

Forest Policy Induced Social Exclusion: A Case Study of Forest Villages of Buxa Tiger Reserve

Bijoy Debnath

***Abstract:** Annexation of forest by creating reserves through various legislations and destruction of forest resulted in loss of livelihood and marginalization of the forest dependent communities. The communities (tribal and other traditional forest dweller) depend on forest for various needs such as shelter, livelihood, culture, etc. Conservation regime had denied them all, even today they do not have the rights on the land they till. Panchayati raj institution introduced in late 1990s in forest villages (forest dependent community) face various obstacles in carrying out land based development as the land belongs to forest department. The policy of protected area brought unemployment and deprivation in livelihood for forest villagers.*

The paper attempts to identify this multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing livelihood, education, health, dignity and voice in determining resource allocation. The concept of 'social exclusion' has been applied to understand this phenomenon, as it is both cause and consequence of poverty. 'Social exclusion' may be conceptualized from the different ways in which disadvantage operates to circumscribe the opportunities available in a society.

For the case study we have selected Buxa Tiger Reserve (BTR) because this forest has witnessed virtually every forest policy and act. Secondly, this forest has relatively higher concentration of forest villages than other forests of North Bengal.

We may conclude that the forest dependent community or forest villagers historically had suffered worst kind of social exclusion. Commoditization of forest resources in colonial era and in independent India benefited the elite rulers, landed elites, industrialists, traders and planters. Our survey suggests that the prevailing situation in BTR in terms of functioning of panchayat, educational facilities, healthcare facilities and institution building is indicative of the worst kind of disadvantages over opportunities. A situation has emerged where peoples' livelihood is overshadowed by the so-called prerequisites of modern conservation ethos.

Keywords: annexation, reserve, livelihood, social exclusion, disadvantage, opportunities, forest - village.

Introduction

The paper is an offshoot of a broader research study on livelihood of forest communities. Relevant primary data on forest villages, collected through survey are incorporated in the paper. Primarily, it is an outcome of my studies of various scholarly books, journals, research papers and articles as well as various government documents relating to forest management policies and practices, social exclusion, history of deforestation, forest communities' livelihood options etc. I shall therefore use all those resources in this paper and present my own impression and observation. The area of the study is North Bengal's Buxa Tiger Reserve (BTR). I would try to focus on the history of alienation of forest villagers from their resource base, on the decline of voice in determining resource management and also on the institutional arrangements that were constituted at different point of times. The paper also examines the present status of forest villagers in terms of their health, education, functioning of *panchayat* and the latest legislative intervention in the form of Forest Rights Act 2006.

Why Buxa Tiger Reserve (BTR)?

BTR has been selected as the study area because this forest has been covered by all forest Acts and policies; right from *commercial forestry* practices to the present day's protected *area management*. So, while analyzing the forest policy induced social exclusion the BTR becomes a ready reference for us. Secondly, this forest has relatively higher concentration of forest villages in North Bengal. Out of 168 officially declared forest villages, 37 are situated in BTR. Thirdly, BTR is a part of the flagship program of 'Project Tiger' in India.

Social exclusion

The term "social exclusion" became relevant in developmental discourse during closing decades of the 20th century in Europe. A period which witnessed rising unemployment and income inequalities, as also considerable economic and social dislocation as the countries sought to deal with the challenges of globalization on their labor markets, welfare nature of states and prevailing ideas about citizenship. Increasing attention to the usefulness of the concept in developing countries started after the social summit in 1994. Consequently, value addition to the concept made it a popular lexicon of development policy. The term social exclusion was coined by Rene Lenoir, who had prepared a list of socially excluded persons. This list of

socially excluded was significantly improved by Silver in 1995 (Lenoir and Silver 1995, quoted in Sen 2000)

Social exclusion may be conceptualized in the different ways in which disadvantage operates to overshadow the opportunities. Resource based thinking remained the focal point of economic theories. So far, the conceptualization of poverty within development studies hovered around income or expenditure shortfalls. Poverty is largely understood as a multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing income, assets, education, health, dignity and voices and therefore in economic terms. The poor within this concept are believed to have no say or little voice in determining resource allocations and institutional arrangements within a society because they are poor; it is rarely thought that they are poor because of lack of space in determining resource allocations and social arrangements (Kabeer n.d.). The phrase “social exclusion” is used to describe a situation, as also to focus on a process, which excludes individuals or groups from livelihoods and rights, thus depriving them of sources of well-being. Economists have recognized the two dimensions of poverty – material and non-material. Often it is observed that development practitioners find it easier to address the first dimension due to its tangible nature. A major non-material dimension of poverty may be narrated as the exclusion of the poor from participation in and access to opportunities and activities (Nayyar 2003).

