

Chapter-4

Situating Resistance Below: Praxis and Empowerment in Movements

1. Introduction

As indicated in the last section of the previous chapter we might think of an alternative empowerment other than the broadly cooperative framework of empowerment and this is the subject of the section 2. The present chapter is firmly focused on the historic forest movement in the Dooars region of North Bengal and through section 3 to 11 we have introduced the colonial forest practices like Taungya, the onset of radical politics and the different phases of struggle from 1967 to 1976. Section 12 concludes the chapter.

2. The Other Side of Indian Environmentalism

The conventional discourse on empowerment is remarkably limited within the top-down framework of politics where it 'implies formal rather than substantive power and it involves an external upper level agency to grant power rather than people below seizing it in the course of struggle' (Mohanty:1995:1436). This notion of empowerment invokes cooperation among agents and revolves around the two sets of assumptions; one is that the distribution of power among the powerless people is utterly depending upon the legitimate scope provided by the powerful authority and the next is that the participation of the people in the state sponsored programmes is the sole guarantee of raising their skills, capability and assets to meet their needs and aspirations for development. This concept, however, hides the possibility of co-optation through the process of cooperation while promoting state agenda through the usurpation of people's power. It legitimizes also the authoritative distortions in governance by keeping people silent in lieu of providing some privileges to them.

Moreover it fails to capture the value of resistance in shaping of people's power emerging out from the struggle against that exploitative framework of cooperation. It denies the scope of alternative empowerment arising out of people's movement against exploitation and injustice which demands fair mode of collaboration. The realm of natural resource governance in North Bengal is perhaps the best example of that alternative empowerment where forest people denied even conventional empowerment and sizes the power from below through their struggle against the exploitative regime of forest governance under cooperative framework of forest management. Notably the JFM is not the only manifestation of that cooperative or collaborative management of forest in the region in particular and India in general rather this form of management dates back to the colonial period under British rule when the taungya system was introduced as a form of agro-forestry for the said mutual benefit of the forest administration as well as the forest dwellers. However, the process of alternative empowerment in North Bengal began in the late 60's through a historic struggle of the forest villagers against the very colonial framework of the Taungya which posed a serious challenge to the one-sided understanding of Indian environmentalism as the 'environmentalism of the poor'.

Chipko Movement is commonly appreciated as the starting point of environmental movement in post-colonial India. The movement, ranged between 1973 and 1980, initially was started against the 'blatant injustice' of allotment of ash trees for commercial purpose by the Forest Department instead of providing those to the peasants for making their agricultural implements. The innovative technique of embracing or hugging trees by Sarvodaya workers was born to stop felling of trees by companies in collaboration with the Department. The resistance later on turned its attention to wider environmental concerns like protection and management of forests by the communities against the commercial forestry and recourse to environmentally and socially just 'alternative technologies' against industrial-urban orientation of the modern development process (Guha, 1989, 152-184).The

movement gave impetus to a series of popular protests throughout the country around ecological issues and inspired the intellectuals and academics to conceptualize the Indian environmentalism as the “environmentalism of the poor” which refers to the struggle of the communities against ‘partial or total dispossession’ from their resource base by the commercial-industrial interests while their ‘own patterns of utilization were (and are) less destructive of the environment’ (Guhā and Martinez-Alier, 2000:5) It was further suggested that the origin of those environmental conflicts and movements in India in particular and the Third World in general can fairly be understood under the political ecology framework of “ecological distribution conflicts’ implying the unequal ‘burdens of pollution’ or unequal access to natural resources due to the “unequal property rights and social inequalities of power and income” (Martinez-Alier, 2004:Vii).

However, while not underestimating the practical and theoretical contribution of Chipko, the conventional position of it as the pioneer environmental movement might be challenged by a historical movement of the forest villagers in North Bengal prior to that of Chipko. The first and foremost point is that of the time period of the movement which started during 1967 and when the Chipko was in its peak the movement was in its last episode. Secondly unlike Chipko the movement was started against the colonial legacy of ecological exploitation of both the ecosystem and its people. Thirdly like Chipko the movement was not resultant of ‘ecological distribution conflicts’ but was emanated from the exploitative design of natural resource governance through co-option. There are much more characteristics and significance of the movement which deliberately focus on the other side of Indian environmentalism so far been neglected or underrepresented in the dominant discourse of political ecology especially in the Third World context. Further, unlike Gandhian shadow on the ideology or ‘vocabulary of protest’ the movement was indebted to the radical peasant and workers movement in Bengal and essentially inspired by Subhas Bose’s ideals including the freedom from slavery,

his technique of active resistance and his nationalist spirits of struggle. The movement is mostly relevant in its focus against ecological exploitation while going beyond the paradigm of distributive justice and principle of recognition particularly when the Indian State along with its global counterparts are continuously employing newer inclusive techniques of ecological exploitation through invoking collaboration or cooperation of the eco-system people. But, before going to the detail on its contribution in theory and practice of Indian environmentalism it is fair to get into the narrative of the movement and its practical achievements while imparting a look into its context.

3. 'Imperial Onslaught on Dooars Wood'

The Dooars valley in the Jalpaiguri District, known as gateway to Bhutan and the North-Eastern states of India, stretches from River Teesta on the west to River Sankosh on the east, over a span of 130 km by 40 km, was the birth place of this historic movement. The landscape with its fascinating natural beauty, rich treasure of flora and fauna, dense forests including two National Parks and wildlife sanctuaries interwoven with lush green tea gardens and crisscrossed by Teesta, Raidak, Torsha, Jaldhaka, Kaljani and other rivers and their innumerable tributaries, is lying in the Himalayan foothills of North Bengal. The region is populated by a large number of ethnic communities with their colorful rituals and unique lifestyles who are mostly tribals like Rava, Mech, Toto, Dukpa, Tamang, Orao etc.¹⁷ At the outset, the ecological context behind the movement was prepared with the British intervention on Dooars forest in 1866¹⁸ and simultaneous introduction of imperial management regime imbued with their colonial project of transforming the natural

¹⁷ Nature Beyond, <http://www.naturebeyond.co.in/area.asp?areaID=Dooars>, Accessed on 04/06/2010

¹⁸ British annexed 'Bengal Dooars' in 1864-65 from Bhutanese rule and the boundary separating Bhutan hills from the Dooars were finally demarcated with the creation of a new District, namely Jalpaiguri in 1869. For details see Karlsson, 1997, pp92-93

landscape.¹⁹ It was the period when systematic forestry began in India with the stabilization of British rule in the aftermath of 1857. The financial crunch following the revolt of 1857 led the ruler to set priorities before colonial forestry which were “essentially commercial in nature.” (Gadgil and Guha, 1997:141) In Dooars like other parts of Bengal initially the forest was administratively placed under the Revenue Department and remained open for “indiscriminate felling” but after 1874 with the creation of Forest Department the whole forest tracts became “reserved” and were divided into Jalpaiguri and Buxa Forest Divisions with the Torsa River as the border separating them (Karlsson, 1997: 97-99). Consequently the ecological fabric of the region was irrevocably altered either by a devastating depletion of forests or by introducing a significant change in the natural vegetation structure. A large tract of forests outside the Reserved category declared as “waste land” and handed over to the European planters for setting up tea gardens at “very low or nominal rent” which encouraged the establishment of 200 tea gardens within a mere span of 20 years by the end of the nineteenth century (Ibid, 100). A network of roads and railways to connect Dooars Plantation with the rest of the empire were built up by rampant clearing of bushes, grasslands and unreserved forests. Further all non reserved forests such as *khasmahal* forests and *jote* forests of the region were being disappeared soon with the extension of agriculture resulting in an increased pressure on Reserved Forests for fuel wood²⁰ (Ghosh, 2000;218). More than anything else the migrated tea labourers from Chota Nagpur region like Orao, Munda, Santal known as “best coolies” together with “agricultural settlers” from the south led to an increase of the total population of Dooars from 50,000 in 1865-67 to above 400,000 in

¹⁹ Despite its naturalness Dooars forests were not “virgin” at all during British annexation. Timber operations were regularly held by ‘special labor gangs’ and trees were sold to timber merchants. Ibid, p, 99

²⁰ During that phase in 1899 September in a letter to the Commissioner of Rajsahi Division the then Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri acknowledged that due to rapid disappearance of non-reserved forests the pressure on reserved forests for fuel woods was increasing voluminously. See Ghosh, 2000, p 218

1901 Census²¹ which caused a tremendous biotic pressure on the Dooars forests in the forms of fuel wood, forest products, household and agriculture requirements etc. Moreover, within the domain of reserved forests forest vegetation was changed drastically and natural mixed forests were converted into more homogenous and productive forests characterized by “valuable trees” like Sal (*Shorea robusta*) and later on Teak (*Tectona grandis*). Though the primary motive behind the management of reserved forests was to generate revenue either by exporting commercially valuable timber outside or by supplying firewood and soft woods (for preparation of tea boxes) to the local tea gardens²² but with the construction of Bengal-Dooars Railway the entire focus of management had been changed significantly. As the demand for sleeper arose, the timber was granted free of cost to the North Bengal State Railway and Forest Department lifted its earlier restrictions temporarily on the felling of forest trees with a recovery period of 25-30 years. This change in focus led to the extraction 30,000 sleepers in 1881 from the Buxa Division and left the Tondu Reserve in the Jalpaiguri Forest Division “completely stripped of trees” by early 1890’s which rapidly exhausted the reserved forests in the region (Karlsson, 1997:100). Besides, there was a practice of excluding forests for broader purposes of the Empire. As for example out of 3,259 acres of total exclusion, 2,609 acres alone, comprising the whole of Teesta Forest under Jalpaiguri Division were deforested under a Notification by the Government of Bengal in 1905 (Trafford, 1905:3). These whole processes of large-scale deforestation, changes in the vegetation structure and abrupt extraction of forests for colonial purposes have best been described by Karlsson as “the imperial onslaught on the Dooars wood”. (1997: 96). The rationale behind this onslaught on forests through the progress of demarcation and reservation was to fulfill both the objectives of ‘revenue generation and supply of

²¹ The total population of the Jalpaiguri District rose to double or close to 800,000 in 1901 Census for the similar reason. See details in Karlsson, 1997, pp 100-101

²² Between 1900 and 1904, the export of timbers rose from 393 to 1,010 tons from the Jalpaiguri District and 2,170, 282 cubic feet firewood were removed for thirty-three tea gardens during 1904-05. See Trafford, 1905, p 6

sleeper woods and other industrial goods for the expanding commercial economy and growing political integration of the late nineteenth century.' (Sivaramkrishnan, 1999:202)

4. Advent of Taungya: Ecological Exploitation through Co-option

However, this model of systematic extraction of timber from Dooars forests for construction of railway sleepers to tea boxes and warship to office paneling facilitated the rise of resource production of particular timber species and its preservation. This aspect of 'scientific forestry' was closely related with regeneration and conservation of forests backed by continental approach towards resource use which was duly informed by the colonial priorities in silvicultural management. Dooars forests became an ideal site of this form of practice where even local knowledge of the forest dwellers found its place in that overall project due to the local climatic conditions which forced the foresters to go beyond the conventional approach of modular science transposed directly from European Laboratory. This location-specific forest protection programme made Dooars categorically distinct from the rest of Bengal at least in terms of overall framework of resource production and its conservation.

It is often argued on the basis of a distinction made between the colonial ruler and practicing forester that the motive behind the colonial initiative for forest conservation invariably related with particular method of regeneration and protection could not be explained best by drawing examples only from the 'extractive reality' but by a recognition to the wider concern for a rational regime of resource use implicit in the practice of scientific forestry. This agenda of 'modernizing nature' began in the late nineteenth century by replacing the ad hoc attitude towards forest management with the appointment of some doctors and botanists to the post of conservator of forests throughout the country following the establishment of the colonial forest departments who were duly aware of the

scientific value of nature imbibed with their scientific attitude shaped up under the training of scientific institutions and disciplines in Europe. Those men of science produced a strong discourse in favor of conservation within the overall framework of colonial resource management on the basis of evidence of the impact of deforestation on climatic change and soil erosion and therefore often involved in hot contestation with the other government departments over the issue of priority before management under the British Empire (Ravi Rajan, 2008, Grove, 1995) Though it is true that such thesis behind the motive of forest conservation cannot obliterate the true outcome of British penetration in the Dooars forests resulting either "historically unparalleled deforestation" (Karsson, 1997) or extensive "monocultural plantations" by destroying diversity (Ghosh, 2000) but necessarily finds the ground for justification of forest protection against uncontrolled resource use by the eco-system people for their subsistence. Similar to other parts of the country the techniques of scientific forestry were applied to regulate access of that very population and even in some cases their entering into forests were completely forbidden. Actually, the Dooars forests was not an exception to the wider colonial strategies of scientific management practised throughout the country which were developed "by carefully regulating the intrusion and exclusion of 'man', classified in the terminology of forestry science as one of the 'enemies' of the forest." (Guha, 1989:60) In Dooars the perceived threat before the conservancy regime was the shifting cultivators or "Jhumeas" who practised a typical form of agriculture known as shifting cultivation characterized by the clearing and cultivation of forest patches by rotation where use of fire was considered as key element for preparing land for cultivation.²³ As soon as the forest department was established in India the colonial forester waged a war against shifting cultivation which was viewed as 'the most destructive of all practices for the forest'. (Guha, 1997:151) The reasons behind such

²³ It is the most general or common description of shifting cultivation where a lot of technicalities involved which makes it distinct from "swidden agriculture" often used interchangeably with it. For detail discussion see Christanty Linda , 1986, pp, 226-240.

