

# Land Tenure and Forest Conservation in the Dooars of the Eastern Himalaya

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Abstract: Reservation of forest land led to the loss of community rights and impoverishment of forest communities in the Dooars of Eastern Himalaya. The Forest Rights Act 2006 is the first piece of legislation meant to undo the historical injustice done to forest communities. However, the manner in which the Forest Rights Act has been implemented raises questions about its role in protecting the livelihood security of forest dwellers. In the Dooars of Jalpaiguri, an argument made for denying community rights is that these forests were reserved from waste land and hence no prior community forest rights existed. This paper argues that a vibrant forest community existed prior to acquisition of these forests, and that "reserving from waste" is a colonial construct. In the Himalayan region, the livelihood needs of forest communities cannot be met from agriculture alone, but also require access to forest commons. Extraction of natural resources may be unsustainable if forests are made an open access resource. We argue that recognition of community property rights in forests can ensure conservation of the resource and also enhance livelihood security among the poor.

**Keywords:** Land rights, property rights, conservation, Forest Rights Act 2006, Dooars, Himalaya, agrarian relations in West Bengal

#### INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is on land tenure and community forest rights of forestdwelling tribal communities in the forests of Jalpaiguri Dooars in Eastern India, and their implications for forest conservation in the region.

The Dooars refer to the narrow stretch of densely forested land along the Indo-Bhutan border. It has distinct eastern and western regions. The Western or Jalpaiguri Dooars lie in the eastern Himalayan region of Jalpaiguri district. This narrow strip of land, measuring 130 km by 40 km, lies between the river Sankhos in the east and the river Tista in the west and forms the northern boundary of the district.

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The tribal economy is based on land, forest and water, and the well-being of tribal people depends on their ability to gain access to and freely enjoy these natural resources. Tribal property rights are therefore associated with land and natural resource rights. In India, rights of tribal communities in forest land have been progressively curtailed since the enactment of the first Forest Act in 1865. Under subsequent forest legislation – in 1878 and 1927 – the forests of the western Dooars were declared reserved forest. All rights enjoyed by the forest communities until that time were either converted to concessions or privileges. As a result, the access of forest-dwelling communities was severely curtailed and such communities declared as encroachers on forest land. Forest dwelling communities had access to certain number of concessions and privileges only upon payment of a fee or the provision of free labour for forest work. Grazing livestock, collecting fodder and wood for fuel were curtailed. The Wildlife Act of 1972 and Forest Conservation Act of 1980 resulted in a further curtailment of rights and also reduced the availability of forest work.

Forest Survey of India (FSI) data for the Eastern Himalaya show that the proportion of open forest to dense forest has gradually increased, indicating a loss of quality with respect to forest cover. Attempts were made by means of decentralising forest management to ensure community participation in conservation programmes, but lack of adequate livelihood opportunities under the programme resulted in a general loss of interest in the programmes among forest communities.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act or simply the Forest Rights Act 2006 is the first piece of forest legislation in India to recognise land tenure security as a key factor for the success of an incentive-based policy with respect to the conservation of forests. The Act has provisions for individual land rights and community property rights, essential to ensure security of land tenure and property rights of the people living in forest villages in India. This does not imply that there is a causal relationship between security of tenure and conservation of biodiversity. The relation between land tenure and forest conservation outcomes is rooted in a complex matrix of social, economic, cultural and political factors. Land is more than a factor of production; it is associated with social, cultural and political values of forest communities (Platteau 2000). Land-use decisions and the valuation of natural resources largely depend on how forest communities perceive land tenure, and not merely on statutory provisions under any law. Security of land tenure enhances the value of natural resources among rural communities and thereby reduces the degradation of forests (Bohn and Deacon 2000).

The question of tenure in forest land cannot be postponed any further, and needs to be resolved especially in regions that are ecologically fragile and have witnessed new pressures from growing populations on natural resources. In India, the Himalayas constitute one such ecologically fragile zone. The forests in Himalaya show considerable difference in the ratio of classed to unclassed forests of the Western and Eastern Himalaya, with the latter region suffering considerable deforestation in recent times (Forest Survey of India 2011). From 1987 to 2011, the period for which data are available from the Forest Survey of India (FSI), the ratio of open to dense forest in the Eastern Himalayan region has increased from 0.19 to 0.56, indicating a gradual depletion in the forest density of the region (Choudhury 2011).

The two northernmost districts of West Bengal, namely Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri, span a collective area of 9376 sq. km (10.6 percent of the area of the State) inhabited by 5,711,709 people (Census of India 2011). Most of the forests of North Bengal are in the reserved category, directly under state ownership. Recorded forest cover in the two districts was 1204 sq. km and 1790 sq. km, respectively (GoWB 2011). The region is characterised by endemic poverty, high migration, rapid population growth, the expansion and proliferation of urban settlements, and high rates of dependence on primary resources, with diminishing common land per capita. Rural households are very dependent on non-commercial energy sources (e. g., collected fuels); the region is also characterised by a scarcity of fodder, and the commercial felling of trees to meet growing urban needs.

### Research Questions and Methodology

The paper addresses the following issues:

- 1. the evolution of the land tenure system in the Jalpaiguri Dooars and its effects on property rights and incentive structures for forest communities;
- 2. forest legislation and forestry practices and their impact on land use and the subsequent degradation of forests in the region;
- 3. the decentralised Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme and its effectiveness in ensuring community participation in forest management in the region; and
- 4. the effectiveness of the Forest Rights Act 2006 in strengthening livelihood security among forest communities.

I have used secondary and primary data for the description and analysis in this paper. The assessment of land tenure, land use and resource degradation in the study region are based on a wide range of forest documents, reports, and policy papers, published and unpublished. The evaluation in this paper of joint forest management and the Forest Rights Act is based on a study of legislation, government notifications and circulars, published reports, and other published articles and books. Disaggregated data on the implementation of joint forest management and the Forest Rights Act are limited. I have tried to fill the gap through field work, using data collected by means of primary surveys over the last few years.

# Land Tenure and Land Use in Sub-Himalayan Regions of Jalpaiguri Dooars

There are no historical records to suggest that, prior to the acquisition of the Bengal Dooars and Terai area by the British, the territory had any elaborate system of revenue administration (Roy 2002). The region is likely to have been covered by dense forest with swidden cultivation (*jhum*) being widely practiced by indigenous communities after clearing forest land. The size of the population was too small to warrant any permanent system of land tenure to extract surplus from this territory. The Gorkhas from Nepal and the Bhutias from Bhutan regularly raided this part of Jalpaiguri district to collect rent from the indigenous forest communities (Mech, Toto, Garo, Rava) and the major agricultural community (Rajbanshi).