The forest dwellers often confront forest policies which continuously encroach upon their existing opportunities to live a decent life, displace them from their resource base and make them irrelevant in their homestead. A look at the history of forest communities would unravel the various forms of forest policy induced social exclusions.

Forest villages

It is during late 19th century to early 20th century that the forest villages were established to execute the plan drawn out by Diettrich Brandis, the first IG of forest. Many scholars argue that the State had effectively used the mechanism of fire fighting in the process of annexation of forest. As the majority of forest communities of India were *Jhumias* i.e. shifting cultivators, who used to burn grasslands to get cultivable land and new grasses for cattle, the control of fire denied those people the right to continue with their traditional livelihood. This ultimately displaced people from their resource base. Some of the people who were once thrown out of the forest became the first settlers in the earliest forest villages, along with migrant laborers who were brought from other forest areas (Ghosh

2001). Sometimes old villages which existed even before the Indian Forest Act, 1865, were also declared as “forest villages” (Garg 2000).

Another type of forest village that emerged during the same period was “Taungya village”. These villagers were asked to fell and burn the forest and plant trees, in exchange, they were given some land to cultivate for a couple of years. After the plantation work is over, the villagers had to move to another place and had to follow the same process of slash – burn – plant. In this the villagers received remuneration in the form of a temporary right to cultivate the land for a short period of 2 to 4 years and some usufruct benefits like firewood and timber for house construction. They had to offer mandatory free labour (*begar*) of 90 days in the plantation (Public hearing in BTR 2005). Available studies of different activist groups suggest that there are approximately 7000 forest villages in the country today. But the concept of free compulsory labour i.e. *beggar* was abolished in late 1960s. In West Bengal, until 1969 forest villagers had to provide free compulsory labor for the forest department (Jha 2010).

Forest villages in North Bengal

The North Bengal’s *Dooars* (the land along the foothills of the Darjeeling and Bhutan Himalayas) was among the areas in India, where the earliest extensive work was done under the colonial forest management system (Bondhyopadhyay 2010). In the grasslands, and the forests, there were a few human settlements. Semi-nomadic groups like the Mech, Rava in plains and the Lepcha, Limbu, Rai and Dukpas (in the Hills) inhabited these settlements. All these communities practiced shifting agriculture and supplemented that with hunting/food-gathering (NESPON 2000). This changed with the introduction of fire control measures and clearing of the grasslands by the colonial forest department since 1880 (Ghosh 2001). The new type of forest was not suitable for the agricultural practices of *Jhumiya* communities. Moreover, the forests were also being reserved and brought under the newly created Forest Department within a short time. All these made the lives of forest dwellers vulnerable. Today North Bengal has 168 officially recognized forest villages (NESPON 2000).

Buxa forest to Buxa Tiger Reserve (BTR)

In the year 1866 The Forest Department took over the forests of Buxa. The first reservation was made in 1879, after the enactment of the Indian Forest Act 1878. BTR was constituted as a tiger reserve in the Year 1983 in the then Jalpaiguri District (presently Alipurduar District) and became

the 15th Tiger Reserve of the Country. It is claimed that Collector of Jalpaiguri District carried out proceedings for settlement of rights and concessions under section 19 to 25 of Wildlife Protection Act and declared that no rights of anyone exists over the said forest. In 1992 an area of 117.10 km² of the 386.07 km² Sanctuary was notified as National Park under section 35(2) of Indian Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. Today, the total area of the Reserve is 760.87 km² of which 386.07 km² has been constituted as Wildlife Sanctuary and National Park and the balance 374.80 km² area as Reserved Forests and Other Protected Forests (www.buxatigerreserve.com). Before the declaration of Tiger Reserve, for many of the forest villagers in BTR employment in Forest Department (FD) was the most important scope of income. Other sources of livelihood along with subsistence level of agriculture were NTFP (non-timber forest produce) collection and sale. Besides these, a sizeable number of forest villagers were engaged in boulder lifting from the riverbeds, maintaining orange orchards and fuel wood sale to tea gardens and in adjoining markets. The declaration of “tiger reserve” put a legal ban on these economic activities (Sinha et al. 2002).

