

Research Article

Livelihood Issues and Sustainable Development: A Study of Two Villages in North Bengal (BTR), India

Sumita Sarkar

Dean (PhD from TISS, Fellow from LSE, UK), Institute of Business Studies and Research (IBSAR), Navi Mumbai-400614, Maharashtra, India

Email id: sumi.sarkar36@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The term 'sustainable development' is defined as development that has enough resources in its own environment/society to sustain and to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the future generation's interests or without any loss of natural resources endowed to a society. However, the model of rapid development has resulted in exploitation and misuse of vital natural ecological resources, thereby gradually depleting them in a significant manner. This depletion and decline of natural resources not only threatens the present generation (be it rural or urban population) but also throws the challenge of sustainability to the future generation.

According to a United Nations report, India's population is currently ~1.2 billion people and is expected to grow by another 300 million within the next couple of decades. With cities generating two-thirds of the country's economic outputs, an increasing number of Indians are leaving rural areas to seek employment in cities, relying on the already crumbling urban infrastructure, and as a result there is migration explosion, unemployment, homelessness, beggary and rising crimes are being witnessed as problems of modern development in urban India. By 2030, it is projected that sixty-eight Indian cities will each have more than one million inhabitants, and six megacities, more than ten million each. The rapid growth of cities causes a large number of challenges, including insufficient power supply, unreliable public transport and limited access to adequate healthcare and educational services.

India's biodiversity is rich and unique. It is one of the twelve mega-diversity countries in the world having a vast variety of flora and fauna, which collectively account for 60–70 per cent of the world's biodiversity. Its ten bio-geographic regions represent a broad range of ecosystems. India has the world's 6 per

cent flowering plant species and 14 per cent of the world's avian fauna (FSI 2009, Forest Statistics in India, State of India's Forest Report (FSI: Dehra Dun).

There are nearly 45,000 species of plants in the country and similarly in fauna there are 81,250 recorded species (NFAP 1Non Timber Forest Product (NTFP, 1999, as cited by Goshal, 2011). It has 80 national parks and 441 sanctuaries, known as protected area, which is ~14.8 million hectares and this is 4.5 per cent of the country's land area and 14 per cent of forest area. Forests contribute 1.7 per cent to the gross domestic product of the country. However, this figure does not take into account its numerous non-market and external benefits and the vast amount of fuel-wood and fodder and other forest products collected legally or illegally. One estimate shows that total annual removals from the forest is worth about US\$ 7.1 billion or Rs.30,000 crores, which includes ~270 million tons of fuel-wood, 280 million tons of fodder and over 12 million cubic metres of timber and countless non-timber forest products (NFAP please replace it with – NTFP 1999 ac cited in Ghosal, 2011). These are all simple statistics that could be weighed against commercial or economic profit and not include the real value of environmental richness and benefits provided by the 'green zones' of this country. In India, the total forest-covered area is 690,899 km², i.e., 22per cent of the total territory. Since centuries, several clusters of communities have been depending on forest resources for their livelihood, particularly the tribal population. In the post-globalisation open market economy, intensive development of infrastructure in the country has been putting high pressure on the ecosystem. Land classified as a forest is ~23per cent of the country's area (76.53 million hectares). Out of this, forest cover is reported to be ~63.73 million hectares in extent, of which more than 40per cent (25.51 million hectares) is degraded, or at least is recorded as open and scrub forests (FSI1999). Forest Statistics in India, State of India's Forest Report (FSI: Dehra Dun)

Over the decades, the forest cover has been gradually shrinking and such rapid depletion has attracted massive protests as those inhabitants whose only skills are to survive on forest produce for their livelihood have been pushed to marginalisation due to depletion, and now they have become marginalised within their own areas. Forests have been disappearing fast; the land left behind is ravaged and is not even fit for agriculture, thus forcing these people to migrate to poor living in urban areas. They have lost their sustainable livelihoods and are exposed either to the vagaries of nature and imprisoned in their areas or have left the forest lands in search of alternative sources of livelihood and migrated to low-level jobs (unskilled) in urban areas. The fast pace of deforestation has resulted in large shortfalls between needs and supply of forest produce, especially of timber, firewood and fodder – not only the necessity of rural population but also of large use for urban lifestyle and commercial needs. 'Future generations' are mainly going to suffer because of the environmental problems of resource consumption, and pollution and their distribution over long time horizons. In this context, this paper focuses on 'studying sustainable development, marginalised forest communities and their livelihood issues' for forest dwellers in general with a special focus on North Bengal (part of West Bengal, India) situated at the Himalayan foothills.