an objection against such practices were two fold. First its use of fire for the sake of primitive agriculture which led to the destruction of forest wealth as represented by valuable timber species. Second, it posed an obstacle before territorial control of the forest and facilitates the evasion of taxation. Fire prevention thus became the main concern of forest conservancy in Dooars like other parts of the country coupled with an objective of keeping other biotic influences like grazing out of identified forest tract. The process involved clearing fire lines internally and externally and 'sweeping them regularly, for which village head men and raiyats provided free labor in exchange for privileges in the forests.' (Sivaramakrishnan, 1999:220) The challenge before the Department in Dooars was to ensure and protect the natural regeneration of Sal the most valued tree in Bengal forests, from the 'Jhoomeas' who slashed and burnt young second-growth Sal for growing cotton. It was further observed by Dr. Schlich, the then conservator of forests in Bengal during time of reservation in Dooars that 'the villagers (shifting cultivators) continued to burn the forest and cause large forest fires and thus ruin the work of forest department.' Consequently the decision was taken by the Department to keep out the Rava and Mech villagers (shifting cultivators) from Jalpaiguri and Buxa Reserve in exchange of nominal compensation like Rs 5/acre of cultivated land and Rs 2/house shifted. The decision reaffirmed the position of colonial management in relation to that ecosystem people as set out in the Notification of the Reserves which prohibited all kinds of interference of them into the forests for mere subsistence. (Karlsson, 1997: 105)

However, the expulsion of fire from Dooars forests like other parts of the country caused havoc to the scientific forestry where protection, extraction and marketing of principle timber species like Sal were subject to natural regeneration. Within twenty years of preparing the first working plans in North Bengal it was found that the prescribed system of management of Sal was not yielding the desired result in Jalpaiguri and Buxa Divisions due to diverse forest conditions than any other

regions of the country. (Sivaramkrishnan, 2000:73) In this high rainfall zone the prevention of fire led to the tremendous growth of creepers and 'savannah grass cover favorable to Sal seedlings was replaced by a thick layer of undergrowth'. This new semi-evergreen species crowded old Sal trees and impede severely the growth of new Sal seedlings. (Karlsson, 1997:108 and Ghosh, 2001:3) Against the backdrop the radical solution was found initially by Hart, a British Forester having long experience of working in Dooars forest. This new method for combating weeds was further developed by E.O Shebbeare and J.W.A Grieve who argued in favor of introduction of fire after clear-felling the forest tract for artificial regeneration of Sal plants. The new system brought the fire back in the regeneration and protection of Sal forests which earlier was considered as the main enemy before the modular approach of scientific forestry. This new method was originated from the practice of shifting cultivators instead of scientific knowledge and was already been experimented by Sir Dietrich Brandis in regeneration of Teak in Burmese Highland. In Burma Karen people practised a particular system of cultivation where field trees were planted along with food crops. The system was known in Burma as Taungya meaning hill (Taung) cultivation (Ya) in which fire was used as a key component for burning the previous woody plant component to improve soil fertility and plantation were established in that cleared forest land. Originally it was the local term for shifting cultivation and was subsequently used to describe the regeneration method. The system was proved so efficient that Teak plantations in Burma were established at a very low cost. (Nair, 1993: 75) The first experimentation of Taungya in India began soon after its first introduction by Brandis in Burma in 1856. The first taungya plantations were raised in 1863 in North Bengal followed by further attempts in 1886 at Sylhat in Assam and in 1890 in Coorg. Although the regular taungya cultivation was not taken up until the first half of the twentieth century when it was used for raising Sal plantations in North Bengal and was soon extended to Teak in 1912. (Seth, 1981:31) However, the adoption of Taungya in India as a system of silvicultural practice under colonial framework of management was marked by a debate on

shifting cultivation among the British foresters. From Asia to Africa and Australia the British Empire was stuck in the dilemma of managing shifting cultivators under a rational framework of forestry science. On the one hand, a group of British foresters opposed vehemently the method on the ground that the very practice caused severe ecological disruption and immense destruction of forests which had major economic and political consequences followed by the successive elimination of superior species in favor of an inferior one. The other group advocated for a controlled regime of shifting cultivation as it provided a supply of reserve labor and resulting increased food production. Further, both the examples of successful regeneration of Teak in Burma with the help of shifting cultivation (Taungya) and failure in the natural regeneration of Sal in North Bengal were sought in this debate. Amidst this controversy a committee of 'neutrals' was formed which came out finally with the recommendations that though shifting cultivation in its crude form led to the destruction of forests and often denudation of the soil combined with associated political damage but at the same time if full use of the method is to be made it would help to the propagation of valuable species in suitable areas. To this end, the committee urged, especially for India, the establishment of forest villages for the practice of controlled shifting cultivation inside reserves as silvicultural operation. (Ravi Rajan, 2008:171-179) In this context by early twentieth century taungya system became regularized as the standard method of artificial regeneration in Dooars along with its key component of fire in the working and management of Sal forests. This introduction of Taungya reinforced the necessity for restructuring the forest village system as a whole because the earlier establishment of a few forest villages in the Dooars were made to ensure the supply of a permanent labor force for fire protection but under the new system more skilled labor were required who had the knowledge of cultivation by applying the technique of slash and burn. Hence, the indigenous shifting cultivators like Rava, Mech or Garo whom the British forester threw out from forests earlier staged a comeback in the new established forest villages. Taungya system could not work without fire and skilled taungya workers

were absolutely those indigenous jhumeas who knew the ecology of fire. (Ghosh, 2001:3) In this newly created taungya villages' villagers were allowed to raise agricultural crops for two years in clear-felled coups between the lines of forest plantation. As soon as the crops grew to shade the space between the tree seedlings, the villagers had to discontinue cultivation and move to a new site of plantation. According to Shebbeare, each household could cultivate nearly an acre of taungya every year and cultivated it for two seasons. Along with plantation, the villagers were involved in associated weeding, cleaning, thinning operations and further they had to save the plantation from fire and grazing hazards for 4/5 years. In exchange of their service the villagers were entitled to certain privileges and facilities followed by an yearly agreement or bond with the forest department like free timber and other implements for building quarters, drinking water, limited medical assistance, free firewood and fodder in addition to cultivable land not more than 5 acres and cash payment for extra work. Thus the system provided some sort of rehabilitation space for the earlier displaced shifting cultivators while paying at least moderate attention to the problems of their livelihood security. The system continued even after two decades of Independence and remained the crux of forest conservation and regeneration until the historic movement broke out in the region against this exploitative exercise amidst the atmosphere of highly industrialized production forestry.

However, from the viewpoint of forest management Taungya achieved a striking success as it successfully turned the destructive practice of shifting cultivation into a method of regeneration. It involved very low cost due to free labor supply in forest plantations and thus save the Government's exchequer which leads to increase in profit from timber operation. Further it incorporates the skill of the shifting cultivators in forestry operation while ensuring their livelihood at least at the subsistence level. It provides an alternative know-how for forest plantation where natural regeneration has failed due to locational peculiarities in the eco-system. It acknowledged also the gap embedded in laboratory based forest profession and

recommended for a site-specific management plan in forest governance. Above all Taungya brought the forest dependent people back into their eco-system who were displaced earlier and thereby preventing their first hand physical separation from nature. Considering its success, anthropologists perceived Taungya either as a 'revolution' in the environmental history of the Duras (Karlsson, 1997) or as a site for recognition of the local forestry knowledge under the colonial framework of scientific forestry (Sivaramakrishnan, 2000). These approaches focused implicitly or explicitly on the structural arrangement of cooperation as a hallmark of the system where the Forest Department accommodates both the shifting cultivators and their skill in the collaborative framework of natural resource management and extending certain privileges and facilities to them in lieu of their service for forest regeneration. But from the view point of praxis those assessments on Taungya have failed to understand the political ecology of exploitation inheres as an essential property of the system where the much projected vocabulary of cooperation has been transformed into a mechanism of co-option. Under the Taungya no customary rights of the forest dwellers were recognized in the region. Further the forest villagers were denied to make their choice even in the matter of field crops they were entitled to cultivate in between plantations. They did not have any authority to decide the species of their preference to be planted. There was no scope for negotiation with the forest department relating to matter of facilities and privileges usually offered to them. Rather the forest villagers had to sign a heinous agreement with the Department on behalf of the Governor of the State on terms and conditions to work 90 days free of wages and up to 275 days on daily wages of meager amount without any arrangement of education, drinking water and supply of working implements.²⁴ All the members of the family including women and children of the forest worker were made to work without any remuneration.²⁵ Even in some cases, when the villagers were granted homestead lands under the system, prolonged or permanent occupancy of the land was impossible because they had to shift to new locations after every plantation cycle. Moreover, in those villages living conditions were so

²⁴ See Writ Petition in the High Court of Calcutta.C.R. No 5165(W) of 1976, C.R. 8893 (W) of 1976 and C.R 800 (W) of 1976

²⁵ For further details see agreement between forest villagers of Bhutri Forest Village and the Government of West Bengal as on 1.1.1966, DFO Jalpaiguri Division

poor and the oppression so severe that villagers seldom stayed there for long.²⁶ Hence, marked by the absence of freedom of choice, authority in decisions making and scope of negotiation on the part of the forest villagers the system became an instrument of co-option in the hands of the Forest Department in order to realize their goal of extracting valuable timber species for serving commercial and strategic interest of the Empire. All those initiatives for incorporation of those useful indigenous tribes and recognition of their knowledge were nothing but to fulfill the gap of their knowledge and practice of eco-system management to cherish their colonial ideals, interests and purposes. However, in Taungya this political ecology of exploitation through the mechanism of co-option involved both the exploitation of ecosystem and its people. The first kind of exploitation manifested in the choice of principle timber species like Sal, Teak etc. for regeneration as well as conservation at the cost of multispecies forest eco-system which eventually encouraged the monocultural plantations by destroying diversity of the forest land. This type of exploitation continued even in the era of 'production forestry' or 'industrial forestry' during the post-colonial period and discontinued largely with the 'conservation regime' in the mid eighties. However, the next type of exploitation related with the exploitation of eco-system people has of greater relevance even today particularly in the context of ongoing experiments with collaborative forms of resource governance like Social Forestry, JFM, Participatory Watershed Management etc. In Taungya this kind of ecological exploitation of the eco-system people occurred fundamentally at two concurrent levels of their service towards the eco-system and their organic relation with the eco-system. Primarily it was the exploitation of the service of those eco-system people in order to extract values from nature to serve the ruling interest. The mechanism of co-option worked successfully behind the usurpation of their service. First, under the system villagers were encouraged for intercropping which contributed to the preparation of land involving the associated process of weeding, cleaning and burning for forest plantation at free of cost. Second, protection of the plantation from the attack of wild animals automatically took place with the

²⁶ For detail about the condition of the villagers under taungya in Dooars see Shebbeare, (1920) Working Plan for the Reserved Forests of Buxa Divisions of Bengal Forest Circle, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, Cited in Ghosh Soumitra, 2001

initiative of the villagers to save their own crops. Third, the system of uninterrupted, compulsory and free labor in lieu of granting certain facilities made the foresters free from headache to carry out their managerial success in forestry operation. There were many things more inherent in the nature of exploitation which were summarized best by former Inspector General of Forests in India in a report compiled for Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (See Appendix VI):

“In the taungya, the emphasis has always been placed on the success of the forest planting, more particularly on establishing a forest crop at the least possible cost. All operations are primarily in the interest of the forest species. Scant attention has been paid to the seasonal crops grown by the agriculturists, or to their possible benefits to or interference with the forest crop but without much supporting evidence, many of the most paying crops have been prohibited in different localities on the grounds that they interfere with the growth of tree seedlings.....facilities are designed primarily to keep the labor force of the taungya cultivators tied to their plots and in tolerable shape to enable them to look after the Plantations because if they have no place to live if they fall ill, frequently the plantation will suffer. These incentives are, therefore, primarily linked with benefits to the forest crop rather than with the welfare of the taungya cultivators and are given to them at the minimum possible scale. The system is frankly exploitative in concept and operation and cashes upon the needs of the landless and poor people to serve its own ends. The much vaunted incentives are only a cloak for uninhibited exploitation, as the savings effected by the Forest Department are many times more than the expenditure incurred on elementary conveniences provided to the working force.” (Seth, 1981:34-35)

