

## **Chapter-5**

### **The Ongoing Forest Dweller's Movement in North Bengal**

#### **1. Introduction**

Section 2 of the present chapter is about the beginning of the movement of forest dwellers in North Bengal which is the ongoing movement. The section connects the ongoing movement from the 90's to the movement of the 60's by discussing the interconnecting factors. Section 3 discusses the contemporary framework of natural resource governance and section 4 connects the grievances arising out of it and the early signs of the movement. Given the fact there have been definite changes in the rhythm, directions, objectives and strategies of the movement the ongoing movement has been divided into three phases discussed respectively under section 5 to 7. Section 8 discusses the significance of the movement and section 9 concludes the chapter.

#### **2. The Beginning of the Ongoing Movement**

The movement of the 60's left a considerable impact on the psyche of the forest villagers in the region. It built up their confidence, courage and generosity to undertake struggle for common cause and against issues affecting their life process adversely. But the disintegration of the NBFWJCU impeded the opportunity to mobilize those people at the regional level against all sorts of injustice and authoritarian onslaught perpetuated under the regime of natural resource governance. The landscape of struggle became fragmented, so were the leadership and organization. The unprecedented victory of the Left Front in 1977 State Assembly election in West Bengal accelerated the process further. The seat adjustment among the partners of the Left Front in Jalpaiguri left a single constituency for Forward Block namely Jalpaiguri from which Professor Nirmal Bose

was elected but the rest 11 constituencies in the District were divided among the CPIM and RSP where the former held six assembly seats and the latter captured five seats in the election. It drastically changed the entire political map of the Dooars. All the centres of the historic movement like Alipurduar, KumarGram, Kalchini, Dhupguri, Malbazar etc were left by the Front under the purview of RSP or CPIM. Consequently, the Forward Block who sponsored the Movement earlier directed all its supporter and organizers of the movement to follow the strategy for the greater interests of the Front. Hence, organizers of the Movement who were inclined more to the Froward Block chose either the banner of RSP or CPIM accordingly in election campaign for ensuring massive mandate of the forest villagers in favor of the left. The election onwards the division alongside the party line began. It was the period when Dhiren Sarkar, the resident of Alipurduar where RSP candidate won the election, left the Block and joined the RSP along with hundred volunteers of the movement. In this context the Union was broken down and lost its relevance as the sole organization of the forest villagers throughout the region. Though with the initiative of Ramesh Roy another Union namely Dooars Forest Workers and Jaigir Cultivator's Union was formed soon but it largely concentrated its activity mainly in the Buxa Division around his place of residence. Despite showing allegiance to the struggle of Ramesh Roy at the personal level most of the forest villagers in the Coochbehar and the Jalpaiguri Divisions initially extended their support to the RSP sponsored Forest Workers Union to get their demands realized through the Party which was in power in the region. Further, this tendency to satisfy their demands through the cooperation with the ruler without any further struggle led a section of them to quit RSP and joined CPIM, the dominant party within the front, during the late 80's in Jalpaiguri Division. However, this fragmentation of the struggle caused havoc to them as the oppressive regime of forest management got the opportunity to cherish their landlordism again across the divisions. Several isolated resistances took place against the regime during the period under the leadership of different organizations like Orange Orchard Resistance in Buxa under the Dooars Forest

workers and Jaigir Cultivators Union, the Loading movement in Khuntimari (Jalpaiguri Division) under the banner of CITU etc. The villagers ultimately realized that they were lacking power and consequently were suppressed by the bureaucracy which pushed them to raise their voice across divisions in the late 90's for introduction of Panchayat in the forest villages which was one of the most important demands in the 17 point Charter of the earlier movement. Hence, several incidents of protests and resistances like suspension of forest works, gherao, deputations were organized simultaneously under different banners throughout the region. In Jalpaiguri the leadership was in the hand of CPIM, in Coochbehar it was RSP and in Buxa it was led by both FB and RSP. Their demand was ultimately fulfilled and with a new circular in 1998 the Panchayat System was introduced in the forest villages of North Bengal. But the ineffectiveness of the Panchayats to deliver goods to the people was revealed very soon. Apart from the Panchayat, the prohibitive praxis of natural resource governance in the region prepared the internal context of another region based movement of the forest villagers since 2000 which is still going on across divisions both in the Jalpaiguri and the Darjeeling District of North Bengal.

### **3. Natural Resource Governance and the Formation of Grievances**

After the Movement the Department put a stop to the practice of establishing new forest village. Permanent settlement of the forest dwellers took place in the forest villages with certain fixed amount of lands and livestock<sup>51</sup> and the shifting of villagers under taungya from one place to another for the sake of plantation had been stopped altogether. Further it was decided under the same Rule that in case of intercropping each household was required to grow field crop in one acre of new

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<sup>51</sup> In the plains forest the total area of land allotted for homestead and cultivation for each household shall not exceed 2.5 acres. In the hill forest the corresponding amount of total land shall not exceed 1.5 acres. Though in both the cases each household was entitled to keep not more than 2 plough cattle or draught animals, 2 milch cows or buffaloes and 4 calves; 2 goats or sheep may also be allowed with the condition of stall feeding, (See Rules regarding establishment of permanent forest villages, Para 59, Appendix V(A), page 171, Directorate of Forest, Government of West Bengal, 1976

plantation area and in another acre of 1 year old plantation permitted under the working plan of the concerned division. As far as wages for forestry works to the villagers were concerned, the above mentioned concessions and facilities seemed mostly beneficial to sustain their livelihood. But, during the period several things like increase in number of families particularly who were not registered further by the Department, ceiling of agricultural land in between 1.5 acre in the hill forest and 2 acre in the plain's forest, occasional eviction threats etc. put the villagers into a miserable condition. The 1972 Wild Life Protection Act together with the 1980 Forest Conservation Act further worsened their condition as they were denied all access to forest usufructs in areas within sanctuary limits. In other areas also those privileges were drastically curtailed. Simultaneously those acts choked regular employment opportunity in timber operations as such were stopped by the Department. As a result the availability of their per capita man-days was brought down from 100 – 120 per year during 1970's to 40 – 60 days per year during 80's and in some cases even to less than 20 days.

In North Bengal<sup>52</sup>, where the forests are more economically productive, compact in form and cover approximately 26% of the state's forest in West Bengal, the JFM Programme was introduced in 1991. Hence, it was assumed that these programmes would empower forest dwellers economically and socially while also allowing them to share usufruct with the Forest Department (FD) in lieu of their participation in the forest protection activities through the formation of FPCs. But after nearly a decade of J.F.M. and Eco Development Project, it was seen that whereas in South Bengal till 1998-99 a total of Rs. 277.39 lakh had been paid to 369 number of FPC's and 40283 number of beneficiaries, (State Forest Report, 2000:51) there was no mentioning of benefit sharing in North Bengal even in 2000 State Forest Report. Moreover, while assessing the performance of JFM and Eco-

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<sup>52</sup> I used the term to refer the extremely northern part of the West Bengal comprising three districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar covered with the natural forests.

