

Chapter-6

Summary and Conclusion

The facts and arguments that we have presented throughout the analysis signified an attempt to locate the status of people's empowerment in the praxis of natural resource governance in North Bengal. In the context of sustainable forest management the study has made use of both the framework of cooperation and that of resistance around forest eco-system to understand the problems and possibilities of empowerment of forest dwelling communities particularly in the district of Jalpaiguri.

The study has shown that the trajectory of forest governance in the region is marked by the opposing initiatives of the Forest Department and that of the Forest villagers to exercise power upon each other according to one's necessity, interest, choice and priorities over resource use. In the context of a general picture of natural resource governance in India the experiences from the region deserve to be seen as unique primarily on three counts. First, the relative failure in capacity building through the cooperative framework of forest management does not result in disempowerment of the communities who have already been accommodated by the alternative process of empowerment through struggle. Second, the episodic resistances of the forest dwellers do not always revolve round the issue of controlling resources rather the main thread of struggle points either to the problem of inclusive technique of exploitation like taungya or Gram Sansad based FRC's while implementing the FRA etc. or to the various forms of exclusions like eviction, absence of usufructs under JFM etc. Third, the cooperative framework of empowerment finds its success at the field level, though under special circumstances, only when the villagers are entrusted with the exclusive authority to determine their own fate instead of following dictum from the top. Hence, the whole spectrum of empowerment at the field level is characterized by the movement from the below which does not only pose serious challenge to the framework of

cooperation defined by the state mediated participatory forest management but indicates also the simultaneous failure of the movement from the above in ensuring sustainability on the ground. The following summary of the findings of each chapter would justify the argument of this concluding discussion.

In the context of increasing depletion of resources causing environmental degradation worldwide, the Government of India adopted the National Forest Policy of 1988, which made a significant departure in the management of vast forest resources throughout the country. Though the concern for deforestation, changing physical-climatic conditions and the need for involving communities in forest extension were felt earlier in the post-colonial 1952 forest policy, a comprehensive recommendation for people's participation in the management of forest resources to satisfy their needs while achieving the broader environmental goal was made for the first time in the 1988 policy. Hence, following the spirit the Government of India notification in 1990 evolved the strategies for Joint Forest Management in order to empower the forest dwelling communities while recognizing their role in restoring and conserving forests. Arrangements were made under the Programme for sharing of usufructs among communities prescribed by the concerned state forest department along with the limited access to firewood and grazing for each household in lieu of their participation in the forest protection activities. This kind of participatory forest management programme initially was introduced in the degraded forests with the formation of Forest Protection Committees (FPC's) at the village level and was further extended even to the good forest areas after 2000 with the financial assistance from the World Bank and other bilateral donors. Simultaneously, since the early 90's another variation of participatory management institutions came up with the setting up of Eco-Development Committees (EDCs) in the Protected Areas of Sanctuaries and National Parks in the country with an objective to divert biotic pressures from the wildlife zones. In Jalpaiguri JFM started with the FPC resolution, of 1991 which covered also the plain areas of North Bengal

excluding Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) area. Other than FPC's, Eco-Development Committees (EDC's) were also introduced with a resolution in 1996 to apply the same principles of sustainable forest management in the Protected Areas of the District. Today as on 31.03.2008, there are 200 registered FPCs across five territorial divisions in the District comprising of 33,139 members responsible for protection of 67,241.28 hectare of forests area. Similarly, there are 57 EDCs in four wild life divisions of the district comprising of 4,451 members responsible for protection of 55, 693 hectare of protected area. The extension of JFM in the District covered both the forest fringe revenue villages as well as the 76 forest villages which were established during colonial regime to satisfy the imperial needs. However, following the guidelines of the Ministry of Environment and Forests under the rubric of National Afforestation Programme (NAP), the entire JFM programme was revised since the middle of 2000 with the formation of two tier set up of Forest Development Agencies (FDAs) and Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) across six forest divisions in Jalpaiguri. With the enactment of The Scheduled Tribes And Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006, the revision in the programme got further impetus following a new Resolution on JFM issued by the State Forest Department in 2008.