However, ecological exploitation under Taungya was not limited merely to the exploitation of the service of those eco-system people but at another and more deeper level it was also the exploitation of the organic relation between those

people and their eco-system. This type of exploitation is unique in its kind and unlike the mere exploitation of working force it is peculiar to the field of natural resource governance where even innate association between man and nature has to be abused for serving the ruling interest. Organic relation between the ecosystem and its people is the by-product of that innate association which develops through a living and continuous process of material exchange. This organic relation has been encoded through an interactive process between man and nature which manifests itself in the form of specific eco-system based practices. The method of cleaning and burning under shifting cultivation was a concrete manifestation of that practice worldwide under forest eco-system with its location specific regional variations. Though it was seen as a destructive practice of converting forest patches into the agricultural land but unlike pure agriculture that conversion was temporary in nature and suit to the rotational intervention by the low density population into a relatively abundance forests. In Taungya the exploitation of that organic relation took place through the co-option of the indigenous technique of slash and burn into the domain of scientific management while disassociating it from its very purpose and corresponding mode of being. At this level the ecological exploitation led to the defacement of the organic relation between the ecosystem and its people either by distorting or disrupting the life process of interaction and material exchange with the eco-system under an oppressive bureaucratic praxis of forest management. The defacement does not mean the complete loss of harmony between the eco-system and its people but definitely implies the negative transformation in the attitude and orientation of those people towards the practice of resource use which perverts their mode of intervention into the nature. Earlier, when the shifting cultivation was their way of life they intervened into the nature for subsistence only but under the Taungya the motive for subsistence was transformed into a motive for incentives. This incentive culture of capitalism distorted their interaction process with the nature as it altered fundamentally their communal orientation towards subsistence born out from the necessities of life in favor of an individualistic utility maximizing

exercise to earn more money by cashing nature to satisfy multiple desires of life. Another dimension of defacement necessarily followed from the exploitation of organic relation was the concurrent loss of bonding with the nature. This loss was emanating from the framework of bounded interaction imposed on those populations in the taungya system. Under the practice of shifting cultivation they were free to interact with the nature as they felt necessary but the Taungya robbed that scope and put restrictions on grazing, collection of timber and firewood and thereby systematized their interaction to fit with the colonial project of 'modernizing nature'. This type of bondage through institutionalization of practice disrupted the free flow of exchange between the eco-system and its people and thereby resulted in loss of bonding with the nature. Though sometimes in some cases the forest dwellers attempted to revert the very process through the means of subaltern resistance against the rule by setting fire to the forests, grazing cattle and collecting firewood and various forest products in the prohibited zone under the Reserve but as a whole it was next to impossible under the regime of severe punishment. The threat of punishment was so obvious that in the annual Progress Report of 1877-78; the Conservator of Forests (Bengal) advanced that people "come to understand better what our object is, and when they see that they cannot set fire to the forests without becoming liable to severe punishment" (1878:39)²⁷. Thus restricting the free flow of life and disciplining under a new system disrupted their normal interaction with the ecosystem which affected negatively their practical, emotional and psychological bond with the nature and thereby prepared the basis for further attitudinal changes towards eco-system. The institutional imposition of rules on resource use created a paradoxical situation in which the material conditions of their dependence on eco-system remained same whereas they were forced to reduce their level of interaction with the eco-system. This paradox, under suitable circumstances engendered reaction among those people not only against the rule but against the nature also which was seldom manifested in the destruction of

²⁷ The quotation is cited in Karlsson, 1997:98, p, 98

forests by those people for certain petty purposes. However, this dimension of defacement is pretty obvious under the ecology of expulsion where ecosystem people were evicted or displaced by force or by imposed consensus outside the National Parks and Protected Areas for the sake of Wildlife Preservation. Thus, the defacement of the organic man-nature relationship as born out from the ecological exploitation under the Taungya or from the ecological expulsion under the conservation regime outside Taungya produced the similar results as it altered radically the space for praxis of those ecosystem people either by distorting or disrupting their interaction with the nature.

This ecological exploitation in the Taungya became severe after independence with an inept and corrupted bureaucratic atmosphere. The villagers were even deprived from their bonafide entitlements earlier enjoyed under colonial regime. The first onslaught came in the form of denial of nominal wages for their extra work beyond 90 days. Earlier the forest villagers were paid Rs 1.50/day for their extra work between 90 days and 275 days. After Independence the situation was changed completely as they were forced to finish all the works within 90 days by the lower grade forest officials so as to forfeit the money conventionally spent by the government for extra work. . Simultaneously, there was continuous threat of eviction from those officials if anyone failed to finish his assigned work within 90 days even due to the illness. This denial of entitlement became regularized along with ill-treatment and torture by the forests officials and staffs like Beat Officer, Range Officer and Forest Guards. Though the phenomenon was not new at all as in 1933 the First Taungya Conference under the colonial rule at Nainital in Uttarakhand (earlier in UP) admitted that the FD had a moral responsibility towards the taungya workers and the Department should protect the villagers from harassment by the subordinate staffs. (Ghosh, 2001) However, in the post independence period the torture and harassment by the Departmental staffs went beyond the limit. Those officials often asked for milk, Ghee and fish from those people at the free of cost.

The people were asked even to provide free labor for household work of those officials. Moreover, misbehave and insult from those officials became the norms of the daily life. Thus the system of Taungya was reduced completely into a system of slavery of the forest villagers in the post colonial period. The problem became intensified further with the increase of population since the establishment of the forest villages under colonial rule. Though after independence the population became more than double there was no initiative by the Department to accommodate those villagers under the Taungya. The second generation settlers stayed in the forest villages but without any agreement with the Department and were considered as "non-agreement" or as "*faltu*". The Forest Department did not treat those forest villagers like the agreement holders. They were deprived of any land holdings and other entitlements like free firewood, grazing, intercropping etc. Absence of agreement made them more vulnerable for oppression and torture. They were bound to do anything for the officials to secure their live in the forest villages. Those villagers used to stay in the premise of their relatives who usually were the agreement holders and shared the land for cultivation allotted to them. But it led to the fragmentation of the agricultural lands though unofficially which badly hit the basic subsistence economy of the villagers as a whole. Besides, certain changes in the eco-system during the period hit at the very base of survival of the forest villagers. The first and foremost problem was the increasing destruction of paddy and other crops by the wild animals for which the villagers often failed to take the products of intercropping back at home. There was no compensation scheme by the Department for them at that time. It was reported in working plans of Jalpaiguri and Buxa that monkey and pigs were the common enemy for fruit trees and certain kinds of vegetation used to be cultivated by the villagers between plantations. Besides, elephant caused considerable damage to the field crops of the villagers. Though the wild life attacks on crops became quite visible in the first part of the twentieth century due to continuous loss of habitat with the imperial destruction of forests, establishment of tea gardens and monocultural plantations but it increased

considerably during sixties due to further loss in their natural habitat in Dooars especially with the establishment of Binnaguri Army Cantonment and Hasimara Air Force Station along with several other Army-Camp aftermath of the Indo-Chinese War in 1962 and Indo-Pak war in 1971. Apart from that the constant influx of Refugees from Bangladesh after the partition of Jalpaiguri during Independence and from Assam after the initiation of "*Bongal-Kheda*" Movement in the late fifties and early sixties respectively caused tremendous pressure on the Dooars forests and loss of habitat of the wild life. Additionally shifting of river Torsha into Buri Torsha caused havoc damage to the Chilapata forests. Moreover, the Teak plantation which started during late 30s and 40s in the region increased enormously after independence and 'Teak Working Circle' constituted under different divisions of Dooars in order to meet the demand for industrial production forestry. Villagers reported that due to heavy temperature Teak plantations with a narrow spacing of 2 meters suppressed the field crops in between rows and blocked the undergrowth of vegetations and other inferior forest species which left any scope for grazing of their livestock. Last but not least was the problem of river bank erosion and concurrent floods in the region which not only damaged forest plantations but caused great harm to their agriculture, livestock and houses. In October, 1968 an unprecedented flood occurred in the Western Dooars along with Darjeeling after incessant rain for 60 hours. Entire habitations of the both banks of Teesta River were flooded and many lives including 20,000 cattle were lost and the paddy fields were silted. All those factors contributed in the formation of grievances among the forest villagers as the livelihood conditions were worsening day by day so was the oppression and exploitation under the taungya system. But until and unless the wave of radical politics stepped in with its ideology of struggle their aspirations and growing discontent were not crystallized into a form of organization for movement which could bring about justice against that exploitative regime of the forest governance.

5 Radical Politics Stepped in

Environmental movements owed much from other socio-political struggles took place in the colonial and post-colonial India. As integral parts of the social life environmental issues are shaped up in the context of larger socio-economic processes. Due to constant dialogue among different spheres of life environmental movements are often coincided with the other forms of struggle and vice versa. Further, it is observed that even in some cases like Chipko and Silent Valley Movement organizations of earlier social movements have been transformed later into platforms for environmental movements. Though Indian environmentalism is largely dominated by the ideology and technique of Ghandhi, the left-radical traditions of socio-political movements also have its significance on the history of environmental resistances. On the one hand the Gandhian strand within environmentalism borrowed the techniques of non-violent protest or *satyagraha* of Gandhi and has drawn heavily from his ideals of 'pre-capitalist and pre-colonial village community as the exemplar of ecological and social harmony' while rejecting heavy industrialization and modern way of life. (Guha, 1988:2580, Guha and Martinez-Alier, 2000:153) On the other, the left-radical strand relies upon the militant techniques of active resistance and concerned more about the transformation of existing power relations 'and of the prospects for the empowerment of marginalized groups'. (Kothari and Ahmad, 2004:11) In the context of Dooars though the radicalism of the said forest movement was greatly inspired by the ideals and techniques of Subhash Chandra Bose but it got direct impetus from the left-radical traditions of workers and peasants struggles in Bengal which started on the eve of Independence in the region.

Dooars remained largely unaffected by the currents of nationalist movement until late 30's due to its physical isolation from the rest of the country and the strict regulation for entering unauthorized outsiders made by the European tea planters and Forest Department. However, since the eve of Independence it became the hub

of radical peasants and workers movements along side the anti-imperialist struggle. It was with the formation of the Jalpaiguri District Krishak Samity in 1938 a peasant movement involving large section of Rajbanshi and Muslim peasants and *adihars* started during 1939-40 against collection of excessive tolls at the weekly rural markets, various levies by the *jotedars* from the *adhiars* over and above the half share and also high interest against loan for cultivation from them. Though the movement did spread nearby districts and became successful to a certain extent with conceding certain demands by the colonial administration but severe oppressive measures were taken against the leftist organizers as the CPI was banned during the period. Despite repression the Krishak Samity maintained its underground network and activities which became obvious after the withdrawal of the ban on CPI in July 1942. However, with the 1943 famine and consequent mass sufferings the exploitative relationship between *jotedar* and *adihars* was exposed once again. In this very context, the communists responded to the situation and in 'September, 1946 the Bengal Provincial Kishan Sabha gave a call for tebhaga i.e. two-third shares of the harvests in favor of the *adihars* recommended by the Land Revenue Commission in 1940.' Following the call a major peasants outbursts took place in the large part of the Jalpaiguri District including Dooars along with the districts of Dinajpur, Rangpur and Malda. The active participation of peasants in a large scale and intensification of the movement led to the publication of the Bargadar Bill in 1947 which incorporated some of the demands of the movement. The Bill gave further impetus to the movement which turned in violent agitation by its volunteer throughout the year. As a result many *Jotedars* either made a retreat or arrived at compromise with the peasants. In spite of launching repressive measures against the movement it created mass peasant awakening of their rights and built up confidence about their success against exploitation. However, in the early 1947, the movement was received support from the railway workers union and tea garden workers of Dooars which emerged as the sites of uncompromising labor struggle during the period together with the peasant uprising. The first large-scale workers

demonstration in Dooars began with the victory of CPI dominated Bengal-Assam Rail Road Workers Union (BARRWU) as a part of an all India agitation of the railway workers in the mid of 1946. The achievement of the workers in realizing certain concessions from the authority laid the seeds of workers movement in tea gardens. The railway lines in Dooars went through the tea gardens and a number of Railway stations in the region surrounded by a cluster of tea gardens. Besides the lowest ranking railway workers mostly tribals came into frequent contact with tea laborers. Moreover the CPI led organizers of the Bengal Dooars Railway tried to establish contact with the plantation workers to spread trade unionism in that crucial front. (Dasgupta, 1985:42-52)

Though the communist trade unionist were partially successful to organize certain agitations in tea gardens during 1946 on the issue of regular supply the workers with their quota of food ration it was actually *tebhaga* which showed the way for mass mobilization in tea gardens. The CPI led organizers of BARRWU found it as an opportunity for united action by workers and peasants in and around tea gardens. Consequently tea-garden workers were organized and volunteer groups were formed to carry forward the agenda of joint struggle. In 1947, as a part of this joint movement plantation workers revolted in a large number of tea gardens which was quite unfamiliar to the European Planters. The most common slogans of the joint movement were 'abolish *jotedari*', 'give us two-third share of the crops' and 'European Planters go back to London'. Several repressive measures were taken by the planters but the tea workers were unmanageable. At last daily wages of the tea garden workers were raised to disassociate them from the peasant's movement which was finally called off in May, 1947. After independence with the recognition of the fundamental right to organize and form associations, the trade union movement in the tea gardens of Dooars gained a new momentum. Several trade unions like AITUC, INTUC, UTUC, HMS etc affiliated to different political parties started to organize workers to realize their bonafide demands. In the 50's and 60's leftist trade

unions became the major force to organize labor movements in the region. During the period labor unrest was on the peak as the increasing trade union activity helped to highlight their grievance. The trade unions with the active support of the workers protested on so many different issues including lower wages, heavy work load, low qualities of ration and irregularity in bonus, provident fund etc. The workers frequently struck work on various issues. Hence the incidents of man days lost, production failures were very common during the period. The most remarkable movement during the phase took place in 1955 when the workers from all trade unions struck work for eighteen days on the demand for minimum compulsory bonus against a huge profit secured by the planters in 1954. The strike paralyzed all most all tea gardens in Dooars which was held in the peak season and resulting substantial loss in the production of tea. Despite arrests and atrocities by the police the struggle was continued. Finally in 1956 the Government was compelled to force the employers to abide by the principle of compulsory minimum bonus and a formula for the quantum of bonus for three years from 1953 to 1956 was settled. In 1962, the co-ordination Committee of Tea Plantation Workers (CCTPW) was formed to initiate further struggle over issues such as wages, bonus and benefits under the Plantation Labor Act. The committee played a vital role in forging the unity of the workers and joint actions on common problems. With the formation of the first United Front Ministry in 1967 along with its pro-labor policy the joint action got further impetus. Strikes were taken place for some specific demands of the workers in individual tea gardens as for example in 1967, in Hope Tea Estate; the workers continued a strike for seven months. After the second United Front Ministry came into power in 1969 the Coordination Committee framed a charter of demands and called for an indefinite general strike from 18th August of the year. The strike continued for 16 days and was ended up with the agreement that was reached between the planters and unions with the active intervention of the Government on behalf of the workers. With the movement workers achieved so many of their long standing demands including employment in permanent vacancies, additional

employment, ration at concession rate, increase of extra leaf price (ELP) etc.(Bhowmik, 1981:137-57)