The entire Dooars was part of ancient western Kamrup and continued to be so until the middle of the seventh century. From then onwards this region came under the Kamtapur regime, and in 1515 became a hub of the Koch kingdom (Nath 1989). This arrangement came to an end in the 1760s when the Bhutanese army overran this part of the Koch territory. Two Bhutanese governors, Tongsa Penlop and Paro Penlop, were in charge of the eastern and western Dooars respectively (Deb 1984).<sup>1</sup> Under Paro Penlop, the area comprising Goomah, Rephoo and Bhalka was entrusted to Bhutia revenue collectors. A Bhutia officer (Dooar Deo) was in charge of Buxa, the area under present Jalpaiguri forest division was under local Mech chiefs (*mondol*), and the Raikat of Jalpaiguri held the Baikunthapur forest division (Roy 2002).The dominance of this territory by the Bhutanese came to an end in 1865 with the annexation of the Dooars area by the British. They took possession of the rich forest resources and also began to invest in the production of tea. The Government passed the Bhutan-Dooars Act in 1869 and declared this stretch of land "wasteland" and all forest resources government property.

The British were confronted with the question of what the best way to manage this stretch of land – covered with high–value forests and with a small population – would be. The district as a whole was declared a "non–regulation" district, and the land in Dooars constituted a Government estate managed as a ryotwari tract. As a result, all land settlements in the Jalpaiguri Dooars till 1895 were made under the provisions of Act XVI of 1869 and the Waste Land Rules of 1875. In 1875, Act XVI was repealed and Act X of 1859 and Act VI B. C. of 1862 replaced it. In 1898 the Tenancy Act was extended to the temporarily settled area but proviso III of the notification No. 964 T.–R was excluded from its application to all lands previously or subsequently granted under leases for the cultivation of tea or for reclamation under the Arable Waste Land Rules (Census of India 1951). All initial leases granted to the tea estates were for five years. After the expiry of the period and fulfilment of conditions as per the initial lease terms, the second term of lease was extended for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Penlop is a term that refers to temporal rulers or governors.

thirty years to the tea gardens. In later leases, rights related to the grazing of cattle, construction of factories and labour quarters, and the cultivation of tea plantations were settled (Gruning 1911).

A lease, however, did not give the leaseholder the right to sublet or to establish a village weekly market (*hut* or *haat*) without the prior permission of the Deputy Commissioner. The expansion of tea gardens through purchase of cultivable land (*jote*) was restricted and prior permission was required for such expansion. However, a large number of tea gardens had land in excess of area under the tea plantation, land that was either cultivated or under forests.

Even after the enactment of the Forest Act of 1865, the forests of Jalpaiguri district continued to be indiscriminately felled and in practise were virtually "open forests." The first reservation was made in 1879 under the provisions of Forest Act (Act VII of 1878) (GoWB 1971). The Gazette Notification for reservation, issued on January 23, 1879, stated that forests had been reserved from unoccupied waste. In 1890–1, the forests of Jalpaiguri district were surveyed by the old Forest Survey Department and mapped on a scale of 4 inches = 1 mile (1.60 kilometres). These maps were revised and published in 1918–9 by the Surveyor General of India. From 1890 to 1896, the Forest Settlement Officer ascertained rights and a revised notification No. 3147–For, dated July 2, 1895, was issued.<sup>2</sup> By 1951 all the forest area except the Baikunthapur forests measuring 275 sq. km was controlled by the Forest Department. The Baikunthapur forest was held under the Private Forests Act and was under the charge of the Divisional Forest Officer, Jalpaiguri Forest Division (GoWB 2001).

When forests were first reserved in the district it was felt that a moratorium on extraction of forest produce was required to help the regeneration of over-exploited forests. This was never followed in practice; instead, the extraction of fuel for tea estates continued, and by 1893, large-scale exploitation of timber began in this forest (GoB, 1928). Even before the first reservation was made in 1879 in Jalpaiguri Dooars, forest land was being leased out for tea plantations. As early as April 1, 1875, the first lease was granted to Fulbari tea estate and the process of leasing forest land for tea plantation continued till 1933 under the colonial administration (Datta 2001). The production of tea had a gestation period but extraction of fuel for tea production began in 1884. From 1884 to 1890 no big trees were cut, but the free grant of sal for railway sleepers in 1891-2 to Bengal Duars Railways resulted in the extraction of the best timber from the forest (GoWB 1957). The depleted condition of the forests immediately required an action plan, and hence the first Working Scheme for the period 1892–9 was drawn up, which prescribed a so-called "coppice with standards" system.<sup>3</sup> The first proper Working Plan for the period 1898–1905 was published in 1898.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

 $<sup>^{\</sup>scriptscriptstyle 3}$  Coppice is a silviculture system in which new crops are grown from old shoots.

# Evolution of Forest Community and Land Rights in Forest Villages of Jalpaiguri Dooars

The Dooars forest came under British management in 1866 and the first block was reserved in 1879 (GoWB 1971). In the 13 years in between, the forests of Jalpaiguri Dooars were indiscriminately felled by timber contractors, who hired workers from the region to do so. Forest reservation in the Dooars progressed by leaps and bounds after 1879, and, by 1884, all forest in the Dooars was classified as reserved under the provisions of the Indian Forest Act of 1865. Forestry operations in the reserved forests were managed by the Forest Department. The Forest Department viewed the practice of swidden farming by local communities to be a major threat to the success of scientific forestry. On grounds of preventing the loss of forests from fire, agriculture in forest land was prohibited, and the forest–dependent communities were pushed out of reserved lands. Forest–dependent communities had cultivated cotton on shifting cultivation (*jhum*) lands; this was prohibited and they were subsequently permitted only to cultivate jungle land with bushes, shrubs and short trees (*jhar*). Further, during the process of forest demarcation, the settlements of swidden cultivators came to be included within forest limits (Roy 2002).

