Radical Politics and Environmentalism against Taungya in Dooars

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The mainstream paradigm of understanding grass-root environmentalism in India as “environmentalism of the poor” might be challenged by an alternative prototype forest movement in the Bengal Dooars prior to the Chipko movement. It was fought against the exploitative design of ecosystem governance under the taungya method of artificial regeneration as invented by colonial foresters during the British rule. The movement is historic and mostly relevant in its radical gesture against ecological exploitation through inclusive technique of community involvement in the top-down management of forest resources.

The Chipko movement is commonly appreciated as the starting point of the environmental movement in post-colonial India. Ranged between 1973 and 1980, it initially started against the “blatant injustice” of allotment of ash trees for commercial purpose by the forest department instead of providing these to the peasants for making their agricultural implements. The resistance later turned its attention to wider environmental concerns like protection and management of forests by the communities against commercial forestry and recourse to environmentally and socially just “alternative technologies” against industrial-urban orientation of the modern development process (Guha 1989: 152-84). The movement gave impetus to a series of popular protests throughout the country around ecological issues and inspired the intellectuals and academics to conceptualise Indian environmentalism as the “environmentalism of the poor” which refers to the struggle of the local communities against “partial or total dispossession” from their resource base by the commercial-industrial interests while their “own patterns of utilisation were (and are) less destructive of the environment” (Guha and Martinez-Alier 2000: 5). While not underestimating the practical and theoretical contribution of Chipko, its conventional position as the pioneer environmental movement might be challenged by a historical movement of the forest villagers in Dooars of North Bengal. The movement started in 1967 and unlike Chipko it was not a result of “ecological distribution conflicts” but emanated from the exploitative design of natural resource governance through co-option of the forest dwellers. It was indebted to the radical peasants and workers' movement in Bengal and was essentially inspired by Subhash Chandra Bose’s ideals, techniques and nationalist spirit of struggle. The movement is mostly relevant in its focus against ecological exploitation while going beyond the paradigm of distributive justice and principle of recognition, particularly when newer inclusive techniques of ecological exploitation through collaboration or cooperation of the ecosystem people are being employed in the management of forest resources.

Advent of Taungya

The Dooars Valley in Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal, known as the gateway to Bhutan and the north-eastern states of India, and which stretches from the Teesta River on the west to the Sankosh River on the east was the birthplace of this historic movement. British intervention in the Dooars forest in 1866 and the simultaneous introduction of systematic forestry, which began in India after 1857 was the ecological impetus to this movement. In
Dooars like in other parts of Bengal initially the forest was under the revenue department and remained open for “indiscriminate felling”. After 1874 with the creation of the forest department the forest tracts became “reserved” and were divided into Jalpaiguri and Buxa forest divisions with the Torsa River as the border separating them (Karlsson 1997: 97-99). The colonial model of systematic extraction of timber from reserved forests in the region for construction of railway sleepers to tea boxes and warships to office panelling facilitated the rise of resource production of particular timber species and its preservation. Fire prevention thus became the main concern of forest conservancy in Dooars especially to protect the sal (Shorea robusta) with the objective of keeping other biotic influences like grazing out of the identified forest tract. However, this negatively affected the practice of so-called scientific forestry and soon it was found that the prescribed system of management of sal was not yielding the desired result in Jalpaiguri and Buxa divisions due to different forest conditions as compared to the other regions of the country (Sivaramakrishnan 2000: 73). In this high rainfall zone the prevention of fire led to the tremendous undergrowth of a new semi-evergreen species which crowded old sal trees and severely impeded the growth of new sal seedlings (Karlsson 1997: 108).

Against this backdrop a radical solution was found by the then British foresters working in Dooars like Hart, E O Shebbeare and JWA Grieve who argued in favour of introduction of clearing the land by fire after clear-felling the forest tract for artificial regeneration of sal plants. This new method originated from the practices of the shifting cultivators rather than scientific knowledge and had been used by Dietrich Brandis in regeneration of teak in the Burmese Highland where it was known as taungya meaning hill (taung) cultivation (ya). In this system the woody plant component was burnt to improve soil fertility and plantations were established in the cleared forestland (Nair 1993: 75). The introduction of taungya in Dooars reinforced the necessity for restructuring the forest village system as a whole because under the new system skilled labour which knew the technique of slash and burn was required. Hence, the indigenous shifting cultivators like Rava, Mech or Garo whom the British forester threw out of the forests earlier in the fire prevention regime were back in the newly established forest villages. In these newly created taungya villages the residents were allowed to raise agricultural crops for two years in clear-felled coupes between the lines of forest plantation. As soon as the crops grew to shade the space between the tree seedlings, the villagers had to discontinue cultivation and move to a new site of plantation.

