

CHAPTER: 8

WEST BENGAL PANORAMA

Organised illegal logging has become commonplace in many forest areas, including protected areas also. Forest legislations in the country have not been able to make even an impression in the activities of the mafia-political groups or criminal activities of forest staffs and the most pressing danger to Indian forests gets stronger every day. During the year 2012-13 and the first part of 2014, several major timber scams have been unearthed in various parts of the State of West Bengal and as a result there is a decline in growth of forests and the break in forestry activities gradually destroyed livelihoods of lacks of economically deprived families living in forest areas and in many cases starving, impoverished people are forced into aiding the very forces that are destroying forests for commercial profits.

There are some examples of illegal activities relating to timber trade in various parts of State of west Bengal which are enumerated as under. Most of these information's are available in the public domain in the form of media reporting. For this purpose only those incidents reported in the print media have been made use of. The audio visual media has been excluded from the preview of this thesis.

1. Timber smuggling is not new in northern part of Bengal but the trend is on the rise in the forests of the Dooars. Illegal saw mills which are run by timber mafias and smuggle out precious wood from the core forests are mushrooming in the remote villages of Dooars. A clash between forest guards and the timber smugglers at Khuttimari forest of Jalpaiguri exposed the links of interstate rackets, which even have international links and harbour poachers from the north eastern states. Like other forest in north Bengal similar racket is active in Buxa Tiger Reserve (BTR), where a Toll investigation unearthed evidence of rampant felling of precious teak and Saal woods. Interestingly the racket is operating with the help of some local influential persons and the modus operandi does not rule out the involvement of forest officials. People living at villages inside BTR who are dependent on the forest products for their livelihood claimed that the youths mark trees in the day time and late at night they enter in a group of 20 to 30 and manually chop off the marked trees and smuggle those out to Bhutan and Bangladesh at high price. The Times of India reports that the local MLA Wilson Chamapamari who resides close to Buxa, refuse to comment but forest villagers like Durga Adhikari and Pratap Lama said that employing local youths as tourist guides and casual forest guards can restrict this. Forest official said there are 61 forest protection committees with villagers but most of these are defunct due to lack of supervision by the forest officials⁶²².
2. Workers of Balurghat Forest Office caught a tractor loaded with some illegal timber (Neem, Mango, Black berry, Eucalyptus) from Sahapur a place in Kumarganj, Dakshin Dinajpur in West Bengal⁶²³.

⁶²² The Times of India, Kolkata, Tuesday, May 29, 2012

⁶²³ Uttar Banga Sambad, 26th November 2013.

3. Timber smuggling is a very common issue in Bengal. There are many laws related to control of timber trade, even though the timber mafias smuggled the timber without any fear and hesitation. From a reliable source the researcher is come to know that timber mafias smuggled the timber with the help of passenger train (Alipurduar to Bamanhat) also⁶²⁴.

Coordination is very necessary between railway department and the forest officials otherwise eradication of smuggling of timbers via train is impossible.

4. Timber looters are cutting Saal trees by illegal means from the forest near Bagdogra in Siliguri, District Darjeeling. Earlier the timber mafias usually cut trees at night but now a days the looters are looting specious trees from the forest area near Bagdogra during day time also. According to some forest officials there are very less number of forest guards and as a result protection of forest from the timber smugglers is more or less impossible. Deputy Forest officer of Kersiong also admitted the fact that there are very few number of forest workers. Arun Rana the Secretary of Forest Service Association (Bagdogra Range) also says that several times they wrote application to the higher authority to increase the number of forest officials or workers but the higher authority did not take any serious steps regarding the matter⁶²⁵.

5. For the purpose of protecting the forest, in AN ORDER OF THE FOREST DEPARTMENT of West Bengal Government being number EN/871/T-II-4/002/2008 Dated April, 15th 2008⁶²⁶ states that there should not be a hotel or restaurant within one kilometre of the forest boundary. The G.O. further states that for the purpose of putting up any complex for commercial activity it is mandatory to obtain a NOC from the ministry of environment⁶²⁷.