The all India experiences of implementation of the SFM programme through joint management of forests suggest that the collaboration has become successful in terms of improving vegetation status and the protection of forests from illegal extraction to a certain extent whereas it has failed largely to empower forest dwelling communities both in terms of involving themselves in the decision making process as well as enhancement of their livelihood opportunities by financial capacity building. In Jalpaiguri also the Programme in its early phase had failed miserably to ensure usufructs and other developmental benefits to the communities while often excluding them from the participatory framework of FPCs and EDCs. Several studies conducted during the period showed how bureaucratic apathy,

absence of marketing mechanism, unplanned support activities and unwillingness of the Forest Department to relinquish any power to the communities etc. contributed to the gross failure of the JFM and Eco-Development Programmes in the region. However, during the Xth Plan period (2003-08) the situation has improved to a certain extent. Against the backdrop of increasing financial assistance and more or less regularization of usufruct sharing, the number of FPCs and EDCs has increased considerably in the District. Moreover, the earlier defunct committees have been revived while keeping the promises before the villagers to consider their problems of livelihood. The formation of FDAs under the National Afforestation Programme ensures sustained flow of developmental funds while seeking greater participation of the communities in the newly formed Joint Forest Management Committees. The formation of Self Help Groups (SHGs) in the forest villages has extended the alternative livelihood opportunities with an objective of reducing the level of dependence on forests. Further, the initiative to introduce 'The Project for Infrastructure Development and JFM Support in North Bengal.' during 2003-04 by the West Bengal Forest Development Corporation promotes the co-operation between the local people and the forest staff for natural resource management and protection. The recent progress with the implementation of NREGA and The Scheduled Tribes And Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act has created newer possibilities of empowerment by generating employments and providing land titles to the forest communities while creating additional spaces for their involvement in forest protection.

Despite the interventions from the above the field study undertaken in the seven forest villages under four largest forest divisions in the District shows the derisory position of empowerment among the communities. The present status of empowerment has been examined comprehensively under the framework of cooperation between the Department and the forest villagers in the context of natural resource governance in general which often goes beyond the Sustainable

Forest Management practices through JFM and Eco-development Programmes. In so far as the cooperation from the above is concerned it is seen that the Jalpaiguri Forest Division has relatively higher status than other divisions in terms of empowering communities through regularization of usufruct sharing, distribution of developmental benefits, building of community assets and providing greater man days under NREGA etc. as the other divisions are lagging far behind in securing those opportunities for empowerment under the same parameters despite registering a bit of improvement in the Xth Plan period. Nevertheless it has been found that the whole exercise of empowerment at the field level is merely limited within the practice of providing financial or other kinds of material assistance to the communities while ignoring the need for involving them in the participatory process of forest management. The total exclusion from the decision-making process and consequent underestimation of their choice in forestry operation as a whole undermines the very basis of sustainability on the ground. But, there exists a reverse process of empowerment which has been characterized by the cooperation from below where villagers are seeking departmental assistance to carry forward their goal of development in order to transcend the existing mode of being in their own way. The invention of Saji Kanchu (*Colocasia esculenta*) as a species for intercropping particularly in the context of shortage of water due to climate change and increasing wildlife attack can be regarded as the best example of that kind of empowerment. A few successful experiments with the SHGs in Jalpaiguri Division extend the scope for further engagement with this kind of empowerment through the active initiatives from below. However, the process of empowerment in the forest villages of the District is not limited merely to the framework of cooperation rather it is being conditioned by the historical process of movements. This alternative process of empowerment through movements in the region has begun with a pioneering struggle of the forest villagers during 60's against the exploitative regime of forest governance.