Along with plantation, the villagers were involved in associated weeding, cleaning, thinning operations and had to save the plantation from fire and grazing hazards for four to five years. In exchange they were entitled to certain privileges and facilities granted by an annual agreement or bond with the forest department like free timber and other implements for facilities granted by an annual agreement or bond with the years. In exchange they were entitled to certain privileges and facilities granted by an annual agreement or bond with the

the historic movement put an end to this exploitative exercise of production forestry.

**Political Ecology of Exploitation**

Taungya achieved striking success from the viewpoint of forest management as it successfully turned the destructive practice of shifting cultivation into a method of regeneration where natural regeneration has failed due to locational peculiarities in the ecosystem. It was low cost due to the free labour supply in forest plantations. Considering its success, anthropologists perceived taungya either as a revolution in the environmental history of the Dooars (Karlsson 1997) or as a site for recognition of the local forestry knowledge under the colonial framework of scientific forestry (Sivaramakrishnan 2000). These approaches, however, focused implicitly or explicitly on the structural arrangement of cooperation as a hallmark of the system where the forest department accommodates both the shifting cultivators and their skill in the collaborative framework of natural resource management and extends certain privileges and facilities to them in lieu of their service for forest regeneration. But, from the viewpoint of everyday praxis those assessments on taungya have failed to understand the political ecology of exploitation inherent as an essential property of the system where the much projected vocabulary of cooperation has been transformed into a mechanism of usurpation.

Under the taungya, no customary rights of the forest dwellers were recognised in the region. The forest villagers were denied a choice in the matter of field crops they were entitled to cultivate in between plantations. They did not have any authority to choose the species to be planted and there was no scope for negotiation with the forest department relating to the facilities and privileges usually offered to them. The forest villagers had to sign an agreement with the department to work 90 days free of wages and up to 275 days on meagre daily wages without any arrangement for their children’s education, drinking water and supply of working implements. All the members of the family, including the women and children were made to work without any remuneration. In some cases, when the villagers were granted homestead lands under the system, prolonged or permanent occupancy of the land was impossible because they had to shift to new locations after every plantation cycle. Hence all those initiatives for incorporation of those useful indigenous tribes and recognition of their knowledge were nothing but to fulfill the gap of the colonial knowledge and practice of ecosystem management to cherish the empire’s interests and purposes.

The political ecology of exploitation under taungya involved both the ecosystem and its people. The first kind of exploitation manifested in the choice of principle timber species like sal, teak, etc, for regeneration as well as conservation at the cost of multisppecies forest ecosystem which eventually encouraged the monocultural plantations by destroying the diversity of the forestland. The next type of exploitation was that of the service of those ecosystem people in order to extract values from nature to serve the ruling interest. The mechanism of a co-option worked successfully behind the usurpation of their service. First, villagers were encouraged to do intercropping which contributed to the
preparation of land involving the associated process of weeding, cleaning and burning for forest plantation without being paid. Second, protection of the plantation from the attack of wild animals automatically took place with the initiative of the villagers to save their own crops. Third, the system of uninterrupted, compulsory and free labour in lieu of granting certain facilities made the foresters free from headache to carry out their managerial success in forestry operation. The nature of exploitation under the system was beautifully exposed by a former Inspector General of Forests in India in a report compiled for Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations:

In the taungya, the emphasis has always been placed on the success of the forest planting, more particularly on establishing a forest crop at the least possible cost. … The system is frankly exploitative in concept and operation and cashes upon the needs of the landless and poor people to serve its own ends. The much vaunted incentives are only a cloak for uninhibited exploitation, as the savings affected by the Forest Department are many times more than the expenditure incurred on elementary conveniences provided to the working force (Seth 1981: 34-35).