Development activities and status of conservation and development of the forest resources, West Bengal State Forest Report 2002-2003 clearly stated that –“There is no denying that performance of FPCs have tended to vary amongst regions endowed with different bio-physical parameter but there is also appreciable difference in the level of performance of FPCs characterized by similar resource parameters. 50% to 60% of FPCs have been identified as good to very good in South-West Bengal whereas only 30% of FPCs can be attributed to this category in the northern part of the state”. (State Forest Report, 2002-03:39) In addition, despite having highest revenue generating two districts of West Bengal namely Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri (De 2005:86) a field survey conducted by an Siliguri based independent N.G.O, in 2000 showed that only 18.75% of these committees under study in the forest village of those districts were benefited from revenue and usufruct sharing. Besides, most of the committees in the study area had not even bank accounts till 2000.(Gosh, 2000:8-9) This clearly shows the lack of economic empowerment of the community through JFM. The same study showed how bureaucratic apathy, absence of marketing mechanism, unplanned support activities and unwillingness to relinquish any power to the community contributed largely to the failure of the J.F.M and Eco. Development Programmes this region.

Outside the J.F.M framework, the Panchayat system was introduced in those forest villages in 1998. Nevertheless, as they were not allowed to take any land-based activities due to absence of land entitlements of the forest dwellers it failed considerably to uplift livelihood status, of the community. In most of the cases the Department denied to provide NOC to the Panchayat except a few cases where the villagers had shown their unquestionable obligation to the Department. Development programmes of the Panchayat relating to health, sanitation, housing, employment, education and so on have never been carried out properly in those villages which remained far away from the focus of urban-centric media.

Moreover, man-animal conflicts increased highly during this period. Elephants and other wild animals regularly destroyed crop and killed or injured people whereas compensation schemes of the Forest Department remained inadequate as well as mostly irregular. Though a few elephant squads were formed by the Department but they did not make much headway due to under staffing of those squads against a vast tract of forest area which left the landscape unmanageable and vulnerable before the wild attack.

Besides, landlordism and apathetic attitude of the forest bureaucracy towards the forest dwellers contributed further to worsening their situation. The forest bureaucrats are not willing to relinquish any power to the forest dwellers and they treated them merely as laborers belonging to a lower species than the human being. This attitude often led to the entire exclusion of those communities from the participatory management practices. Above all, the rampant cases of opening fire, killing of forest dwellers, false arrests, tortures, illegal or legal harassments, and eviction threats in the name of forest and wildlife protection resulted in gross violation of human rights in the region.

All of these factors led to the accumulation of grievances among the forest dwellers. Such grievances were quite varied before J.F.M, so were the practices and aspirations throughout the region. Under JFM regime however, their aspirations and grievances were being institutionalized and consequently it paved the way for regional basis of their demands. But the existing forest workers' unions by different political parties were unable to redress their demands at the regional level and to provide leadership and organization, as their activities were concentrated locally. This gap, which was palpable between the growing aspirations and discontents among the dwellers on the one hand and the limited operational areas of the Unions on the other led to further regional crystallization of the objective conditions of a strong movement.

#### 4. Shaping Resistance

Against the backdrop, NESPON, a Siliguri based NGO, which was acting as a catalyst in the implementation of the J.F.M and Eco Development programmes to support Forest Department in the region, convened a meeting at 10<sup>th</sup> Mile Forest Village under Kurseong Divisions of all FPC and EDC members of the region in the early 1999 and decided to form *Uttarbangya Banabasi Samity*(UBBS), a non-political platform to press their demands including issues like forest conservation, land and livelihood rights of the forest dwellers (See Appendix VIII). The meeting concluded with identifying the following objectives of the UBBS<sup>53</sup>:

- to build up a peoples movement for conservation of forests
- to build up a movement for securing rights of the forest villagers
- to raise their voice to introduce community Forest management by replacing J.F.M.

However when they initiated their movement they were mainly addressing issues at hand and therefore acted on a symptomatic basis rather than under an unifying and general ideological direction. This resulted in their futile search for an effective leadership and organizations working for the forest dwellers in the different parts of the country. Finally, they succeed to make contact with the leaderships of National Forum of Forest People and Forest workers (N.F.F.P.F.W) in Delhi which sent their representatives in the next meeting of UBBS in early 2000 at 10<sup>th</sup> mile forest village. In that meeting U.B.B.S decided to join the N.F.F.P.F.W with an objective to build up a non-partisan platform of the forest dweller's which tried to bring together different groups and organizations that may be political or non-political and would work to protect livelihood of the forest dwellers and natural resources. In the following meeting held at Garubathan (Kalimpong Forest Division) in November 2000 different workers unions from different political parties like RSP,

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<sup>53</sup> Resolution taken by Uttarbanga Banabasi Samity, 10<sup>th</sup> Mile Forest Village, 16-17<sup>th</sup> January, 1999

G.N.L.F etc joined in the N.F.F.P.F.W and agreed to send their representatives in the national conference on Forest Villages to be held at Sukna in May 2001. The conference became a success where almost 200 representatives participated from different forest villages under different forest divisions.<sup>54</sup> In the same year in November 2001 by a regional conference of N.F.F.P.F.W at Siliguri a regional committee was formed to lead the regional movement of the forest villagers across all the divisions in North Bengal and a permanent campaign centre of NFFPFW Regional Committee was decided to establish at Siliguri. The Conference identified certain key issues in the struggle of forest people and forest workers which were:

- Violation of Livelihood, Land and housing rights of communities living in and around Protected Areas (e.g. national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, biosphere reserves, etc.).
- Ownership rights over collection, processing and marketing of Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFPs) for all communities dependent on NTFPs for livelihoods.
- Land and housing rights, and rights to equitable development for people residing in Forest and Taungya villages, and other forest settlements.
- Land alienation of forest people through industrialization, urbanization and other development programmes.
- Impact of WTO and other global pacts and treaties on forest people and workers.
- Human rights violations and atrocities against forest people.
- Unity among various Groups and Organizations working on the forest question
- Unity among various Groups and Organizations working with people dependent on natural resources.

