	12.9	12.9	87.1
	101 to 150	4	5.7	5.7	92.9
	151 to 200	3	4.3	4.3	97.1
	251 to 300	2	2.9	2.9	100.0
Total		70	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Data

Table 15: Hundred Days Work, 2008-09 (financial year)

Range		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Zero	1	1.4	1.5	1.5
	1 to 20	31	44.3	47.0	48.5
	21 to 40	22	31.4	33.3	81.8
	41 to 60	10	14.3	15.2	97.0
	100 days	2	2.9	3.0	100.0
Total		66	94.3	100.0	
Missing	System	4	5.7		
Total		70	100.0		

Source: Field Data

Table 16: Individual Assistances Realized from FD

Values	Compensation: Elephant attack on Crops		Compensation: Elephant attack on House		Assistance: House by FD		Assistance: Micro plan	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Yes	2	2.9%	1	1.4%	7	10.0%	22	31.4%
No	33	47.1%	12	17.1%	63	90.0%	48	68.6%
Inadequate	21	30.0%	3	4.3%				
Not applicable	14	20.0%	54	77.1%				

Source: Field Data

5.3. Problems of Livelihoods due to Eco-System Degradation

Besides the basic problems stated above there are some special kinds of problems of the livelihood which are peculiar to the forest villagers as they have to face those directly for living under the forest eco-system and their close proximity to the nature. The origin of those problems is the degradation of the natural ecosystem in general and the forest ecosystem in particular. The household survey conducted among the 70 households in the seven forest villages revealed those problems and their relative impact on the livelihood of the forest villagers (See Table 17). We can see from the Table that the first and foremost problem in terms of impact on the villager is the problem of elephant attack on the agricultural crops and human lives. It is reported by the villagers that elephants destroyed their crops regularly due to absence of food like Purundi, Bamboo, Lali etc in the forests whereas the compensation schemes of the Department remained inadequate and irregular. The major problem before the villagers is the problem of elephant attack. Wild life squad from the FD could not come regularly to the village whereby necessary because the Squad has entrusted a large area with a small number of staffs and therefore it is not feasible for the Squad to keep watch the whole area under their supervision. FD also suggested to alternate their cropping pattern and encouraged to produce lemon and

Oul (an edible bulbous plant akin to arum or turnip) but the villagers told that those cannot be the alternative to rice which is their main food. Moreover a section of the villagers are also superstitious to lodge complain against elephant attack as they believe it as their goddess.

Table 17: Problems of Livelihood due to Eco-System Degradation

Problems	Impact of the Problem in terms of percentage affected	
	Count	%
Affected by Elephant Attack on Crops and human lives	67	95.7%
Affected by Shortfall of Rain	57	81.4%
Affected by Decreasing soil productivity	53	75.7%
Affected by Increasing Temperature	49	70.0%
Affected by Shortfall in biomass of Fish	30	42.9%

Source: Field Work

The Second problem is the shortfall of rain which led to decreasing soil productivity. The villagers told that the water available from the irrigation system cannot be substitute of rain water because it not only affects the soil productivity but it is responsible for drying of streams which together with the increasing use of chemical fertilizer results in the shortfall of fish on which a particular forest community like Ravas are dependent heavily for their livelihood. However, villagers advanced that earlier the practice of applying chemical in fishing was limited only to the Tea-garden workers but now some villagers are also involved in the same trade because it ensured the larger harvesting of fish from the river in comparison to the other traditional method of fishing. Further as a result of the declining of fish biomass in the river villagers have changed their instruments of fishing. Now they have left their traditional instruments like Jhakoi, Burung etc. and have opted for Fasi-Jal (a unique and long fishing net for capturing thousands of fish at a time) as the earlier instruments have proved to be ineffective to catch fish in higher quantity at once