This ecological exploitation in taungya became severe after Independence due to an inept and corrupt bureaucratic atmosphere. The villagers were even deprived of their bona fide entitlements which they earlier enjoyed under the colonial regime. The first onslaught came in the form of denial of nominal wages for extra work beyond 90 days. Earlier the forest villagers were paid Rs 1.50 per day for additional work between 90 and 275 days. After Independence, they were forced to finish all the works within 90 days by the lower forest officials. Simultaneously, there was continuous threat of eviction if anyone failed to finish his assigned work within 90 days even due to illness. This denial of entitlement became regularised along with ill-treatment and torture by the forests officials and staff like the beat officer, range officer and forest guards. They often asked for free paddy, milk, ghee and fish from the people and forced people to do free labour in the homes of the officials. Moreover, they misbehaved with and insulted the forest villagers. The problem intensified further with the increase in population. Despite this there was no initiative by the department to accommodate those second generation settlers under the taungya who stayed in the forest villages without any agreement with the department. These second generation settlers were deprived of landholdings and other entitlements like free firewood, grazing, intercropping, etc. Many villagers stayed in the premises of their relatives who were agreement holders. However, their aspirations and growing discontent were not crystallised into a struggle until the peasant and workers struggle took a decisive turn during the 1950s and 1960s in the region.

**Radical Politics**

As integral parts of the social life, environmental issues are shaped in the context of larger socio-economic processes. Due to constant dialogue among different spheres of life, environmental movements often coincide with other forms of struggle and vice versa. In the context of the Dooars, though the radicalism of this forest movement was greatly inspired by the ideals and techniques of Subhash Chandra Bose it also got an impetus from the left-radical traditions of workers’ and peasants’ struggles in Bengal which started on the eve of Independence in the region. There is no denying that movements like the Tebhaga movement, Berubari movement, Food movement and the Naxal Baris movement in the Dooars and the adjoining districts of North Bengal prepared the radical atmosphere as a whole but the single and most important contribution behind the radicalism of the historic forest movement against taungya perhaps was credited to the tea workers’ movement in Dooars which had its direct bearing upon the awakening of mass consciousness in the forest villages. In the 1950s and 1960s leftist trade unions in tea gardens organised movements on many different issues, including low wages, heavy workload, low qualities of ration and irregularity in the bonus, provident fund, etc.4 The struggle and success of the tea workers, particularly in the 1955 Bonus Movement left a considerable impact on the psyche of the forest villagers and helped to initiate the struggle. The obvious reason was the multiplicity of interaction between tea gardens and forests on several counts, almost similar characteristics of the ecosystem (as most of the tea gardens found their place in the forest fringe area) and some common climatic and geospatial hazards like flood, cyclone, elephant attacks, etc. All these factors contributed to the favourable conditions for continuous interaction between forest villagers and tea garden workers that led to the sharing of their problems and experiences of life. This sharing even turned into learning from each other for mutual benefit.

Despite great inspiration from the tea workers’ struggle, the final ground for the movement was prepared with the formation of the first United Front (UF) government in 1967 in West Bengal. The UF government in its 18-point programme recognised the legitimate rights to form unions by the employees of all categories, including workers and peasants. The pro-labour policy of the government was anticipated with the legitimising of the gherao (surrounding an official in protest) by the then Labour Minister Subodh Banerjee (Ghosh 1981: 63-68). This unique technique of protest was adopted extensively throughout the struggle against taungya.

**Shaping the Resistance (1967-68)**

Ramesh Roy, a ration dealer at Hasimara took the initiative to organise the forest villagers with the help of the Forward Bloc (FB) district leadership at Jalpaiguri. Prominent among them were Binoy Bhowmick, Nirmal Bose, Satyajyoti Sen, Mukulchandra Sanyal and Sudhanshu Kumar Majumder, who were the products of middle class radicalism in Bengal and had imbibed the ideals of Subhash Chandra Bose during the freedom struggle. In October 1967 Ramesh Roy and his followers started their first campaign at Kodal Basty followed by Godamdbari, Menda Bari, Holapara and other forest villages under the Coch Behar forest division. Though the resistance started at Kodal Basty it registered its first success at Godamdbari where the villagers successfully resisted the eviction initiative of 29 forest villagers, who were the
second generation settlers and had no agreement with the department. Following the massive agitation against the beat and range officer at Godamdbri along with frequent gheraos, Roy was arrested and spent 15 days in jail. Despite the fall of the UF government in November, the success of Godamdbri quickly spread to other parts of the Dooars and by the beginning of 1968 the villagers from different divisions started to contact Roy. He had already organised a group of volunteers to carry forward the struggle. The most well known of them were Emanuel Kujur, Nikuddin Kujur, Jogen Narjinary, Sarba Singh Lama, Khudiram Pahan and Harman Singh. The governor Dharma Vira came to Hasimara around the same time and nearly 1,000 forest villagers under the leadership of Roy organised a protest rally and met the governor in a deputation. In that deputation forest villagers for the first time raised their voice against taungya and demanded that it be abolished immediately. Taking the momentum of the movement into account and the fact that the forest villagers were peasants and workers both, the organisation for the movement was formed in the first half of 1968 namely the North Bengal Forest Workers and Jaigir Cultivators Union (NBFWJCU). The NBFWJCU built up their stronghold quickly throughout the Dooars with the formation of village level committees which carried out gheraos and other agitational programmes. The movement was successful in resisting the departmental eviction measures at Godamdbri. This resulted in annihilating the villagers’ fear of the forest guards and other officials and they started talking against the department openly while registering their protest against all sorts of injustice. As a consequence the department failed to renew the annual agreement which was considered to be the backbone of taungya. Though the movement lost its momentum a little in the wake of the state’s assembly elections, and particularly after the devastating flood of October 1968, which paralysed both the activities of administration and the unions, it regained vigour when the UF came to power on 25 February 1969.