Pre colonial forest policies and social exclusion

The pre-colonial Indian society had a considerable degree of coherence and stability despite the fissures in society on the basis of class and caste. A tradition of prudence and a strong communal institution evolved which guaranteed the long term viability of system of production. The Mughals were unable or perhaps not interested in radically altering the existing patterns of resource use and the social fabrics in which they were weaved. (Gadgil M. 2000). The rulers of the Gupta and Mughal Empire were more interested in fertile agricultural lands, populous towns. Though the concept of reserve creation can be traced back to Maurya period, Kautilya advised to reserve the forests rich in fish, game and elephant. Elephant forest was of great importance, this was because elephant had permanent importance for army. There have been little discussions in the existing historiography regarding the effects of the resource extraction and creation of reserves on the livelihood of forest tribes. Migration from the resource bases might be the one way. Social exclusion of the forest tribes can be understood from the derogatory terms like *milakkha* or barbarians, *mlechajati* as reference to the forest tribes. Kautilya advised that in conquered territory the chieftain should be separated from his army and other people (Sen 2012). The process of dismantling their institutions of governance and resource use practices was part of a wider policy to establish control over newly conquered territories.

Mughal Empire heavily depended on the extension of cultivation. Peasants acquired more and more lands cutting down trees. Newly acquired lands were given a moratorium of revenue for the first few years. Elephant as tribute to the throne (*peshkash*) was most common in nature. Certain forests were made game reserves for the Emperor's hunting. Unlike the Elephant reserves of the Mauriya period Mughal's reserves were clearly mapped. Edward Terry, an English traveler and merchant found that though the reserves put certain restrictions but the concept of property rights over jungle was not absolute. Access to reserves was open but the kind of animals that were to be hunted by locals were regulated (Rangarajan 2012)

British forest policy and social exclusion

In the sixteenth century, India came into contact with Europe particularly Britain. At that time Europe was going through industrial revolution. The revolution brought a radical change in the pattern of resource use. Technologies of transforming resources from one form to other and transporting them to large distances enhanced the types of resource use in a big way. For example, wood and bamboo were used as domestic fuel, in the construction of shelters and for agricultural implements in a subsistence economy on a limited scale. But it could now be transformed into paper, could be used in running engines of ships and trains, resulting in a limitless use of wood.

When the colonial state asserted control over forest hitherto managed by community it represented (I) interference in the day-to-day life of the villagers, (II) radical change in the concept of property rights, (III) a shift in management resulted in a wholesale destruction of forest ecology (Gadgil 2000). Few examples of this destruction are: (i) the network of railway tracks increased from only 56 kms. in 1853 to over 51,650 km in 1910. The expansion of railroads in different parts of India had a deep impact on forests in many ways: (Oosthoek 2012). (ii) Hugh Cleghorn, the first Inspector General of Forests in India, (he shared the post with Brandish) in his address to the Royal Scottish Arboricultural Society, in 1874 told timber resources in India were declining rapidly under the pressures of the high timber demand in the British Empire, local use for railroad construction and shipbuilding and also for its use in running ship and train engines (Stebbing 1922) (iii) During the World War I timber and bamboo were supplied to war zone for building bridges, buildings, ships etc. Annual export of timber during the war was approximately 1.7 million cubic feet (Gadgil 2000). Commercial extraction of timber in a huge scale started denuding the forest in great

speed resulting in loss of forest dwellers' livelihood. It also demanded hassle free extraction as a result creation of reserves got going. A strict regulation on the traditional use of the forest resources was a necessary condition for commercial timber production. The erstwhile right holders were given specific quantum of timber and fuel, while the sale or barter of the same was banned in Forest Act 1878.