The shortfall of rain coupled with the increasing temperature is causing the decreasing level of soil productivity as reported by the villagers. It affects their agricultural production on a tremendous scale. Due to shortfall of rain most of the natural water bodies are dying out whereas the irrigation facilities are inadequate. Further, the rain water carried out rotten leaves, weeds from the deep forests which used to increase the fertility of the land. But presently with the absence of regular rain the process remains absent. Further increasing of temperature led to the burning of crops. As a result the villagers who earlier dependent on cow dung as the sole fertilizer now started using hybrid seeds and chemical fertilizer since 2007-08 but it caused the death of earth worms responsible for improving fertility and thus again destroying the land quality. With the absence of proper and adequate knowledge and training about using of modern methods involving fertilizer and hybrid seeds they often use them injudiciously which lead to further destruction of the quality of land. Moreover while the cost of agricultural production is increasing they do not have any loan facility due to having non-saleable land. Further, due to frequent attack of elephant the insurance companies are also not interested in providing crop insurance. Moreover with the disappearing forests the attack of pests on crops is increasing day by day. With disappearing forests the insects are increasingly coming out from forests and destroying crops. Besides, with the increase of temperature the diseases are on the rise. Villagers reported that presently the peptic diseases and malaria are increasing day by day. Earlier the diseases took place only in the rainy season but now they are affairs of everyday life.

Moreover one of the biggest problems facing the villagers due to eco-system degradation is the problem of free and open grazing of livestock which destroys their crops on an unprecedented scale. It has been taking place since the last 10 years as the threat from tiger attack is increasingly going down. Before that the villager accompanied their livestock during grazing where as presently with the disappearance of tiger the villagers set their livestock free for grazing. The practice

not only poses a threat to the new plantation but destroys the crop of the villagers which results in conflict among them. The problem becomes so acute that the villagers of Garo Basti under BTR (W) Division left one term cropping finally. Villagers told that during rainy season when all the villagers used to be engaged in cropping there was no problem of livestock because that time each and every villager was fully aware of their crops and put certain controls on grazing of livestock but during winter when all the villagers could not cultivate due to lack of water the livestock would have been freed for unbound grazing which caused harm to the crops of the villagers having source of water. Thus the livestock of non-cultivators becomes a danger to the crops of the cultivators. They try to regulate it by convening several meetings and to introduce certain rules of grazing but all efforts are in vain. Therefore cultivation might happen when all the villagers would cultivate otherwise it becomes a remote possibility for a single villager to cultivate crops and save them from the attack of livestock due to this free rider problem.

5.4. Negative Consequences

Villagers reported that the problems of livelihood led to a section of the villagers to extract fire wood and timber from the forests regularly. They used to sell it in the nearby market, hotels, shops, restaurants and local factories. Villagers found from their experience that if they can sale a small piece of timber in the market they can easily earn Rs 500 whereas to earn the same money by providing labor they had to work even more than a week. Hence the greed for money together with high demand in the market led to increase in the business. Actually the illicit trading becomes so lucrative and easy source of income that it becomes a regular practice for some people. The problem is most acute in the Buxa Tiger Reserve where closing of regular plantation and forestry operation results in massive unemployment among the villagers who used to be employed as wage laborer by the Department earlier. It is reported by the Department so many times that it is the biggest site of illicit trading of timber and fire wood and due to this the villagers are often shot

dead by the Department personnel at the spot which culminates into confrontation between the Department and the villagers. Unfortunately political parties are backing the trade directly or indirectly to keep their cheap popularity intact. Villagers accused that the intense corruption of the Forest Department is also responsible behind the trade as it corrupts villagers and giving indirect indulgence in illicit trading of the timber. Further, the problem of illicit trading of firewood and timber affects the agriculture also. It has been found that where the trade is on rise the villagers are not serious about the cultivation despite possessing multi-cropping lands. Instead they are enthusiastic to sell the cow dung of their livestock, the sole fertilizer for farming, to the outside merchants. As a result due to absence of the regular cultivation their lands become sterile which causes further decreasing in the soil productivity.