Notably the JFM and the Eco-development are not the sole examples of using the framework of cooperation between the forest villagers and the Department in North Bengal. Rather the collaborative approach in forest governance was introduced for the first time under the Taungya system of artificial regeneration during the colonial regime of forest management. Under the Taungya the forest dwelling shifting cultivators of Dooars like Rava, Mech, Garo etc were incorporated under the guise of scientific resource management of the colonial forestry where those forest dwelling people made use of their indigenous technique of slash and burn for preparation of the field for artificial regeneration of sal (*Shorea robusta*) and later on teak (*Tectona grandis*) species. In order to perpetuate the system the permanent forest villages were established within the reserved forests in the District and 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 similar site of new plantation. In exchange of the free and compulsory labor of the villagers they 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 nominal cash payment for extra work beyond 90 days. The system was fairly exploitative as the forest villagers were bound to provide free labor under any circumstances to raise the plantation of valuable timber species and failing to do that resulted in physical punishment, torture and even eviction from the village. Moreover, their indigenous technique of cleaning and burning was abused to serve the colonial interest while disassociating the technique from its very purpose and corresponding mode of being. The institutionalization of the practice disrupted their free flow of material exchange with the eco-system and thereby contributing to the defacement of their organic relationship with the nature. After the independence the exploitation of those people became severe as they were denied even the

regular facilities enjoyed earlier in the system. The payment for extra work was stopped altogether along with the denial of other entitlements protected under the system. Besides, the second and third generation settlers were not registered by the Department and hence were deprived of all the privileges of being forest villagers. In this context inspired by the left-radical tradition of the peasants and workers movement in the region like the *tebhaga* and tea-workers movement along with a congenial political climate under the First United Front Government of west Bengal the forest villagers in Dooars initiated a struggle against the exploitative system since 1967. With the assistance from the Forward Block District leadership imbued with the ideals and struggle of the great Nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose, North Bengal Forest Workers and Jaigir Cultivators Union was formed to mobilize the forest villagers against the colonial legacy of injustice. In its earlier phase the movement continued across different divisions in the District with the 17 points demands including abolition of taungya system and introduction of wages, permanent settlement of the forest villagers, recognition of so far unregistered forest villagers and providence of arable land not less than 15 bighas/household and building of adequate infrastructure of health, education along with the introduction of panchayat system in the forest villages. In course of struggle the villagers occupied forest lands forcefully under different divisions to settle the unregistered villagers. By the end of 1969 the Union called for a strike in all forest divisions in the District which continued for 17 months and it ended with the death of five forest villagers of Jalpaiguri Forest Division in police firing in June, 1971 which finally brought about the end of taungya and the wages for work was introduced soon. The later phase of the movement started in 1972 against the ill practice of cutting down unauthorized and immature trees by the dishonest forestry officials and corrupt contractors in the wake of commercial forestry. The movement waged war against the unholy nexus and enemies of the forest under the contractor system and raised the slogan-‘Drive out corruption and save forests’. Several corrupt forest officials were caught red handed on the spot and more than thousand cubic meters of illicit log were

recovered by the villagers under the leadership of the Union. Further village patrolling and motivation camp were started as a part of the struggle. As a reaction the Department started forceful eviction of the forest villagers particularly in BTR (West) with the help of CRPF during the emergency period in 1975. The Union moved to the High Court in Kolkata in 1976 against the illegal operation of eviction as the occupied additional land became regularized earlier by the Government Order in 1970. Finally with the injunction from the High Court the Department stopped the process and the final verdict of the Court came out later in 1979. However, with the Writ Petition at the High Court the movement came to an end with several achievements which inspired the other resistances of the forest dwellers in the subsequent years in North Bengal.