The Dooars were sparsely populated, and problems of a shortage of a supply of labour arose with respect to forest work and the growing demand for labour from the expanding tea sector. On several occasions the Forest Department had to hire additional workers from neighbouring tea gardens, especially during the slack season on tea estates (March to May). For more skilled work, like sawing, and constructing buildings and bridges, arrangements were often made with labour contractors to obtain labour from Nepal during the winter months (November to March). In forest compartments that were to be opened for exploitation, new roads were constructed by workers from Bihar (*Nunia*) (GoWB 1971).

Cultivators were first allowed to settle on forest lands under the provisions of the *Taungya* Act 1894 (GoB 1928). Under this Act, temporary settlements in the forests were established, generally close to work sites. Forest communities were given plots of land for cultivation and homestead, and permission to keep a small number of draught and milch cattle. They were also permitted to grow fruit in areas where plantations were to be established and between rows once saplings were planted. By 1897, there were 76 forest villages in the forest areas of the Jalpaiguri Dooars. Constant exploitation and hardship led to an exodus of most workers from the forest villages in the Dooars and only few remained after 1902.<sup>4</sup> To arrest the outflow of workers from the forest areas, permanent forest villages were created.

Establishment of permanent forest villages became the new policy, and by 1904, a large number of households were allowed to settle in forest villages. In these villages,

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

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there was no restriction on the size of agricultural holding or the number of cattle per household. Soon foresters found this arrangement to be unsatisfactory, since the benefit derived from forests by the villagers, they believed, was not matched by a commensurate volume of labour supply. Thus, in 1912, rules were framed by the Forest Department to limit the size of each agricultural holding to five acres and to one pair of plough bullocks and two milch cows for each household. As a consequence, a large number of forest dwellers left their settlements and moved out of the forests to settle in tea estates and in the vicinity of cultivable land (*jote*) in neighbouring revenue villages.<sup>5</sup> This mass exodus of forest dwellers seriously threatened forest work, and, subsequently, a new method of labour supply was prescribed.

Under the new method of labour supply, a person from a forest village was designated as the chief (*mondol*) and could enjoy additional benefits as long as he was able to commandeer workers from at least ten registered households from the same village. Each registered household had to sign an agreement with the Forest Department. The title of the agreement was "Agreement for Forest *Jagir* Villages."<sup>6</sup> The term *jagir* in the context of forest villages in Western Dooars is close to the feudal land grant (*jagir*) system that was prevalent in the plains of eastern Nepal until 1952 (Regmi, 1976).

Under this agreement a person could cultivate land in an area specified by the agreement free of rent as service (*jagir*) only so long as he performed certain duties and strictly observed certain rules. The land right was not alienable, and the grantee or his successor was allowed to cultivate the land as long as their services were required by the Forest Department. The tenant and his dependents had to ensure that they were available for a specified number of days to undertake forestry work without payment. In addition, village households needed to be available when called upon for work. The wage rate paid for these additional days of work was much lower than the wage received by workers in cultivable land (*jote*) settlements. The number of additional days and quantum of work to be assigned to each household was prescribed by the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) (GoWB 1957). This system of labour contract was commonly known as the begar system (GoB 1942). A limited usufructuary right to collect wood for fuel and poles, and fodder, for home consumption was allowed to each household. The Divisional Forest Officer also decided the number of cattle each household could keep for ploughing and for milk. Cattle were meant to be stall-fed. Grazing in forest areas was permitted only after paying a fee. Grazing was strictly prohibited in all forest areas closed by order of the Forest Officer. Any trespass by cattle was severely dealt under the Cattle Tresspass Act or Indian Forest Act. Although grazing cattle was restricted for forest village inhabitants, timber merchants were allowed to graze their cart-animals for free (GoB 1928).

Year	Number of forest villages	Number of households	Total cultivable land held by households (acres)
1918-19	16	206	1185
1924	27	367	1599
1948	35	712	3758
1960	30	622	3683
1972	25	431	2552
2008	22	360 (as per 7th WP) 384 (as per	—
		Division record) 436 (as per Range record) 436 (considered in 9th WP)	

 Table 1 Progress of forest settlements in Jalpaiguri forest division, 1918–2008 numbers and acres

Source: Various Working Plans (WP) for Jalpaiguri Forest Division.

The size of settlement in each forest site was determined by sylvicultural objectives. The progress of forest settlements in the Jalpaiguri Forest Division from 1918 to 2008 is shown in Table 1. The area cultivated by forest villagers was much larger than permissible under the agreement. Upon enquiry by the Forest Department, it was found that many households had engaged sub-tenants who cultivated in return for half of the produce (*adhiar*) and cleared land in excess of what was permissible. The chief (*mandal*) and their kin took the largest share of land and virtually became petty owners of cultivable land (*jotedars*).<sup>7</sup>

Such an expansion of forest villages in the Jalpaiguri Dooars was not considered to be commensurate with existing sylviculture requirements, and hence "full control of labour" was prescribed. Four alternatives are provided in the Fifth Working Plan for the Jalapaiguri Forest Division. First, the number of households from which a chief (mondol) had to commandeer labour in order to continue to enjoy his additional privileges was enhanced from 10 to 15 and, in some cases, even 20. Land allowance for permanent cultivation was fixed at 2 acres per household. For each annual clearfelling coupe (coupe is the smallest unit of area of forest land) only two households were permitted to settle permanently. Hill cultivation (taungya) with food crops for two successive years was made compulsory. In effect each household would get four acres annually for crop cultivation. Any excess of any land above the 2-acre limit was immediately resumed and either redistributed or afforested. Any excess population was either shifted to deficit areas or pushed out of the forest. Further, in order to release adequate labour for sylvicultural work, mechanised cultivation and harvesting was prescribed for all agricultural holdings. Villagers could hire machinery free in lieu of additional free labour (begar) services to the Forest Department. Next, permanent cultivation was abolished and households were allowed to cultivate an additional 2 acres of hill cultivation (*taungya*) land each year. If the crop was found

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> *Jote* is a system of land tenure unique to the sub–Himalayan region of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts in Eastern India. The title holder of *jote* land is called a *jotedar*.

to be inadequate then paddy was made available through rations, and the additional cost was recovered by hiring workers out to coupe purchasers (timber contractors) or through additional work by the Forest Department. Finally, it was suggested that permanent cultivation be totally abolished and foodgrain be made available through the Department at a low price (GoB 1942). The necessity for full control of labour in order to ensure adequate surplus or rent from forests was reiterated in subsequent Working Plans of the forest division.