5.5. The Prospects of Livelihood

However, amidst this overall bleak picture there is certain silver lining in the livelihood scenario where the villagers prove their capability to bring about success and well being with the assistance from the Department or other governmental bodies. The first and foremost instance of which is the experience of Self Help Groups (SHGs). In most of the forest villages women SHGs have been formed earlier by one or other NGOs with the assistance from the Forest Department. Recently Large Sized Multipurpose Co-operative Societies (LAMPS) has taken initiatives to form SHGs in the forest villages. Most of the SHGs are successful to achieve the objective of financial and social well being of the villagers. The performance of SHGs in terms of Gradation is more or less satisfactory which is obvious from the Table 18 which shows that except two SHGs under BTR (E) Division all the SGHs secure respective Grades where 7 SHGs are under Grade III, 12 SHGs are under Grade II and 20 SHGs are under Grade I out of 41 SHGs in total in the study area. The Jalpaiguri Forest Division shows best performance whereas the BTR (East) shows the worst at least in terms of Grading.

Table 18: Performance of Self Help Groups (SHGs) in the Study Area

Divisions	Jalpaiguri		BTR (West)		Coochbehar	BTR (East)	
	Gossainhat	Khuklung	Garo Basti	Panijhora	Andu Basti	Santra Bari	Lepchakha
Groups	10	8	5	3	7	2	6
Grade-III	7	-	-	-	-	-	-
Grade-II	-	4	3	-	3	2	-
Grade-I	3	4	2	3	4	-	4
No Grade							2

Source: Field Work

Villagers reported that SHGs are performing well in the development of livelihood as well as to uplift the condition of the poor. A range of works used to be performed by the group members including acre-nut production, piggery, goatary, and cultivation of rice. There works include also the preparation of mid day meals for children and regular cleaning of nearby weakly market. Besides, the women from the groups sometimes work as wage laborer within the village during the harvesting season with a contract of Rs 50/head/Day. They used to open food canteens during picnic season near the Eco-Park. They also render money to the group member as a loan with a fixed amount of interest. One of the interesting examples of their activities is found in the Santrabari forest village where two women groups have registered their success in the harvesting of fish in a redundant water reservoir constructed earlier by the Block Office for some other purposes.

The villagers have noted that a lot of progress has so far taken place with the SHG initiative. The women of the villages are increasingly becoming more and more forward while involving in regular interaction with the Bank, Panchayat, businessmen and other institutions in the public sphere. Now they have become aware about the outer world and assure certain regular income from those activities which helps a lot to the well being of the family. Moreover, earlier during crisis or cropping the villagers used to take loans from the outside Mahajan with a high rate of interests but now after the SHG the problems of loan has been solved as they can

get it from SHGs with much lower rate of interest. Further with the increasing awareness and securing importance as the earning member of the family the women are spending much for education of their children and in some cases they often raise their voice against the habit of being intoxicated of the male members and put certain control on the spending of money in those bad practices.

Besides SHGs there is another story of success to bring about positive changes in the livelihood by the forest villagers. This is all about the intercropping of Saji Knchu in the forest plantation. The story begins with the experiment at Dumchi Forest Village, a predominantly Rava village under the Coochbehar Forest Division. The villagers started the cultivation of Saji/Mukhi Kanchu (*Colocasia esculenta*)¹⁶ at first in their agricultural land during 2000 as there are certain advantages in its production. At first it is profitable and easily salable in the market. Secondly, it does not require more water. Thirdly elephants do not eat or destroy it rather avoid it and finally the cultivation of mustered seeds becomes easier after the cultivation of the Saji Kanchu as the soil becomes more fertile and soft. But soon after the beginning of cultivation in the agricultural land they found the biggest disadvantage of applying more chemical fertilizer otherwise the production was quite low. However to overcome the disadvantage they experimentally cultivated it in the forest land where plantation is going on. Their assumption was that the forest land is more fertile than their agricultural land and requirement of fertilizer would be kept in minimum. They found astonishingly that in the site of plantation Saji Kanchu grows successfully and far better than the agricultural land even without any fertilizer. They became inspired from the event and decided to intercropping it in the forest plantation. The new system of plantation with the wider spacing system of three meters between the rows encouraged them further as they got more gap between seedlings to produce it because in case of normal plantation with two meter of spacing they can plant only two lines whereas in the increasing gap of 3 meter they