In spite of the historic success of the movement against the exploitation of the forest dwellers and in contributing to the well being of their daily life by the introduction of wage system the livelihood condition of those people started worsening in the 80's. The Forest Conservation Act together with the 1972 Wild Life Protection Act choked the regular employment opportunities which brought down per-capita man-days from 100-120 per year during 70's to 40-60 days per year during 80's and in some cases even to less than 20 days. The situation was further aggravated with the denial of their all access to the forests within the sanctuary limit and increasing division of land due to the growing of unregistered families on an unprecedented scale. After the introduction of the Joint Forest Management and Eco-development Programmes in the region during 90's it was expected that the forest dwellers would become more empowered economically and socially in lieu of their participation in the forest protection activities. But initially those programmes failed miserably in the region to deliver any good including the usufructs which the forest people were entitled to get under the programmes. An independent study in 2000 showed how bureaucratic apathy, landlordism, absence of market mechanism, unplanned support activities and unwillingness to transfer power to the communities

by the Department contributed largely to the failure of those programmes. Against this backdrop the process of systematic and organized protests with the initiative of National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers (NFFPFW) started throughout the region with its main slogan 'protect livelihood and protect resources'. Since its formation in 2001 the NFFPFW organized several major programmes against the injustice under JFM in the region. Those were attended by a large number of forest villagers from entire North Bengal including the District of Jalpaiguri. In this phase the movement was not limited to demanding the proper implementation of JFM across divisions rather they upheld the larger issue of land and livelihood rights of the forest dwellers and demanded the abolition of all 'black laws' of the Central and the State Government which tended to view them as burden for forest conservation and hence prescribed for their wholesale eviction from the forests. Since 2008, after the notification of the Forest Right Act, 2006 by the Govt. of West Bengal, the movement has gained a new momentum as it resists the biased implementation of the Act through the formation of Gram Sansad based Forest Right Committees (FRC's) which has violated the letter and spirit of the Act's instruction to form FRC's at the Gram Sabha level. In 2010, a remarkable achievement of the movement has taken place in Coochbehar Division in the Jalpaiguri District where forest villagers forcefully have taken control of a 2,985 hectare of forest on the outskirts of the Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary while announcing that no one will be allowed including the Department to conduct any activity without the permission of Gram Sabha which they formed spontaneously. Though the villagers could not retain their control of the forest tract for long against the intervention of Police on advice of the Department and lodging false cases against its leaders, the movement has been continuing to mobilize people at the Gram Sabha level in order to construct a multi-ethnic political community to establish social control of the 'primary producers' by means of instituting an equitable and decentralized resource management system while replacing the hegemonic claim of the Forest Department over the forests in the region.

It is no denying the fact that there is an appreciable difference between those two movements both in terms of issues and forms of struggle. Though the former movement was fought under the banner of North Bengal Forest Workers and Jaigir Cultivators Union it was strongly backed by a political party while embodying the ideals and techniques of struggle of the founder of the party – the great leader of Indian Nationalism, Subhash Chandra Bose. On the contrary the later movement is basically a non-party political movement and therefore is inspired by strategies and ideology of struggle which are still in the process of making. The earlier movement was inspired by the then left-radical tradition of peasants and workers struggle in Bengal whereas the later movement draws its inspiration heavily from what Harriss called ‘new politics’ centering civil society organization around new social movements of 90’s in the country. The older movement waged its struggle to abolish the exploitative system of taungya and to make an end to the practice of corruption in the domain of the forests in order to ensure the healthy conditions of livability and the forests but the focus of the new movement is to protect land and livelihood rights as well as to protect resources. More importantly the fundamental difference between the two movements is that the former movement upheld the demands for transferring all the power in the hands of the Union- the sole representative of the people and thereby demanded for the abolition of the then contractor system and radical alteration in the practice of forest governance whereas the later movement mainly focuses on the proper implementation of Government policies and Acts and thereby aims to reform the current system of forest governance in favor of a more equitable and decentralized resource management system. Therefore the older movement was radical in character whereas the newer movement is somewhat reformative in nature. Despite those differences it is no denying the fact that both the movements contribute to empowering forest communities by building capacities to transcend their extant mode of living while creating newer spaces and ways of engagement for negotiating their demands and claims with the Department around the issues and mode of governance of natural resources in the region.