The radical atmosphere as a whole behind the historic forest villager's movement against ecological exploitation was prepared with the peasant and workers movement in Dooars and several other militant movements in the adjoining districts of North Bengal like food movement and Berubari movement in Coochbehar during 50's and Naxalbari movement in Darjeeling during 60's. Nevertheless, the single and most important contribution behind the radicalism perhaps was credited to the tea garden worker's movement in Dooars which had its direct bearings on the awakening of mass consciousness against exploitation. The obvious reason was the multiplicity of interaction between tea gardens and forests on several counts. As it has been said earlier that inception of tea gardens in the region took place with the clear-cutting of forests by the British. Consequently most of the tea gardens found their place in the forest fringe area and did share almost similar characteristics with the forest eco-system. According to the recent Annual Divisional Reports there are 76 tea gardens in the fringe area of Jalpaiguri Division, 27 in the BTR (W) and 12 in BTR (E). Though the single natural landscape was divided artificially into two parts by the colonial ruler for sectoral development but it could not alter the common sufferings of the tea workers and forest villagers due to some common climatic and geo-spatial hazards like flood, cyclone, elephant attack etc. Further, tea workers depended heavily on the forests for their livelihood like fishing in the forest's river, firewood, and minor forest products etc. Besides, the immigrated tribals from Chhotanagpur known as 'best coolies' were not only brought for the tea plantation but a considerable portion of them were placed in forest villages particularly in the early regime of fire protection. Naturally in many cases forest villagers were found to be relatives of the tea-garden workers and vice-versa. Moreover, professionally both the tea workers and forest villagers visited frequently to each other's places. On the one hand Forest Department was the supplier of soft wood for tea boxes and

firewood required for tea gardens and to collect those materials tea workers used to come to the timber depot of the Department. On the other, during 60's it was often complained by the lower forest officials to the higher authority that the reason behind the problem of labor shortage in the Departmental operation lies in the tea industry which offered more attractive terms and conditions to the local labors who naturally preferred to seek employment there. All these factors contributed to the favorable conditions for continuous interaction between forest villagers and tea garden workers which led to the sharing of their problems and experiences of life. This sharing even turned into learning from each other for mutual benefit. Hence; the radical politics in tea gardens had the greater scope to influence the forest villagers directly. The impact of tea workers movement was evident in the 60's when villagers under Coochbehar and Buxa Divisions approached the RSP leaders who had stronghold in adjacent tea gardens to take up the issue of the forest dwellers but the Party leadership denied to organize people in that front. Further, probably, keeping this phenomenon in mind the Forward Block leadership chose a person as the secretary in the organization for movement who was the son of a tea garden manager and having some sort of experience in practical politics in that front. Moreover, there is no scope of denying the fact that the movement inspired largely by the struggle for wages and better livelihood conditions of the tea workers and also by their forms of protest like strike for achieving the demands.

Despite a great inspiration from the tea workers struggle the final ground for the movement was prepared with the formation of the first United Front (UF) Government in 1967 in West Bengal. The UF Government in its 18-point programme declared to recognize the legitimate rights to form unions by the employees of all categories including workers and peasants to raise their voice against all sorts of injustice. It decided to accelerate the democratic and legitimate struggles of the people from all walks of life and sought to foster workers and peasants' trade union movements free from the fear of police repression. It therefore attempted to

reorient the police in order to make them conform to the popular aspirations and demands. The Government was committed to bring about changes in the existing social structure to improve the condition of the people through active cooperation and association in all matters. The pro-labor policy of the Government was anticipated with legitimizing the technique of *gheraos* free from police intervention as introduced by the then Labor Minister Subodh Banerjee with a circular issued in March, 1967. (Ghosh, 1981:63-68) Such an initiative from the government took the workers and peasants on road against all sorts of oppression following mass mobilization across factories, workshops, government offices etc. Apart from the technique of *gherao* which was adopted extensively throughout the struggle against Taungya, the policy of the Government as a whole had a catalyzing effect on the forest villagers in Dooars to organize them for the first time against ecological exploitation.

6. The First Phase of Struggle (1967-68): Voice against Taungya

The success of the bonus movement of 1955 by the tea garden workers left a considerable impact on the psyche of the forest villagers. They realized the strength of a mass movement and felt the necessity for an organization devoted completely to their cause. By capitalize their sentiment RSP leadership who were dominated in the tea-garden movements in the large part of Dooars by 60's entered into a number of forest villages and created their forest workers union but soon the Union was proved to be inadequate as it did not raise any strong voice against the despot forest bureaucracy what it did in tea gardens movement. However, in the wake of their failure the first United Front Government in 1967 with its radical approach towards people's movement brought the opportunity to actualize the necessity to build up struggle in the forest. But the problem was that of a leader and organization who could shoulder the responsibility to organize those people courageously and lead them into right direction. Interesting enough Ramesh Roy, a ration dealer by profession at Hasimara, could not refrain himself from responding to that call of the

hour. He astonishingly observed that the forest villagers who seldom came to get weekly ration from his shop only took the kerosene oil and never asked for the sugar or rice. When he enquired the fact he became surprise to know that the villagers did not get any wages for their work for the Department and instead they had to sign an annual agreement with the Department containing the condition of free and compulsory labor for 90 days. Though, there was a provision for providing some nominal wages for extra work but the illiterate villagers were not even informed by the officials as the copy of that agreement was retained with the Beat or Range Officers. Further he kept informed about the untold misery and severe exploitation of the villagers who really live a life of slave. When he was convinced about the unconstitutional practices of the Department which violated the spirit of freedom he made contact with one of his lawyer friend at Jalpaiguri town. Mr. Binoy Kumar Bhowmik, the lawyer-friend, introduced Ramesh Roy with Professor Nirmal Bose in A.C.College who later on won the 1977 state assembly election as a Forward Block candidate from Jalpaiguri constituency. Professor Bose who himself met Subhash Chandra Bose at Jalpaiguri during pre-independence period and took the responsibility to cater his ideals inspired Ramesh Roy with his ideals to transfer power in the hands of the people and struggle for liberation against all sorts of slavery and exploitation. Through Professor Bose Ramesh Roy met other District Committee Members (Jalpaiguri) of Forward Block like, Mukulesh Sanyal, Satyajoyti Sen, and Sudhanshu Kumar Majumder who were the product of middle class radicalism in Bengal imbibed with the ideal of Subhash Chandra Bose during freedom struggle. However, Professor Bose assured Ramesh Roy that if he joined Forward Block they would extend all kinds of support to build a movement against the injustice. Returning back to Hasimara Roy convinced one forest villager namely Emanuel Kujur to accompany him in order to organize the forest villagers against exploitation. It was October, 1967 they started their first campaign at Kodal Basti followed by Godamdabri, Menda Bari, Holapara and other forest villages under Coochbehar Forest Division (Now Wild Life –II).

Initially a set of concurrent incidents during the period helped the organizer to mobilize people for the first time in Cooch Behar Division. The first incident took place at Kodal Basti where the DFO suddenly convened a meeting of the villagers and declared that a considerable portion of land under their cultivation should be vacated immediately by the villagers for plantation as those were actually belonged to the Department. Villagers were completely stuck to listen it and told DFO that they cultivated the land since British Period. But the Officer was arrogant and ordered village Mondal to take necessary step for fencing the land soon after the meeting. Naturally it annoyed villagers very much and they approached the RSP leadership in nearby tea garden to take up the issue but were denied to take any action in this regard. Amidst the bottleneck, Nikuddin Kujur, a villager, who had earlier contact with Ramesh Roy called him to the spot immediately. Upon his advice the forest dwellers gheraoed the Beat Officer and forest guard after few days. Following that another meeting was convened by the DFO but no solution was reached. However the villagers could not resist the Department for long to take away their land as the movement was in its embryonic stage and they were threatened and forced to give their consent in favor of the Department. Though the movement failed at Kodal Basti it registered it's first success at Godamdabri forest village under the same Division where the villagers under the leadership of Ramesh Roy successfully resisted the eviction initiative of 29 forest villagers who were the second generation settlers and had no agreement with the Department. Following the massive agitation against the Beat and Range Officer at Godamdabri along with frequent gherao of those officers Ramesh Roy was arrested by the Police and spent 15 days in jail custody. Returning from Jail he led a delegation to the Chief Conservator of Forest in Kolkata with the help of Nirmal Bose who actually arranged the meeting. Soon, the decision of eviction was temporarily withheld by the Department. It is to be noted that till then no exclusive organization of the forest villagers was formed and all movement works took place under the Banner of *Aragami Kishan Sabha*, a peasant organization of the Forward Block.

Despite the fall of United Front Government in November, the success at Godamdabri was quickly spread to other parts of the Dooars and in the beginning of the 1968 villagers from different divisions started to make contact with Ramesh Roy who already organized a group of volunteer to carry forward the struggle. The most well known of those volunteers were Emanuel Kujur, Nikuddin Kujur, Jogen Narjinary, Sarba Sing Lama, Khudiram Pahan and Harman Sing. Incidentally the then Governor Dharma Vira came to Hasimara at that time and 1000 of forest villagers under the leadership of Ramesh Roy organized a protest rally following a deputation placed before him. In that deputation forest villagers for the first time raised their voice against the Taungya and demanded to abolish it immediately. Taking the momentum of the movement in account and the peculiar identity of the forest villagers who were both peasants and workers at the same time, the banner of Agragami Kishan Sabha was found inadequate to capture the whole spectrum of the struggle. Consequently the organization for the movement was formed in the first half of 1968 namely the North Bengal Forest Workers and Jaigir Cultivators Union (NBFWJCU). Viewing the potential of the movement the Forward Block District leadership intended to keep their control over the movement as that was the only opportunity to spread their organization in Dooars where other left parties like RSP and CPI already established their stronghold through workers and peasant movements. Consequently two party members based at Alipurduar namely Dhiren Sarkar and Durgesh Niogy placed at the post of Secretary and working President of the Union respectively and another member of the Party namely Kali Charan Pandey, resident of a forest village-Garam Basti (BTR), was placed in the executive committee along with Ramesh roy and Emanuel Kujur who were the mass leaders of the struggle. However, Roy and Kujur did not oppose the initiative of the Party as their sole objective was to build up a genuine struggle for the interest of the forest people. The union became registered under Society Registration Act, West Bengal and a new chapter of the struggle began very soon.

In the mid of 1968 the Buxa Tiger Reserve²⁸ became the main centre of that struggle. The ground became mature when due to a heavy and continuous rainfall in June forest plantation was disrupted in Dooars. Forest Villagers at GaroBasty, naturally, failed to finish their weekly target for plantation in the Beach Line. But the Department was strict to complete all the works within 90 days and therefore issued a directive that all the pending works should be finished altogether with the stipulated work in a week by involving all the family members of the forest villagers through working along day and night. Hence, the Department forced the villagers to abide by the directive and to achieve the target the failing of which the villagers were said to be evicted from their village by the Department. When the villagers realized the impossibility of the target and preparing themselves to leave the village a few of them like Prem Kumar Sharma went to RSP Office at Kalchini to seek help from the trade union leaders of the tea gardens but he was refused to be assisted by the leaders. The villagers were disheartened though not frustrated as they had another option to make contact with Ramesh Roy at Hasimara who already emerged as the undisputed leader of the movement. Tanka Bahadur Chhetry along with some other villagers went Hasimara and met him and following his advice a meeting was called for at their village. Ramesh Roy and Emanuel Kujur along with Sarba Sing Lama, Kalicharn Pandey and Harman Sing came on behalf of the NBFWJCU to attend the meeting. Eventually the Forest Guard tried to dismiss the meeting but due to resistance of the villagers he went back. After the meeting the villagers leaded by NBFWJCU gheraoed the Ranger at Rajabhatkhawa in the evening. The gherao continued for whole night and the next day the villagers from Buxa Road, another village in the BTR joined the agitation and immediately the DFO came to meet the Union leaders at the place. A deputation was placed before the Ranger in front of DFO who gave written promises to keep their demand before the higher authority and the gherao put an end. There were two main demands in that deputation along with the others. The first was to abolish *Bhaga* System of work where each villager

²⁸ Now divided into two divisions i.e. Buxa Tiger Reserve (West) and Buxa Tiger Reserve (East)

was bound to finish all plantation works including cleaning, burning, weeding etc. in a hector of forest land for free within 90 days and if anyone failed to do so he would have been liable to do extra work without any wages until and unless the target was completed. The target of one hector plantation/villager (seldom two hectors/villager) within 90 days was actually an unrealistic one and villagers often were able to reach that and hence practically they had to work all along the year except one or two months without even realizing the wages of Rs 1.50 which was stipulated in the annual agreement for works beyond 90 days. The Foresters used to pay those nominal wages only in cases where the villagers were employed for work besides that one hectare. Naturally this *Bagha* System of one hectare was acted as the stumble block to realize their wages. The second demand in that deputation was the introduction of wages in all works @ Rs 3/Day. Though the demands of the agitation were not realized immediately but it put an end to the eviction process of the villagers from Garo basty in case of failing to reach the target of plantation. Few weeks later in another incident when the Department took initiative to destroy self made-houses of the villagers at Pampu Basty under BTR the DFO was gheraoed again for 24 hours at Rajabhatkhawa with the presence of Dhiren Sarkar which was withdrawn after coming of the Chief Conservator of Forest, Northern Circle to the spot where he made promise to withheld the decision. This success of the agitations led to intensify the movement throughout BTR and several demonstration programmes were also taken throughout the rest of the year which led to spread out the movement previously untouched parts of Buxa, Jalpaiguri, and Coochbehar Divisions. A landmark agitation programme was taken at Kumargram under BTR in this period where thousands of villagers' gheraoed the despot Range officer who frequently tortured the villagers but the police came immediately and latched on to the people and some of whom were severely injured including Ramesh Roy. In 1968 two fold strategies were taken by the movement leaders; one was to form village committee in each and every village in all the divisions of Dooars and the second was to continue agitation programmes involving mainly the techniques of gherao and

deputation at the Beat and Range levels. The main demands of that period were to abolish Taungya and introduce wages. Those strategies and demands penetrated the forest villagers successfully to mobilize themselves under the banner of NBFWJCU. During the phase Ramesh Roy was arrested by police several times and many cases were lodged against him for disrupting the Departmental activities. Kalicharn Pandey was also sentenced two years rigorous imprisonment for assaulting forest officials physically. Though the movement was slightly lost its momentum by the end of the year particularly after the devastating flood of October, 1968 in the wake of state assembly election which paralyzed all the activities of administration as well as all the parties and organizations except the relief work but it regained its radical gesture with the 2nd United Front came into power in 25th February 1969.