This discussion analyses strategies for sustainable development adapted so far by the Department of Forest Management, by government agencies (Tribal Welfare Department) in West Bengal, as well as the deprivation or preservation of forest rights (under the Forest Right Act) (2006), which are necessary for the survival of various age-old ethnic/marginalised tribal communities residing within and around forests who believe that forests and their livelihood are intertwined. This paper is based on a pilot study of an on-going research project that aims to emphasise on how to improve the quality of life for both existing and future generations in these areas by interrelating natural–ecological sustainability with forest livelihoods, thereby ensuring sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES

The term ‘sustainable development’ can be defined as development that has enough resources in its own environment/society to sustain and to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the future generation’s interests or without any loss of natural resources endowed to a society. Over the years, the practiced models of development have resulted in exploitation and misuse of vital natural/ecological resources, thereby gradually depleting them and threatening not only the present generation (be it rural or urban population) but also the future generations due to challenges of sustainability.

India is rich and unique in terms of biodiversity. It is one of the twelve mega-diversity countries in the world having a vast variety of flora and fauna, which collectively account for 60–70per cent of the world’s biodiversity. Its ten bio-geographic regions represent a broad range of ecosystems. India has the world’s 6per cent flowering plant species and 14per cent of the world’s avian fauna (World Bank 1996). There are nearly 45,000 species of plants in the country and similarly in fauna there are 81,250 recorded species (NFAP 1999). It has 80 national parks and 441 sanctuaries, known as protected area, which is ~14.8 million hectares and this is 4.5per cent of the country’s land area and 14per cent of forest area. Forests contribute 1.7per cent to the gross domestic product of the country. However, this figure does not take into account its numerous non-market and external benefits and the vast amounts of fuel-wood and fodder and other forest products collected legally or illegally. One estimate shows that the total annual removals from the forest was worth about US\$ 7.1 billion or Rs.30,000 crores, which includes about 270 million tons of fuel-wood, 280 million tons of fodder and over 12 million cubic metres of timber and countless non-timber forest products (NTAP 1999). These are all simple statistics that could be weighed against commercial or economic profit and many not include the real value of environmental richness and benefits provided by the ‘green zones’ of this country.

In India, the total forest-covered area is 690,899 km², i.e., 22per cent of the total territory. Since centuries, several clusters of communities have been depending on forest resources for their livelihood, particularly the tribal population. In the post-globalisation open market economy, intensive development of infrastructure in the country has been putting high pressure on the ecosystem. Land classified as forest is ~23per cent of the country's area (76.53 million hectares). Out of this, forest cover is reported to be ~63.73 million hectares in extent, of which more than 40per cent (25.51 million hectares) is degraded, or at least is recorded as open and scrub forests (FSI1999).

Over the decades, the forest cover has gradually been shrinking and rapid depletion has attracted massive protests from forest dwellers who only had skills to survive for their livelihood on forest produce and were reduced to marginalised communities within their own habitat. Forests have been disappearing fast; and the land left behind is ravaged and not even fit for agriculture, thus forcing these people to migrate to urban areas and to squalor and poor standard of living. They have lost their sustainable livelihood and are exposed either to the vagaries of nature and imprisoned in their areas or have left the forest lands in search of alternative sources of livelihood and migrated to low-level jobs (unskilled) in urban areas. Fast-pace deforestation has resulted in large shortfalls between needs and supply of forest produce, especially of timber, firewood and fodder – not only the necessity of rural population but also of large use for urban lifestyle and commercial needs. 'Future generations' are mainly going to suffer because of the environmental problems of resource consumption, pollution and their distribution over long time horizons. In this context, this paper focuses on 'studying sustainable development, marginalised forest communities and their livelihood issues' in general with special reference to two villages in North Bengal (part of West Bengal, India) situated at the Himalayan foothills.

Focus of this Paper

This paper analyses strategies for sustainable development adapted so far by the Department of Forest Management, by government agencies (Tribal Welfare Department) in West Bengal, as well as the deprivation or preservation of forest rights (under the Forest Right Act, 2006), which are necessary for the survival of various age-old ethnic/marginalised tribal communities residing within and around forests who believe that forests and their livelihood are intertwined. The findings are based on a pilot study of an on-going research with two village case-studies in the Buxa Tiger Reserve (BTR), Alipurduar (subdivision), North Bengal. The two villages of BTR, which are Jayanti and Bhutia Basti (where most of the families have already been displaced and now only twenty-nine families reside there) and

their possession of present livestock, living conditions and profession/sources of livelihood are dissected and how to improve the quality of life for both existing and future generations in these areas has been explored.

In particular, the focus is on whether natural resources and eco-environment are sufficient for their basic survival, health, sanitation, income and is well protected or whether these forest dwellers are deprived of their rights as beneficiaries under the law. The present sources of livelihood, patterns and practices of the forest dwellers and the population living adjacent to forests and their communities' dependency for livelihood and sustenance is also explored: whether erosion of soil, deforestation, frequent floods are impacting the sustainability and livelihood of locals.