In the rules for the establishment of forest villages it was explicitly stated that forest village dwellers were to be considered tenants–at–will and would be allowed to stay as long as required for forest work.<sup>8</sup> Households identified in excess of the approved strength for a felling series were immediately shifted to deficit areas or were forced to leave the villages in which they lived. Forced eviction and displacements were forced to reduce the extent of wet cultivation and instead take up two acres of new hill cultivation (*taungya*) annually. This change was considered necessary as wet cultivation required more labour than *taungya*, so a reduction of the area under wet cultivation would increase labour supply, and an increase in labour supply would enable the creation of new forest villages in those areas where new rounds of clear felling were to take place.

The first resistance to such exploitation and threats of eviction was made by workers organised by the North Bengal Forest Workers and Jagir Cultivators Union (NBFWJCU) in the late 1960s (Jha 2012). Workers refused to sign the agreement and demanded complete abolition of the system of unfree labour (begar). On October 15, 1969, a tripartite agreement was signed by the North Bengal Forest Workers and Jagir Cultivators Union, the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, and the Government of West Bengal. The provisions of the agreement included a daily wage rate of Rs 2.50, the abolition of unfree labour (begar), and Government budgetary allocations for improving infrastructure in these villages. The new system came to be known as the two-and-a-half rupee system (*dhai-rupaiya-bebasta*) in the forest villages of the Dooars. However, the question of the security of land tenure was not resolved and Forest Department continued to throw out those village residents who had joined the Union and were not registered households. Members of the North Bengal Forest Workers and Jagir Cultivators Union moved the Calcutta High Court and succeeded in getting a favourable verdict in 1979, a verdict that stopped all forms of eviction from the forest villages of the Jalpaiguri Dooars.9

The demand for labour fell after the Forest Conservation Act of 1980. There was also a change in the manner of undertaking plantation work in the forests around this time. The earlier method of plantation was commonly known as "fine dust" (*dhulal*),

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 61.
 <sup>9</sup> Ibid.

in which the area to be planted was ploughed and the soil was levelled and later manured. Once the land was prepared, seeds were spread on the field. Under this method, thinning operations were later required to remove the weaker saplings. From the early 1980s, seedlings were planted in lines at a gap of two to four metres (GoWB 2000). At the same time, the ban on clear felling reduced labour demand because less labour was required for land preparation and thinning operations (Gupta 2005). Income opportunities were severely curtailed and many young people moved out of the forest in search of a livelihood.

The forest villages of the Jalpaiguri Dooars also suffered because of the regular incursion of wild animals, especially elephants, on their agricultural land. Monetary compensation from the state for such losses was inadequate and was difficult to obtain. With the continuous loss of forest cover over the years in the Dooars, this human–animal conflict in the region has become more acute. To supplement the meagre income of villagers, and, more importantly, to check the outflow of labour, households were permitted to cultivate the space between the lines of saplings in plantation coupes (GoWB 2008). This was not a gesture of goodwill from the Forest Department, but a re–introduction of the hill cultivation (*taungya*) method of inter–cropping. The advantage for the Department was that the household would pay more attention to the field, and make more effort to protect the plantation from animal encroachment.

With the initiation of the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme in the 1990s, foresters were adequately empowered to offer additional benefits to villagers in lieu of their cooperation in forestry work, as discussed in the next section.

## Decentralisation of Forest Management and Land Rights

The decentralisation of forest management in India began in 1988. Decentralisation of natural resource management can be a major step towards the conservation of natural resources if the benefits from such decentralisation are not skewed (Fisher 1999).

The Joint Forest Managment (JFM) programme in the Himalayan and sub-Himalayan regions of West Bengal was introduced in 1991, and was subsequently modified in 2004 and 2008. The Joint Forest Management programme was implemented by Forest Protection Committees in territorial forest divisions and by Eco-Development Committees in wildlife forest divisions. Each Forest Protection Committee or Eco-development Committee has an Executive Committee. Beneficiaries were identified by the Divisional Forest Officer in consultation with the Forest and Land Reforms Committee (*Bon–O–Bhumi Sanskar Sthayee Samiti*) of the respective local government body at the block level (panchayat samiti). For each household, joint membership of Joint Forest Management Committee was given to husband and wife. There were several conditions laid down for members to be eligible for usufructuary benefits. For example, a member household had to protect forest, plantation, or wildlife for five years. A member was eligible to collect fallen twigs, grass fodder, flowers, mushroom, seeds, leaves, and any intercrops raised by the Forest Protection Committee. Collection of medicinal plants was allowed only on the basis of an approved micro-plan. All *shorea robusta (sal)* seeds had to be deposited with the West Bengal Tribal Development Co-operative Corporation. Benefits that members were entitled to under the Joint Forest Management programme, as listed in 2004, were as follows:

- 1. for the first 10 years after plantation, members were entitled to 50 per cent of the poles and firewood or net proceeds of sales therefrom;
- 2. from the 11th year onwards, the share mentioned in (i) was reduced to 25 per cent;
- 3. members were entitled to receive one-fourth of firewood and poles or 25 per cent of net sale proceeds from final harvesting; and
- 4. members were eligible to receive 25 per cent of the royalty from sales of boulders.

The Joint Forest Management programme had two professed objectives: first, to recognise the right of local rural communities with respect to decisions over natural resources through the instrument of a micro–plan, and, secondly, to recognise the property rights of the rural community through provision of usufructuary rights to forest–dwellers.

A major shortcoming of the Joint Forest Management programme in the Dooars region was that it had no provision to share the benefits from the final sale of timber. This was addressed by a modification of the resolution in 2008. By the new resolution, members were to receive 15 per cent of the net sale proceeds of timber at the time of final felling. However, it is no secret that the trees in question would not mature for final harvest for at least 60 years (Gupta 2005). The modified resolution also fixed the household share of firewood and poles harvested during thinning and cultural operations at 25 per cent. Because of statutory restrictions imposed on the extraction of boulders, members ceased to be eligible for 25 per cent of the royalty from sale of boulders.

Between 1988 and March 2011, 544 Joint Forest Management committees covering an area of 2224.38 sq. km and with 67,483 members were formed in the State (GoWB 2011). The Joint Forest Management committees were either constituted from members living in forest villages or forest–fringe villages and in some cases included members from both types of villages. In the early period, Joint Forest Management participants were given training and funds for alternative land–based activities such as animal husbandry, bee–keeping, fisheries, sericulture, and floriculture. Women's self–help groups were formed and their members given training in sewing, knitting, soft-toy making, and in making handicrafts from bamboo and jute. The purpose of forming these groups in forest-fringe villages was to lower their dependence on forests by creating alternative livelihoods. These initiatives were not sustained in later years.