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<sup>54</sup> A Paper on Forest Villages in India in the National Conference on Forest Villages, Sukna, held on May 25-26, 2001

Further, the Conference highlighted the problem areas before struggle in North Bengal including multi ethnic dependence on forests, unemployment among forest dwellers, organized deforestations, violation of human rights by the Forest Department, failure of JFM/Eco-development in the region, lack of civic amenities, conspiracy to evict forest people in Protected Areas, wildlife depredation etc. It decided to build up a solid organizational base in North Bengal and took the resolution to organize public demonstration programme throughout the year at the Beat, Range and division level in the region. (NFFPFW, 2001)

Besides the Regional Conference, the first phase of the movement in North Bengal, got impetus also from the National Conference of NFFPFW held in Nagpur on 30<sup>th</sup> September to 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 2002, which formed a National Committee comprising 46 members and prepared a long National Charter of Demands including regional demands throughout the country. The Conference ended up with declaring four point resolutions to build up movement against the anti-people forest polices, eviction of the forest villagers, Forest Department activities under the guidance of World Bank, IMF and MNC's, spreading of communal disharmony and the Report of the Labour Commission violating the rights of the working class. (NFFPFW, 2003)

## **5. The First Phase (2001 to 2005) : Struggle for Land and Livelihood**

Since its formation in 2001 N.F.F.P.F.W organized several major programmes in this region. A large number of forest dwellers participated from different parts of the region in different programmes. In this course of movement, the focus in first phase was marked by the struggle for land and livelihood rights for the deprived forest villagers of the region'. Simultaneously, the resistance against other injustice to the forest villagers and violation of human rights by the FD continued side by side of the main struggle. However, in North Bengal in order to strengthen the regional level struggle the following major programmes were taken in the following years:

- On 10<sup>th</sup> Dec, 2001, in the occasion of International Human Rights Day around 2000 forest villagers from recorded forest villages mainly in the hills and terai areas of North Bengal demonstrated at Siliguri against all the 'black laws' of the centre and state government which tend to view them as burden and denied even constitutional rights of land and livelihood to them. The demonstration took a regional character in the true sense of the term as out of 173 recorded forest villages in north Bengal forest dwellers from 168 villages took active part in that demonstration. On that day they placed a memorandum before the Hon'ble Minister in charge of Forest Department, West Bengal where they argued that the JFM policy has failed miserably to deliver the goods in this region and accused the Department as Panchayats are denied to carry out any land based development schemes in this region by them. Following the programme deputations were given to the CCF North Bengal and the District Magistrates, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri<sup>55</sup>.
- In April, 2002 to press their demands of "more land and livelihood rights" the forest dwellers of North Bengal took out a relay '*padayatra*' which 'continued for 10 days and traversed more than 600 kilometers' the *yatra* started from two extreme points of Maneybhanjang and Sankosh and by covering 82 forest villages it culminated at Birpara in Jalpaiguri.
- In June 2002 NFFPFW organized successive strategy workshops at village and regional level. The process culminated with formal meeting between the Senior Forest officials and the forest villagers of North Bengal at Sukna, where the Forest Department conceded in writing that they do not have any objections to converting forest villages to revenue villages and guaranteed that the Panchayats would be allowed to function smoothly in forest villages, among other things.

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<sup>55</sup> Memorandum on the Rights of Forest Dwelling People of North Bengal, placed before the Hon'ble Minister of Forest, Govt. of West Bengal, Kolkata, 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2001

- In July, 2003, the NFFPFW North Bengal Regional Committee started a 'unique campaign programme' from the Bhuttabari Forest village of Kalimpong to press the demand for immediate conversion of all forest settlements into revenue villages. Under this campaign the villagers in remote forests and mountain areas have started to prepare elaborate land use maps for their villages to strengthen their contention that the land they had occupied for more than last 150 years were homestead and agricultural and not forest. They prepared more than 100 maps of this kind during the process.
- Since NOV. 2003, the NFFPFW, Regional Committee has been protesting along with other local and national level organizations against the NHPC promoted Teesta Low Dam Projects at 27<sup>th</sup> Mile and Kalijhora. They demanded for suspending the project until and unless people's grievances over environmental impacts and rehabilitations are met.
- On 10<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2003, N.F.F.P.F.W held a colorful rally at Darjeeling town. More than 7000 forest villagers from all over North Bengal joined the programme.
- In January 2004, NFFPFW Regional Committee sent a 72 member delegation to the World Social Forum, Mumbai.
- On 10<sup>th</sup> Dec 2004, the regional committee of N.F.F.P.F.W. organized division wise demonstration programmes. Where deputations were placed before all the Divisional officers from all the forest divisions of North Bengal. Himalayan Forest Villager's Union from G.N.L.F., Forest Majdur union from R.S.P. and Dooars Forest Workers and Jaigir Cultivators Union from Forward Block participated in those demonstrations under the Banner of N.F.F.P.F.W.

In 2005, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regional Conference of North Bengal held at Rajabhatkhawa under BTR (West) Division on 31<sup>st</sup> March and 1<sup>st</sup> April. A new Regional Committee has been formed to carry out the ongoing movement. It decided strategies for future struggle which were almost same with the 1st Regional Conference like to undertake

agitation programmes at the divisional or district headquarters in order to gain revenue status to all forest/taungya villages, to combat the threat of eviction in the Buxa Tiger Reserve, to demand immediate medical intervention in all forest areas threatened with malaria and other diseases and to demand for a comprehensive compensation package for all types of depredation etc. But the Conference registered its discontinuity with the earlier one by emphasizing two other issues which were claimed to be paid immediate attention of the workers of the movement despite their holistic infeasibility in the short term without policy changes at the national level. Those two issues were 'forest management' and 'livelihood support.' To make it success, the Conference decided to strengthen its organizational efforts to provide livelihood supports to the deprived and marginalized forest peoples in the Darjeeling Hills and Rava areas of Jalpaiguri and Chilapata. In terms of Forest management it planned to provide a model of 'Community Forest Management' (CFM) and in terms of livelihood programmes it thought to initiate community tourism, micro-finance and NTFP marketing with required organizational strength. Further the Conference resolved to develop joint programmes with cinchona plantation workers, and small/marginal farmers and agricultural workers along with special stress on building alliance with the tea workers as many of the tea gardens in the region were closed and several more facing closer during that period of severe crisis at the tea gardens of North Bengal. (NFFPFW, 2005)