FOREST, LIVELIHOOD AND TRIBAL COMMUNITIES (FOREST DWELLERS): ISSUES OF SUSTAINABILITY

Wherever there is a large concentration of forest, there is also a high concentration of tribal people in particular and rural population within and surrounding forests in India. Over the years, forest produce has been reduced, resulting in scanty resources for forest dwellers to sustain themselves and aggravate the trans-generational poverty in which they survive. This area has been neglected and not thoroughly researched and documented in the past several decades. However, the emergence of several popular movements like APPIKO during the 1970–1990s, the Silent Valley Movement (1970s) in South India and CHIPKO (1980s) in North India to save forests and protect the life and livelihood of forest inhabitants emphasised the need for further research and action to ameliorate the living conditions of these marginalised communities.

The main livelihood sources of these communities are forest produce and agriculture, near their cottages/homes in the village within and outside the fringe of the forests. Unlike other rural areas in plain land, they do not own lands away from their locale. Their agricultural activities within forests are complimented by wage labour, mostly by working in government schemes in nearby areas or through seasonal migration to work in construction, road making, brick kiln, etc., in the adjoining areas. Many a times, due to lack of proper source of livelihood a significant population shifts away from the use of forests as a primary source to townships and cities for earning a living and for seeking alternative jobs. Even communities residing in remote forest zones at times travel for miles to seek wage labour to earn livelihood. Mainly, in such situations, forests are used for subsistence fuel-wood and fodder. Some dwellers sell wood/timber and few forest products in local markets. However, the commercial sale of forest products are minimal, due to poor access to markets as a result of degraded roads, distances, community

isolation, low levels of forest produce and poor awareness of markets outside of the local trading areas.

Having ~2.5per cent of the world's geographic area, India at present is supporting 16per cent of the planet's human population and 18per cent of cattle population. The forest cover has been progressively reducing as well as degrading in terms of quality produce. Degradation is not only indicated by the thinning density of forests but also by soil erosion and lack of natural regeneration of plants. Between 1950 and 1980, India lost ~4.3 million hectares of forest land to non-forest use like development of agriculture, heavy industries and other developmental process. In addition, there were serious problems of encroachment, grazing, forest fire, shifting cultivation and illegal felling of trees. Most of the flora and fauna species are now endangered with serious economic implications. A recent World Bank (2005) report estimated that due to degradation and deforestation the loss has been up to one million hectares per year during the 1970s–1980s. The depletion of forest resources has created dissonance among the rural poor in particular and the general public at large and also abrupt population movements mainly in the form of inter-state migration, from mountains to the plain lands and from rural to urban/semi-urban areas to secure livelihoods.

The National Forest Policy 1988 envisaged people's involvement in the conservation, protection and management of forests. It emphasised that forest produce must go first to the people living in and around the forest areas. In June 1990, a government resolution supported the involvement of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the creation of village-level institutions for forest management. With active support of the local NGOs, people's participation in forest management was initiated and named the Joint Forest Management (JFM) in India. It encouraged forming village-level institutions for forest management. Formally, a few NGOs were identified to provide an interface between the forest department and rural communities. Benefit-sharing mechanisms were also outlined to enable rural communities to develop an equity-based stake in the protection, development and rehabilitation of degraded forests.

In 2006, the Indian Parliament passed the Forest Rights Act, finally recognising 60years after Independence that almost one-quarter of India's land is classified as 'forest': '...forest rights on ancestral lands and their habitat were not adequately recognized in the consolidation of State forests during the colonial period as well as in independent India resulting in historical injustice...' The Act provides a legislative basis to redress this injustice and thus has major implications particularly for West Bengal, both in promising a more secure basis for forest people's livelihood and also legal provisions necessary to defend them in the future. It was tacitly recognised by the Acts (2006) that there could be no financial

assets if there were no ecological assets. Sustainable livelihood was increasingly linked to environmental conservation through this legislation. The Forest Rights Act (2006) appeared to be a right step in the direction of livelihood protection of forest dwellers.

Forest Life and Tribal Communities of West Bengal

West Bengal comprises 88,752km² (2.7per cent) of India, and 13.38per cent of it has been recorded as forest area (12,343 km²) in official land records, meaning any land that has been legally notified as forests by the government, and was owned and managed by the government, although not necessarily having any forest vegetation (IPPG Discussion Paper, 2010). The *actual* forest cover is slightly higher than the 'recorded forest area', at 14.64per cent of the state (or 12,994km²). These forests, which are spread across three distinct areas, i.e., the north, the south-west and the Sundarbans, are composed of a range of forest types. Overall, 25per cent of this alone is now made up of tree plantations and private 'farm forests' (FSI 2009). Although the state's forest area is relatively small compared with that of many other states, the absolute number of forest-dependent people was very high with a population of 80.02million (7.8per cent of the county's population: 2001 census). Scheduled tribes typically living in forested landscapes comprised 5.5per cent of the population (4.4m). The tribal population of the state was composed of thirty-eight group types, out of which more than 50per cent concentration of tribal communities was in the North Bengal region of the state. Particularly in North Bengal, the forest area in two major districts, i.e., Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling was 21.4per cent and 28.2per cent, respectively, having a large concentration of tribal and schedule caste population (Government of WB 2001). Tribal communities like Santhal, Oraon, Munda, Lodha and Kheria were a significant few to be mentioned here.