To strengthen joint forest management and provide funds for income-generating activities, a Forest Development Agency was created in 2004. The Forest Development Agency is an autonomous federation of Joint Forest Management Committees created by the Joint Forest Management Cell of the Forest Department and the National Afforestation and Eco-Development Board. The Forest Development Agency was provided funds for afforestation, bamboo development, forest village development, and so on. In 2010-11, in Jalpaiguri district, the utilisation of funds was highest in the Jalpaiguri Forest Division (Rs 2249 per member per annum), and lowest in the Buxa Forest Divison (Rs 115 per member per annum).<sup>10</sup> Data for earlier years show a similar pattern. Of the total funds utilized by Forest Development Agency, only a part can go to the member household as wage income. These data clearly show that the income generated by joint forest management activities was very low. The overall assessment of the Joint Forest Management programme in the Dooars was that no substantial benefits had accrued to member households (Choudhury 2010). Another reason for low levels of participation of households in joint forest management was that members had to wait for five years for tangible benefits to accrue.

It is not easy to estimate the extent of conservation done through the Joint Forest Management programme in this region as data on plantations are not readily available.

The programme has been rightly criticised as a top-down approach, a method to ensure adequate labour supply for forest work, but with little opportunity for forest communities to participate in conservation decisions (Bhattacharya, Pradhan, and Yadav 2010). Joint Forest Management as implemented in the Dooars of West Bengal did not involve joint decisions on forest conservation. The people of the villages were unaware of site-specific micro-plans (Choudhury 2012). In principle, the micro-plan envisaged forest communities being given the right to select species for plantation and to decide on forest land-use. Proper implementation of the programme would have been a step forward in strengthening security of tenure for members of village communities, and would also have created an opportunity for forest communities to claim carbon benefits under the Reduced Emission from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) programme. To claim carbon benefits under the Reduced Emission from Deforestation and Degradation programme, property rights must be well defined, and must have been accepted by local communities, verified by local institutions, and legally recognised by the government. In areas where property

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

rights disputes have not been resolved, the territory cannot be included in Reduced Emission from Deforestation and Degradation programmes.<sup>11</sup> Since joint forest management was introduced in the State by means of an administrative order, it did not have any legal powers to assign individual or community rights.

Nevertheless, the primary reason for the failure of the Joint Forest Management programme was its inability to provide adequate livelihood security across generations; I believe that this would have been possible if security of rights had been guaranteed to beneficiaries of the Programme.

## PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS AND CONSERVATION

The inclusion of forest villages in the local government (panchayat) system was a major step in integrating local institutions with forest conservation.

The official resolution on Joint Forest Management in the early 1990s did not take note of the fact that forest villages were not a part of the panchayat system. This created a problem at the level of execution, as the Divisional Forest Officer could not identify the appropriate block committee (panchayat samiti) to consult when identifying members (Gupta 2005). The inclusion of forest villages in the local government system in the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992 broke the isolation of forest villages and brought new hopes of development and improvement in rural infrastructure. The euphoria vanished when the newly elected members realised that many local government schemes could not be implemented in forest villages because forest villages in the Dooars were non–revenue settlements. The enactment of the Forest Rights Act 2006 has once again raised the hope that forest villages will be declared revenue villages, following which local governments should be able to implement development programmes there.

The 73rd Amendment Act of 1992 has given enormous scope for decentralised decisionmaking by local government institutions for rural development and the conservation of natural resources. Under Article 243G (Schedule XI) of the Constitution, panchayats have been entrusted with managing forests, land improvement, soil conservation, minor irrigation, and watershed development. A feature of local government in West Bengal are permanent Forest and Land Reforms Committees (*Bon O Bhumi Sanskar Samiti*), which help Divisional Forest Officers identify Joint Forest Management beneficiaries. A Divisional Forest Officer approves the constitution of the Executive Committee of the Joint Forest Management Committees on the recommendation of the Forest and Land Reforms Committees. The head (*sabhadipati*) of a district council (*zila parishad*) is a member of the Executive Committee of the Joint Forest Management Committees. The head of a village panchayat (*gram pradhan*) is a member of the Executive Committee. The Forest and Land Reforms Committee is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Skutsch, Banskota, Trines, and Karky (2008).

responsible for monitoring, supervising and reviewing the work of the Joint Forest Management Committees. The inclusion of natural resources like forest, land, and water in Schedule XI was meant to provide additional funds to the local government institutions to develop these resources on the basis of local needs.

In West Bengal, the involvement of the *panchayat* acted as a check on the imposition of unilateral decisions by the Forest Department on Forest Protection and Eco– Development Committees. A study of forest villages and fringe villages in this region found that the involvement of local government institutions in Joint Forest Management functions had increased over the years (Choudhury 2012). Though this has generally been interpreted as empowerment of the rural community, it has also led to politicisation in decision–making in some cases.

# Deprivation of Forest Rights and Marginalisation of Forest Communities

Land in forest communities, typically tribal societies, is not merely property but integral to identity and culture. The extended concept of land as territory is the foundation of tribal social order and collective action.

Under the Indian Forest Act of 1878, prior to reservation of forest land, it was mandatory to enquire into the nature of property rights on such land. In Jalpaiguri division, 341 sq. km of forest tracts were declared reserved forest by 1890 without any inquiry into prior rights. The Forest Settlement Officer assigned to inquire into property rights in these forest lands from 1890 to 1896 concluded that no rights existed as these forests had been reserved from unoccupied waste (GoWB 1971). The Forest Department offered concessions rather than rights to the forest communities; these concessions included permission to graze cattle and collect fuel wood, fodder, and minor produce with prior permission.

Permits for the collection of fuelwood, and for grazing and the collection of minor produce were made available to contactors against payment of fees. Contractors bid for leases for harvesting commercially valuable minor produce like long pepper (*pipli*). Cultivated bamboo varieties such as *bambusanutans* (*makla*) and *bambusabalcooa* (*boro bans*) were also leased to contractors. The brown semi–crystalline product known as *katha*, manufactured from the *acacia catechu wild* (*khair*) trees, was also sold from these forests (GoB 1928).