Now we may relate specific findings to the research questions and theoretical framework stated in Chapter 1. The chapter 1 established a link between the concept of empowerment and participatory development in the context of forest management in the forest rich area of West Bengal especially the Dooars region of North Bengal famous for its wildlife and ecology. We were also introduced to two different dimensions of empowerment, the empowerment from above and the empowerment from below. In Chapter 1 we also suggested that one may conceptualize empowerment as praxis containing two interrelated aspects of cooperation and resistance in relation to participatory forest management. In the context of what we have learned in Chapter 3 we could at least offer an answer to one of the research questions asked in Chapter 1 about how do empowerment on the one hand and sustainable forest management in particular and natural resource governance in general on the other relate to each other in field situation. Our studies have not found positive implications of top-down approach of forest management or of participatory management from the above for forest eco-system and conservation. Our review of the practices of sustainable forest management in Chapter 2 further showed that in the context of India the empowerment initiatives through SFM produced uneven results across states. In the context of North Bengal in general and Jalpaiguri in particular the state interventions at least in terms of fund outlay, introductions of new schemes like NAP, SHGs etc had increased to a considerable extent in the Xth Plan period compared to the early phases of its implementation. Still this did not indicate success of top-down process of empowering communities and was marked by inconsistent bureaucratic endeavor in the Jalpaiguri District which resulted in differential progress of the Govt. schemes, formation of FPCs/EDCs and utilization of available funds across the forest divisions. Besides the progress of NREGA and FRA, 2006 lacked supportive evidence which put question marks on the sincerity of bureaucracy in implementation of those programmes seriously in the District. In fact the extent of effective execution of those programmes and the fate of both the empowerment and sustainability in the

field situation could not be estimated without understanding the degree of penetration of the collaborative engagement on the ground. In Chapter 1 while laying the theoretical foundation of our research we had observed that in the field situation we could expect to have both cooperation among stakeholders and resistance to 'empowerment from without' as a part of wider social movement. The main research problem could be explained as a conflict between two kinds of movements or two kinds of empowerment. The relative success of empowerment from within may be related to positive realization of sustainability. Further, the cooperation between stakeholders would be of tactical nature, a way of living with what is bare necessity, but also a way of developing new needs and capacities that is likely to be expressed in a overtly political manifestation. Participatory structures for natural resource governance thus could be seen as capable of both integration of needs and capacities of opposed kinds, for preservation of entrenched dominant structures of needs and capacities as well as for outgrowing that integration by a process of empowerment through social learning and experience , cooperation and resistance , a process of movement away from particular social organization to general social organization , from metabolic 'rift' to natural metabolism around cooperative production. These lines of argument were more or less validated by our findings. In Chapter 3 our quantitative analysis pointed to the confluence of a high rate of cooperation and high rate of resistance of forest dwellers with respect to forest bureaucracy. Similarly, in Chapter 5, especially in relation to ongoing movement of the forest dwellers, we could see a move to community forest governance, albeit with ideological and organizational weaknesses, but nevertheless, decisively outgrowing the imposed frameworks of forest bureaucracy such as JFMC.

The above summary of the findings while affirming the role of forest based resistances in empowering local communities raises certain serious questions about the framework of cooperation as a method of empowerment designed from the above to back up the ongoing praxis of participatory forest management in India. In