IMPACT OF DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES: SOME OBSERVATIONS

The West Bengal Forest Department (WBFD) has been expanding its own conservation areas by discouraging the tribal conservation practices of growing certain rare weeds and plants, which blended well with their cultural traditions of worshipping the forest for sustainable life. Tribal groups had established many sacred forest grooves for religious rituals. They also had cultural festivals around traditional annual hunts. The government, claiming the forest to be the state's property disregarded the age-old cultural connection between the people and the forest and declared hunting activities illegal. Furthermore, developmental plans like laying rail tracks without the help of any bridge but on plain land amidst larger overspread forests has also forced animals to change their century-old routes, thus endangering them to the risk of frequent accidents and death (elephants and other wildlife) especially in North Bengal.

The author feels that the developmental initiatives and activities had not only endangered wildlife but also resulted in curtailment of forest-based sources of livelihood, which had sustained numerous tribal communities and indigenous people for centuries (IIPG Discussion Paper 2010). Factors like irregularities in the normal settlement process, forest villages, post-independence estate acquisitions, national parks and sanctuaries, destruction of sacred groves, state monopolisation of forest product marketing, land acquisition for industry and development, encroachment and eviction, JFM, deprivation scenario, forestation of degraded land especially in south-west Bengal and arbitrary punitive state coercion have all led to unforeseen problems. There was blatant and rampant violation of the rights of indigenous people living in upper North Bengal forests compelling them to live a life below the sustenance level and thus to seek an alternative means of livelihood by migrating to urban areas in the plains.

The BTR was one of the most important locations for this study. It has dense, diverse vegetation cover and four national sanctuaries and wildlife conservation zones. It is located in the Alipurduar subdivision of Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal. It stretches over a length of 50 km from west to east and 35km from north to south. The total area of the reserve is 760.87 km², of which 385.02 km² is the Buxa Sanctuary and National Park and the rest 375.85 km² that falls outside the sanctuary is considered a buffer area.

The BTR had thirty-seven forest villages with a population of 18,100 (1991 census). Twelve forest villages and two fixed demand holdings were located within the core areas of the BTR. In forest villages, ~2919 families were residing. Out of them, the dominant ethnic groups were the Nepalis, the Rabhas and the Oraons (Das 2005a). The BTR is also encircled by thirty-four tea gardens and forty-six revenue villages on the western and southern sides (2 km from the park's boundary). The population of these revenue villages was 95,049 (1991). The predominant ethnic groups in these revenue villages were the Rajbanshi, the Mechs and migrant Bengalese (Das 2009). The cultivation of paddy, maize, *marwa* and millet with rainwater was the prime economic activity of forest villagers of the BTR owing to the absence of any irrigation facility. Sale of milk, areca nuts, bamboo and NON TIMBER FOREST PRODUCT (NTFPs) was the complementary source of income for sustaining the daily needs of families, particularly in these villages (Das 2005b).

At least 13 per cent of West Bengal's population (at the lowest estimates) has been living in forests for the last many generations and have been depending on the forests for their livelihood. People live in severely deprived conditions and compose what may reasonably be known as a trans-generational forest *underclass*: they have been collectively subjugated and impoverished by depleting and degrading forests, thus rendering them to live at the lowest income levels. One may challenge

this argument by contending that forest people's livelihoods inherently destine them to a low income level, and thus, their poverty was latent rather than externally imposed. However, there was little scope to overlook the fact that due to the onslaught of modernisation, urbanisation and the unending thrust to usurp their fragile resource base by the business, commercial, political and capitalists' interest opportunities of livelihood in forest lands has shrunk over the years. For example, timber was a big money spinner, coming from forest and other cultivation along with poaching wildlife had led to deforestation on the one hand and destroyed the ecological balance in these areas on the other. Forest dwellers as a result have been pushed to the brink and made to live a life of frugality with whatever little resources left to them as the controls of all the forests, land, produce and wildlife had gone into the hands of institutions/interest groups supposed to help and protect the forests and wildlife. In addition, natural resources have become restrictively available to the local populace.

In this paper, two villages have been analysed as already mentioned: **Jayanti village** is located inside the BTR and **Bhutia Basti** was already abandoned and only twenty-nine families were staying there, either out of compulsion or because they are waiting for a better compensation package for resettlement in the nearby areas outside the BTR. On resettlement, these communities only got a house and lands to cultivate, but no job (temporary/permanent) or money as part of the rehabilitation and resettlement package. The package was decided based on the understanding by the expert committee that the inhabitants had knowledge of agriculture and cattle breeding, and thus would fend for themselves. In addition, they can also work as wage labourers in nearby small urban clusters in the Kalchini block and neighbouring areas.