The Conference was followed by a Public Hearings in Indian Protected Areas at the same venue (Rajabhatkhawa) on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 2005 where people from 30 villages in Buxa Tiger Reserve (BTR) presented testimonies to the panel comprising Justice Samaresh Banerjee (Executive Chairman of the State Legal Services Authority), Sadhan Roy Chowdhury (a senior advocate of the Kolkata High Court and human rights activists) and Prof. Subhendu Dasgupta (a noted economist and columnist). Several gruesome stories of torture and murder of the forest villagers, human rights violation, livelihood displacements and administrative and financial

mismanagement by an inept and corrupt forest administration came to the light in that Public Hearing. Following the Hearing Local activists have succeeded in filing a complaint before SDJM, Alipurduar and get an order in one of the cases, for exhumation of the body that was buried in the woods adjoining the village after cool blooded murder by the FD. A case was registered against the local Range Officer and Deputy Field Director, BTR. Soon after the Hearing the Regional Committee observed a symbolic road-block programme across divisions on 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2005 in order to protest against “heinous atrocities” committed by the Forest Department in Buxa Tiger Reserve area against Ravas and other forest dwelling communities. (NESPON, DISHA & NFFPFW, 2005)

## **6. The Second Phase (2005 to 2008): Campaign for Forest Rights**

However, during this period certain crucial changes in the national scenario regarding the rights of the tribal and other forest dwellers affected the course of the movement at the regional level. The background was prepared by an eviction drive of the Forest Department throughout the country following the Supreme Court Order on February 2002, to regularize illegal encroachment of the forest lands. This resulted in countrywide eviction drive by the FD during May 2002 and 2004. However, following resistance and mass protests by tribal communities, after the May 2004 general elections, the UPA (United Progressive Alliance) Government, in its Common Minimum Programme, committed itself to discontinuing the ‘eviction of tribal communities and other forest dwelling communities from forest areas’. In January 2005, the prime minister decided that a bill granting forest rights to tribals should be drafted and tabled in Parliament. The task of drafting it was assigned to the ministry of tribal affairs (MoTA) which constituted a Technical Resource Group, consisting of representatives of various Ministries, the civil society and legal specialists, to draft the Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill, 2005. Several provisions of the Bill were met with stiff opposition from various quarters. Wildlife conservationists and the MoEF expressed concern over the purported

potential adverse impact of its implementation, which could, according to them, extensively damage the existing scarce forest cover. In December 2005, the Bill was referred to the Joint Parliamentary Committee (the 'JPC') in order to settle these differences. The JPC's recommendations, which were presented to the two Houses of the Parliament on 23 May 2006, were also hotly contested by conservationists. In order to resolve the crisis, a group of ministers was asked to arrive at a consensus, which took the form of the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill, 2006 (the 'revised Bill'). Despite further opposition the revised Bill was approved, and the Act was passed by the Parliament on 18 December 2006. Subsequently, the MoTA set up a technical support group to prepare the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Rules, 2007 (the 'draft Rules'), which supplement the procedural aspects of the Act. After a one-year delay, the Act was finally notified on 31 December 2007 and the final Rules (or 'the Rules') were notified on 1 January 2008. (Bhullar, 2008:23-24 and Munshi, 2005:4406)

Against this back drop, the main focus of second phase of the struggle was the campaign for forest right throughout the region. Several programmes were taken by NFFPFW regional committee in this regard during November 2005 to December 2007. This phase of struggle was inspired and intensified further with the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Conference of NFFPFW held in Ranchi, Jharkhand on 31<sup>st</sup> Oct-2<sup>nd</sup> November, 2006. The central theme of the Conference was "Resist Commodification of Forest, Support Community Forest Governance". The four workshops were organized around the four themes in order to evolve strategies for further struggle which includes 1) Community Forest Governance and the Forest rights Bill, 2) Privatization of Indian forest and role of IFIs, 3) Environmental politics and livelihood, and 4) Future of forest communities: Challenges before the youth. The Conference formed a new National Steering Committee and was concluded with the following major resolutions: (NFFPFW, 2006)

- This Conference demands that the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (forest rights recognition) Bill be immediately passed in the Winter Session of the Parliament, with all amendments proposed by the Joint Parliamentary Committee. Together with all people's movements fighting for forest rights and rights over natural resources, the conference resolves to step up a nation-wide struggle for the enactment of the Bill, and if this is delayed, not to let the Forest Department function from January 1, 2007. NFFPFW won't accept any dilution of JPC recommendations. While welcoming the Joint Parliamentary Committee's recommendations, the Conference resolves to fight for a new and comprehensive forest legislation that replaces all existing black Forest Acts, and establishes people's governance over forest resources.
- The Conference notes with alarm and concern that the Government of India, in connivance with the World Bank and Indian Pulp and Paper Lobby, has been trying to push through a dangerous forestry sector reform called Multi-Stakeholder Partnership. The Conference denounces this underhand attempt to privatize people's forests, and resolves to resist all such attempts. International Financial Institutions and Corporations won't be allowed to enter forest areas anymore, and, together with other people's struggles and movements in the country and the world, NFFPFW vows to resist all forms of monoculture plantations in India.
- The Conference resolves to resist all forms of environmental trading including the carbon trading and demands that the Indian Government immediately review all such trading projects going on in the country.
- The Conference also denounces the latest attempt of the international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development

Bank to foment trouble by eyeing the resource rich and community owned and governed forest areas of the north eastern states.

- The Conference notes with great concern and alarm that people in forest areas are increasingly being subject to brutal state repression in the name of national security and anti-terrorist operations, and demands that the Government of India and State Governments immediately ensure that people's lives and livelihood remain protected. The Conference also denounces militarization of resource-rich forest areas and the trend of state-sponsored private armies being set up in forest areas, and demands that all such illegal and anti-constitutional efforts like the Salwa Judum be immediately stopped.
- The Conference condemns all anti-people repressive laws like Armed Forces Special Forces Act, and demands that all such acts be immediately repealed.
- The Conference resolves to stop all such development projects in forest areas that threaten people's lives and livelihoods, forest and biodiversity.

Moreover, the key strategic demands and campaigns identified by the conclave include:

- All negotiations on forest issues must be carried out between the government and the forest people. NFFPFW rejects any of intermediary mechanisms such as the World Bank supported Multi-stakeholder dialogue process that gives industry unwarranted access to forest resources.
- A moratorium on entry of International Financial Institutions such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and the Japanese Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) into the forestry sector through projects

such as monoculture plantations in poplar and eucalyptus. The campaign against plantations would take on both on domestic and foreign companies.

- A focus on alternatives in community forest control. The Forum will consider evolving processes such as collective agriculture and people's forest produce cooperatives. Cultural expression was seen as crucial to building resistance and organizational strength.
- In the event of the stalling of the Forest Rights Bill 2005 in the forthcoming session of the Parliament, the NFFPFW proposes local actions against the Forest Department through dharnas and gheraos at local offices. Recapturing of land usurped from forest communities under various projects will also form part of the proposed actions.