In this phase the NBFWJCU built up their stronghold quickly through out the Dooars. It is in this phase the movement became successful to resist the Departmental eviction measures against the villagers for some nominal reasons. The threat of the Forest Guards and other officials became liquidated and the forest villagers for the first time started talking against the Department openly and registered their voice against all sorts of injustice. The most remarkable achievement of the movement during the period was that due to throughout resistance by the villagers the Department failed to renew the Annual Agreement further which was considered as the backbone of the Taungya. Further in some cases the movement was successful to regularize the payment of Rs 1.50/Day for extra work beyond 90 days to the forest villagers.

7. The Second Phase (1969-71): Abolition of Taungya

As the Second United Front (UF) came to the power in the end of the February 1969 the movement got a new impetus. Forward Block was the crucial part of that Front and led the voices of the Movement to the orbit of power. Perhaps due to the persuasion backed by fervor of the movement the Second UF in its 32 point

programme includes the issue of protecting forests and forest dwellers as an important political objective of the Government for the first time in the history of West Bengal and perhaps in the history of India also. The point No. 3 (C) stated that "The UF Government will pay due attention to preservation of forests. It will look to the legitimate interests of the people who live in forest areas and depend on forests for their livelihood."²⁹ This positive approach of the Government instigated forest villagers to carry forward their struggle with great enthusiasm against all sorts of exploitation and oppression by the Department. It was the period when the villagers were organized in the Jalpaiguri forest Division and placed their first ever deputation to the DFO at Jalpaiguri followed by a mass rally. The movement immediately did spread to different villages under Coochbehar Division e.g. North and South Khairbari, Chilapata, MendaBari, Sal kumar hat etc. and Chalsa, Panijhora, Old Khunia. Khuklung, Mela, Reti, Mangal kata, Ghoasaihat etc under Jalpaiguri Forest Divisions and Panijhora, Bala para Santala Bari, Chunabhathi, Sankosh, etc under Buxa Divisions. Simultaneously a new group of leaders emerged like Jogen Rava, Lagrus Orao, Avilak Thakur, Prem Chand Lakra, Sanchu Munda etc. to lead the movement in the right direction. Several new village committees were formed while creating women and youth brigade where the former acted as a shield against police atrocities in each demonstration the later was responsible to mobiles people around particular agitation programme and maintained a network of information. In this phase to accelerate the movement Ramesh Roy was shifted from Hasimara to Rajabhatkhawa while leaving his profession of ration dealer to devote himself fully for the cause of the movement. The movement quickly grasped the popular support across divisions with its new and more crystallized demands including abolition of terms and conditions under the Taungya, introduction of wages @ Rs 3/day, maximum 6 hour working hours, introduction of Master Role and recognition of unregistered villagers as forest workers etc. Range and Beat wise agitations were

²⁹ See 32-Point Programme of the UF Government in 1969, in Ghosh, Anjali 1981: C-29, Appendix-Four

intensified in that period. Series of deputation, processions and gherao used to take place in every month. The normal departmental works virtually were paralyzed against the constant struggle. The lower grade officials and forest guards who were earlier enjoyed tremendous authority over those people became suddenly powerless. In some cases the movement took even a violent turn with the outbursts of the grievances of those long oppressed people. The most notable incidents of such kinds took place at Sankosh in Buxa Division and Godamdabri in Coochbehar Division. In Sankosh the villagers under the movement demolished the Beat Office and assaulted severely the Beat Officer who, according to the villagers was a tyrant and fixed a quota for every villager to provide him ghee in every week, milk in every day and rice, corn etc. in season. In another case Godamdabri forest villagers' gheared the Beat office while demanding wages and the payment of arrears @ Rs 1.50/day for extra work done by the villagers since long. But when Beat Officer failed to keep any promise to the villagers on their demand the Beat office was ravaged and the Officer was garlanded by shoes. Both the cases police came and arrested so many villagers and put them into jail. However, despite massive agitation programmes no demands were fulfilled and the leadership realized that until and unless the policy would be changed local forest official could do nothing for them. Consequently they prepared a 17 Points Charter of Demands and placed it along with a memorandum to implement it urgently before the Hon'ble Minister of Forests in Calcutta (now Kolkata) probably around the middle of 1969. The long Charter of Demands included the abolishment of terms and conditions under agreement in taungya system, permanent settlement of forest villagers along with 15 *bighas* of arable land /family with adequate irrigation facilities, introduction of wage @ Rs 3/day/head, weekly payment of wages on the basis of mastered role, six hour work day, payment of arrears, employment of unemployed forest villagers, agricultural loan facilities along with compulsory insurance of every villager, supply of necessary implements for forest works and drinking water in every village, establishment of primary school in villages along with proper communication facility of roadways,

establishment of division wise hospital and more importantly introduction of Panchayat in the forest villages.³⁰ The Charter of Demands actually was an omnibus one which included almost all the dimensions of life of the eco-system people which are even relevant in today's context. As for example their demand for permanent settlement was started to actualize with the enactment of FRA, 2006 in 2008. The demand for Panchayat System in forest villages was introduced only in 1989. And still there are many demands like insurance, agricultural loan; hospital and proper education are yet to be realized. However, on the basis of that Charter of Demands the then Forest Minister of 2nd UF Mr. Bhubotosh Soren convened a tripartite meeting at Writers Building with the presence of delegates from NBFWJCU and Principal Chief Conservator of Forest on 15th October, 1969. The resolution was taken in that meeting included introduction of master role and wages @ Rs 2.50/day which would subsequently increase to Rs 3/day in June, 1971. The issue of land was left for the consideration of Divisional Forest Officer. The terms and conditions under agreement and issue of permanent settlement were put under active consideration, The problems of school, hospital and Panchayat were decided to take up before the concerned ministry, It was decided to make allotment of fund in the next Budget for supply of drinking water and no discussion was taken place in the matter of agricultural loan, insurance and unemployed forest villagers related matters. The resolution was a considerable success brought out by the movement and with its decision to introduce master role and regular wage system it indirectly put the stamp on the discontinuation of the Taungya. But the most important problems with the resolution was that it put the question of land under the consideration of the Divisional Forest Officer and it did not discuss the matter of unemployed forest villagers. Both were the serious problem before the movement leaders particularly when there were a growing number of second generation

³⁰ See 'Annexure B', Writ Petition in the High Court of Calcutta.C.R. No 5165(W) of 1976, C.R. 8893 (W) of 1976 and C.R. 800 (W) of 1976, pp 21

settlers in the forest villages who took active part in the movement and were unregistered and deprived of all kinds of usufructs, facilities and works by the Forest Department. The problem became more serious when even after a month no Government Order or Circular was issued by the Department following the Resolution to introduce wages practically in forest plantation. The Beat Officers/Rangers and even DFO's were not agreed to pay wages without any Government Order in spite of showing the copy of the Resolution by the movement leader. Grievances were growing and the momentum of struggle was in peak. In this context, the executive committee of NBFWJCU convened an urgent meeting over the matter and decided to go for indefinite strike in all the Divisions of Dooars. By the end of the year i.e. in December 1969 the strike was called on by NBFWJCU which continued all three divisions more than one and half year and ended up with the death of five forest villagers by police firing in June 1971 who were acknowledged as the martyrs of the movement.

Initially, the Forest Department opposed the strike with all its forces. Several confrontations took place between the Union and the Department. In Chilapata Range when the villagers went to that strike the labor from outside forest villages were employed by the Department's contractor who attacked the forest villagers with guns and ammunition. The organizer of the movement tried to convince those people that their movement was not against them but the contractor's labor were motivated against them. Naturally a tussle broke out and several persons were injured from both the parties. Another incident took place at South Khairbari where the forest officials threatened the villagers and police came in favor of the Department. Immediately Ramesh Roy went there and was arrested by the police. Finally, in both the cases the Union was successful to begin the strike. In 1970 the movement took a new turn. It started exerting pressure on DFOs to settle the issue of land as it was put under consideration of DFO in the Resolution. In Jalpaiguri and Buxa Division DFOs placed the proposal to the Union for providing 2.5 acre of land

i.e. 7.5 bigha in accordance with their Working Plan.³¹ It was a demoralizing proposal for the movement because it was just half of their demand for 15 *bigha* and even less than the earlier regime of forest management. It was seen that under the new and revised proposal each household became entitled to get agricultural land not more than 2 acres which was earlier 5 acres during colonial period. Further this reorganization in the land holdings left the scope of poor and uncultivable land for many villagers who were already burdened with their increased family members. In this context, the Union placed alternative demand for 3 bigha land for non-agreement holder and the existing amount of land for the forest villagers but the Department totally denied that. Amidst the situation the leaders realized that this meager amount of land could not secure the livelihood of the forest dwellers in the context of growing divisions of land due to increasing population and the advent of the second and the third generation of settlers in the forest villages. Hence, there was no option before the Union to occupy forcefully forest lands with the unregistered settlers of new generation. Actually they were greatly encouraged by the land reforms programmes of the 2nd UF Government which promoted acquisition of unutilized land in plantation for the interest of the peasantry. The statement of Harekrishna Konar, Hon'bl Minister of Land and Land Revenue in the State Assembly on 21st July, 1969 also motivated the leader to a great extent. In that historic statement Konar asserted that the radical land reform programme would not success by relying on government machinery alone.³² Hence the call for occupying vacant land by the Union became spread rapidly throughout Dooars and villagers started their operation in almost all the divisions. In addition to occupy vacant land adjacent to villages a few new settlements were established like Bala Para, Naya Basti, Dima Basti. This land grabbing movement was intensified more in Buxa

³¹ Under this new policy in the plains area of wet cultivation allotted to each household shall not exceed 2 acres, or the total area of land allotted for homestead and cultivation may not exceed 2.5 acres. See Fifth Working Plan of Kurseong Forest Division (1969-70 to 1988-89), Vol-I, 1976, p 273 and the Seventh Working Plan of the Jalpaiguri Forest Division (1970-71 to 1989-90), Vol-1 1976, p 172

³² Published in "People's Democracy", Calcutta, August 24, 1969

Division along with two other divisions of Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar. It is worthy to mention here that though in that land grabbing movement some excesses took place in some villages where the villagers occupied land by cutting forests but the official position of the Union was not to harm forests which was manifested in the setting up of new villages in the vacant lands like embankment of rivers Bala (Bala Basti) Panchkole Jhora (Naya Basti), Dima (Dima Basti) and redundant land of tea garden near Garam Basti. This showed their non-harming attitude towards forests. After the completion of that operation the movement again returned to their primary issue of abolishing Taungya and introduction of daily wages. The Union sent 65 member of delegation to placed their memorandum to Governor in Kolakata in the mid of 1970 claiming the issue of Government Order effecting at least the Resolution taken place earlier under UF Ministry. This memorandum was taken seriously by the Government as the whole forests in Dooars went out of control of the Department and all activities were actually paralyzed which caused tremendous loss of revenue and put enormous pressure on Government exchequer. Finally keeping the agitation in account by 31st December 1970, Deputy Secretary, Government of west Bengal issued a G.O to introduce wages at per Resolution and to provide 2.5 acre to each 'genuine forest villager' and more importantly it asked the Department to regularize encroachment of land by the forest villagers on or before 28th July, 1970 and directed the Department to take stern action against any encroachment of land after the due date even by taking help from Police.³³ This Order for introduce wages and regularization of encroachment before 28th July boost up the movement further to celebrate their success on the ground. But the Department officials at the Division level who were annoyed very much with the villagers due to withering away of their land lordism took the Order as an instrument to punish the forest villagers. First of all in many cases they went to the forest villages accompanied by the police force and claimed that the occupation of land by the villagers took place after 28th July and therefore forced them to leave their occupation. In Panijhora forest village under

³³ Writ Petition, Annexure B, Kolkata High Court, 1976 .