Reserves – trade of forest resources and exclusion for forest dwellers

The historians described the reserves as lands either dedicated to producing timber or were constituted into open-access lands that suffered overuse and degradation. The reserved forest lands, taken over by the state merely 'amounted to confiscation, not conservation'. The FD viewed the needs of the forest people as burden, "biotic pressure". In fact several working plans of the FD termed man as the "enemies" of the forest. Some land was set aside as revenue wastelands for ecosystem people to meet their substantial and biomass needs. However, these people had no longer any rights in this land, only 'privileges' of using them, as a result these lands became no man's lands, over-used by everybody. (Guha 2000) By twentieth century some NTFP also figured in the list of revenue earning forest products. India became the only source for some NTFP such as resin, turpentine, tanning materials like Kath etc. Indian forest department became the sole supplier of timber in Middle East and to the allied forces in Persian Gulf during World War II. War need exposed the remotest forests of the Himalaya and western Ghat. The most accessible forests of Bombay region got felled to meet the demand of the war, margin of profit there in some cases rose to as high as 400% (Gadgil 2000). In this loot the question of forest dwellers' livelihood lost voice.

Choice of species and loss of forest dweller's livelihood

Priority of the FD in the colonial era was essentially commercial in nature. Different government committees asked for more and more revenue from forest. Revenue mainly comes from large timber forest, as a result of this the FD was forced to neglect shrubs and pasture land. Ironically these two types of land provide varieties of livelihoods to the forest dwellers. The species promoted by the colonial ruler were of very little use to rural population, whereas the species they replaced were extensively used by the locals for fuel, fodder, leaf manure and small timber. Much of the forest land was converted into tea, coffee and rubber plantations before 1864 i.e. before formation of FD. But FD was flooded with requisition for more

forest land for new plantation seven after 1864. Planters' lobby was extremely influential in the colonial administration. Moreover, development of road and railway connectivity to facilitate export of tea, coffee and rubber further increased felling. Plantation economy itself requires a high level of timber demand for fuel and packaging. Thus expansion of plantation induced shrinking in forest areas in multiple ways. This new economy engaged the erstwhile forest people as captive labor in these plantations (Gadgil 2000).

Abolition of community institution of managing forest

The community managed forest systems that once existed throughout India were systematically abolished during the 19th century. We know about these institutions (mainly their style of function) from the writings of the British foresters. For example, an officer posted in Garhwal Himalaya wrote in 1920s about customary restrictions on over-use of forest produce, maintenance of village grazing grounds, maintenance of fuel and fodder reserves etc. by the community (Guha 2000). Some ecologists mention that there was enough evidence of conservation by forest dependent communities in India. There were widespread network of forest patches conserved by traditional people marked as 'no-use' zones including sacred groves of Western Ghats, the North East, Western Himalayas etc. Many of these sites implemented social and religious injunction even on cutting of dead woods and picking up leaf litters (Kothari 1996).

The policy towards wildlife

It is noteworthy that today's conservation policy is heavily dependent on the concept of the pristine forest where no anthropogenic interferences are welcomed. Human presence is thought to be detrimental to wildlife; this understanding on many occasions is based on the presupposition that the forest dwellers are the reason for wildlife's extinction from the country.

British declared bounties for killing wild lives mainly carnivores during late 19th century, the purpose was to save the peasants. Over 20000 animals were killed annually for bounties in British India. From 1875 to 1925 over 80,000 tigers, more than 150,000 leopards and 2,00,000 wolves were killed. There is a possibility that the number of animals killed were more than this, because officials recorded those numbers for which they paid the bounty. The event of extra reward for killing females and cubs might have played catastrophic consequences. Often princely states invited the high officials

of the British Raj for sports. Rajkumar Sadul Sing of Bikaner had recorded all the hunts that he made in 25 years of his hunting career. His diary mentions, 50000 head of animals, among these were 33 tigers, and an Asiatic lion. Ramanuj Saran Shing Deo of Sarguja holds the all-time record of over 1100 tigers in his lifetime. The native rulers regarded the hunting as reaching into adulthood especially manhood. Even today many landed elites of central India follow the same ritual in their families (Rangarajan 2012). These examples are tip of the iceberg. There are countless such examples, which forced some of the species including tiger on the verge of extinction.

After independence sport became available to top officials and traders - newly built roads and big hydro projects brought the hitherto remote hill tops closer to these new hunters. Despite the creation of handful of sanctuaries and parks the overall ethos remained at the level of commercial forestry. In the IUCN (International Union of Conservation of Nature) meeting, 1969 in Delhi, a senior minister raised a question whether India can afford a loss of Rs. 30000 as foreign exchange that a foreign hunter spent on one tiger hunt. The prime target of the hunters - tiger, became the symbol of preservation of wildlife. Though, in 1968 alone, over fifty commercial hunting parties spent over Rs 20 lakhs in search of tiger. In many occasions GOI also advertised the country as haven for those with gun and fishing rod. Only a decade before the historic event of 1969, the famous American travel writer and hunter Jack Denton Scott visited India as a state guest to take the pleasure of hunting and publicize it abroad (Rangarajan 2012).