Despite the above order, a survey conducted by the news paper Uttar Banga Sambad shows the following:

- I. Trees are being felled in the area continuous and contiguous to the forest boundary, water bodies are filled up and huge hotels and resorts are being

⁶²⁴ Ananda Bajar Patrika, Siliguri 11th September 2013.

⁶²⁵ Uttar Banga Sambad, Siliguri, 21 December, 2013.

⁶²⁶ Government of West Bengal, Ministry of Environment, Writers Building, Kolkata 700001, G.O. No. EN/871/T-II-4/002/2008 Dated April, 15th 2008 as cited in Uttar Banga Sambad 14 March, 2013, SLG.

⁶²⁷ This part of the presentation is based on a special feature of Mr. Joydeb Dey Titled-Forest is Destroyed, Environment Endangered (Aronno Shompod Dhongsho Hochche, Biponno Poribesh), Uttarbangla Sambad , 14 March 2013, SLG

constructed there upon. Over night the forest is cleared and roads are constructed.

- II. In Buxa Tiger Reserve Forest (BTR) core area the chain of biodiversity is severely disturbed and there is an acute crisis of food for the forest animals as a result the forest animals are venturing into the villages and towns. It is imperative to raise the density of forest and depth of the rivers.

In the district of Jalpaiguri in rivers like Jayanti, Dima, Bala etc. the river bed has risen very high due to siltation as a result of tree felling and there is a problem of flooding even with a slight rain fall.

- III. There is a loss of density in forests like Jaldapara, Garumara, Chilapata, Mendabari, Nimti, Jayanti, Kalchini, Chapramari etc. As a result the forest boundary is shrinking and the temperature is increasing and rainfall is decreasing.
- IV. The North-Indian rivers like Torsha, Teesta, Kaaljani, Jaldhaka, Mujnaai, Mahananda, Korotoa, Atrai, Punarbhava, Meechi and Karala have all diverted their flow and there is a rivers flow into the populated area endangering human life and property.

Endangered Rasik Bill (Total Area 178 hectares): Rasik Bill is situated partly in Tufanganj II Block, in district Coochbehar and partly in Alipurduar Block II in district Alipurduar (Formerly District Jalpaiguri). This is a natural lake in the Rampur-Bochamari area under the Protection and care of the department of forest. This lake is an important biodiversity zone with a considerable population of Peacocks, variety of Snakes, Gharial & Deers. The lake is also a home to migrant birds. Over the last decade the area of the lake has reduced considerably. The number of migrant birds is also reduced. The supervision and maintenance of the wildlife has deteriorated as a result of illegal felling of trees. It is now important to increase the number of fruit trees in the area, de-silted the lake and maintain a balance between phytoplankton and zooplankton⁶²⁸.

Endangered Turtle of Baneswar (Mohan): Tortoise were found in abundance in Baneswar, Kholta, Bokalir Mot, all situated in Coochbehar II Block. These tortoises are also known as

⁶²⁸ Ibid

Chittagong Soft Turtle and endearingly called Mohan by the common populace. They inhabit the lakes and ponds which were dug for them by the royal family of Coochbehar. These turtles inhabited the forest as well for laying eggs etc. and added to the biodiversity of the place. Extensive felling of timber has denuded the forest around the lakes and there is intensive urbanization there. As a result these turtles are hunted for their meat and for other purposes which has reduced their number considerably and it is apprehended that they will be extinct soon.

The legal framework of India sense out clear indication for prevention of felling of trees which has been discussed in Chapter 2 specifically and throughout the thesis generally. The role of the Supreme Court Green Bench and specific orders in the Godavarman case also speak for prevention of timber felling⁶²⁹.