**Protect Forest People (1969-71)**

The UF was a crucial part of the second UF and led the voices of the movement to the orbit of power. As a result, in its 32 point programme, the UF included the issue of protecting forests and forest dwellers as an important political objective of the government for the first time in the history of West Bengal and perhaps in the history of India too. Point no 3(c) stated that “The UF Government will pay due attention to preservation of forests. It will look to the legitimate interests of the people who live in forest areas and depend on forests for their livelihood.” This positive approach encouraged the forest villagers to carry on their struggle. The movement immediately spread to different villages under Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Buxa divisions with the emergence of a new group of leaders like Jogen Rava, Lagrus Orao, Avilak Thakur, Prem Chand Lakra, Sanchu Munda, etc. Several new village committees were formed while creating women and youth brigades where the former acted as a shield against police atrocities in each demonstration and the latter were responsible for mobilising people around a particular agitational programme and maintaining a network of information. The routine departmental work was virtually paralysed. The lower grade officials and forest guards who earlier enjoyed tremendous authority became powerless. In some cases, the movement took a violent turn. However, in the middle of 1969, the NBFWJCU prepared the historic 17 point charter of demands and placed it before the minister of forests in Calcutta. The charter included almost all aspects like the abolishment of taungya, introduction of wages of Rs 3 per day per head, permanent settlement of forest villagers with 15 bighas of arable land per family, introduction of panchayat in the forest villages among others. The then forest minister Bhobotosh Soren convened a tripartite meeting at Writers Building in the presence of delegates of the NBFWJCU and the principal chief conservator of forests on 15 October 1969. A resolution was passed for the introduction of wages of Rs 2.50 per day, allotment of a fund in the next budget for improving the livelihood conditions of the villagers, etc. Besides, several issues like land, panchayat and irrigation were put under active consideration of the administration. Though the resolution was a remarkable success as it put the stamp on the discontinuation of taungya with the recommendation for introducing wages it put the issue of land under the purview of the divisional forest officer (DFO), and did not discuss the matter of unemployed forest villagers.

The situation became grave when even after a month following the resolution no government order was issued by the department to introduce wages in forestry operations. Consequently, the beat officers/rangers and even DFO’s refused to pay wages despite being shown a copy of the resolution. The executive committee of the NBFWJCU convened an urgent meeting and called for an indefinite strike in all the divisions of Dooars in the winter of 1969. Despite initial opposition from the department and several confrontations with the departmental contractors the historic strike continued for more than 18 months until the taungya system was brought to an end.