BTR the volunteers of the movement successfully resisted that attempt. On 29th April, 1971, the DFO Coochbehar issued a notice to evict the premises of forest villagers describing that as an encroachment. On the basis of that Notice when the Departmental staffs came to evict the villagers from Sal Kumar Hat by Police, the forest villagers through their Union made a representation to the SDO, Alipurduar who ordered for inspection. The Inspection Report came up soon with its satisfaction that the encroachment whatever took place was happened before 28th July and hence all eviction attempts by the Department were considered as illegal. The said Order was communicated to DFO immediately and the Department was compelled to put stop on that initiative. However, the second kind of strategy to punish and harass the forest villagers was more dangerous than the first. It was to employ the outside labors under forest contractors in forestry plantation which earlier was the sole area of activity of the forest villagers. In 1971, this led to several clashes either in between outside labor and forest villagers or between the Contractor of the Department and the forest villagers. One of such incident took place in BTR where the forest villagers resisted successfully the Depot labor from RSP affiliated Union to refrain from forest plantation in the Division. However, in the same period another incident of such kind at Gossainhat under Jalpaiguri Forest Division took a violent turn. The movement at Gossainhat in particular and the Moraghat Range in general under Jalpaiguri Division which was organized by two undisputed and popular leaders namely Prem Chand Lakra and Sanchu Kumar Munda. When in the last week of May, 1971 the Department sponsored contractor from Gairkata started plantation with the outside labor near Gossainhat the forest villagers at first requested him not to do so. They gheraoed Beat and Range Office demanding employment of the forest villagers in that plantation but nobody heard to them. In this context thousands of forest villagers from Gossainhat, Mela and Khuklung forest village marched to the site of plantation under the leadership of Prem Chand Lakra and Sanchu Munda and physically assaulted the contractor on the spot and women volunteer put the garland of shoes on his neck and thereafter he was kept on the back of a horse and

was taken with a massive procession to Khuntimari Beat nearly 5 kms away from the site. They shouted slogan against the Department and ransacked the Beat Office. From that day the villagers stopped the plantation activities while patrolling the spot every day and asked outside labor to get back from the site. Immediately the Department lodged FIR against the two prominent leaders of the movement along with some other villagers. On 10th June, 1971 night at 1, O Clock the police from Dhupguri Police Station entered into Gossainhat to arrest those two leaders. The night was stormy with continuous pouring of rain but the volunteers of the movement were alert as they were expected such kind of reaction. When Police arrested Lakra and Munda the news did spread within a moment throughout the village. Ignoring the stormy weather villagers assembled immediately to make their leaders free from police arrests. To disperse the mob police started firing and five villagers were spot dead and several others were injured. Ultimately the police arrested more than ten villagers and took them to Dhupguri Police Station that night and produced before the Jalpaiguri Court on 11th June, 1971. The arrested persons got bail within a month and finally few years after the Union won the case which made them free from all charges. However, the martyrdom of five villagers namely Ajman Rava, Jetha Rai, Mongra Orao, Sadhu Orao and Chhandu Orao made a tremendous impact on the overall political atmosphere. With a couple of days a deputation was placed before Jalpaiguri DM and several processions were held at Jalapiguri and Alipurduar. Ashok Ghosh, the State leader of the Forward Block made press statement in Kolkata and demanded immediate introduction of wages and abolition of departmental oppression and exploitation, compensation for the family of the martyrs and action against police and the Department. On the very next week Deputy Chief Minister Mr. Bijoy Sing Nahar convened a meeting with Union leaders at Writers Building and finally Rs 3/day was introduced along with the consideration of other demands like quashing of terms and conditions under the heinous agreement in Taungya, six hour work and introduction of master role while providing employment to the non-agreement holders or unregistered villagers in forest.

villages. Moreover the Government agreed that the villagers would not be evicted further from the land they occupied.

The movement left a deep impression on the cultural sphere of the villagers. Japan Rava, a forest villager from Gossainhat and an artist by profession made a 'putul nanch' (Doll's Drama) on their historic struggle against the Taungya and conducted many shows at village hats (weekly market) and ceremonial occasions in different villages. Later on after few years with the initiative of Abhilak Thakur, a youth organizer of the movement and member of Student's Block in the District of Jalpaiguri, a documentary film was made by a Christian father from Kolkata namely "*Aranyer Adhare*"³⁴. There were other spheres of cultural activities particularly dance and song of the forest communities the incidents, struggles and stories of the movement occupied a significant place and became an important topic of discourse among the forest dwellers when they met with each other in public places for chatting.

However, with the demise of five villagers the movement finally brought the taungya system into end and a new era of forest governance began in North Bengal. From a reductionist approach Taungya was often viewed simply as a system of artificial regeneration involving the indigenous technique of fire. The exploitation of both the service and the organic relation of the ecosystem people with nature through the associated method of intercropping was hardly exposed by the approach. It was often forgotten that an oppressive system of management had constituted the very basis of the practice where any breach of contract on the part of the forest people led to an untold misery and painful suffering to them. The heinous agreement of that contract transformed incorporation of the forest dwellers and their knowledge into mere co-option in the top down system of forest management. Practically in the eyes of forest villagers it was nothing but a sort of slavery which

³⁴ During the period of making that documentary Mr. Abhilak Thakur left the party and joined the Church of North India (CNI) to which the Christian Father belonged

robbed them of all scope to live a life freely and with dignity. They were bound to serve their master at any cost whenever asked. It was a living on the edge of life where a continuous fear of punishment, torture and eviction haunted their everyday existence. However, there was a direct relation between the introduction of wages and the withering away of the Taungya. The provision of wages for the forestry works under the Department could not only create an opportunity to earn livelihood by the forest villager but broke down the entire system of exploitation under the Taungya. First it put an end to the free service for 90 days. Second, it compelled the Department to abide by the Minimum Wage Act and abolish the lower payment of wages for hard work as practised earlier. Third it reduced the working hours of the forest dwellers and kept it within six hours because more works means more pay to which the Department was not interested. Introduction of mastered role to reinforce the wage system created further opportunity to incorporate non-agreement holder in the forestry operation. Fourth and most importantly it put an end to the compulsory intercropping to which the techniques of cleaning, weeding and burning was associated for regeneration. Actually, in the wake of wildlife attack intercropping became ineffective and loss making for the forest villagers³⁵ but under the Taungya they were bound to that because ground preparation for intercropping through cleaning and burning corroborated to the preparation of land for forest plantation. With the introduction of wages villagers claimed money for cleaning and burning process which was earlier done by free of cost. Department took several initiatives to introduce intercropping by encouraging villagers for the production of valuable crops but the villagers refused to do that because in the most of the cases of intercropping even the choice of crops was determined by the Department and some of the crops or fruit trees even were banned as found unfavorable by the Department for forest growth. As for example in Buxa hill the Department banned the production of Orange Orchards as a species for intercropping during the period.

³⁵ In their 17 Point Charter of Demands NBFWJCU pointed out that minimum 35% of crops has been damaged in every year due to wildlife attack.

Hence while the intercropping was not serving their purpose of livelihood the villagers turned more and more to the agriculture in their own cultivable land because in cultivation they could make choice about the crops and as those lands were mostly nearer to their homestead it was easy for them also to protect crops from the wildlife. It was due to their disillusionment with intercropping they demanded more arable land in the movement. Thus, all those things put a full stop in the practice of Taungya and the colonial legacy of exploitation found its grave nearly after 25 years of Independence in North Bengal. But as a reaction to this the Department stopped the process of establishing forest villages in North Bengal by this time.³⁶ The forestry works were dropped down in an unprecedented scale and the first onslaught came upon the works of forest maintenance. As for example cleaning and thinning works became half than the earlier, killing of harmful insects in the forests was completely stopped. These naturally caused a great harm to the health of the forests. The reason, according to the Department was nothing but the shortage of funds. As long those works were free of cost under the Taungya they were serious about the forest health but when the question of payments came in all seriousness and sincerity became nothing but botheration for the Department. It points out to the fact that under capitalistic production relation the management of ecosystem alike other different sector is also based upon the exploitation of the people without which one cannot manage its own affair. However, the success of the movement brought about real empowerment of the forest villagers in the true sense of the term. They remained no longer the slave of the forest department and could decide their own fate. From then onwards they were in a position of negotiation with the mighty forest bureaucrats on all the matters. They started raising their voice against all sorts of injustice and oppression. They began to exert their authority in decision making in forest related issues through their Union. Indeed it was the dawn

³⁶ See Fifth Working Plan of Kurseong Division, Northern Circle (1969-70 to 1988-89), 1976, Vol I and II, and Seventh Working Plan for the Jalpaiguri Forest Division, Northern Circle, (1970-71 to 1989-90), 1976, Vol I and II, Directorate of Forest, Government of West Bengal, Coochbehar

of people's power in the domain of forest which led the movement into its third phase of struggle.

8. The Third Phase (1972-76): 'Drive out Corruption, save Forest'

In 1972, a martyr's monument was set up at Gossainhat Forest Village. On 10th June Villagers assembled from different parts of the Dooars along with the Union leaders around the Monument of the martyrs and took oath to carry forward their further struggle over issues affecting their life and livelihood directly. By this time certain drastic changes took place in the pattern of management of forests throughout the country which paved the way for an unholy nexus between the corrupt forest officials and the dishonest contractors leading to the indiscriminate exploitation of Dooars'es forests along with the rest of the country. The changes in the management started since early sixties when the central government began to provide financial incentives and encouraged state governments to take up industrial plantations in the wake of modernization process to meet the increasing demands of the expanding industrial commercial sectors. This approach to forestry merely as a revenue-yielding sector violated all the principles of sustained-yield earlier practiced in the management and consequently 'selective felling' was replaced by the method of 'clear-felling', mixed forests were replaced by the monocultural plantations of exotic species and a new regime of 'production forestry' was introduced. (Gadgil and Guha, 1997: 185-93) The immediate impact of this process of industrialization on Dooars was enormous as the necessity for rapid conversion of less valuable indifferently stocked forest to high value fully stocked forest was felt to increase the productivity of forests to meet the increasing demand for forest produce. (Lahiri, 1989:127) Though the method of clear felling was not new to the region and was adopted in North Bengal for the sake of artificial regeneration under the Taungya but the monocultural plantations of exotic species like Teak increased enormously in this

regime.³⁷ During the period new Teak working circles were constituted by different divisions in Dooars and even outside the Working Circles additional areas were brought under the plantation of Teak and other high value species. This great enthusiasm in Teak plantations along with the others industrial tree species to supply paper mills adversely affected the production of other required species for local use. A new thinning method was introduced namely 'heavy thinning' to extract more woods from a forest patches to sell out the industrial sector. The Uttar bangya Ban Babsayee Samitee in their Organ expressed their deep concern over the situation. The first was that the firewood production was heavily neglected by the Department in the wake of industrial production which led to the rise of the price of firewood in the local market and affected the local shops, hotels, tea industry and the rural population for whom which was the sole source of fuel.³⁸ Secondly, to satisfy the demands of paper mills the 'heavy thinning' which withheld crown support from the trees badly affects the forest health by making forests more vulnerable against natural disaster like cyclone.³⁹ The depletion of forests in Dooars due to the method of heavy thinning and Teak plantations took a serious turn with the inception of the large scale corruption where dishonest contractors along with the corrupt officials of the Department took the advantage of the high rise demands of industrial woods to make more money. The corruption was so serious that in 1971 the second issue of the Organ of the Uttarbanga Banababsayee Samity (traimasik), Banabani in its editorial pointed out the revenue loss of the government due to illegal felling by the corrupt contractors and demanded to expose them in order to protect their aggregate interests of business.⁴⁰ Though this corruption and associated illegal felling reached to the climax in the 80's and 90's the seeds of the very process were laid down in this period. Karlsson described 80's as a decade of

³⁷ In a meeting between the Conservator of Forests, Northern Circle and Uttarbanga Ban Babsayee Samity held at Sukna on 18th August, 1973 the first agenda of discussion was the production and exploitation of Teak among the 8 agendas of discussion, See Banabani, 1973:53

³⁸ Banabani, 1973:1-2

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Banaabani, 1971:1

large scale illegal deforestation in Dooars where the actors behind such operations were highly placed politicians, timber contractors and forest officers. To fight out the problem a well-armed paramilitary 'Special Task Force' was set up by the Department in the late 80's (Karlsson, 1997:136-40). Soumitra Ghosh in an article claimed that Buxa Tiger Reserve, a biodiversity hotspot in the Dooars of North Bengal, lost about 10 sq. kms of forest cover in 1998-1999 alone, as a result of a scam due to the activities of the mafia-political groups-forest staff nexus. Protected Area authorities issued false transit passes for illegally felled trees and timber felled from the Tiger Reserve was shown as timber from private forests. In another important Protected Area, Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary, adjoining Buxa Tiger Reserve, senior forest and police officers were found to be directly involved in illegal trade.⁴¹ As a result Salugara and Belakoba forests in Baikunthapur Division, a part of Tundu forest in Jalpaiguri, Poro forests in Buxa Tiger Reserve and Nilapara forests in Cooch Behar degraded tremendously. (Ghosh 2000:374) Moreover the corruption in the late 60's and early seventies was not limited to only the illicit felling of trees but it was extended to the illegal poaching of wildlife. The situation was so grave that the Conservator of Forest, Northern Circle issued a Notification on 1st September, 1970 and prohibited the hunting, shooting and capture of all wild animals and birds excluding the man-eaters for five years within the Reserve Forests.⁴²