Case I: Jayanti village

Locational and demographic profile

Jayanti is a small forest village within the BTR in Jalpaiguri district, located within the main subdivision, Alipurduar, North Bengal. It is located along the Jayanti River forming a natural border with Bhutan hills. It is 685 feet (208 m) above sea level. The village is ~30 km from Alipurduar and 200 km from Siliguri, and seems almost a century old as a portion of the ruined bridge (whatever was left out) is practically lying on the river bed, which was made during the British regime, (in 1915) to connect the village to the rest of the civilisation. However, the ecological landscape is changing fast as the river is slowly dying and is full of debris of broken rocks, dolomites, sand stones, etc., flowing from the nearest mining operations of dolomite collection in Bhutan(refer Annexure 5). The local folklore (local people asserts as well) that it was the same place till Buxa on the silk route

to go to Bhutan and further upward till China's border. According to the 2010–11 census, ~247 families were residing in the village. Above 18 years, the population was 1000+. Approximately 50 per cent were Bengalis, followed by Biharis (30 per cent), Nepalis (12 per cent) and Adhivasis (5 per cent: mostly Mundas, Oraons and Kharias) and about 2 per cent constituted the Muslim population.

Livelihood and economy

Availability of trade livestock (as presented in Table 1) reveals that cattle breeding, although a compulsory part of forest life, was dwindling as big domestic livestock like cows were not affordable by most of the families. Villagers stated that due to increasing dry land and dense forest areas on the other side, very less fodder was available for cows/goats, therefore rendering breeding less attractive. Moreover their lifespan was lesser than that of the cattle on plain lands. Moreover, cattle were frequently attacked and picked up by leopards and wild dogs/foxes, hence depleting stock and discouraging breeding, which otherwise was a major source of income and sustenance.

Decades ago when the same village was prosperous, it attracted labour even from other states like Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, etc. Decades ago, the Bengal Lime and Stone Company was famous and more than a century old, which provided work to miners who migrated to neighbouring villages. After the BTR was formed and mining was completely banned, regular work vanished. Second, the government for some time engaged local people to collect boulders and to protect the river by walling the river belt with bolsters, but has also stopped for the last 16 years due to lack of funds. Hence, the river bed was gradually rising up and drying out and saddled with dolomite and stones that accumulated from the upper Himalayan belt from Bhutan mining areas (*source: the Gram Panchayat/Local Governance Office*). Apart from these two main activities, there was little agricultural land and cattle breeding, which provided basic minimum support for livelihood. However, in the past, local villagers never went outside for work as migrant labourers, but now it was happening under compulsion to stay alive. At present, the decrease of economic activities has shrunk 'Jayanti' slowly but surely; a prosperous town once is now a tiny village. Most of the people who came here for earning their livelihood, left the place for better pastures, but a few (which included people from other states of India also) had nowhere to go and thus stayed back. The descendants of these families got themselves absorbed in the local population over a period of time. This is the reason why one can find a mixed population in this remote part of Bengal. However, the villagers are still dependent on the forest and ecological resources, as their village is surrounded by a dense forest zone (BTR). It helps them collect fuel wood, fruits and fodder for animals and also aids in illegal hunting to supplement their occasional festivities. The river Jayanti is

**Table 1: No. of Family Members' Livestock and Poultry Owned by the Family
(Village: I: Jayanti (BTR))**

S No.	No. of Family Members	Cows	Goats	Chickens	Ducks
1	6	2	-	4	6
2	3	-	-	8	-
3	8	-	3	2	1
4	3	-	-	-	-
5	5	4	-	-	3
6	7	-	2	4	5
7	11	-	-	3	-
8	8	-	-	4	2
9	6	-	4	15	-
10	4	6	-	5	-
11	4	-	3	1	3
12	4	8	4	3	-
13	4	3	5	-	-
14	1	-	-	-	-
15	7	3	-	12	6
16	6	-	-	8	-
17	4	-	-	17	4
18	5	3	2	-	2
19	5	4	-	4	2
20	5	-	6	-	1
21	4	-	-	-	2
22	7	-	3	2	-
23	3	2	-	4	2
24	4	5	2	7	3
25	11	3	-	-	-
26	1	-	6	8	-
27	5	-	2	-	-
28	7	3	-	12	6
29	4	-	-	17	4
30	6	-	-	8	-
31	5	-	-	5	-
32	5	3	-	6	-
33	5	4	3	3	-
34	9	-	-	4	-
35	5	2	-	4	-
36	4	8	4	5	-
37	3	-	-	8	3
38	6	3	4	3	-
39	3	-	2	4	-
40	4	-	-	-	2

Source: Jayanti Village, survey conducted in March, 2013.

still a lifeline for water supply, supported by a few seasonal flora and fauna (refer Annexures 3 and 4).

These days mostly, tourism is the main source of livelihood for the locals. A few private (questionable settlement) hotels and resorts, other than a few forest bungalows in the village are offering some petty jobs to the locals. Sometimes, certain schemes (e.g., MNREGA 100 days' work scheme) were organised for cleaning of forests and for collection of stones from the river bed under rural development, by which people got some work at intervals throughout the year for a few weeks. Private companies indulged in illegal activities by entering in this area with trucks to collect stones from the river bed by bribing lower-grade forest personnel, and thus the villagers got a full day's work whenever these trucks visited.