Amidst the strike in 1970 the movement took a new turn. It started exerting pressure on the DFOs to settle the issue of land. In Jalpaiguri and Buxa divisions, the DFOs placed the proposal before the union of providing 2.5 acre of land, i.e., 7.5 bigha in accordance with their working plan. It was a demoralising proposal because it was half of the demand for 15 bigha and even less than the earlier regime of forest management. In this context, the union placed an alternative demand for three bigha for the non-agreement holders and the existing amount of land for the forest villagers. However, this was refused by the department. There was no option before the union but to forcibly occupy forestlands. The land reform programmes of the second UF government acted as a catalyst in the process. Hence under the leadership of the movement villagers started occupying vacant land in almost all the divisions and new settlements were established like Bala Para, Naya Basty, and Dima Basty along with the occupation of forestland adjacent to existing villages. Finally the deputy secretary, Government of West Bengal issued an order introducing wages according to the resolution and providing 2.5 acre to each “genuine forest villager”. Importantly it asked the department to regularise encroachment of land by the forest villagers on or before 28 July 1970 and to take stern action against any encroachment of land after the due date even if it meant taking help from the police. However, the department officials at the division level who
were annoyed with the villagers used the order as an instrument to punish them. Accompanied by the police force they claimed that the occupation of land had taken place after 28 July but there was stiff opposition by the villagers. These officials also began employing outside labour under forest contractors in forestry plantations, which was earlier the sole area of activity of the forest villagers. In 1971, this led to several clashes both between the outside labourers and forest villagers and between the department contractor and the forest villagers. The clash took a violent turn at Gossaihat under Jalpaiguri division. When in the last week of May 1971 the department sponsored contractor from Gairkata started plantation with the help of outside labour near Gossaihat thousands of forest villagers from there, Mela and Khuklung forest villages marched to the plantation site under the leadership of Prem Chand Lakra and Sanchu Munda. They assaulted the contractor and women volunteers put a chain of shoes around his neck. He was forced to sit on a donkey and taken in procession to Khuntimari Beat nearly five km away from the place. They shouted slogans against the department and ransacked the beat office and asked the outside labour to leave the worksite. The department lodged a first information report (FIR) against the two prominent leaders of the movement along with some other villagers. On 10 June 1971 the police from Dhubguri police station went to Gossaihat to arrest these leaders.

The news of Lakra and Munda’s arrest spread rapidly and ignoring the stormy weather villagers assembled to force their leaders’ release. To disperse the mob the police started firing in which five villagers were killed. The police arrested a number of villagers and took them to the Dhubguri police station and produced before the Jalpaiguri court on 11 June 1971. The arrested persons got bail within a month and a few years later the union won the case which freed them from all charges. However, the martyrdom of the five villagers, namely, Ajman Rava, Jetha Rai, Mongra Orao, Sadhu Orao and Chhandu Orao had a tremendous impact on the overall political atmosphere. Within a couple of days, a deputation was sent to the Jalpaiguri district magistrate and several processions were held at Jalpaiguri and Alipurdur. The state leadership of the FB demanded immediate introduction of wages and abolition of departmental oppression and exploitation, compensation for the family of the martyrs and punitive action against the police and forest department. Deputy Chief Minister Bijoy Singh Nahar convened a meeting with the union leaders at Writers Building for quashing of terms and conditions under the heinous agreement of taungya and consequently Rs 3 per day was introduced along with the consideration of other demands like six-hour work. Moreover, the government agreed that the villagers would not be evicted from the land they occupied. In this way, the movement finally brought the taungya system to an end and a new era of forest governance began in North Bengal. Indeed it was the dawn of people’s power in the forest domain and which led the movement into another phase of struggle.

**Drive Out Corruption, Save Forest (1972-76)**

The later phase of the movement led by the NFIPFWCU started in 1972 with the oath taking in front of the Martyr’s Monument at Gossaihat. The oath was to wage a struggle against the practice of cutting down unauthorised and young trees by dishonest forest officials and corrupt contractors in the wake of commercial forestry. The movement raised the slogan – *Chor Hatao, Jangal Bachao* (Drive out the thief and save the forests). Several corrupt forest officials were caught red-handed and illicitly cut logs were recovered by the villagers under the leadership of the union. Village patrolling and motivation camps were started as a part of the struggle in different divisions. As a reaction the department started forceful eviction of the forest villagers, with the help of the Central Reserve Police Force during the Emergency in 1975. The union moved the Kolkata High Court in 1976 against the eviction. Finally, with the injunction from the high court (HC) the department stopped the process and the final verdict of the HC in 1979 stopped the recurrent eviction drives of the department in the North Bengal forest villages. Nevertheless, the movement was not successful in stopping corruption. The forest villagers accused Parimal Mitra the first forest minister in the Left Front in 1977 of opening the flood gates of corruption in Dooars and who was allegedly involved in illegal trade and encouraged both the contractors and forest officials to cut down trees. Despite this, the movement continued to inspire the forest dwellers in North Bengal. The Orange Orchard resistance in Buxa hills during 1993-94, the introduction of the panchayat movement during 1998 and other movements throughout the 1990s got an impetus from this historic movement. The legacy of the movement continues in the ongoing forest rights’ movement which has started since 2001 under the leadership of the National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers (NFFPWFW). The senior most regional convener Lal Singh Bhujel happens to be the proud disciple of Ramesh Roy. More importantly what the other resistances including the present one owes to that pioneering struggle is the method of empowering forest people through movements, which are diametrically opposite to the many projected paradigms of participation under the imposed mechanism of forest management in the name of forest protection or afforestation programmes throughout the country.