Above those factors however led to shift in focus of the struggle at the regional level. The movement started campaign programmes for forest rights prior to and the post Conference periods while carrying out the spirit of the Conference. The programmes of the movement spread out across forest divisions in North Bengal even with greater impact than the first phase of struggle. Besides, the ground level campaign and exerting pressure on administration, during this phase of struggle, the regional committee took part also in the lobbying at the national level to amend the proposed bill as well as to enact "The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. The major programmes taken in the period are given below:

- A 'Jail Bharo' programme in various areas of North Bengal from 15<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> November, 2005 as part of a nation-wide campaign for quick introduction of the Proposed Forest Rights Bill with all proposed amendments to undo the historical injustice against forest dwelling communities.

- A mass protest demonstration and rally at Jalpaiguri on 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2005 along with submitting a memorandum to the Divisional Commissioner, Jalpaiguri Division as a part of nation-wide campaign for introduction of the Proposed Forest Rights Bill with all amendments
- A Maha Rally of 5000 forest dwellers was organized at Siliguri on 26<sup>th</sup> July, 2006 for immediate introduction of the Proposed Forest Rights Bill with Recommendations by the Joint Parliamentary Committee.
- Simultaneous demonstration programmes were held in 19<sup>th</sup> Range Offices across 4 forest divisions were organized on 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 2006, demanding immediate enactment of the Bill.
- Following the passing of the Forest Rights Bill in the parliament a series of Public Meetings were organized in Kalimpong, Coochbehar and Buxa on 25<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> December, 2006 Hundreds of forest villagers took part in those meetings.
- In January, 2007, the NFFPFW proposed to utilize the Bill as a movement weapon and without waiting for the Rules/ Notification/GOs would give a call to constitute Gram Sabhas according to the definition in the Bill to prepare the base for Community Forest Governance mechanism
- A historic Cycle Rally took off from the Khunia Forest Village in Dooars on 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2007 and ended in Mendabari Forest Village on 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2007 as a part of the National Campaign Programme-“Gram Sabha Banao Aviyaan”. The Rally covered 38 forest villages in Buxa, Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri Divisions in its 500+kms long way and thousands of people participated spontaneously in the programme.
- On 21<sup>st</sup> June, 2007 a memorandum has been placed before the state Forest Minister, Govt. of west Bengal demanding all atrocities on forest

communities by the FD must be stopped immediately, all FPC/EDCs and similar type of structures promoted by the FD should be redundant and illegal as it violated the FRA, 2006 Act which gave the Gram Sabhas in all forest villages complete management power over community forest resources, FDA funds should be disbursed and utilized in consultation with villagers and forest villagers movement in the region to keep intact the spirit of the new Act.

- In August and September, 2007 Gram Sabhas were formed at six villages of Kalimpong, Coochbeher and Buxa Forest divisions. Two more Gram Sabhas were formed in the November, 2007
- The full Regional Committee of NFFPFW met in Chalsa in early December, 2007 and drew up a plan for North Bengal wide campaign, demanding immediate notification/implementation of the FRA. A mass rally in Siliguri has been planned for January 2008.

After the Notification of Rules of FRA, 2006 on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2008, the campaign programme was intensified further. A press conference was held in Kolkata Press Club on 9<sup>th</sup> January, 2008 by NFFPFW where it demanded that the Government of West Bengal must start the implementation of the Forest Rights Act in right earnest, giving full primacy to the *Gram Sabhas*, and not to the so-called JFM (Joint Forest Management) Committees formed by the Forest Department, the completely illegal notification for 'inviolable' critical tiger habitats in the Sunder bans and Buxa issued by the Government of West Bengal be immediately withdrawn and suitable amendments be made to the Forest Rights Act, to include the recommendations of the Joint Parliamentary Committee, and to ensure that all genuine forest-dwellers of the country come under it, and rights enshrined in the Act do not get in any way compromised by interference from, or by the whims of, State Government Officials. In order to get justice to those demands, the Regional

Committee organized a number of programmes in subsequent months. The most notable among those are:

- On 25<sup>th</sup> January, 2008 about 7000 forest dwellers across three districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar participated in a historic Rally at Siliguri demanding immediate implementation of the Act. Prior to the Rally, in each forest Range and Sub-Divisions in forest areas of North Bengal, demonstrations were organized demanding legal accesses to forests.
- On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2008, the Deputy Field Director, BTR was gheraoed in Rajabhatkhawa and the departmental timber auction was stopped against the deliberate murder of Samuel Rava, a 15 year old boy from Poro Beat who was attacked while exercising his rights of grazing of cows and collecting firewood as a forest dwelling Schedule Tribe which are firmly enshrined in the FRA, 2006. Following the demonstration a memorandum was placed before the State Forest Minister-in-Charge on 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2008

## **7. The Third Phase (2008 onwards): Reclaiming the Forest Commons**

The third phase of struggle was started with the Government Order in 2008 to initiate the process of implementation of FRA, 2006 within the state.<sup>56</sup> The Order created a commotion among the people who fought for the forest rights as it stated that "A committee named Forest Rights Committee (FRC) shall be formed at the level of Gram Sansad in the meeting to be held to before 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2008..." However, the Order was found inconsistent with the original Act. The Order proposed the formation of Forest Rights Committees (FRC's) at the *Gram Sansad* level to settle down the rights of the forest dwellers whereas the FRA (Rule 3.1) clearly stated that the formation of FRCs would have been at the *Gram Sabha* level in which the *Gram Sabha* has been defined as the village assembly comprising of all adult members of a

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<sup>56</sup> The GO No.1220/PN/O/I/1A-2/07 issued by the Principle Secretary, Gov. of West Bengal dated 17<sup>th</sup> March, 2008

village (The Gazette of India, 2007:3). *Gram Sansad*, on the other hand, according to the Panchayat Act, 1973, West Bengal, is a body constituted with all the voters in a constituency of the Gram Panchayat. The constituency, however, may comprise of several villages, depending upon the size of voting population, even residing at a considerable distance from each other, which often left the opportunity for elected Panchayat Member from that *Gram Sansad* to favor his own village at the cost of others while distributing benefits of a government's scheme. There is even no upper limit in the number of villages under a *Gram Sansad* whereas *Gram Sabha* is based upon a single village. In an extreme case 11 numbers of remote and spatially dislocated forest villages in the Buxa Tiger Reserve (East) Divisions of Jalpaiguri District constitute a single *Gram Sansad* under the *Rajabhatkhawa Gram Panchayat*. Therefore, formation of FRCs at the multi-village *Gram-Sansad* level instead of single-village *Gram Sabha* level could make the process of recognizing rights ineffective while providing the forest bureaucracy with an opportunity to manipulate the overall process of implementation in collaboration with corrupt Panchayat members. Hence, as a reaction to the Order, NFFPFW, North Bengal Regional Committee placed a memorandum before the Chief Minister of West Bengal on 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2008 where it demanded an immediate withdrawal of the Order which it saw as a violation of the spirit of the Act.<sup>57</sup>