The Government of West Bengal, in 1999 made a draft bill called the West Bengal Protection of Trees in Non Forest Areas, Bill. In the final version of the draft bill, it is stated that no tree can be felled in the urban area without the permission of the forest department. In case of felling One tree 6 trees have to be planted i.e. in the ratio of 1:6. The Bill also stresses on creating awareness about the importance of trees especially in offices, schools, colleges etc. The Draft Bill further stressed that trees like Saal, Teak, Mahogany, Arjun, Jarul, Neem, Ashwat, etc. have to be planted on either side of the road. The Draft Bill also proposed on building an united resistance against the timber mafia. The Draft Bill has now matured into an Act in the same. Under its aegis forest week is celebrated between 14th July and 20th July each year. During this period free saplings are distributed. Unfortunately none of the saplings survive due to lack of supervision and care.

In 2007, in the name of starting the Coochbehar airport 300 fully matured trees that were planted by the Coochbehar royal family were felled overnight by the order of local authorities. No effort is seen in planting trees at 1:6 rates. The airport, “which is a parameter of development” did not take off even in 2014. In North 24 Pargana from Kampa in Brrackpore to Mandoli a stretch of 8 Km road was widened in 2004 at the cost of 248 trees. No amount of appeals and protest helped⁶³⁰.

The present forest area of West Bengal is only 13.46% of the total land mass of the State which should have been 33%. In the Buxa Tiger Reserve in Jalpaiguri (761 sq km) there are

⁶²⁹ Ibid.

⁶³⁰ Ibid.

152 species of trees, 192 species of wild life, 194 species of orchid, 72 species of medical orchid, 62 variety of medicinal plant, 41 variety of reptiles, 4 variety of amphibians, 33 type of fishes, 264 verity of birds & a number of mammals, cheetahs, elephants and royal Bengal tigers. All these are endangered because the trees are illegally felled and smuggled in the flow of rivers like Raidak, Sankosh, Jayanti, Dima, and Poro. These illegally felled timbers are then sold in various markets of West Bengal. On an average daily timber worth rupees five lakhs are sold in the black market. The forest guards of the core area are not all equipped to resist the timber smugglers⁶³¹.

The State of the forest in West Bengal is adversely affected in various ways:

- I. In Chapramari or Neoda Valley in North Bengal and in Pengolakha sanctuary of Sikkim there is a plan to build a road up to China border by the Indian Army. 200 hectares of core forest will be lost which means the biodiversity of the area will be affected. Various specious of trees like Saal, Oak, Firn, Rhododendrons will be lost. Wild life like royal Bengal tiger, red panda, leopard, black bear, sloth, laser cat and Himalayan Thor will be endangered. An alternative proposal has been given by the forest department that runs through Dam-Dim – Gorubatahan-Labha- Kolbong- Cchagey-Lingsakha and Aditar but the same has not been accepted by the Army.
- II. It is reported that in West Bengal between 2001 and 2006, 298 people were killed in villages adjacent to the forest due to rampage by elephants the reason being loss of their habitat.

There is an extreme indifference to enforcement of forest protection laws on the part of forest department. It is important that the elephant migration root should not be obstructed and the natural salt water body in the forest must be protected. Neither of this is maintained effectively.

There is a railway line running through Alipurduar Forest which starts from Siliguri Junction and goes to Alipurduar Junction Via sevoke-Madarihat-Hashimara-Rajabhatkhoa-Alipurduar Junction. Umpteen numbers of elephants and visions have been killed due to railway accidents. The forest department has been not taken any preventive action in this regard.

⁶³¹ Ibid

- III. A report of the forest survey of India shows that the forest canopy in Hazaribag, Koderma, Lohardaga, Chatra, Pakur & Palaset in Jharkhand have suffered about 400 sq km reduction in forest canopy. The forest department has stated that this reduction is due to two reasons. One, indiscriminate felling of trees is taking place due to industrialisation purposes and two, there is extensive illegal felling of timber in this area.
- IV. Teesta, Torsha, Mahananda, Jaldhaka, Raidak, Shankosh, originate in the Sikkim Bhutan Himalaya these rivers used to be perennial in nature. Due to illegal felling of trees the mountains are denuded of vegetation and there is extensive landslide. As a result the river beds have elevated and the river source has dried. There is a considerable reduction in the rain fall in this region as a result the perennial rivers have dried up and there is an extensive flood even during inadequate monsoon.
- V. Some environmentalist have pointed out that in many situations the Conservation of Forest Act, 1980 has been deliberately relaxed to give a green signal to the hitherto fore held up projects which were considered harmful.