**Impact of Subhash Chandra Bose**

No account of the movement would be complete without remembering the effect of Bose’s philosophy of action on the struggle against ecological exploitation. Nirmal Bose who introduced Ramesh Roy to Bose’s ideals was a by-product of the middle class radicalism in Bengal during the freedom movement when Jalpaiguri was one of the most important centres of struggle in North Bengal. In 1939 Bose’s visit to Jalpaiguri as the president of the All India Congress Committee to attend Bengal Provincial Congress inspired a large section of the youth to carry forward his ideals most of whom joined the FB when it was formed at Jalpaiguri in 1942. Nirmal Bose played a pioneering role along with others in the freedom struggle led by the FB in the district which continued even in the post-independence period. He along with the district leadership of the FB extended their full support to the forest villagers’ movement. In Netaji’s plan of action the “Indian Struggle” of the party would stand for the interests of the masses like peasants, workers, etc, against the vested interests and for the complete political and economic liberation.
of the Indian people (Bose 1981: 349). One of the major demands of the movement in its 17-point charter was to establish panchayats in the forest villages, which would have been inspired by Bose’s programmes for “social reconstruction” to “build up a new social structure assuming the village communities of the past, that were ruled by the village ‘Panch’ and will strive to break down the existing social barriers like caste” (ibid: 349-50). Besides the ideals, the movement was greatly indebted to Bose’s technique of “active resistance” what he viewed as the only method to overthrow the unjust system. Bose was a critic of the Gandhian technique of passive resistance which could reform but would fail to contribute to the revolutionary transformation. Following the method of “active resistance” the movement took on a militant character in the form of gheraoas, strikes, etc. in order to bring down the exploitative regime of forest governance. Further, one of the most important reasons behind the spread of the movement was its identification with Bose. During my fieldwork, the forest villagers often told me “earlier we were the member of Revolutionary Socialist Party but after that when the party of Subhash Chandra Bose came with its anti-taungya standpoint; we joined it to end the oppression and exploitation of the department.” Villagers often called Ramesh Roy, seen as the bearer of Subhash Chandra Bose’s ideals as “Roy Babu” and were inspired by his charismatic leadership and selfless pursuit of politics. This was an example of what Subhash Bose described as “to merge one’s individual consciousness in mass consciousness” (Bose and Bose 2004: 19). Roy was familiar as the “barefoot leader” of the movement as he walked barefoot mile after mile through the rough forest patches to organise masses in the extreme climatic conditions. Roy believed in the simplicity of life and was living in an ordinary hut at Rajabhatkahwa with his wife and children where he had shifted from Hasimara for the cause of the movement. Though after 1977 with the coming of the Left Front into power a number of left leaders managed to live better. Roy retained his frugal lifestyle until his death in 2008. The movement which sacrificed the lives of five forest villagers in the struggle against taungya upheld Bose’s message in the “Political Testament”. He said,

Forget not that the greatest curse for a man is to remain a slave. Forget not that the grossest crime is to compromise with injustice and wrong. Remember the eternal law: You must give life, if you want to get it. And remember that the highest virtue is to battle against inequity, no matter what the cost may be (ibid: 197).