Case II: Bhutia Basti, Village, BTR

Locational and demographic profile

Located at about 2.5 km away from the village Jayanti, Bhutia Basti is an almost abandoned village with only twenty-nine families living there. Bhutia Basti comes under zero point at the 'Hati Pota' village and **patka para** and in Kumargram village as well, within the Jalpaiguri district. Table 2 shows the remaining families, who stayed back in Bhutia Basti. A mix of Chetris (20 per cent), Lamas (with majority of 80 per cent) and one Bengali family (exceptional but old residents in the village) were the inhabitants of the village. Only twenty-nine families were staying at the time of field visit. These families were stuck due to lack of alternative resources or were waiting for the government relief package. About 120 people were staying (excluding kids below 10 years of age) with proportion of 45:55 of females–males (refer Annexure 1).

Resettlement and Present Issues of Livelihood

Initially as a compensation package, the villagers got a house and land for cultivation. The Bhutanese were familiar with agriculture, and so on relocation to Bhutia Basti they cleaned the forest land and started growing mainly maize, potato, rice and other vegetables. This Basti is as old as Jayanti village. While interacting with a few villagers, it was learnt that they had been living there for more than three generations. The resettled Bhutanese were not given any monetary compensation; they simply carried their cattle and family along with them when they were shifted. Although a few families are still left in this village, they still continue with the same age-old lifestyle of cultivation and cattle breeding.

A few families resorted to wage labour as they did not have sufficient land or cattle to live. While interviewing one Bhutanese woman, aged 55+ years, she

Table 2: Bhutia Basti: Details of Livestock Owned by the Families

S No.	No. of Family Members	Cows	Goats	Chickens	Ducks	Pigs
1	8	17	35	6	6	9
2	4	3	7	-	10	10
3	3	-	-	8	-	-
4	5	2	-	1	-	3
5	8	3	1	10	-	2
6	2	-	-	8	2	-
7	4	3	-	-	-	2
8	7	-	-	-	-	3
9	8	4	2	3	-	2
10	7	8	1	-	-	3
11	3	-	-	-	-	-
12	5	9	4	2	-	8
13	4	12	4	2	3	3
14	15	-	-	7	-	7
15	11	10	2	3	1	4
16	6	3	2	4	-	-
17	7	3	2	4	-	4
18	4	3	-	-	-	-
19	8	1	3	-	-	2
20	12	1	4	2	2	1
21	10	5	3	-	-	3
22	6	1	1	4	2	1
23	6	-	-	-	-	-
24	5	—	—	-	-	-
25	3	-	-	-	-	-
26	8	-	-	-	-	5
27	7	8	7	-	-	5
28	7	3	4	-	-	2
29	6	4	13	-	-	4

Source: Bhutia Basti, survey, March, 2013.

asserted ‘we are forced to leave our land which my father and ancestors build and toiled for after this zone was declared under core area of tiger conservatory zone’. A man, who was a daily wage labourer waiting for further compensation to come, said ‘we have no other choice as we cannot go up or allowed to grow any vegetables or paddy here and I don’t have any livestock to feed my family’. The culture of keeping pigs was common among the Bhutanese as they said that it was cheaper

to look after pigs, as after reproduction, pigs could be sold in the market. A family that had seventeen cows, a large hoard of goats and pigs, as well as large land and that was considered the richest in Bhutia Basti, was considering moving out to **Panbari** or some other place nearby by selling off all their live stock as they found agricultural life to be insecure and believed that their next generation should not suffer just as they had.

Community Development

Jayanti village had one common public toilet constructed by the Gram Panchayat (local governance), and a market place with concrete flooring and roof (7610 km²) where a weekly 'haat' (bazaar) was held. The last census in 2011 maintained that the BTR had total twenty tigers, i.e., fourteen males and six females, and thus the village of Jayanti was declared a core village. However, the local political parties and the villagers had a conflict over declaring Jayanti as a core village of BTR. On behalf of the Government of WB, the District Magistrate declared on 15 May 1989 under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, that Jayanti village including Jayanti highschool was outside of the boundary of the core area. Minimum mining was allowed provided it was conducted in a scientific manner causing no damage to wildlife. It was also declared that no revenue land was inside the sanctuary and that the public road, i.e., the Jayanti–Turturi–Newlands Road (24 km) that existed under BTR (E) was a public highway. Later, the World Bank project was taken up by the WB government. The Directory of Forest Reports drafted a guidelines (2012) prepared by the Ministry of Environment and Forest, Government of India, declaring Jayanti as a core village (Government of WB, Directory of Forest), and also recognised old settlements existing throughout BTR (E) till the **Buxa Fort** (~ 4500 ft) and **Lepcha kha** (~ 7664 ft) above the Jayanti village and located in even more denser forest) where even an election booth was put up for the last elections. With help from the local governance, the school introduced mid-day meals; 100 days' work (under MNREGA) was offered, although not on a regular basis; and one community hand pump with concrete flooring and boulder building to protect the boundary of the river partially was also set up. Over the years, very scanty developmental work was done. The chief of the local governance complained of lack of funds and the local youth accused political biases and severe lack of venues of employment especially for the deprived and famished segment of population in that area.