Hence, as a reaction to the Order, NFFPFW, North Bengal Regional Committee placed a memorandum before the Chief Minister of the state on 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2008 (See Appendix IX) where it complained that "by making *Gram Sansad* co-terminus to *Gram Sabhas* (as defined under FRA, 2006), the Order entirely violates the letters and spirit of the Act." It condemned the inclusion of *Gram Unnayan Samitis* in the Order where neither the Act nor the Rules mention any such bodies and therefore which are clearly external to the Act. The Memorandum stated

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<sup>57</sup> Memorandum on Immediate Withdrawal of the Govt. Order for Implementation of FRA in West Bengal, placed before Chief Minister, Govt. of West Bengal, 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2008

that the FRC can only be meaningfully formed when and after the *Gram Sabhas* have been democratically constituted and the *Gram Sabha* meeting to form FRC has been attended by two thirds of the members but according to their best of knowledge in many villages of Jalpaiguri Districts where FRCs have been formed on 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> March, there was no quorum and Attendance Registers were being circulated either the previous day or after the meeting. The Memorandum, therefore, demanded that

1. The illegal and arbitrary Order issued by the P& RD Department gets immediately withdrawn
2. All Governmental Activities to form FRCs under this Order in all parts of the State are suspended immediately
3. All FRCs formed through this Order are dismantled immediately.

Following the Memorandum, NFFPFW released a press statement on 27<sup>th</sup> March, 2008 condemning the implementation process of the Act, following the said Order by forming Forest Rights Committees (FRC) at the Gram Sansad level which violated the provisions under the Act to form FRCs under Gram Sabha as defined by the ACT. However, the whole phase of the struggle during the period was characterized by the opposing initiatives between the Forest department and NFFPFW to implement the Act on the ground. The FD in most of the cases denied the validity or legality of the FRCs formed at the Gram Sabha level as initiated by NFFPFW and on the other forest dwellers under the leadership of the Movement derecognized the FRCs formed by the FD at Gram Sansad level. Nevertheless, due to the intense movement at the forest village level Siliguri SDO and later on Jalpaiguri DM admitted the logic of the NFFPFW to form FRCs at the Gram Sabha level as defined by the FRA, 2006 and not by the W.B Panchayat Act which the definition of Gram Sabha differed completely with the Act. But despite their admissibility of the argument they could not make much head way to implement the Act in toto as the State Government did not revised its order. Taking the reality into account, 30 forest villages under the leadership of NFFPFW along with Nagarik Mancha, Kolkata filed a

writ petition against the State Government regarding the implementation process in the High Court of Kolkata on May, 2009<sup>58</sup>. The case is going on till date. However, during the period NFFPFW organized several demonstrations, agitation and constructive programmes to establish the community claim over the forests. The landmarks among them are as follows:

- Hundreds of forest dwellers aggrieved by the illegal and slipshod attempts by the Government of West Bengal to implement the Forest Rights Act, gheraoed Block offices at five different places of Dhupguri, Kalchini, Madarihat, Birpara and Alipurduar-1 simultaneously on 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 2008
- A Janajagan Yatra comprising NFFPFW/NESPOL members toured the remoter forest villages of the area, and held public meetings at nine locations, to raise peoples' awareness about the provisions of the FRA against the false propaganda by the FD. The Yatra continued for nearly three weeks from 23<sup>rd</sup> March to 12<sup>th</sup> April.
- Demanding that the trees belong to the people, from 24<sup>th</sup> April, 2008 onwards, agitating forest dwellers closed one after another timber depot in North Bengal. Out of 34 government timber depots across Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar districts, four in Kurseong, six in Kalimpong, two in Darjeeling and two in Coochbehar have been shut for one month.

The third phase of struggle took a unique turn with a workshop on Community Forest Governance in North Bengal held on 24<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> May, 2008 at Takdah in the Darjeeling Himalaya co-organized by NFFPFW North Bengal Regional Committee, Himalayan forest Villagers Organization and NESPOL (See Appendix X). The workshop was attended by Dr. Ajit Banerjee from Kolkata and national conveners of NFFPFW. (NFFPFW, 2008)

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<sup>58</sup> The Writ Petition No. 13635 (W) OF 2009 at the High Court of Kolkata

50 Forest Dwellers from all over North Bengal attended the workshop and discussed the possibility of establishing community control over all natural resources in their forest areas as provided in the Forest Rights Act. The consensus was in favor of starting the practice in select areas immediately, without waiting indefinitely for the extremely uncertain and so far dubious Governmental process of implementing the Act. Apart from creating a lot of confusion over the nature of both rights and rights holders, the West Bengal Government has up until now done nothing to implement the Act (issuing a number of Orders utterly violated the Act, and harassing and intimidating villagers in the process).

The position taken in the programme was that:

1. The Act admits that there are rights which the forest dwellers have been denied unjustly.
2. It lists and defines some such rights.
3. It defines and lists a set of conservation tasks for the rights holders.
4. It creates and defines an institutional mechanism for the forest-dwelling communities in order to enable them to exercise their rights.
5. It creates a mechanism for the Governance to list and recognize the already-existing rights.

Therefore a conducive legal environment exists to reclaim the commons, and start a peoples Governance Process in the existing/and newly-created community forests. The workshop then discussed the possible contours and theoretical boundaries of such a CFG process, and outlined a set of simple tasks to initiate it in North Bengal:

1. Forming the *Gram Sabhas* and FRCs, Where *Gram Sabhas* would form FRC involving the Panchayat. If the Panchayat does not get involved, let *Gram Sabha* tell in writing the intent and date of forming the FRC.
2. Start claim-listing and processing through the FRC.
3. Demarcate CFRs at landscape level including agricultural areas, grazing lands and water bodies.
4. Prepare a resource map of the CFR. Publicly proclaim control of the area.

5. Prepare a Management Plan of the CFR.
6. Initiate Governance process, form necessary committees and other institutions..