¹⁶ Author L. Schott, Family Araceae

can plant three lines of Saji Kanchu. Henceforth they requested department to get permission for the intercropping of the Saji Kanchu in which they used to intercrop mustered seeds earlier. The Department, however, agreed with their proposal and since 2002-03 they started intercropping of Saji Kanchu in the site of plantation. In a plantation they can intercrop the Kanchu twice until the seedling rose to the height of three to four meters. In between the two cultivation of Kanchu they used to produce mustered seeds once. The traders came to the village and collect the product from the villagers and the villagers having bi-cycle directly sale the product in the nearby urban market. Hence it becomes a lucrative business which inspired the entire Rava forest villages under the Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri Division who are presently engaged with great enthusiasm in the intercropping. Goassaihat in jalpaiguri division and Andu Basti in the Coochbehar Division under the study are the sites of this success. The only problem with the intercropping is that it cannot be cultivated without regular forest plantation. As a result forest area devoid of plantation cannot be considered for intercropping of the Kanchu. In the most of Protected Areas of National Park where plantations do not take place regularly the villagers are deprived of the benefit of this intercropping. However, despite their success of about four and five years MFP Division of the FD could not take it officially as a crop for intercropping while continuing the citronella grass as the sole item for intercropping most of which are used to be damaged or destroyed by the wild elephant which shows the extent to which the Department is alienated from forest villagers or forest people.

6. Empowerment through the Cooperation from the Above

If we observe the overall process of sustainable forest management across different divisions in the Jalpaiguri District it can be seen that the cooperation from the Department is obvious in the Jalpaiguri Division at least in terms of wage employment in the forestry operation and NREGA, regularization of usufruct sharing after 2006 and developmental activities in the forest villages whereas the other

divisions of BTR (W), BTR (E) and Coochbehar are lagging far behind in these respects. However, it is interesting to note that even in the Jalpaiguri Division the Department is more active to distribute developmental benefits among the forest dwellers and less interested to incorporate them in the overall process of forest management. Their policy of management as said by one elderly forest villager is that 'gets the money and keep silence but don't interfere into our business'. It is a virtual denial of the whole participatory approach embedded in the concept of sustainable forest management as it restricts the practice of empowerment merely either into the building of community assets like community hall, power tiller, and pump set etc or into the raising of financial capability of the individual community member in terms of wage employment through forestry operation, loading/unloading activities in the Depot and NREGA. Further, the development in the financial capability and building of community assets do not ensure the capability to control and direct oneself in the right direction to perform the social responsibility entrusted on him rather it may alienate oneself from the contextual manifestation of the generic essence leading to the bondage by the structural conditions of life resulting in actual disempowerment and loss of agency. The field level implication of the process can be drawn from the example of increasing involvement of the forest people in the illicit trade of firewood and timber even in the Jalpaiguri Division where the livelihood condition is comparatively better. Another example of this process of alienation is the practice of setting free the livestock for unbound grazing especially when the concerned household is not involved in cultivation which causes harm to both the forests and the crops of the fellow villager. The current process of empowerment through the betterment of the livelihood rests on the most popular hypothesis that if the dependence on forests of the forest dwellers is to be reduced there would be the complete absence of forests theft. This hypothesis has been failed to consider the structural presence of growing market demands for firewood and timbers resulting from the continuous process of urbanization on the one hand and failure of the Department to meet the demand on the other. This gap is palpable

when the villagers have been offered lucrative amount of money to steal timber from the forests. Thus the Department led empowerment has been failed to a great extent to change the praxis of the villagers required to fulfill the condition for the sustainable forest management and makes the villagers more opportunistic by providing developmental benefits devoid of any responsibility to protect forests through patrolling, participation in the decision making process and in the overall framework of forest governance.

7. Empowerment through the Cooperation from the Below

There is indeed the other side of the coin which is nothing but the cooperation from the below. It is true that the Department did not take any serious initiative to involve forest people in the planning process or in the patrolling activities rather always showed their reluctance in their participation. On the contrary it is seen in the household survey that despite the dysfunctional FPC and EDCs wherever the Department becomes active to conduct meeting and patrolling most of the forest villagers willfully participated in the process. Villager's cooperation does not limited to that meeting and patrolling only but they used to keep informed the Department about the illicit felling regularly whenever they watch it and even served the Department despite lower wages (See Table 19). However, all those efforts for cooperation become meaningless and do not lead to the much desired empowerment as the Department keeps their total control over the process and discourages villagers always even to maintain the formal arrangements under the JFM framework to save forests. Authoritative mentality, inept corruption, inefficient bureaucracy, landlordism and anti-people attitude of the Department are responsible together behind the death of possibilities for participation. The scope of empowerment has been limited to convince the fellow villager to follow the Department's dictum in toto and to become an authoritative and responsible person in the eyes of Beat or Range Officer which eventually has produced a class of agents

in the hands of the Department alienated from the villagers and are also hated by the people.