Although the number of cattle per household was restricted, the working plan had an elaborate grazing scheme. The number of cattle permissible for grazing was identified as 5193, a number based on an estimate of the carrying capacity of the forest area under the Jalpaiguri Forest Division for the period November 15 to May 14 each year (GoB 1942). In addition, the draught animals of timber merchants could graze free of charge. The curtailment of rights has adversely affected the well-being of forest communities by eroding their asset stocks. Land and livestock are the two most important components of rural household assets. Restrictions on the ownership of land and livestock has deepened the poverty of forest communities. The denial of usufructuary rights in the commons made these communities highly vulnerable to income fluctuations. The failure to build basic infrastructure, including the means of communication and transport, facilities for the provision of drinking water, schools, and health services, has marginalised forest communities further.

To mitigate hardship, households in forest communities often took to distress sale of livestock, or the unauthorised sale of forest produce mainly fuelwood (Jodha 1986). In the Himalayan and sub–Himalayan regions, while agricultural land was held by individual households, pasture was held in common. Springs (*jhora*) and streams (*khols*) for water and the jungle for fuelwood, fodder, poles and leaf litter were also held in common.

In this context, the conferment of tenurial rights in forest land under the Forest Rights Act 2006 is a much awaited forest reform, and akin to agrarian reforms for cultivable land. What distinguishes forest reform from agrarian reform is that it incorporates the issues of livelihood security, property rights and conservation. Forest-tenure reform in India involves granting rights to people dwelling in and around forests for the use of forest resources. Post–Independence agrarian reforms in the country have largely brought about individual ownership of cultivable and homestead land. In the case of forest resources. In India, forest reforms are being undertaken through the distribution of individual land rights *and* community forest rights. There is no reason to believe that individual land tenure security will automatically ensure the sustainable use of forest resources. The conservation of corest resources under community ownership depends on the forces of deforestation and collective action.<sup>12</sup>

Community rights in forest resources usually involve authorization for the regulated use of forest land under supervision of the Forest Department. Community rights in forest resources are a collective right given to a forest-dwelling community while the state remains the principal right-holder. In other words, right to alienate forest land continues to remain with the state. The local community is considered a co-owner and is legally bound to co-manage the forest resources.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Though many studies suggest a strong relation between community forest rights and forest conservation, attempts made through meta–analysis to correlate the two have often showed mixed outcomes depending on the methodology applied, selection bias, and endogeneity problems (see Seymour, La Vina, and Hite 2014).
<sup>13</sup> Without alienation rights, such land is not considered property and is unacceptable as collateral for loans (see Barry, Larson, and Colfer 2010).

# Implementation of Forest Rights Act in Forest Villages of Jalpaiguri Dooars

The Forest Rights Act 2006 has provision for the settlement of individual rights and community rights (and, as such, to ensure tenurial rights to rural communities living in forest villages in India). A schematic presentation of the structure of institutions created under the Act is below.

Institution	Functions
Forest Rights Committee (FRC) at the village council (gram sabha) level	Authorised to assist the village council ( <i>gram sabha</i> ) to collect, verify and approve claims to rights
Sub-Divisional Level Committee (SDLC)	Examines village council ( <i>gram sabha</i> ) resolutions and maps related to land claims
District Level Committee (DLC)	Can accept or reject claims
State Level Monitoring Committee (in West Bengal, the Backward Classes Welfare Department or BCWD)	Responsible for the overall implementation of the Forest Rights Act at the State level
National Level Nodal Agency: the Ministry of Tribal Affairs or MoTA	Responsible for the overall implementation of the Forest Rights Act at the National level

The official number of forest villages in West Bengal is 170; this figure has been seriously challenged by forest rights activists. In West Bengal the total number of individual and community claims received under the Forest Rights Act from Scheduled Tribe and non–Scheduled Tribe communities of forest villages, as of July 2013, were 129454 and 7824 respectively. As of February 2014, only 31497 individual and 312 community claims had been settled. The data also show that 865 title deeds (*patta*) were ready for settlement, of which only 61 were community claims.

The data on the status of implementation of the Forest Rights Act in Jalpaiguri district as on July 2013 and February 2014, provided by the Backward Classes Welfare Department, are given in Tables 2 and Table 3 respectively. The data are not free from ambiguity. First, in India, forest administrative boundaries do not correspond to district boundaries. In our case, a large part of the forest area of Jalapaiguri district is under the Cooch Behar Forest Division. Therefore, the figures in the Tables are not easily comparable with figures given in the Forest Working Plan for the Dooars. Secondly, data on the implementation of the Forest Rights Act are not available at the level of the forest village; instead, an aggregate figure for the entire district is given. This feature of the data makes it difficult to identify community claims.

Thirdly, there is disuniformity in the data on implementation of the Forest Rights Act at the national and State levels. As noted above, data on the implementation of the

Forest Rights Act in West Bengal are collated by the Commissioner of the Backward Classes and Welfare Department. However, the most recent data, pertaining to February 2014, have been issued by the Managing Director, West Bengal Tribal Development Cooperative Corporation. The latter provides data only for number of title deeds (*pattas*) distributed to both individuals and communities along with the extent of land involved (Table 3). There are data on the number of titles for land ready for distribution and land to be distributed, but the figures for individuals and community claims are clubbed together. Prior to 2014, as shown in Table 2, data were provided on the number of claims for individuals and communities separately for Scheduled Tribe and non-Scheduled Tribe categories. There was also information on the status of enquiry into claims and claims pending with the Forest Rights Committee, along with data on the disposal of claims at the village (*gram sansad*), sub–divisional and district levels.

Even earlier data, however, did not show the extent of land claimed under individual and community rights nor the reasons for rejecting claims. For title deed (*patta*) distribution, there was no disaggregation of data for Scheduled Tribe and Non Scheduled Tribe households. For all these reasons, it is difficult to accurately trace the progress of the implementation of the Forest Rights Act in West Bengal. Data provided at the national level by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs also suffer from similar drawbacks, in addition to the fact that data are not reported in a uniform format across States.

In Jalpaiguri district, comparing the data in Tables 2 and 3, we find that the number of individual titles for land distributed fell from 4895 to 3716 and the corresponding extent of land from 7501 acres to 5916 acres between July 2013 and February 2014. This implies either an error in the data provided for 2013 or that land titles were revoked for some reason at a later date.

