

Of Forest and Forest Dwellers

Subhendu Dasgupta

Land is the major source of earning of the forest dwellers of the Buxa Tiger Reserve Forest. The forest dwellers were allotted land within the forest by the forest authorities during the British rule. The land was given in exchange of labour for forest work from the people who had been settled in the forestland by the forest department. Land was allotted both for cultivation and hutments. And thus the forest villages (*banabastee*) were created. This system has been continued in the period after independence, and has also been recognized by the forest department of the post-independence government. The cultivation was mainly of subsistence nature, basically to support the livelihood of the dwellers. Though the settlement of population was done on the basis of agreement between the forest department and the forest people living in the villages, no official paper recognizing the right to land was issued.

The economy of the forest dwellers has come into a critical situation with the declaration of the reserve forest act. At the time of the declaration of protective area, the forest had within it forest villages with cultivation and settlement. After the promulgation of the act these settlements have been declared *illegal*. The forest dwellers, their settlement, the land, the cultivation all have been placed under the threat of eviction. As a result the agricultural economy of the forest dwellers is, at present, facing a serious crisis.

Though in the meantime the population of forest dwellers has increased, no new land has been allotted to them, and land has become fragmented into small plots. The amount of land per family has decreased to an uneconomic level. The available plot of land thus cannot provide for the livelihood of a family. No steps for the improvement of land by the cultivators themselves are allowed by the forest department. Even the usual governmental developmental programmes targeted for the rural people are not allowed to be implemented here. The cultivators are unable to avail of the facilities provided by the banks because the dwellers do not have the official papers recognizing their ownership of land, as needed by the bank officials for the granting of loans. In order to protect their crops from the attacks by elephants, some cultivators have decided to change the cultivation of crops from paddy to bettlenut. This also has not been permitted. This attitude of the forest department towards the forest dwellers, their land, their cultivation and towards the overall agrarian economy has led to a severe crisis of the economy of the forest dwellers. The authority has considered as illegal the historical existence of the agricultural economy of the forest villages, simply by promulgation of an inhuman act.

Another kind of settlement called Fixed Demand Leasehold Land came into existence by an agreement between the forest department and the timber merchants during the British period. They established colonies for migrant labour and employees for their work. These people had been settled in the land at the fringe of the forest against the payment of revenue. After the declaration of the forest protection act the collection of revenue has been stopped and the renewal of the lease has been denied. Like the forest villagers the economic existence of the residents of these villages are at stake.

For the negative land-man ratio prevalent in the area, a family has to depend for their livelihood on a small plot of land. They are not allowed to take any step to improve the land and to increase the production. The governmental support system is absent. Shifting to better produced and protected crops are not allowed. Being under constant threat of eviction from the land it is not possible for the villagers to apply full concentration on cultivation. Under these circumstances the land economy that supports the livelihood of the forest dwellers is in serious crisis.

The second important sector of the economy of the forest dwellers is employment generated by the forest department.

The forest villages were created by the forest department for the ensured supply of labour for forest work. For the commercial use of the forest the British authority took steps of clearing the natural forest and for the plantation of *sal*—a commercial tree. Labour was needed for timber harvesting, raising plantations, fire fighting and other kinds of work related to forests. This need of the forest workers has continued in the post-colonial forestry. However, the magnitude of work has been gradually declining. Forest area has been decreasing; rate of plantation also on the decrease. In the plantation of new trees, the distance between two plants has been increased, and proper care has not been given for nurturing the growth of trees. Moreover, the requirement of labour is being met by the forest department not from local villagers, but through forest contractors. The contractors are not using local labour and are bringing in migrant labour. The temporary migrant labour are paid wages lesser than the amount paid to the local labour. The local forest workers are thus deprived of their employment and earning.

In this respect it has to be pointed out that the scope for alternative employment in this area is very meagre. The former economic operations like, dolomite mining, lifting of boulders from the riverbed, fishing from forest rivers have been banned by governmental declaration. A large number of people engaged in these activities have become unemployed. The small economic activities like, weaving, jute-based and bamboo-based manufacturings are suffering from dearth of market and from lack of necessary state support.

The third significant economic sector of this area is based on non-timber forest products. The forest provides a large range of natural resources. These resources are used for food, medicine, shelter, inputs for manufactured goods, manures,

fuel, fodder etc. These forest resources are utilized by the forest dwellers for their livelihood and lessen the pressure on their family budget. The villagers also sell some of the forest resources in the market as inputs for other manufactured products. Sometimes they themselves produce goods with these resources and sell in the market. In any form the large numbers of non-timber forest products provide economic support to the forest dwellers. With the introduction of the forest protection act the collection and use of non-timber forest products by the forest dwellers have been declared *illegal*. The forest dwellers are now deprived of the facilities extended by the forest resources that they have been enjoying for a long period of time. This has deep-rooted effect on the livelihood of the forest dwellers.

In the situation of economic crisis that has emanated from the non-accessibility to local natural forest resources, a project named 'India Eco Development Programme' has been launched to provide alternative economic facilities created by external sources. It is nothing but a form of much practised village development programme.

In this forest area under the 'India Eco Development Programme', piggery, poultry, milch cattle farm, potato cultivation were introduced. All these projects, alien to the traditional knowledge and practice of the local people, have failed miserably. Further, the committees entrusted to implement the programme did not function properly and allegation of corrupt dealing in project funds became frequent. In summary, the 'India Eco Development Programme' for providing alternative economic opportunities for the livelihood of the forest people has not attained success.

✍✍✍✍