Table 19: Cooperation from Below

Frequencies	Participation in FPC/EDC AGM		Participation in Patrolling		Informing FD Staff about Forest Offences		Work in Forestry Operation Despite Lower Wages	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Always	24	34.3%	41	58.6%	37	52.9%	23	32.9%
Mostly	12	17.1%	4	5.7%	32	45.7%	46	65.7%
Frequently	14	20.0%	2	2.9%	0	.0%	0	.0%
Occasionally	12	17.1%	1	1.4%	1	1.4%	1	1.4%
Never	8	11.4%	13	18.6%	0	.0%	0	.0%
Not applicable	0	.0%	9	12.9%	0	.0%	0	.0%

Source: Field Work

However, there exists the other dimension of cooperation from the below which does not only bring about material well being in the livelihood of the forest people but has changed also the mode of living in the respective sphere while preparing themselves for going beyond the earlier limit of agency. This alternative process leads to the empowerment in its true sense as it involves the people actively to set and transcend their own boundary. The examples are the SHGs and intercropping of Saji Kanchu in the forest plantation. Through the SHGs the illiterates forest women become free from their familial boundary and with their earning they become the equal partner of their male counterpart in the public sphere and in some cases even decision maker within the family. On the other the innovation of Saji Kanchu as a species for intercropping without facing the hazards of elephant attack, water scarcity and application of costly chemical fertilizer leads to build their confidence for producing useful local knowledge to fight against poverty, elephant attack and the consequences of climate change. This further reinforces and justifies

their valid claim for participation in the forest governance. All these kinds of cooperation can be seen as transcending praxis to overcome both the limitation of agency and structure while reshaping them to recognize life necessities and paves the way for meaningful and actual empowerment of the forest dwellers.

8. Empowerment through Cooperation and Resistance

Understanding Praxis, as we explained, takes us from the cooperative account of ordinary notion of empowerment through participation to a complex dialectical, conflict and cooperation oriented notion of empowerment. The hypotheses that we derived from our theoretical framework of Praxis in Chapter 1 pointed to the possibility that higher the scale of cooperation and resistance would be the better would be scale of empowerment, and it may have definite implications for sustainability of forest eco-system. To test our hypotheses we analyzed our field data and as we will see, our hypotheses were largely borne out. Forest dwellers participation are expected to be normally distributed which implies that extreme behaviour will appear rarely and the majority of the forest dwellers will follow the modal path. The normal distribution suggests that nearly 68% of the population lies within (mean \pm sd). If there are any reasons or factors to be believed as operative to influence the normal behaviour of the population, then the aberration could be measured by the deviation from the mean. If the Govt. schemes introduced for the benefit of the population are able to motivate the people positively that will cause the departure from the normal or expected behaviour. This departure can be identified by the skewness of the distribution of the intensity of participation. (See Appendix-V)

In order to understand the level of cooperation we considered nine indicators e.g. (1) participation in Annual General Meeting (AGM) of FPC's and EDC's, (2) participation in patrolling and forest protection activities, (3) participation in discussion in the FPC/EDC meeting, (4) (5) participation in micro-planning, (6)

participation in Self Help Groups, (7) informing the Forest Department about the forest theft or illicit felling, (8) participation in the FDA sponsored afforestation programme despite lower wages than the minimum wages, and (9) participation in the intercropping. Each indicator has been measured in five point scale. Total cooperation is, therefore sum total of scores of all indicators. Since lower end of the scale indicates lower level of cooperation, the higher the total score signifies higher level of cooperation. (See Figure 1 & Table 20)