Today's conservationists skillfully hide this history of all out war against wild life. In a drama, one needs an antagonist, from whose ill motive something precious has to be saved. Forest dwellers have become the perfect antagonist to manage the stage. Their dependence on forest made it easier for people at large to believe their role to be real. Our concern is that this helps in formulating policies which alienate forest people from forest and for that matter from livelihood.

Independent India's forest policy and forest dweller's livelihood

Independence brought little change in forest dwellers' life, ironically the "concessions and privilege" enjoyed by them in British period were viewed as overtly generous in some quarters of policymakers. In fact, the 1952 National Forest Policy recommends for tightening of the 'concessions and privileges' provided to local forest dependent community (Poffenberger et. al.1996). The notion of a restructuring forest to maximize commercial gain

already strong in the colonial era got even stronger. The mono culture of commercially valuable trees were planted uprooting the natural vegetation, even many sanctuaries introduced commercial plantation to meet the demand of paper and pulp industries (Rangarajan 2012). An extensive commercial forestry operation continued till 1970 with little emphasis on regeneration. This destroyed the forest, its ecology and the forest dependent people's livelihood (Poffenberger 2001). According to available estimates the country had a tree cover of 40% of its land mass in 1894 by 1952 it dwindled down to 22%. Thus, showing an annual net deforestation of 0.18%, by 1980 country's forest cover went further down to 10%, measuring an annual deforestation of 0.4% which is much higher than in the colonial period. However, INSAT image of 1991 shows a forest cover of 13% in the country (Fernandes 1996). The zeal of industrialization after independence was so intense that forest resources were awarded to industrial houses at throw away prices. One such example may be cited here; in 1960s bamboos were supplied to industry at Rs.1.50/ton, when the prevailing market price was Rs.3000/ton (Guha 2000).

With the passing of the Wild Life Conservation Act, 1972 the concept of protected area (PA) management came into force. Once a forest is declared Protected Area (PA) i.e. wildlife sanctuary, national park etc. under the Act, everything in the forest becomes wildlife and hence need to be protected (1972 WLC Act). Several provisions of the said Act imposed restriction on collection of NTFP as well. Under the Act before declaring protected area a notification is done to register whatever rights local people have on that forest. However, the complex process of determining rights had restricted thousands of illiterate forest villagers from registering their rights to what-so-ever they had.

By 1980, planners were concerned with the shrinking forest cover and increasing demand for timber. Govt. brought Forest Conservation Act 1980 (FCA 1980). The Act emphasized on the controlling of logging operations, restricting conversion of forest land, and providing livelihood options to the local community. According to few studies, the act performed its first two duties considerably well but failed miserably in restoring communities' livelihood (Poffenberger 1996). Under the Act diversion of forest lands for non-forestry purpose requires 'approval of Central Govt'. This clause in many occasions has become a stumbling block for *panchayat* in forest villages to undertake land based development as the land officially belongs to the forest department. Cultivation of fruit bearing trees or medicinal plants also required 'prior approval of Central Govt.'. This clause might

have empowered the BTR authority to uproot the age-old orange orchards in 1998, situated in the forest villages of BTR hills.

Communities dependent on forest got some kind of relief when Central Government came up with a new forest policy in 1988 (National Forest Policy 1988). The policy admitted the necessity of involving forest communities in the management of forest and acknowledged their historical dependence on forest. The policy recommended Participatory Management or joint forest management (JFM) (Saxena 2003). Peoples' participation in forest management became a pertinent question as it highlights grassroots level democratization of resource management. It is worth mentioning that participatory approach reduced the cost of maintaining forest for FD. Some viewed that JFM is a result of forest people's prolonged struggle because the school of "scientific forest management" failed to keep the people away from forest. In this ground reality when it is seen that people themselves have started regenerating *sal* forest in south west Bengal. The FD grabbed the opportunity, the response has been, 'all else having failed, JFM' (Khatre 1996).