Health and sanitation

Most of the houses had no private toilets except 15per cent in the whole village. The data are in consonance with very poor sanitation facilities at the national level as roughly 60per cent of the Indian population has no sanitation or has crude

medieval facilities. The researcher visited the nearest health centres (Accredited Social & Health Activists (ASHA) and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)). In one health centre, one doctor came from Alipurduar twice a week. It had two trained midwives (nurses). The nearest hospital, in critical cases where the villagers were compelled to go, was in Latabari, 35 km away from the village. The situation was same for Bhutia Basti as well. These workers were irregularly and very low paid (Rs. 4350 for midwife and for helpers only Rs. 2950). The only female doctor while interviewing stated, ‘the distance was too much for me, even I come by public transport, and that payment was not made regularly from the main center of ICDS Alipurduar’. They mainly treat children aged 0–3 years (~272 children have been counted in 13 ICDS centres) for vaccinations and had minimum and basic medication for fever and stomach-related problems. Deliveries were mostly done by the midwives of the village unless it was a critical case. The doctor of the Community Health Centre asserted that more than just basic medicine for fever, ‘we need more vaccination and antiseptic medicines and injections for the villagers as they were frequently going to forest for fuel-wood, bird hunting and also becoming victims of wild animals ‘attacks’. Sometimes wild leopards, dogs and pigs enter the village and the villagers fight back to drive them away to the forest. These encounters result in injuries which are common but the provided medicines are scanty. ICSD had introduced a project called ‘SABLA’ (self-dependent) where girls aged 18+ years were provided orientation and training on nutrition for young girls and women to make them aware about their reproductive health before and after marriage (Annexure 2).

Having visited, analysed and observed the life, the availability of livelihood and the plight under which the human beings in these villages have survived, the researcher is constrained to say that in the name of care, development and human significance, the situation was pathetic in both the villages. The researcher was surprised at the resilience and grit of these families who lived in these villages in spite of the non-availability of minimum sustainable sources to support life. If there was anything called ‘wretchedness’ in life, one experiences the same inspite of all attempts for developmental initiatives, grants, resettlement, compensations, public health and sanitation schemes, right to education, etc. All efforts appeared to exist on papers, but where the funds went nobody knows as nobody knew where they came from in the first place! The sub-human conditions and the ignorance of the populace in the area is real bliss for government functionaries, administrators and leaders. The geographical location, now tagged as a ‘core’ area through a controversial decision enshrined poor governance in these villages as various agencies felt no reciprocity towards these poor villagers as they were seen as ‘encroachers’ rather than as forest inhabitants.

CONCLUSION

The provisions enshrined in the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution of India were meant to protect, administer, serve and control scheduled areas and tribes living therein. However, West Bengal did not have any scheduled areas and, hence no protection clauses were made available to prevent unfair land grabbing or transfer of land of scheduled tribes by questionable means. In many cases, the forest residents and the users were dispossessed of their homes and disinherited of their customary rights (e.g., Bhutia Basti) of ownership under the Indian Forest Act. A large section of such dispossessed population continued to reside in the forests as they had no other place to go, by stealth or forcibly or by unofficial arrangements with the local state officials and used the forest for their sustenance and livelihood. The fact appears that a very large number of forest residents, both tribal and otherwise, having legitimate customary rights on forest land, were dispossessed over the years and to their dismay were made illegal occupiers of ancestral property and collectors of its produce in the forest, which they had inherited trans-generationally.

The inhabitants of the two villages (Jayanti and Bhutia Basti) under study were struggling for survival with minimum amenities, sanitation, medical or alternative sources of livelihood. They had no land, hence, no agricultural activities. Most of them opted for either daily wage labour or for work in mushrooming 'stay homes' (the legality of this business could be questioned as the area comes under 'core' forest area after the Census 2011 and governmental notifications). However, under the West Bengal Tourism Department, Jayanti is 'core', yet a key attraction for tourists for BTR conservation. Only two government bungalows were developed, one of which was recently badly burned and broken due to a sudden accident, and so far no investigation has been conducted to find out how such a mishap happened. During peak seasons, there is always dearth of stay for tourists to come to this village and enjoy the serenity and beauty of nature. This has further encouraged blatant violation of law by the moneyed and powerful people in the tourism business mushrooming with cottages and hotels in these localities. However, contrarily, it is important to observe that these legal or questionable tourism businesses have somehow given certain seasonal sources of livelihood to a significant percentage of local villagers in various unskilled and skilled jobs (such as guards, guides, cooks, waiters, drivers, etc.). The Forest Management Department seems to have hardly done anything to explore strategies to improve the existing livelihood or alternative sources of some. Rather it got more rigid and speculative about their settlement inside the BTR. As a result, intense conflict was prevalent in these villages between the forest department officials and the dwellers.