In case of measuring the incidence of resistances, we define that the institutional failure causes dissatisfaction which leads to frequent participation in the movement. Theoretically, it is expected that in absence of institutional failure we may assume the causes of grievances should not be existed and hence, the frequency of organizing movement will be less. Moreover, number of forest dwellers having extreme dissatisfaction as well as and also extreme satisfaction will be rare. It is quite expected that the majority of the population will lie within the two extreme situations. There are seven indicators to estimate the degree of participation in the movements e.g. (1) ratio of attending movement, (2) participation in the campaign programme, (3) participation in the fund collection, (4) participation in the rally/deputation, (5) participation in the boycotting meeting, election etc, (6) participation in the dharna/gherao programmes, (7) participation in the bandh or strike. Except the ratio each indicator has been measured in the five point scale. The ratio of attending movement has been calculated by dividing the number of attending movement of single respondent with the total number of movement taking place in the respective locality. Total resistance is, therefore sum total of scores of all indicators. We further define that higher the score signifies higher level of resistance and vice versa. (See Figure 2 & Table 21)

In the study empowerment has been seen as relative to both the framework of cooperation and resistance where the higher degree of participation of the forest dwellers both in the state sponsored collaborative process of resource management and episodic movements against the existing modes of natural resource governance signifies higher degree of empowerment of the population and on the contrary lower degree of participation implies lower level of empowerment. (See Figure 3& 4)

MEASURING COOPERATION

Figure 1

Cooperation Level

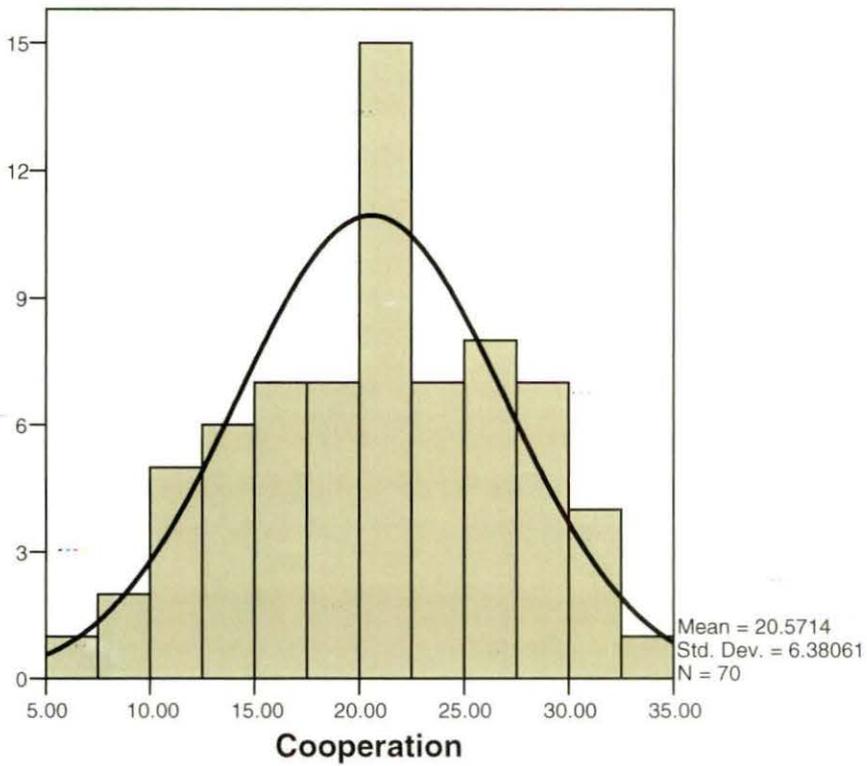


Table 20: Level of Cooperation from Below

Values	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
High Cooperation	35	50.0	50.0	50.0
Low Cooperation	35	50.0	50.0	100.0
Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Data