However, for the forest villagers the problem of deforestation was more serious as the abrupt exploitation of forests not only affected their direct dependence on forests for fuel woods and other NTFPs but the increasing disappearance of forests led to the loss of animal (wildlife) foods like *purundi*, bamboo etc which proved to be alarming to save their crops and life from the increasing animal attacks. The man-animal conflict was on the rise in that period due to several reasons and it was reported by the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (A Bengali Daily News Paper) on 30th August, 1978 that only in between three years since 1976

⁴¹ See Ghosh Soumitra (2005) WRM Bulletin , Issue.98, September

⁴² See Part-I of the Calcutta Gazette, 17th September, 1970: 1723 (Regulation on Hunting, Shooting etc)

elephant took hundred lives in Dooars and destroyed paddy fields and property of tea gardens to a great extent.⁴³

Against this backdrop a two days conference of the Union took place in the mid 1972 at Khuklung Basti under Jalpaiguri Forest Division and a new chapter of struggle was introduced in order to throw the enemies out of the forests. The Union and the villagers unanimously found the corruption and the unholy nexus between the contractors and forest officials as their main enemy as it violated all the norms of sustained yield and cut down even immature trees to supply the industrial sector and thereby caused large scale deforestation. The movement raised its voice against the Contractor System as it created the scope for corruption and demanded handing over all the responsibilities of logging and transporting of timber to the forest villagers. A new slogan was born in this struggle i.e. "Chor hatao, Jungle Banchao" (Drive out Corruption Save Forests) and several memoranda were placed before the higher authority in the Forest Department citing specific cases of illegal felling. But the Department did not bother about their demand and relied heavily upon the prevailing system. Soon the people of the movement realized that they should take initiatives on their own to stop deforestation by involving the villagers. Several 'motivation camps' were organized across divisions to make the forest villagers aware about the ill-effects of deforestation and the awareness raising campaign culminated with the formation of 'village party' through which villagers started patrolling at night to undo corrupt practices in the domain of forests. Though during the period the initiative of patrolling by the villagers to protect forests was unauthorized in the eyes of the Department, after several years in the regime of Joint Forest Management during 90's the concept became the only recourse to protect forests under the regime of the sustainable forest management throughout the country. However, without bothering about the permission from the Department the village patrolling was started at several places under three divisions of Jalpaiguri, Buxa and Coochbehar. A number of officials and contractors were caught red handed

⁴³ See Banamahala, 1978-79, Vol:30, page 1

and thousand cubic meters of logs were recovered by the village party and the Union. In 1972 the first patrolling group was formed in BTR which recovered three hundred stamps from forests. In another incident in the same year the Union members caught read handed the contractor who was involved in felling trees beyond the marking done by the forest officials which was took place in SRVK-II compartment near Rajabhathkawa. When the Union was reported by the villagers that the contractor was cutting down trees illicitly they rushed to spot and asked the contractor to show authorization letter from the Department which they could not produce. Immediately the Beat Officer came to the spot and ordered the contractor's labor to carry on their operation. The leaders asked the Beat Officer to place supporting evidence but he could not produce anything in favor. The Union member's gheraoed the Beat officer and some of the members were sent to the DFO to bring him in the spot. Finally after coming of the DFO, Beat officer was found guilty and the Contractor left the spot immediately. Actually there were serious flaws in the felling through marking system which was often manipulated by the corrupt officials and contractors. Trees were marked in a scattered way depending upon their size and level of maturity and the contractors were permitted to enter into the forests to cut down those marked trees. But they often cut down the unmarked trees by managing the forest guards and officer and this led to the indiscriminate felling in the forests. In one after another case in 1972 and 1973 the Village party and the Union stopped such kind of illegal felling at Panbari Range, Madhugach and other parts of the Buxa Division and raised there voice against the system of felling and the permission of the contractor to enter into the forests. Due to their constant resistance the Department at BTR was bound to bring certain changes in the marking system in the last part of 1973. However, there movement against corruption was continued. In 1974 two trucks were detained by the Panijhora Village Party under the leadership of Lajrus Orao, the secretary of the village committee in the Movement. The trucks carried the illicit logs from Buxa forests. As a consequence the DFO came to the spot and promised to take action against the corrupt officials. The similar type of incidents was took place at Garambasty where the Village Party

unloaded the illicit logs from the truck and sent to it to the Range Office. The leadership of Ramesh Roy in the movement was quite obvious. At Salkumar Hat in Chilapata Forests under Coochbehar Division when Sal trees were cutting down by the forest guard along with the contractor and loaded it on the trucks bound for Punjab, the villagers under the leadership of Ramesh Roy blocked that truck and took it into the Beat office and simultaneously gheared the Beat Officer along with the truck for 24 hours. Ultimately they found that the Beat Officer took Rs 4000 from the contractor for the said illicit felling which was acknowledged immediately to the higher authority along with the demand to suspend the Beat Officer from the job. In the early 1975 there was a regular involvement of people from a Dolomite factory to bring illicit logs from Diamakuari near 29 Basti to Alipurduar via the Bengal-Dooars Railway. When it was known to Ramesh Roy he stopped the train and recovered 150cft log from the train and handed over to the DFO, BTR at Rajabhatkhawa. There were many such incidents of catching the thieves by the Union and the Village Party which continued until the imposition of internal emergency by June, 1975. Though the people on movement caught several Beat officers and a few Rangers on the spot throughout the period, they were also well aware about the indirect involvement of some DFO's in that unholy alliance and the movement therefore placed several memoranda against those officers to the Chief Conservator of Forest, Northern Circle but no action was taken against them.

However, the Union's objection to the ill-practice of earning a lot in collaboration with corrupt contractors made it an eye-shore to some corrupt forest officers who made huge money by ransacking the forest in collusion with the dishonest contractors. Some of the forest officers who made enough money in collaboration with contractors started to allege before the higher authority that the forest became out of control of the Department and no authority could be exercised over any matter in the forests as it was completely taken over by the Union. All these factors annoyed the Department's officers very much who were very much afraid of losing either the business or the job. Consequently all developmental activities

were suspended in the forest villages as the officers denied providing no-objection certificate to those works. As a reaction the Union started strong agitation programmes throughout forest divisions which paralyzed all the activities of the Department throughout the region. In this context the Forest Minister convened a meeting at Hollong (Jalapiguri) with all the DFO's along with the MLA's and MPs of North Bengal on 9th June, 1975. In that meeting the decision was taken to remove the forest villagers from the forest enclave to the peripheral forest areas in order to enable them to get the benefits of the various developmental activities in the district. It was decided further that the removal should be gradual and done by persuasive methods and never by coercive methods, for which special inducements should be offered in the shape of alternative forest land for cultivation, transport facilities for transfer, cash benefits, and payment of cost of shifting huts and properties to the peripheral areas. It was resolved that the matter would be taken up to the Chief Minister for obtaining Cabinet decision by July next.⁴⁴ But on 21st June 1975 the emergency was imposed and under the emergency rule a cabinet meeting held on July 23, 1975 where the cabinet accepted the proposal of the Forest Department to adopt special emergency measures with the help of the police to evict encroachment on forest lands 'to save and preserve the green gold of the nation'.⁴⁵ On the basis of that decision Deputy Secretary, Govt. of West Bengal sent a Directive to DFO's on October, 1975 asking to take immediate measure against encroachment and sent the Report on action back to the Government. On the basis of that Directive, the Department took up the task of removing encroachments of forest lands in the Balabasty and Dima Basty under BTR on December, 1975. CRPF marched in those villages immediately and the villagers were evicted by the March, 1976. Similar process of eviction was started at Dalbadal and Bhutri forest villages under Coochbehar Division. Taking the situation in account NBFWJCU filed a writ petition at Kolkata High Court in the last week of April, 1976 (See Appendix-VII) and

⁴⁴ Annexur D Writ Petition in the High Court of Calcutta.C.R. No 5165(W) of 1976, C.R. 8893 (W) of 1976, Page 27

⁴⁵ Annexur E Writ Petition in the High Court of Calcutta.C.R. No 5165(W) of 1976, C.R. 8893 (W) of 1976, Page 31

an interim order of injunction was passed by the High Court on 27th April, 1976 which restrained the Department from continuing its eviction process. In its Writ Petition to the Kolkata High Court, the petitioner (NBFWJCU) argued that whereas the encroachment at Bala and Dima along with other forest villages took place before July, 1970 and was duly regularized by the Government Order of 1970 it was very surprising that why the Department took initiative to evict those people from their land 5 years later which was utterly illegal and violation of the Government Order. They continued in that Writ Petition that the reason behind that was not to save forests but to demolish the movement of the forest villagers. This because the movement, as claimed in Writ Petition below:

‘boldly raised a voice, “Drive out corruption, Save forest”....Your petitioner have endorsed the policy of afforestation in North Bengal to save forest in national interest and also in the interest of saving national animals....That all the aforesaid protests of your petitioner annoyed the divisional authority and who are continuing in indulging an anti-national policy in depriving the forest villagers of their legitimate wages, wide scale deforestation in collaboration with some corrupt contractors and liquidation of valuable animal s livestock causing serious loss and damage to the national property’⁴⁶

Though the final judgment of the Case was given in 1979 which stopped finally the recurrent eviction initiative of the Department in North Bengal Forest Villages, the movement was ended in 1977 with the coming of the Left Front in Power. There were several reasons behind that. The first was as argued by the leaders of the movement that Parimal Mitra, MLA from Kranti assembly constituency near Malbazar became the first Forest Minister in the Left Front who opened the flood gate of corruption and often told in the public meeting that ‘make use of forest

⁴⁶ Writ Petition in the High Court of Calcutta.C.R. No 5165(W) of 1976, C.R. 8893 (W) of 1976,1976, p, 9-10

to meet your needs' which encouraged both the contractors as well as revenue villagers to cut down forests. This kind of observation was supported by another field work by Karlsson who was told by the Rava forest villagers that 'the late Parimal Mitra, the former Minister of Forest in West Bengal was involved in or was, in fact, one of the main actors in the illegal trade. Public opinion holds that when Parimal Mitra became Forest Minister the large-scale felling began.' (Karlsson, 1997: 136) However as the Forward Block was the partner in that Left Front they could not encourage opposing such kind of initiatives and the Union leaders became disheartened. Secondly, a personal clash began between Ramesh Roy and Dhiren Sarker. Some of the villagers said that it was an ego conflict while others told that it was over financial matters. Whatever may be the reason due to the clash Dhiren Sarkar resigned from the Union and with his hundred supporters along with Durgesh Neogi Joined RSP and consequently the Union was broken down. In the following year Ramesh Roy formed a new Union namely Dooars Forest Workers and Jaigir Cultivators Union (DFWJCU) which later on built up a strong resistance against the Department's cutting of Orange Orchard in Buxa Hills during 90's. Thirdly, one of the main organizers and comrades in arms of Ramesh Roy was Emanuel Kujur who left India for USA sponsored by the Christian missionary and another leader Abhilak Thakur left politics and adopted Christianity and joined Church of North India. Last but not the least was that under the Left Front Government villagers found security of their lives as both the RSP which had stronghold in Dooars and the Forward Block who organized the villagers against taungya system were in power which infused a sense of stability among those people. All these factors along with others brought the historic movement to its end and a new episode of the conflict and cooperation between the Department and the Forest Villagers began.

Though in this phase the movement could not make success to stop corruption in the domain of forest as it did in case of ecological exploitation under the Taungya but it obviously points to another face of ecological exploitation where

common property resources are being exploited for individual gain which is not only illegal but also at the same time immoral. Indeed the corruption is a big problem to ensure sustainability in the management of forest resources because it is one of the most important underlying causes of forest degradation.⁴⁷ One of the major problems in forest-corruption is that it does not only involve forest officials to play role in deforestation but more importantly it involves also the forest people from the below in that very process. This involvement of forest dwellers cannot be explained in terms of poverty only because a large section of the young forest villagers involved in illegal felling in order to 'get access to the fortune of the consumer society' which is otherwise next to impossible for them. They used to spend the money to buy motorcycle, TV, Radio, Wrist watch etc and more importantly the money they earn does not support the family economy in any way. (Karlsson, 1997:138) The involvement is an outcome of defacement in their organic relation which led them to exploit public property like forests to meet private desires of life. One of the major contributions of the movement at least at the local level was that it successfully protected those forest villagers from that ill-effect of defacement and resulting involvement in corruption. It built up alternatively a public ethic among those people to save their forests from making it a source of earning money. It was due to the fact that the contractors could not involve those villagers into that unfair and unjust practice and were compelled to hire labor from outside of the forest village for cutting down the illicit trees. It successfully prepared the ethical ground on the minds of the forest dwellers that for private interest public property particularly the forest could not be spent. The movement which was not fought according to the class line showed its responsibility and obligation to the national property like forest. The anti-corruption movement successfully tuned the villagers with the spirit what one of the movement volunteer told me that "we would save our forest". They did not wait for government or Department's approval rather under the leadership of

⁴⁷ Transparency International
http://www.transparency.org/regional_pages/asia_pacific/forest_governance_integrity/corruption_and_forestry. Accessed on 7th July, 2010

the Union they took the initiative by their own. May be their way can be debatable but their spirit cannot. Finally the movement gives us the lesson that unless and until peoples movement to save forests are built up corruption can not be exposed and thrown away from the domain.