the context of inconsistencies and gaps in the policy and practice of sustainable forest management it expresses the doubt about the real intention behind the state sponsored paradigm of empowerment. So far as the inconsistencies and gap within the policy and practice are concerned the paradoxical position has been held by the Indian state to manage forest resources throughout the country. On the one hand the policy recognized the 'symbiotic relationship' between the tribal's and forests and viewed that forest conservation cannot succeed without 'the willing support and cooperation of the people'. But in case of protected area network like national parks, sanctuaries and biosphere reserves which are viewed as 'essentials of forest management', forest-people are viewed as mere disturbances and harmful presence for the conservation of biological diversity on the other hand. This discriminatory strategy of conservation is manifested in the two consequent programmes taken by the MoEF on the basis of the 1988 policy. One is JFM in the reserved forests and the other is Eco-Development in the protected areas. The JFM programme made an arrangement among the State Forest Department, the village community and the voluntary agency/NGO to set up village forest protection committee (FPC's) in order to establish and monitor management plans while providing access to the resources like grass and NTFPs to the villagers and also a potential share of the income to them from the timber sold by the Forest Department. But under the Eco-Development programme the rights of the people to the forest resources were denied, the emphasis was on a variation of rural development directed towards natural resource conservation which would promote income generating activities and sustainable land use practices. Actually eco-development, it is argued operates within the parameters of the Wildlife (Protection) Act and assumes that wildlife conservation is a priority which overrides people's rights to resources within the protected areas (Baviskar, 2003:276).

This double standard in relation to empowerment of the people has also been manifest in the recently enacted Forest Right Act, 2006. On the one hand the

Act recognizes the rights of the forest dwelling tribes and other traditional forest dwellers including their responsibilities and authority for sustainable use, conservation of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological balance but simultaneously, the Act attempts to create 'human free wildlife zone' by displacing the communities from the forests in the critical wildlife habitat as defined by the state governments. (The Gazette of India, 2007:1) This approach indeed is based upon the categories of 'separation' and 'exclusion' and borrowed in the Indian context from the West based upon the Deep-Ecological tradition in the US. Unlike 'anthropocentric' perspective the Deep-Ecology is an eco-centric perspective and attempts to preserve 'pristine wildernesses devoid of any kind of human presence. But how far this anthropocentric/eco-centric divide is justifiable to ensure sustainability is a matter of long standing debate. John Bellamy Foster argued that 'there is a tendency to turn endlessly in circles, so that the analysis stops where it started, no more equipped at the end than at the outset to deal with the real problems of environment and society. Numerous studies have been written on anthropocentrism vs ecocentrism, arguing that this or that thinker, culture or civilization was more or less anthropocentric. Although this has frequently opened our eyes to issues that have too often been downplayed, the dualistic perspective perpetuated here tends to block any genuine development of knowledge or meaningful practice. Indeed, the dichotomization embodied in such views tends to perpetuate the "humanity vs nature" conceptions which are in many ways, the source of the problem' (Foster, 2001:17-18).

Further, though the JFM programme at first recognized the role of forest dwelling communities in restoring and conserving forests, only participation in patrolling and regeneration has been emphasized and encouraged by the Department while underestimating their participation in decision making and micro-planning in the governance of forests. Even when in some places the possibility of participation in the decision making process arises the Department imposes its own

decision over the people from its privileged position in the exercise of authority. In the practice of JFM the participatory mechanism is being used by the authority to achieve their project target while legitimizing the system of governance as predesigned by the neo-liberal agenda of the state. The undermining of participatory essence once again has been found in the implementation process of the Forest Rights Act where the Forest Departments across states are more reluctant to transfer their power to the Gram Sabha and are more interested in providing individual land titles while ignoring the communal rights over the forest resources. Hence, both in policy and practice the framework of cooperation has been limited by the principles of exclusion in the context of wildlife conservation or been reduced to a mechanism of co-option in the conservation of forests. This has generated new contradiction and conflict leading to new power equation, the victim of which is none other than the eco-system people and the powerless nature. However, one need not be a pessimist either. In the month of September, 2010 a delegation of the National Forest Rights Act Committee, constituted jointly by MOEF & MOTA, visited the forest regions of North Bengal and reviewed the implementation of FRA. They inter alia commented on poor awareness campaign about FRA by the State Forest Department and of sticking to Gram Sansad and not replacing them with Gram Sabhas which represent FRA's favored institutional arrangement of community governance. This has loosened the psychological hold of the forest bureaucracy on the forest villagers and the officers looking after Tribal welfare have found a new area of intervention. The strugglers have now something to rejoice and we may have a little hope that newer and more sustainable forest management practices may evolve.