The Alternative Paradigm
The historic forest movement in Dooars which took place before the Chipko movement represents the alternative paradigm within Indian environmentalism both in its content and form. The movement broadly falls within the left-radical tradition of struggle since it conforms to the general standpoint of the left regarding “a positive and proactive role of the state in the sustainable harnessing of local resources” (Prasad 2004: 14) and greater access and control of the ecosystem people over the natural resource base (Gadgil and Guha 2000: 120). However, it differs considerably from the conventional Marxist position in its approach and looks for inspiration to the nationalist ideals of Netaji. As a movement of the ecosystem people it adheres to the national interest while fighting against the exploitation of both nature and people. This can be seen in the union’s statement before the Kolkata HC which “endorsed the policy of effective implementation of policy of afforestation in North Bengal to save forests in national interest and also in the interest of saving national animals”. The movement was not organised to fight against any specific class enemy but the focus was essentially against the system of praxis and remained consistent in the struggle against taungya as well as corruption. Against taungya the main demands were abolishing of the slavery with its “outdated terms and conditions” and against corruption the demand was to get rid of the practice of handing over the responsibility of logging to outside contractors who are unconcerned about the degradation of forests. The movement explicitly or implicitly rested upon the holistic view of organic interdependence between the ecosystem and the people where protection of forests implied protection of those very people from all sorts of suffering and vice versa. This holistic underpinning led to emphasis on fair and just governance of forest and its people with due recognition of the people’s organisation in the overall process.

The movement posed a challenge to the one-sided understanding of the nature of grass-roots environmentalism in India as it was represented by the “environmentalism of the poor”. It showed that environmentalism in India did not always arise out of conflict over natural resources but often emanated from the ecological exploitation through co-option under an apparent cooperative gesture of the state agencies in the management of ecosystem. The idea of “ecological distribution conflicts” could not capture the inclusive technique of domination over the ecosystem people and usurpation of their contribution to the ecosystem to further the top-down agenda of resource management. The “environmentalism of the poor” therefore, rested on the inadequate criteria of characterisation of the struggle of the eco-system people against the oppressive system of resource management. Secondly, along with the struggle of the ecosystem people against all forms of displacement and unequal access to resources the movement is equally critical about the pseudo recognition of their role merely at the local level of implementation in lieu of providing certain incentives while not acknowledging their authority in the arena of policymaking. Thirdly, like the “environmentalism of the poor” the movement was not limited only to the demand for fair distribution of ecological goods and recognition of rights of the ecosystem people but also demanded a fair system of harnessing natural resources free from corruption and a fair opportunity of employment of those people in the process of regeneration, felling and maintenance of forests. Finally, the movement raised the fundamental question of ascribing a misleading phrase to the struggle of the ecosystem people in India as “environmentalism of the poor” which restricted the understanding of their struggle merely around the issues of livelihood and subsistence while undermining the issues of their dignity against humiliation and their desire for a better life against exploitation, which might work as a motive force behind the struggle. Further, the issues which the movement upholds are still relevant in the context of natural resource governance not only at...
the regional level but national and global level. Notwithstanding certain progressive legislations like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Forest Rights Act, 2006 at the national level, the problems of unemployment and land rights are yet to be resolved, particularly when the conservation regime has choked the regular employment opportunities of these people and globalisation has taken away their mineral rich forestlands. Villagers have accused the contract system of jeopardising forest preservation through irregular cleaning, thinning, weeding, etc. It often deprives them of their legitimate wages guaranteed under the Minimum Wage Act. The movement reveals further the politics of co-option through the inclusive technique of incorporating people's knowledge and workforce, which continue to exploit the ecosystem people under the disguise of collaborative or participatory resource management at the global level. This exploitation hinders the organic exchange between life forms and results in defacement of that relation. The lesson that the movement has left behind is to build up resistance against the exploitation, to find more democratic space for negotiation, alteration and challenging of the entire process of ecosystem governance for the sake of both the forest and its people while innovating new ways to keep the process of organic exchange alive and free.

NOTES
1 British annexed “Bengal Doors” in 1864-65 from Bhutanese rule and the boundary separating Bhutan hills from the Doors were finally demarcated with the creation of a new district, namely, Jalpaiguri in 1869. For details see Karlsson (1997), pp 92-93.
3 For further details see agreement between forest villagers of Bhutri forest village and the Government of West Bengal as on 1 January 1966, DFO Jalpaiguri division.
4 For a detail account of tea workers movement see Sharit (1981).
8 Karlsson (1997) viewed the movement as a Forward Bloc Movement in his sketchy account of about merely three pages, which are based upon his interview with a single volunteer of the movement, namely, Abhilak Thakur. The account is utterly incomplete in its representation and contains serious flaws about incidents of Gossaihat and Bala. In this respect in my interview with Abhilak Thakur he admitted that his speech was misrepresented by Karlsson probably due to the language problem. Moreover, Karlsson failed to grasp the significance and context of the movement to a great extent.
9 To get a fair picture about the ongoing forest movement in North Bengal see Jha Sourish (2010).

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