Emergence of new generation of conservationists in India

It took over two decades after independence for the new generation conservationists to come to the fore-front of policy making. The attitudinal shift in political leaders helped the situation to become conducive. A nationwide census on tiger population was conducted in 1972 and the figure was found to be at around 1800 much below the earlier estimates of 2500. The first count suggested more detailed proposal to conserve tiger in its natural state, the recommendation included (I) to select few sites having tiger's habitats- each with a core area of at least 300 sq. km., (the core area should be free from any kind of human intervention.) (II) A large surrounding of buffer zone would be created, where limited access of local peoples would be entertained. However, these areas will be repopulated by the growing numbers of tigers in the core area. The Project Tiger was launched in April 1973, at that time it was the largest wildlife conservation Project in the World. The concept of "do nothing" in the jungle to let nature take its own course through natural regeneration, came into being. (Rangarajan 2012) Eviction from forest and ban on forest resources became order of the day. In many cases the eviction or ban on resource use in protected areas has resulted in a negative way. For example the Keoladeo Ghana NP, Rajasthan, a World Heritage site is home to one of the most colorful birds in the world. From a sanctuary it was upgraded to a national

park in the year 1981. Until 1981 a large number of buffalos of the pastoralist communities around the park used to graze in the park's grassland. Local people used to collect firewood and fodder from the forest. In 1981, with the change of the status, grazing was banned. In the absence of the buffaloes two types of weeds covered the surface of the water bodies. These weeds were good fodder for buffaloes. The ecological impact was immediate; the diving birds find it impossible to dive into water, resulting in decrease in diversity in bird's variety (Seberwal et. el. 2000). There are countless examples of locals being removed from sanctuaries, national Parks. The ostensible reason always had been to save the ecosystem, to make the forest devoid of people.

Findings of the survey

Villages for the study were selected following stratified purposive sampling method based on forest Ranges, ethnic composition and geographical location. Finally, 12 villages were chosen making sample size 32.43% (12/37) of the 37 forest villages of BTR, distributed across 11 Beats and 8 Ranges. 8 villages were under the BTR (E) and 4 in BTR (W) division. After selecting the villages we interviewed the *panchayat* members with structured questionnaire. In order to make the sample representative of all the communities we had to select 8 villages from BTR east because BTR(E) is home to Mech, Ducpa, Rava, Santhali, Nepaly (tribes as well as upper caste) and mixed population. Administratively all the villages were in 2 blocks namely Kumargram and Kalchini of Alipurduar district.

We found 58.33% villages wherein the Gram-Samsad itself has 3 villages (either comprising 3 FVs or attached with revenue villages or TG) This creates a problem of absentee *panchayat* member for certain villages. Members also face an allegation of nepotism in favor of his/her own village. In the GP composition, the ratio between FV: RV plus TG is as low as 2.19:10 i.e. every GP has a ratio of members of 10 while FV's representative comprises only 2.19. FVs are minority in the GP's composition. Whoever wants to control the GP does not significantly have to depend on FVs. Surprisingly; there are 25% of FVs who are the only FV member in the GP. The prevailing unfavorable condition in the composition of the GP makes the forest villagers politically irrelevant. Their economic activities also get affected due to this, especially when a sizable work in rural Bengal is done through *panchayat*.

Question of NOC and forest village

Since the FVs are situated within the forest and the land belongs to FD, *panchayat* of FVs need an NOC to carry out land based development. This sometimes poses a stumbling block for the panchayats. However, the members having influence in the political parties do the works without an NOC or with a verbal permission from the Range Officer or DFO. We found that 13.67% and 45.27% of the total land based works undertaken were carried out without NOC or with a verbal permission from the FD. But, all works do not fall under this category as 41.04% of works undertaken required NOC and 35.58% of works got delayed due to lack of timely availability of NOC. Works like constructing new roads, repairing roads, constructing canals are of great importance in forest villagers' life. Every year these roads, canals are either rebuilt or repaired before monsoon, if the works get delayed the village remains almost unapproachable from block offices. We found that the works of this paramount importance got delayed due to lack of timely NOC in as much as 62.5%, 55.56% and 57.14% cases respectively. The situation suggests disadvantages operate to circumscribe facilities like health, education and livelihood, as many of the villages remain cut from the nearby towns due to bad or no roads.