Furthermore, by the Act of 1988, the WBFD promoted JFM, which allowed local people conditional access to collecting timber for family use but not for commercial selling. Thus, timber that grows substantially in these areas could not be sold, killing another major source of livelihood. The villagers, who were known to be peace loving and benign in the past, felt that the Forest Department had harassed, and subjugated them to inhumanly conditions, even though for long periods of time they had assisted the officials in forest conservation, plantation, development and protection. A large number of residents was unemployed, suffering and sought non-forest work. The villagers have become extremely anti-Forest Department, relations were at an all-time low, and continuing cases of shootings, punishments and attempted evictions were rampant. For example, in the BTR (where the 28-mile Buxa Road village under study is situated), a public hearing was conducted in April 2005 (NESPON 2005) by the Executive Chairman of West Bengal State Legal Services Authority, and it reported (Para 26, NESPON 2005) that 'The Forest department has adopted coercive methods to compel the forest dwellers to leave their dwelling place...'. 'Tortures and atrocities are being perpetrated by the officials /employees of the forest department upon the forest dwellers'. This report further confirms coercive strategies used by forest officials to drive the villagers out of their age-old habitats in the forest.

Interestingly, at times there were cases of organised crime by poaching of animals and cutting of commercial wood, as well as by attacking and killing of Forest Department personnel by gangs. However, while the above events were significant, the local politics and its influence on people created a grievous problem: the gradual usurping of power by the elected party by an oligarchy of leaders and their local associates to decide on every local issue. It affected local governance, medication and health, sanitation facilities, etc. This oligarchic control through party cadres (during left government) still continues even after the political regime change. Unabated exploitation of forest dwellers appears to continue even under the new political regime.

However, if the Forest Department wanted to help people, it could have always employed labourers from these villages for a variety of tasks such as road repair, road making and sericulture operations under MNREGA, which unfortunately was less known and not fully used to benefit these poor forest dwellers. Workers could have also been employed for departmental construction work, e.g., building bridges, culverts and causeways to supplement their income and scanty resources of livelihood and sustainability. Unfortunately, the local bosses never thought on these lines leaving the tribals to their fate.

The researcher is constrained to comment that till now the efforts to improve the chances of livelihood of these marginalised people that were undertaken by various

ANNEXURE 1



Source: Butia Basti (BTR), Alipurduar.

ANNEXURE 2



Source: Community Development, Jayanti, BTR.

Sumita Sarkar

ANNEXURE 3



Source: Jayanti Village 1, BTR.

ANNEXURE 4



Source: Jayanti Village 2, BTR.

ANNEXURE 5



Source: River bed, Jayanti, BTR.

ANNEXURE 6



Source: Village Haat (Market), Jayanti, BTR.

governmental agencies have yielded a negligible effect. The schemes and legislation aimed at empowering these people when implemented resulted more in dispossessing of whatever scanty resources they had. Their tragic situation continues in spite of change of the political powers and local leaders in the state. The malaise of keeping them marginalised and below sustenance is deeply entrenched in the system and routed in the psyche of the powerful people in that area. All efforts by the centre, state and NGOs so far have failed to uplift these people from below subsistence level existence sums up in brief of researcher's observations.

REFERENCES

- Banerjee, A. (2007).** 'Joint Forest Management in West Bengal', in Springate-Baginski and Blaikie (eds), *Forests People and Power*, London, Earth scan.
- Bulletin of Cultural Research Institute 1997, Vol. 22(1), pp.1–5.
- FSI (2009).** 'State of India's Forest Report', Dehra Dun, FSI.
- Gadgil, M. and Guha, R. (1995).** 'Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India', Delhi, Routledge.
- Ghosal, S. (2011).** Importance of Non Timber Products in Native Household Economy, *Journal of Geography and Regional Planning*, vol.4 (3), P: 159-168.
- GoWB (2001).** Census http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_westbengal.pdf
- Harriss, J. (2006).** 'Notes on a Historical Institutional Approach to the IPPG Agenda.' Discussion Paper No. 1, IPPG at: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/IPPG/Sanders> 2006
- IPPG Discussion Paper (2010).** Institution for Pro-Poor Growth (IPPG), Madhu Sarin with Oliver Springate-Baginski, Discussion Paper Series, Number Forty Five , July 2010
- Magistrate Report (1989).** West Bengal Government, Jalpaiguri District.
- Ministry of Environment and Forest Report 1999–2000, Chapter 9.
- Sanders, E. (2006).** 'Historical Institutionalism' in R.A.W. Rhodes, S.A. Binder and B.A. Rockman, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*, pp. 39–55, Oxford, Oxford University Press,
- UNDP (2004).** West Bengal Human Development Report, Delhi, UNDP.