After carefully analyzing and assessing the strength of the ongoing forest movement in the area, and other variables like the amount of and type of natural forests left in the CFR, six forest areas have been selected for immediate practice of CFG:

1. Darjeeling: A cluster of 4 Gram Sabhas adjoining/inside Senchal Wild Life Sanctuary.
2. Kalimpong: A Cluster of 5 Gram Sabhas adjoining Neora Valley National Park.
3. Kurseong: A cluster of 5 Gram Sabhas adjoining/inside Mahanada Wild Life Sanctuary
4. Jalpiguri: A cluster of 5 Gram Sabhas adjoining Gorumara National Park.
5. Coochbehar: A cluster of 2 Gram Sabhas inside Jaldapara Wild Life Sanctuary.
6. Buxa: A cluster of 2 Gram Sabhas inside Buxa Tiger Reserve.

The first three will be in the hills and the next three in the plains.

The workshop concluded with the note that the only way to stop imminent privatization/commodification of forests and resources is reclaiming and reinventing forest/village commons, and establishes social control over such areas. It would also be an answer to Climate Change, by ensuring forest conservation and further ensuring that forests remain effectively within community control.

Besides, in this phase NFFPFW Regional committee started a campaign against the relocation initiative by the State Forest department of forest settlements in the BTR (East) under the provision of the 'Critical Wildlife Habitat' As a part of the campaign programme following the FD Notification a 4 member team visited those settlements on 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2008

However, taking CFG as a main thrust of the struggle in the region the following organizational and movement programmes were taken by NFFPFW:

- In July, 2008 several meetings were organized in Coochbehar division. A Forest Right Committee at Gram Sabha level was formed at Kurmai village. Similar programmes were taken in the Moraghat Range under Jalpaiguri division and the Terai area of Kurseong division.
- In August, 2008 a mass rally held at Alipurduar where 16 villages from Buxa Division and 3 villages from Coochbehar Division submitted mass petitions to the SDO to dissolve existing Samsad level FRCs and to form new Gram Sabha level FRCs.
- In September, 2008 CFG meetings were organized in Kodal Basti in coochbehar Division and Karmat-Kandung villages of Kurseong Division. By this month FRCs at the Gram Sabha level were formed at all villages of Coochbehar Division and several villages in Jalpaiguri and Buxa.
- A Community Forest Governance meeting held in Kodal Basti in Coochbehar Division on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2008. On that day, hundreds of youths belonging to Rava and other tribal groups proclaimed complete community control over their forests.
- In November a meeting was held at Kalimpong Division to initiate the CFG in Pankhabari Range. Simultaneously A Gram Sabha and FRC was formed at Gajoldoba under Baikunthapur Division. Further a joint meeting of NFFPFW and Himalayan Forest Villagers Organization have been organized at Jorebunglo, Darjeeling to discuss issues related to the implementation process of FRA in Darjeeling District
- The biggest event during November, 2008 took place in the Chilapata area of Coochbehar Division, where tribal youths launched a revolutionary campaign that effectively established peoples control over the area's forests. This led to a violent conflict on 13<sup>th</sup> November between the movement organizers and the Forest Department along with its sponsored Timber mafia

- In 20<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> November, 2008 two subsequent memorandums were placed before the DM at Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling to point the manifest irregularities in the FRA implementation process in those district.
- From 26<sup>th</sup> November to 2<sup>nd</sup> December, meetings were organized in Buxa Division to combat governmental excesses and harassment of villagers in the name of the FRA implementation in Buxa. A six member's team of NFFPFW/NESPOIN visited 20 villages to discuss CFG related issues.
- On 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2008, a fact finding team comprising representatives of Nagarik Mancha, Kolkata and civil society representatives from Siliguri visited Chilapata and Buxa forests to talk to the villagers regarding the irregularities in the FRA.

In 2009 the forest dwelling communities under the leadership of NFFPFW organized several agitation and demonstration programmes to challenge the faulty and politically biased implementation of the FRA by the Government of west Bengal. Empowered by their new formed awareness of the pro-people Act they issued a stiff challenge to the existing hegemonic control of the state over all forest resources. In one after another Gram Sabha areas the communities continued proclaiming their legitimate governance control over their forest resources. Though such activities gained the most intensity in the Coochbehar and Kurseong Division, every forest division in North Bengal resonated. This led to a confrontation situation in many forest areas, where the state owned forest department tried to sneak in a 'new' JFM Resolution to counter the FRA, and kept on intimidating the villagers with withdrawal of development money unless new JFM committees were formed according the Departmental dictate.<sup>59</sup> The confrontation situation became more manifest with the faulty 'patta' (land title) giving process to the selected recipients by the FD only before the Parliamentary Election. The confrontation get further

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<sup>59</sup> JFM Resolution No 5969, dated 3/10/08 issued by the Forest Department, Govt. of west Bengal, Kolkata. In this Resolution 15% share of timber to the forest dwellers has been stipulated additionally along with prevailing 25% share of usufructs to the forest dwellers

intensified when in November and December witnessed several incidents of firing at the forest dwellers in the BTR. Following those incidents all the forest offices in Dooars and three divisions in Darjeeling District were shut down for two days on 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> December, 2009. However, during the period the organization had called for the initiation of community forest governance in the entire area at individual Gram Sabha level in the Kurseong and Coochbehar Divisions. Each forest village under those divisions was asked to set up display boards indicating forest areas, forest block number and compartment number etc. under Gram Sabha. The process started effectively when a leading news paper namely Telegraph reported that on the January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2010 more than 500 forest villagers “took control” of a 2,985 hectare forest tract on the outskirts of Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary by putting up a board on the Kodal Basti area under Coochbehar (Wildlife III) Division while announcing that no one would be allowed to conduct any activity in the area without the permission of a Gram Sabha they had formed. The villagers invoked Section 3(i) and Section 5 of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. (Chaudhuri, 2010) The incident was preceded by a movement in November, 2009 when the villagers had stopped the forest department from felling trees in the Bania V compartment of the Chilapata Range of the same division. The forest officials had then sat with the villagers to sort out the issue, but no solution was reached and the felling has been suspended since then. The Newspaper reported that the villagers celebrated the “take over” of the forest land by bursting crackers, smearing each other with gulal and cracking open coconuts. The residents of North and South Mendabari, Kurmai, Andu, Mantharam, Banin and Salkumarhat assembled on the grounds of the Kodal Basti community hall at 1pm and trekked to the forest on foot. On the way, they had not been stopped by guards at the forest check post. As a reaction to the incident the local Police, backed by the Forest Department, lodged false cases against the movement leaders which invoked further confrontation between the forest villagers and the State of West Bengal. Recently a mass convention has been organized against police atrocities and the strategy for a

ground level campaign launched. Other civil society groups' involvement has also been encouraged as part of a series of steps taken to exert pressure on administration alongside ongoing legal battles. Anyway, this is the first case of a Gram Sabha putting up a notice board publicly declaring its community forest resources and indeed can be regarded as a first historic step towards establishing Community Forest Governance in the region against the Govt. initiated forest management regime. Moreover, another important achievement of the movement in 2009 was that in the state assembly election the Forest Right Act, 2006 became the major issue in the Kalchini Constituency which comprises of BTR (West) and BTR (East) Divisions. The Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) supported candidate finally won the election while keeping promise to implement the Act in toto.