MEASURING RESISTANCE

Figure: 2

Resistance Level

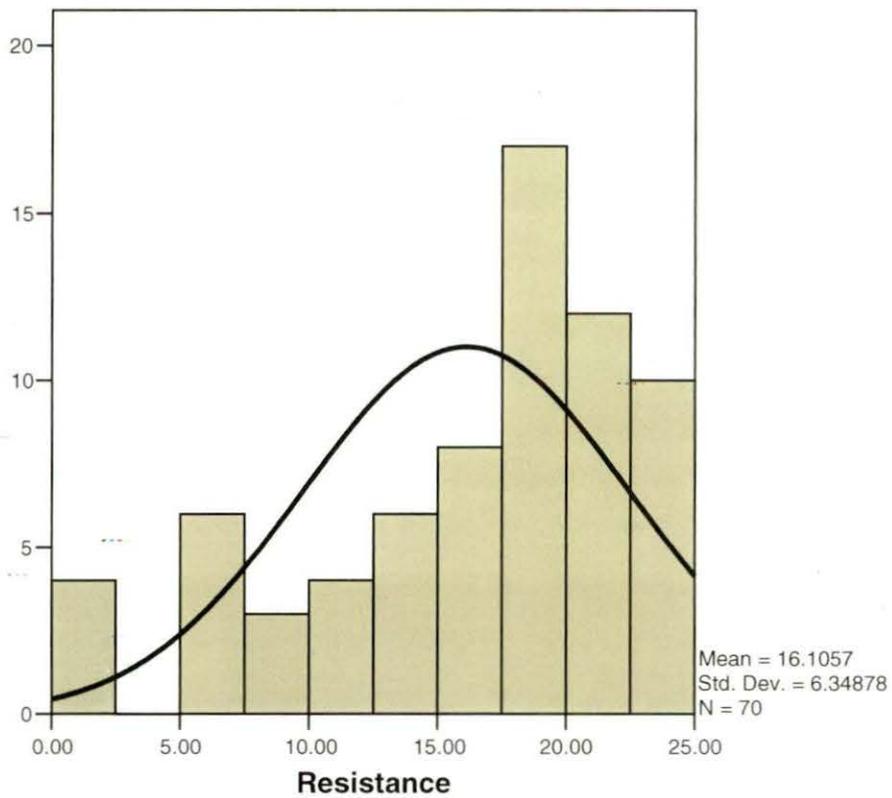


Table 21: Level of Resistance from Below

Values	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
High Resistance	44	62.9	62.9	62.9
Low Resistance	26	37.1	37.1	100.0
Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Data