The average size of individual land titles distributed in the State was 0.53 acres and the corresponding figure for Jalpaiguri district was 1.59 acres. With regard to community claims, the average size of community title deeds distributed under the Forest Rights Act in the State was 0.77 acres and 2.16 acres in Jalpaiguri district. The average extent of the land holdings distributed to communities was very low and, indeed, makes a mockery of the concept of community rights. Panchayat members from Sologharia and Mech Busty forest villages under the Apalchand Forest Range told me that the land titles distributed to the community were meant for schools and health centres. Thus no community rights in forest land have been given as yet to any forest community in the Dooars; this constitutes a violation of Section 3(1) of the Act.

Under Section 3(k) of the Act, the people of the villages have rights of access to biodiversity and community rights to intellectual property and traditional knowledge related to biodiversity and cultural diversity. The denial of community rights in

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Individual claims	Community claims		Claims ei	nquired			Pending fo	ər enquiry		Title deeds dis	stributed	Distributed title (acres)	deeds
ST Non-S1	r ST Non-ST	LS LS		Non	-ST	S,	н	Non	-ST	Individual Co.	mmunity I	ndividual Comn	nunity
		Individual C	Community	Individual (	Community	Individual	Community	Individual	Community				
4553 2346	3010 2032	4069	896	2105	1216	484	2114	241	816	4895	12	7501 18.	39
Source: GoW. Note: ST=Sch	B (n.d.) eduled Tribes												

Table 2 Status of Forest Rights Act implementation in Jalpaisuri district. July 2013 numbers and acres

Title deed ( <i>patta</i> ) dis	stributed	Land involved in cases of distributed title deeds ( <i>patta</i> ) (acres)		Title deed ( <i>patta</i> ) ready for	Ready cases
Individual	Community	Individual	Community	distribution	(acres)
3716	89	5916	192	118	189.42
6 0 W					

**Table 3** Status of Forest Rights Act implementation in Jalpaiguri district, February 2014numbers and acres

Source: GoWB (n.d.)

forest land is an impediment to such access. Even professional foresters in the Dooars have noted the knowledge about forest species that exists among the people of forest villages and their skill in undertaking forest work (GoWB 2001). Forest communities acquire their knowledge of local and regional biodiversity from their long association with forests as a source of livelihood, and the different communities of the Dooars have a wide and well–developed knowledge of the utility of local forest products, including various wildfruit, wild vegetables and herbs, and medicinal and utility plants, besides other more commonly known minor forest produce.

## IMPACT OF FOREST RIGHTS ACT ON LIVELIHOOD SECURITY

While it is too early to comment on the outcome of the conferment of individual title deeds (*patta*) on the livelihoods of forest villagers, there are serious flaws in the process of land distribution under the Forest Rights Act.

There is a crucial distinction to be made between the *patta* as a title deed in the context of the implementation of the Forest Rights Act in our study area and the *patta* as a title deed as commonly understood. First, legally the document in question here is not a full title deed, but a certificate for land use that has no collateral value. According to the Forest Rights Act, a title deed conferred on an individual or community must be free from all encumbrances. In practice, the people of the villages were given land–use certificates and not title deeds to land. Secondly, the document does not demarcate land on the basis of legally acceptable land demarcation rules. The document does not mention the revenue village (*mouza*) name, plot number, and, in some cases, even the date of execution. Thirdly, the documents do not mention land categories and, for that reason, recipients are not free to decide on land use.<sup>14</sup>

We surveyed two forest villages, Shologharia and Kalamati in Jalpaiguri Dooars, in January–March 2012. We found that, although the people were aware of the flaws in the land document distributed, they still unanimously felt more secure in their rights after receiving these documents. A similar opinion was stated by residents of Mech

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> In Kalamati forest village in the Ramsai forest range, people reported that when some of them decided to modify their houses in order to convert them into homestays for tourists, the Forest Department objected on the grounds that no tourist activity was permissible in reserved forests.

Busty and Sursuti forest villages during a survey conducted in November–December 2013. This sense of tenurial security encouraged households in forest villages to plant tea on their agricultural land.

All along the foothills of the Himalaya, from Assam to Darjeeling district of West Bengal, there has been a huge expansion in the cultivation of tea. Areas adjoining the forests of Dooars have come under tea cultivation for two reasons. First, cultivators shifted from food crops to tea so as to avoid crop losses because of destruction by wild animals. Secondly, the Dooars fall under the alluvial region south of Himalayas (*bhabar*) zone, where the water table is low, at a depth of around 11.75 metres below ground level (Ray and Shekhar 2009). Poor farmers in these villages cannot afford to invest in irrigation. Water–intensive crops like rice have been replaced by tea on many fields.

The average yield of rice in the forest villages of Dooars is much lower than in the southern agricultural blocks of Jalpaiguri district. The average yield of lowland rice (aman) was estimated to be 420 to 440 kg per acre in two forest villages (Shologharia and Uttar Kalamati) in 2012, which was much lower than the district average of 836 kg of rice per acre for 2011–2 (GoWB 2014). Cultivation from November to May (boro) was not possible for lack of irrigation. As noted earlier, the average size of land holding (inclusive of homestead land) distributed under the Forest Rights Act was 1.53 acres in Jalapaiguri district. From our survey in these forest villages, we estimated that, on average, the extent of homestead land was 0.1 acres, implying that 1.43 acres were available for agriculture. Using the estimated yield, a household can produce 600 kg to 630 kg of rice if the entire extent of the land is planted with rice, an amount adequate to meet consumption needs of a family of five for six months. A few enterprising households cultivated mustard and maize and some reared pigs. The average monthly cash income of the households was estimated to be Rs 2300 in the two villages surveyed in 2012. However, for each household the intra-year fluctuation in income was very large, with the people having virtually no cash income during the monsoon months.

The introduction of tea cultivation in these forest villages has its own problems. Forest villages have not been converted to revenue villages, and tea cultivators in forest villages cannot get no–objection certificates from the Tea Board. This means that tea plantations in forest villages are not legal and that cultivators are not entitled to benefits like subsidised loans and special–purpose loans given by the Tea Board. The three tea cultivators in our study village of Kalamati and the single cultivator in Shologharia had invested in tea plantations in 2011–2 after borrowing funds at a rate of interest of almost 50 per cent per annum from microfinance companies. Their success or failure will shape the future direction of land use in the forest villages of this region. Initial success by a few cultivators may lure others into tea cultivation, making the entire community food insecure and vulnerable to market forces (Langat *et al.*, 2011).