9. Was It a Forward Block Movement?

It may be worth taking up the question here whether the movement can be called as a Forward Block movement or not?⁴⁸ My own field work suggests that though the movement got assistance and support from the Forward Block leadership but it was never a priority area of the Forward Block both at the District as well as at the State Level. The most obvious evidence of this was revealed by the then District Secretary of the Forward Block who told me that despite its potentiality no article was published in the 'Jonomot', the Organ of the Party. He further asserted that though Ashok Ghosh released a press statement after the martyrdom of five villagers at Gossainhat only a section of the State leaders actually was interested about the movement like Kanai Bhattacharjee, Sambhu Ghosh etc. This lack of interest of the state leadership infected the district leadership also. Two of the most prominent district leadership including the Secretary never visited any spot of the movement and did not attend any mass or public meeting of the Union. This approach was so dominating within the Party that no records of that glorious movement were kept in the office or elsewhere by the leadership. The District leadership unanimously told that it was the movement of the forest villagers under the great leadership of Ramesh Roy who was an ideal, rare and respectable leader devoted to the cause and free from all kinds of opportunism. The role of Dhiren Sarkar was only to assist Ramesh Roy from behind. Secondly, the formation of the Union was itself an

⁴⁸ Karlsson (1997) viewed the movement as a Forward Block Movement in his sketchy account of about merely 3 pages which is based upon his interview with a single leader of the movement namely Abhilak Thakur. The account is utterly incomplete in its representation and contains serious flaws about incidents of Gossainhat and Bala. In this respect in my interview with Abhilak Thakur he admitted that his speech was misrepresented by Karlsson probably due to language problem. Moreover Karlsson failed to grasp the significance of the movement to a great extent.

evidence of its separate existence from the Forward Block. Though the movement was started with the banner of Agragami Kishan Sabha, the peasant wing of the Forward Block the leaders and forest villagers soon realized the difficulty with the organization while recognizing the peculiar dual identity of the forest villagers who at the same time cultivators and workers both and to deal with the peculiarity they formed their own union. It was registered union under Society Registration Act but was not affiliated to Kishan Sabha or any other mass organization of the Forward Block. Thirdly, the entire decisions during different phases of movement were used to be taken by the leaders and activists of the movement and not by the party leadership. This autonomy in decision making was reported by the members of the Union in the incident of High Court Case where as they told me that the State leadership was against the decision of the Union to move to the Court rather there suggestion was to resist the Department at the spot what Ramesh Roy and other Union leaders found unsuitable in the period of emergency. As a result of that autonomy and independence the movement could not create loyalty among the forest villagers to the Forward Block and so in 80's and 90's a large section of the forest villagers either joined RSP or CPIM though they remained loyal to Ramesh Roy's leadership in case of struggle around forest issues. Therefore it can be unequivocally said that in appearance it was the Forward Block Movement but in essence it was a forest dwellers movement the objective of which was to address the issues of forests and forest villagers and not to fight for the party in order to take it into the power.

10. The Impact of Subhash Bose on the Struggle

No account of the movement would be complete unless and until one can remember the impact of Bose's philosophy of action on the struggle against ecological exploitation. Professor Nirmal Bose who introduced Ramesh Roy to Bose's ideals was a by-product of the middle class radicalism which was influenced very much by Bose in Bengal. During freedom movement Jalpaiguri was one of the most important

centres of that middle class radicalism in North Bengal. In 1939 Bose's visit to Jalpaiguri as the President of AICC to attend Bengal Provincial Congress inspired a large section of the youth to carry forward his ideals most of whom joined Forward Block when it was formed at Jalpaiguri in 1942. Professor Nirmal Bose played a pioneering role along with others in the freedom struggle led by the Forward Block in the District and took active part in the post-independence struggle for the interest of the people. Professor Nirmal Bose and other district leadership of the Forward Block extended their full support to the forest villager's movement which conforms to Netaji's plan of action what he visualized in the 'Indian Struggle' that the Party would stand for the interests of the masses like peasants, workers etc. against the vested interests and for the complete political and economic liberation of the Indian people. (Bose, 1981:349) The movement against ecological exploitation was thoroughly consistent in its demand to transfer power in the hands of the forest villagers which is nothing but the reflections of Netaji's ideal to empower communities against the elite. In this context one of the major demands of the movement in its 17 Point Charter was to establish Panchayat in the forest villages which might get impetus from Bose's one of the programmes for 'social reconstruction' which was to 'build up a new social structure on the basis of the village communities of the past, that were ruled by the village 'Panch' and will strive to break down the existing social barriers like caste.' (Ibid: 349-50) Besides the ideals the movement was greatly indebted to his technique of 'active resistance' what Bose viewed as the only method to overthrow the unjust system. One can remember that Bose criticized Gandhian technique of passive resistance as it could bring only reformation into the system but would fail to contribute to the revolutionary transformation. Following the method of 'active resistance' the movement was of militant in character throughout the course of struggle where it took recourse to the techniques of gherao, strike, agitation etc in order to bring down the exploitative regime of forest governance. Further, one of the most important reasons behind the spread of the movement was its identity with the name of Subhash Chandra Bose. In

my field work the forest villagers often told in this manner that "earlier we were the member of RSP but after that when the Party of Subhash Chandra Bose came with its anti-Taungya standpoint we joined it to make the oppression and exploitation of the Department to an end." The militancy and commanding nature of Ramesh Roy made him an icon before the eyes of forest villager who was seen as the bearer of the ideals and spirit of Bose. Villagers often called him 'Roy Babu' and inspired very much by his charismatic leadership and self-less pursuit who was successful what Bose called 'to merge one's individual consciousness in mass consciousness' (Bose and Bose, 2004:19) During that period there was actually no communication of Roadways or Railways in the forest villages which is even inadequate still today. In this context Ramesh Roy organized the movement by walking mile after mile with his bare foot and until his death in 2008 he was familiar as the 'bare footed leader' among the people. When I was asked about the reason in my first meeting with him he told that until and unless all the forest villagers could not make arrangement for shoes or sandal he would not wear any shoes or even sandal. Most importantly he knew all the languages of different tribes in the region ranging from Rava language, Sahdri (language of Orao, Munda etc) to Nepali and Bhutia. His life was simple till his death. He was living in a multi-fractured hut at Rajabhatkahwa with his wife and children where he was shifted from Hasimara for the cause of the movement. Though after 1977 with the coming of left into the power a number of left leaders somehow managed to live better but Ramesh Roy retained his life-style same which was marked by an abject poverty. He could not even manage to bear his cost of treatment before his death. In short his life style, motivation, courage, skill to organize people, dedication to the cause and militancy made him true disciple of Subhash Bose in true sense of the term which left a long standing impact not only on the psyche of the forest dwellers who remember him with respect and love even today but also secured a place in the heart of entire mass of the people in the region including timber merchants, business people, government employees, NGO activists etc. Above all, the movement which scarified five lives of the forest villagers to

struggle against the Taungya while equating it with a system of slavery in the domain of forests upheld one's again Bose's message what he conveyed to his countrymen in this 'Political Testament' that 'Forget not that the greatest curse for a man is to remain a slave. Forget not that the grossest crime is to compromise with injustice and wrong. Remember the eternal law: You must give life, if you want to get it. And remember that the highest virtue is to battle against inequity, no matter what the cost may be' (Bose and Bose, 2004:197)

11. Significance of the Movement

The historic forest movement in North Bengal which took place prior to that of Chipko represents the alternative paradigm within Indian environmentalism both in its content and form. Though the movement broadly falls within the left-radical tradition of struggle as it conforms to the general standpoint of the left regarding 'a positive and pro-active role of the state in the sustainable harnessing of local resources' (Prasad, 2004:14) and greater access and control of the ecosystem people over the natural resource base. (Gadgil and Guha, 2000:120) but it differs considerably with the conventional Marxist position in its approach and ushers the nationalist ideals of Netaji in its spirit. The movement does not categorise itself as a working class movement against the ruling class represented by the state rather as a movement of eco-system people it adheres to the national interest while fighting against the exploitation of both the nature and its people. This conviction to nationalism was manifested in the statement made before the High Court in Kolkata where it was said that the Union has 'endorsed the policy of effective implementation of policy of afforestation in North Bengal to *save forests in national interest and also in the interest of saving national animals.*'⁴⁹ (Emphasis is mine) The movement was not organized to fight against any specific class enemy but the focus was essentially against the system of praxis. The focus remained consistent in its

⁴⁹ Writ Petition in the High Court of Calcutta.C.R. No 5165(W) of 1976, C.R. 8893 (W) of 1976, p 10

both the issues of struggle against the Taungya as well as corruption. In both the struggle the movement demanded for the abolition of modus operandi associated with the specific system of exploitation. Against the Taungya the main demands were to abolish 'outdated terms and conditions' and 'works without remuneration' and against corruption the demand was to get rid of the practice of handing over the responsibility of logging to the outside contractor who did not have any bearing on forests. The movement explicitly or implicitly rested upon the holistic view of organic dependence between the ecosystem and its people where protection of forests implied protection of those very people from all sorts of suffering and vice-versa. Hence, the historic struggle of the forest villagers was not around merely the issue of livelihood but it was simultaneously both for the better forests and better conditions of livability. This holistic underpinning of the movement led it to emphasize more on the issue of fair and just governance of forest and its people with a due recognition to the people's organization for movement in the overall process.

However, the movement exposed the limits of one sided understanding of the nature of Indian environmentalism as 'environmentalism of the poor'. The movement highlighted that the environmentalism in India did not always arise out of conflict over natural resources but often emanated from the ecological exploitation through co-option under an apparent cooperative gesture of the state in the management of ecosystem. The idea of 'ecological distribution conflicts' could not capture the inclusive technique of domination over the eco-system people and usurpation of their contribution to the eco-system in order to further the top-down agenda of resource management. The 'environmentalism of the poor' therefore rested on the inadequate criteria of characterization of the struggle of the eco-system people against the oppressive system of resource use. Secondly, along side the struggle of the eco-system people against all forms of ecological expulsion like displacement, unequal access to the resources the movement is equally critical

about the pseudo recognition of their role merely at the local level of implementation in lieu of providing certain incentives but without acknowledging their authority through their organization of movement in the arena of policy making. Thirdly, like the 'environmentalism of the poor' the movement was not limited only to the demand for fair distribution of ecological goods and recognition of rights of the eco-system people but demanded also for a fair system of harnessing natural resources free from corruption and a fair opportunity of employment of those people in the process of regeneration, felling and maintenance of forests. Finally the movement raised the fundamental question about the justification of ascribing a misleading phrase to the struggle of the eco-system people in India as 'environmentalism of the poor' which confined understanding of the struggle of the eco-system people merely around the issues of livelihood and subsistence while undermining the issues of their dignity against humiliation and their desire for better live against exploitation which might work as motive force behind their struggle.

The issues which the movement upholds are still relevant in the context of natural resource governance not only at the regional level but national and global level also. Notwithstanding certain progressive legislations like NREGA, FRA, 2006 at the national level, the problems of unemployment and land right are yet to be solved to stop plunder of resources particularly when conservation regime has choked the regular employment opportunities of those people and globalization of forests is taking away the minerals rich forest lands by the MNC's at the cost of displacement. Corruption as a system has hardly been pointed out as a serious problem before sustainable forest management especially in the context of India. Though the contractor system in felling against which the movement fought its anti-corruption struggle to save forest has been abolished, the system of contract remains within the plantation and maintenance of forests where forestry operation takes place under per hector contract with the forest people under National Afforestation Programme. Villagers have often accused that the system of contract jeopardizes forest

preservation due to irregular cleaning, thinning, weeding etc and often deprives them of their legitimate wages guaranteed under the Minimum Wage Act. The critical standpoint against corruption what the movement has developed is demanding to investigate such issues to unmask the entire system of abuse and manipulation that currently prevails in the domain of forest. The Movement reveals further the politics of co-option through the inclusive technique of incorporating people's knowledge and workforce which continues to exploit the eco-system people under the disguise of collaborative or participatory resource management at the global level. This exploitation hinders the organic exchange between life forms and results in defacement of that relation. The defacement leads to the attitudinal changes of those people towards intervention into the nature and hence once custodian of nature has been transformed into its destroyer. The lesson what the movement has left is to build up resistance against the exploitation to find more democratic space of negotiation, alteration and challenge the entire process of eco-system governance for the sake of both forest and its people while innovating new ways to keep the process of organic exchange alive and free.

The movement continues to inspire several resistances and movements of forest dwellers in North Bengal. The orange orchard resistance in Buxa hills during 93-94, introduction of Panchayat Movement during 98 and Loading movements through out the 90's got impetus from the historic movement and more importantly the legacy of the movement is still continuing at least in the form of leadership in the ongoing forest rights movement⁵⁰ where the senior most Regional Convener happens to be the proud disciple of Ramesh Roy. Moreover what the other resistances including the present one owes to that pioneering struggle is the method of empowering forest people through movements which is diametrically opposite to the much projected paradigm of participation in the imposed mechanism of forest management. The key to this alternative process of empowerment is to build up

⁵⁰ The following chapter presents an elaborate discussion on the present movement

people's own authority through their own organization as it prepares them for transcending their existing conditions of living that goes beyond the limit of capacity building initiatives in terms of sharing usufructs and opinions following a predetermined structure and agenda of natural resource governance. The next chapter points to the continuation of that legacy of alternative empowerment in the present form of movement though under a different context and new forms of participatory forest management.

12. Conclusion

In this chapter we could see the historic forest dwellers movement in the Jalpaiguri District of North Bengal as an iconic movement of alternative empowerment, something that may be appreciated in sharp contrast to the much hyped Chipko movement. We have also seen in that movement promises of different practices of environmental sustainability through new forms of struggle and practices, something which we would take up for further analysis in the next chapter where we will be talking about the ongoing forest dweller's movement in North Bengal.