MEASURING EMPOWERMENT

Figure : 3

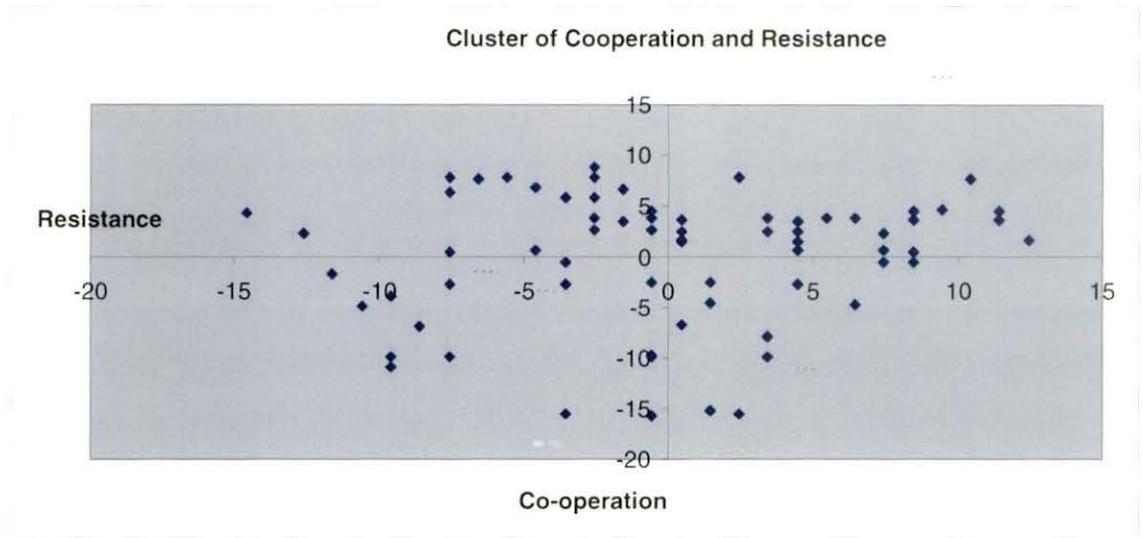
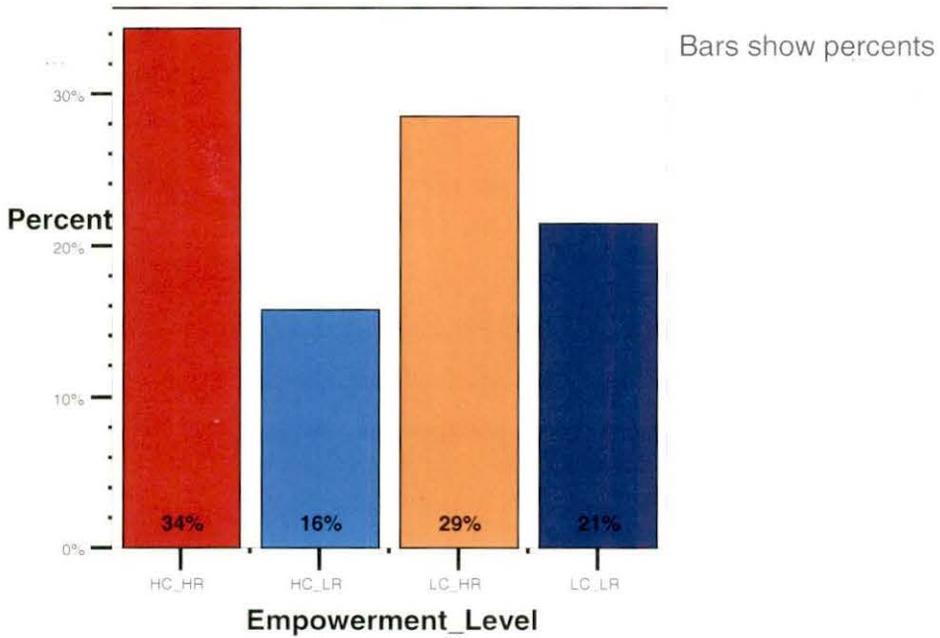


Figure:4



HC_HR= High Cooperation_High Resistance,
HC_LR= High Cooperation_Low Resistance
LC_HR= Low Cooperation_High Resistance
LC_LR= Low Cooperation_Low Resistance

The Figure 1 and the corresponding Table 20 based on the indicators as stated above have produced a balanced and almost normal curve where both high and low cooperation could be identified. Similarly Figure 2 and Table 21 have presented us with a level of resistance where though high and low cooperation level could be identified as in the case of cooperation the curve is positively skewed indicating a greater tendency to resistance in the overall distribution. At one level this reveals forest dweller's increasing disillusionment with attempts at their empowerment from the above as well as their resolve to fight out corrupt practices and exploitation. However, what is theoretically more significant is the close cluster of cooperation and resistance as measures of empowerment through Figures 3 and 4. Out of four criteria and their possible combinations namely, high and low cooperation, high and low resistance (high cooperation, low resistance, high resistance low cooperation, low cooperation low resistance and high cooperation and high resistance) what ultimately could be found was high cooperation and high resistance as closely clustered. Our theory of praxis envisaged a dialectical relationship between cooperation and resistance and from it was presumed that a higher empowerment would also involve higher cooperation as well as resistance. What was not presumed of its possible implications for sustainability as the very institutional arrangement that conditioned the forest dwellers could have influenced that very sustainability either positively or negatively. The data presented above were not meant to capture that complexity. Nevertheless, the data could foretell the search for more liberating framework of governance by the forest dwellers.

9. Conclusion

The present chapter has revealed the complex nature of forest dweller's empowerment through participatory management practices. While the limits of the top down practices of sustainable forest management in empowering people and ensuring sustainability have been revealed generally our field experience has also pointed to the other side of the process of empowerment. In this chapter we have largely touched upon the alternative process of empowerment in North Bengal through movement of the forest villagers against imposed framework, bureaucratic corruption and unsustainable practices while at the same time adopting sustainable practices through cooperation with the Forest Department. However a more comprehensive understanding of empowerment may be possible when we also take up the issue of resistance in greater detail in the next chapter.