These issues have not figured in election manifesto of any political parties⁶³²

The researcher has been through his study stating that environmental issues especially matters relating to forest is linked with the socio-economic condition of a place. Had the youth been given sufficient incentive to protect the forest, they would have guarded the forest effectively instead of smuggling timber. The West Bengal government has started a new cadre called the Civil Police Force a similar force called the Civil Forest Police Force can be created with proper training to assess the forest guard.

The communication route between Haldiri and Meckhliganj being very weak has led to flourishing of the timber mafia. The environmentalist and forest officials of the region fear for their life. The root for timber smuggling starts from Beltolirighat crosses the Teesta River and reaches the Meckhliganj market merely 15kms away. Since there is no bridge across the river here, ordinarily a person has to reach Meckhliganj after covering about 80kms via Mainaguri and Chengrabanda. So to catch a timber smuggler the forest official must travel

⁶³² This part of the presentation is based on a special feature of Mr. Joydeb Dey Titled-Forest is Destroyed, Environment Endangered (Aronno Shompod Dhongsho Hochche, Biponno Poribesh), Uttarbanga Sambad , 14 March 2013, SLG.

about 80kms where as the smuggler escapes by covering only 15 Kms. Neither the local authorities nor the forest department have taken a conclusive step by constructing a bridge across the river. Range officer Mr. Dilip Das has publicly stated that there is a single bit officer in Haldibari. It is not possible for him to control the situation singlehandedly. Therefore the activities of timber mafias are on the rise in this area. Incidentally it may be recalled that this corroborates the finding of the present researcher when the empirical study of West Bengal was done.

The forest department is contemplating that they will appoint a friend of the forest in specific area jurisdictions. If anybody wants to cut a timber they will have to obtain an NOC from the so appointed friend of the forest. The tax so collected will be utilised for paying the friend of the forest. In this manner they plan to protect the forest from the mafia⁶³³.

This is not the only area where the timber mafia is active. In Alipurduar Block II, Salsalabari Model High School was under construction. On an anonymous tip off the mobile range of the forest department in Damanhur raided the premises and recovered a huge stock of illegal timber. Monotosh Choudhury, the range officer of the mobile range has stated that most of the doors and window frames of the school have been made of illegal timber⁶³⁴. The school authorities have defended themselves stating that the cost of legal timber is too high and beyond the schools budget. So, the school administration has decided to use illegal timber⁶³⁵. For a Central Water Project in Coochbehar about 386 trees have been felled with the permission of the forest department. However, much more than the permitted numbers of trees have been cut. There has been an extensive protest against this. The forest department have admitted to the fact that more than the permitted number of trees has been felled. However, no action has been taken by the forest department against this vandalism and the municipality too has been enacted in this regard⁶³⁶.

In Jaldapara Wild Life National Park the forest department, the legal timber traders and the adjacent villagers are facing some difficulty as illegal timber trade is taking place openly. This is also causing huge revenue loss for the Government. The key reason behind this is lack of availability of hammers. In West Bengal as per the forest department rule if a tree is cut from private forest or social forestry, one must obtain an NOC from the range or bit office. For every tree thus felled a transit pass is issued at a cost of Rs.40 and along with some

⁶³³ Dipen Roy, Haldibaritey Kath Mafia der dooratto barar ashonka (Increased Timber Mafia Activity Expected to Rise in Haldibari), Uttarbanga Sambad 12 September 2013, SLG.

⁶³⁴ Uttarbanga Sambad, 17 October 2013, SLG.