The process of electrification of forest villages in this region has begun after the enactment of the Forest Rights Act. The public distribution system has been strengthened and Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards have been distributed to eligible households. Gitanjali, a housing scheme sponsored by the Backward Region Development Fund for Economically Weaker Sections, was launched in these forest villages in 2009–10. The village panchayat is responsible for the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee programme in these forest villages through the Forest Department. Since these villages have not yet been declared revenue villages, any development work by the panchayat requires a no-objection certificate from the Forest Department.

#### Conclusion

The well-being of forest dwelling communities, in general, and of the Himalayan region in particular, depends not only on the security of their land rights, but also on their ability to draw upon common natural resources. One argument for community rights in forests is that it gives forest dwelling communities much-needed territory for cultural development and collective action. Another argument is that the recognition of community rights in forests will help protect livelihoods. In addition to use of forests for subsistence needs, the communities will be entitled to compensation when forests are diverted to non-forest use. Further, community rights can support conservation. When their use of the commons is legitimised, communities will be more willing to cooperate in conservation of forests.

We argue that to ensure future livelihood security, it is essential to recognise community rights in forest alongside individual rights. Community ownership of forests can help overcome the problem of land fragmentation. By means of early recognition of community rights, the Forest Rights Act can create an environment for effective conservation by the community while concurrently ensuring inter– and intra–generational livelihood security.

Ultimately, the main goal of a sustainable forest conservation programme should be to meet the needs of local forest and rural communities without compromising the forest ecosystem. People will require fuel, fodder and non-timber forest produce for their livelihoods and these can be met in a sustainable way only when forest productivity is increased through improvements in forest technology and management.

In conclusion, to ensure conservation of forest resources while enhancing livelihood opportunities of forest dwelling communities, the following measures are suggested:

1. Conversion of all forest villages into revenue villages to enhance the role of panchayats. This will allow integration of existing panchayat–run programmes such as the rural employment guarantee programme with schemes for forest

work. Services such as public health facilities, schools, and agricultural extension can then be extended to these villages.

- 2. Village assemblies (*gram sabha*) must be duly constituted in forest villages as per Rule 4(1)(e) of the Forest Rights Act 2006 for the formulation of conservation and management plans. Once the community receives forests rights under the Act, the *gram sabha* is entitled to issue transit permits for minor forest produce. Forest rent can then be distributed to the community, which directly contributes towards conservation and management of forest resources.
- 3. The optimal size of a community forest for an effective conservation and livelihood programme must be identified. The area under community forest distributed so far under the Forest Rights Act in most States of India (including West Bengal) is very small and cannot provide adequate livelihood opportunities for people. As an alternative, I suggest that the area currently under Joint Forest Management Committees be declared as community forests.
- 4. The overlap between the Joint Forest Management programme and the Forest Rights Act must be immediately resolved (it is not clear if the Joint Forest Management programme will continue to exist in future).
- 5. Finally, data on the implementation of Forest Rights Act should be provided at the forest beat and forest–village levels. Data on the rejection of claims and the reasons for such rejection should be made available in the public domain. This will help reduce tensions amongst forest–dwelling communities. To make the entire process more transparent, the relevant department of government should provide information for each claim made under the Forest Rights Act through its web portal. Only when such information is available can we make a proper evaluation of the forest reform programme in India.

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# GLOSSARY

adhiar	sharecropper entitled to half of the output
aman	the lowland monsoon ( <i>kharif</i> ) rice crop; the term is used in West Bengal and Bangladesh
begar	a system of free labour, in the present context, in forest villages of the Jalpaiguri Dooars
bhabar	coarse alluvial region south of the Himalayas
Bhutia	the people of Bhutan are (mis)called Bhutias in the Dooars region
boro	irrigated lowland rice crop planted in the winter ( <i>rabi</i> or late <i>rabi</i> crop); the term is used in West Bengal and Bangladesh
clear felling coupe	method of clearing a forest coupe (q.v.)
coppice	an area of forest in which the timber is harvested and stumps are left behind to grow to provide firewood or poles
coupe	the smallest unit of area of forest land
Dooars	narrow stretch of densely forested region along the Indo–Bhutan border; the Western or Jalpaiguri Dooars lie in the eastern Himalayan region of Jalpaiguri district, between the river Sankhos in the east and the river Tista in the west
dhulal	lit. fine dust; clearing land of all weeds and crops before planting saplings
Garo	tribe living in Meghalaya, Assam and parts of North Bengal
Gorkha	community whose origin is in a principality west of Kathmandu
hat, hut	a weekly market
jagir	a type of feudal land grant that entailed payment of revenue by means of providing services to the state.
ihar	jungle consisting of bushes, shrubs and short trees
ihora	water spring
jhum, jhoom	shifting cultivation practised in the Eastern Himalayan and sub– Himalayan regions. The method involves clearing forest land by clear felling or setting fire to forest cover and growing crops on the land for few years.
jote	a unit of cultivable land in North Bengal in the 18th and 19th centuries; <i>jote</i> have now been converted to units of administration called mouza
Kamrup	ancient kingdom of Assam; now the name of a district in Assam
khair	acacia catechu wild
kholas	streams
Koch	also identified as Koch Rajbanshi, a scheduled caste of the region; the Koch kingdom was located in Cooch Behar
Mech	tribe living in the foothills of eastern Nepal, and West Bengal and Assam in India; the language spoken by the tribe is a Tibeto–Burman dialect

GLOSSARY (Continued)

Mech chief; in the colonial period, title conferred by Forest Department on a person who controlled village households and ensured labour supply for forest work
a revenue village
a community from Bihar
title deed
rulers of Jalpaiguri and Baikunthapur [1522–1946]
scheduled caste concentrated in districts of North Bengal and northern
Bangladesh
Tribe living in the Dooars of Assam and West Bengal
<i>i</i> system of land tenure introduced by the British in India
shorea robusta; tree found abundantly in Dooars
Burmese word meaning hill cultivation; <i>taungya</i> was introduced in
India by in 1890 and the first plantation was raised in 1896 in
North Bengal
Indo-Bhutanese tribe; its members now live in a small enclave in
Totopara in the Jalpaiguri Dooars