## **8. Significance of the Movement**

The movement has been growing fast day by day, both in terms of its support base and its capacity to bargain with government administration. To sustain the struggle, it is trying hard to build up strong ties with other organizations working for the rights of indigenous people of the land. With its main slogan - "protect livelihood and protect resources" - the organization of the movement is attempting to establish social control of the 'primary producers' by means of instituting an equitable and decentralized resource management system. It is striving for a type of institutional mechanism which would consider the socio-ecological and economic needs of the forest communities according to their varied cultural profiles. (NFFPFW, 2003) The primary objective of the movement is to resist the unequal social system of resources used by the prohibitive bureaucratic apparatus of the State and to stop the systematic plundering of forest resources by global capitalism, which is aided and abetted by Trans-National Corporations in the country. By remaining under the constitutional framework of the country, the forest dwellers' movement has raised the demand for a 'new regime of primary producers' based upon the principle of 'right to self rule', which would recognize the inherent plurality of Indian society

across class, caste and gender borders in the practice of sustainable resource management. It would also draw attention to the serious flaws and contradictory provisions within the legal framework of the forest policies in particular, and in the constitution in general. Through such means one is made aware of other contradictions, regarding rights of the local communities, in The 1972 Wild Life Protection Act and 1980 Forest Conservation Act along with the Panchayati Raj Act 1998 and Panchayat (Extension and Scheduled Areas) Act 1996, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment and also the JFM Orders. Thus it demonstrates the need for the restructuring of current citizenship rights, as they appear in the constitution, without which participatory forest management programmes cannot hope to be successful. Further from this, the movement identifies several drawbacks and loopholes within the prevailing system of participation and criticizes the trend of adopting and implementing a general policy framework, irrespective of the contextual peculiarities of specific regions. The policy framework of the JFM programme in the State of West Bengal is no exception to this trend which requires its replacement by more and more decentralized and context-specific institutional frameworks in order to make the programme a sustainable and successful exercise.

Further, the movement pointed out to the several organizational weaknesses within the JFM mechanism and made it clear that organization did not imply only institutions like FPC's or EDC's rather it is a dynamic process for which different institutional framework is necessary for different stages of progress. The movement therefore demanded for bureaucratic reorientation including a change from authoritarian to participatory styles and a shift in responsiveness from orders from above to demands from below. In a word, forest bureaucracy should adopt learning process approach instead of blueprint approach to achieve participatory goals. Moreover, in the context of biased and manipulated implementations of the FRA by the State of West Bengal, the movement is tasked with the construction of a political community - at least at the village level - where sole responsibility and

authority has been given to the Gram Sabha to settle their livelihood rights, ensure food security and sustainable use of resources as well as to protect forests and biodiversity so that the ecological balance of the forests is maintained in accordance with the conservation regime. Putting this concept of Gram Sabha, or village assembly, into practice the movement inspires the creation of a vibrant community duly aware of their rights and responsibilities, at least at the village level, while also cutting across the ethnic and religious boundaries. Last but not the least is the way in which the movement has created a new space for political mobilization in order that the forest communities are able to raise their voices against unjust governmental practices, while going beyond the traditional party lines or trade union based struggles which mostly revolve around elections at the institutional, provincial or national levels. It broadens the scope of the flourishing trend of 'new politics' throughout the country, which is 'built up around voluntary associations in civil society' 'rather than political parties, around new social movements rather than labor organizations, and forged in communities as much or more than in work places.' (Harriss, 2006:257). It is too early to predict the future course of the struggle but undoubtedly it can be asserted that a new ideology and practice of forest governance by the communities is under the process of crystallization in the region which might, in the long run, replace the hegemonic claim of the Forest Department over the forests and would create a site for democratic praxis.

Despite having a lot of potential, the movement, it should not be denied, has faced and it likely to face a few major impediments both in and outside the framework of movement that may influence the future struggle. So far as ideology of the movement is concerned my interview with the leaders proved that the degree of internalization of the ideological elements has been very low especially by the community leaders who can be considered as the pillars of the movement. There may be a three-fold reason behind it.

Firstly the ideology is itself in the process of making as admitted by the leaders and thereby ambiguous and contradictory positions regarding a number of questions clearly surface. A lot of scope for debate remains within the framework. Since it is confusing, in a number of cases it is not possible for anyone to grasp it properly. Secondly the community leaders are mostly uneducated, as they could not even finish their schooling. Thirdly most of the community leaders of the movement belong to different political organizations and used to take a leading part in local political Organizations. Consequently, each of them had their own distinct political-ideological premises. And it is not a fact that their political organizations are following same direction and objectives in terms of ideology and programmes with the N.F.F.P.F.W. So the contradiction exists between the two different lines of thought. It is another significant problem to internalize the ideology.

Hence this type of movement is difficult to sustain without firm ideological conviction, which is essential for organizational centralism and instrumental role in the hands of the activists for motivating the self as well as the other. This lack of ideological commitment may weaken the movement from within.

Another important impediment of the movement is the absence of whole time workers in good number which is imperative for building up a successful movement. A rigorous organizational discipline is required to sustain the movement for a long term which can be built up by the whole time workers who devote their full energy and time to the cause and inspire the masses to make them free from the spontaneity character of their protest which are otherwise impossible with the part time workers.

The third major impediment behind the movement is the problem of communication. As most of the forest villages are in remotest part of the region, sometimes within deep forest, there exists no comfortable means of communication. Telephonic communication is hardly possible. They did not have

even the roadways to enter into the villages. As a result in case of emergency or any sudden attack on the villagers they are virtually helpless to communicate with their counterparts as well as with the leaders of the movement. During any organizational programme that creates a lot of problems. The progress of the movement demands immediate communication channels through which information exchange can take place comfortably among the activists and between the villagers and the organizers of the movement.

## **9. Conclusion**

So far we have reviewed different stages of ongoing forest dwellers movement in North Bengal and it is more or less clear to us that the movement has left the institutional space for sustainable forestry largely open and contested. At one level it has firmly established the limits of the blueprint approach of participatory forest management and at another level it has both revealed the possibility of community forest governance and the ideological shortcomings of the movement towards that. Last but not the least, in the face of strong and spontaneous movement interacting with state mediated framework of community forest governance through FRA regime, we are left clueless about future development in this regard. Nevertheless there is little doubt that a learning approach to sustainable forest management has been adopted in the contested domain.