⁶³⁵ Ibid. 26 November, 2013

⁶³⁶ Uttarbanga Sambad, 16 May 2013, SLG.

necessary papers for 35cft or 1cubic metre Rs.45 is to be paid. This money is deposited in the Government treasury. After this the forest official put a passing hammer mark on the log after which the log can be taken for sawing. This is the same process for purchasing legal timber as well but due to recent change of name of this area the older hammers cannot be used. In South Chilapata, Jaldapara, Kodal Basti, Madarihat and Bir Para range every range officer and bit officer are allotted a hammer. Until May, 2014 the bit officers and range officers had not received the new hammer as a result timber is felled, sawed and marketed without T.P. and hammer mark. The forest officials are forced to look on helplessly⁶³⁷.

But all is not lost in the state of West Bengal. In the style of the Chipko Movement and the Appiko Movement members of Rava Tribe in North-Khairbari forest resisted the felling of trees by the JFMC (Joint Forest Management Committee) and forest officials from cutting of the trees. Although the members of the JFMC and the forest officials maintained that they wanted to cut about 900 old trees and cultivate new saplings in their place. Kothin Rabha, a member of the Rabha Basti Gram Sabha stated that there is unholy nexus between the forest department, JFMC & timber contractors who are felling trees in discriminately as a result the forest wild life is suffering from habitat and food crises which has a negative impact upon the life of the Rabha's.

The North Bengal forest dwellers and Manual Workers Forum have stated that as per the 2006 Forest Dwellers Act no tree can be felled without the written permission of the Gram Sabha. This is not followed in North Bengal and several parts of West Bengal. As a result of which the biodiversity is being destroyed and there is an acute water crises in the hills. Ravi Rabha, Bipin Rabha, Chunu Rabha, Helani Rabha, Sitasree Rabha and about 100 other members resisted the tree felling attempt by the JFMC and the forest department. The ranger of the Madarihat Forest Bit has stated that there is no log that requires taking permission from the Gram Sabha. Some outsiders with vested interest are misleading the Rabha's. An appeal has been made to the higher authority to look into this matter⁶³⁸.

A division bench of Kolkata High Court comprising of Mr. Justice Arun Mishra and Mr. Justice Joymallyo Bagchi has directed that the panchayat office will not be able to issue timber trade licence without the concurrence of the forest department. The order further states that those traders who are using the earlier licence we forefeet their licence. The electricity board has been directed the electrical connection of those traders be disconnected. The forest department has notified this to all panchayat. Timber trade is officially nonexistent in

⁶³⁷ Uttarbanga Sambad, 22 May 2014, SLG.

⁶³⁸ Uttarbanga Sambad, 25 December 2013, SLG.

Madarihat region. With the new direction it is feared that timber trade will stop altogether. As a result of this many artisans have migrated and there is a apprehension that illegal activities will increase⁶³⁹.

The forest guards and employees could resist timber smuggling in the Moraghat range, Totapara Bit. For this they have to use one round of shooting. The interesting part is only 4 workers fought against a group of 25; this shows all is not yet lost in West Bengal⁶⁴⁰.

In summation it can be stated that the green house effect and then climate change has affected the entire world. A few specific steps need to be taken to prevent global warming, destruction of biodiversity and loss of forest:

1. The forest canopy must be raised and the water bodies must be preserved by planting Neem, Cotton, Saal, Arjun, Mahogany, Cactus, and other fruit trees around the water bodies and on either side of the road.
2. The core forest along with its wild life must be protected from human access.
3. Every factory and industry must produce evidence of putting up anti-pollution machineries before giving them the NOC.
4. Use of plastic must be completely banned.
5. Thermal Power Station and Nuclear Power Station must be put under strong regulation and compliance.
6. Explore alternative source of energy.

The above mentioned measures can bring change in the environment.

⁶³⁹ Uttarbanga Sambad, 7TH April 2013, SLG.

⁶⁴⁰ Uttarbanga Sambad, 28th May 2013, SLG.