Facilities on livestock rearing

Livestock provides forest villagers the much needed nutrition supplements and also adds considerably to their livelihood. So, to keep the live-stock free from diseases is important to them. We found four dominant types of diseases that trouble the livestock in BTR. Diseases like dysentery, 'foot & mouth' (a type of infection in foot and mouth) were found in 100% of villages. Septicemia (blood infection) and ear infection were found in 50% and 41.67% villages respectively.

We found that in 58.33% villages the doctors have visited once in a year and in 25% of villages the doctors did not turn up even once. We found that 58.67% of villages are 6-10 Km away from the nearest veterinary hospital and 25% of the villages are 11-15 Km away. We found 21-30 and 41-50 cattle died respectively in last one year in 16.67% villages each. The villages being small the cattle mortality rates seem to be very high. However, 25% of the villages registered no death of cattle in last one year. In this respect we must mention that FD arranges visit of veterinary doctors to FVs for controlling contaminating diseases that may spread to wildlife from domestic animals. The FD's focus mainly remains on Anthrax, but our study suggests it's a non-issue in forest village.

The implementation of Forest Right Act 2006 (The FRA, 2006)

The FRA 2006 apparently brought a radical change both in the century long underlying beliefs and theoretical understanding constructed on the supposition that accepting the rights of forest dwelling people eventually have ill-effect on sustainability of forest and wild life. This paradigm shift in the official approach and attitude of the Central Government is amply indicative in the following statement made in the first chapter of the said Act:

And whereas the forest rights on ancestral land and their habitat were not adequately recognized in the consolidation of the state forests during the colonial period as well as independent India resulting in historical injustice to the forest dwelling scheduled tribes and other traditional forest dwellers who are integral to the very survival and sustainability of the forest ecosystem...(FRA 2006: 1)

The important aspect in this context is that the Act brings a new institution called 'Gram Sabha' which means the village assembly of the adults. The Act visualizes Gram Sabha as the sole representative and authority to take decisions related to management of forest resources to the extent it has been bestowed on villagers as their rights. The *panchayat*'s role in the Act has been clearly defined in Section 3(1) of FRA Rules 2007 which states, 'The Gram Sabha shall be convened by the Gram Panchayat and in its first meeting it shall elect from amongst its members, a committee of not less than ten but not exceeding fifteen persons as members of the Forest Rights Committee,..'. With this legislative provision we can infer that *panchayat* member has certainly a vital role to play in Gram Sabha. Since the first meeting shall be called by the member we can presume he/she will have at least a rudimentary level of knowledge about the Act and its implementation status. We found that 41.67% of *panchayat* members have not heard of FRA 2006, though surprisingly 66.67% members know that the villagers will get land right. While enquiring about the rights other than land right we found 91.67% of members do not have any clue about the rights on NTFP. The Act stated that the Gram Sabha will manage and control their community forest resource; we found only 8.33% of members have that knowledge.

In West Bengal formal notification for implementation of the Forest Rights Act was issued on 17-03-2008. After a gap of nearly 7 years 50% of the *panchayat* members reported that the process of recording land rights are going on, one disturbing aspect of the findings is 33.33% *panchayat* members know nothing regarding the status of land right distribution.

Surprisingly, 66.67% members do not know whether GS is functional. The data suggest that the *panchayat* is indifferent regarding the FRA 2006, its implementation and the rights there on. An institution which is supposed to offer a legitimate voice to determine policies on forest resources for the betterment of forest as well as forest villagers seemed to have lost its path.

Conclusion

The major finding of the study is that the forest dependent community or forest villagers historically had suffered worst kind of social exclusion. This phenomenon has been acknowledged as “historical injustice” in Forest Rights Act 2006. It is amply clear that commoditization of the forest resources speeded up destruction of the same and also made the forest dwellers economically, socially and politically excluded. Commoditization of forest resources benefited the elite rulers, landed elites, industrialists, traders and planters. Today in the era of conservation, 47 Tiger Projects, more than 500 sanctuaries and national parks etc. are in place but they are primarily used as the means to social exclusion as they have successfully made the forest dwellers vulnerable by excluding them from their resource base, culture and institutions. A situation has emerged where peoples’ livelihood is overshadowed by the so-called prerequisites of modern conservation ethos phrased as ‘forest devoid of people’. However, the newly created conservation heavens should not be devoid of people. A new class of jeep borne safari riders has replaced the erstwhile beneficiaries. Nomenclature has changed but the class probably has remained the same.

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