Contested Belonging

AN INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S STRUGGLE FOR FOREST AND IDENTITY IN SUB-HIMALAYAN BENGAL

B. G. Karlsson

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met elsewhere were all eager to know what had actually happened. To the Rabhas, the Forest Department acted wrongly or very immorally. Amit was innocent and he was the actual victim in the first place and not, as the Forest Department would have it, Molakhar. To the Rabhas, Molakhar only suffered some minor blows and actually got away with less than he deserved. Nor was the beating of Amit seen as an isolated event. Molakhar was known for punishing people for little or no reason. I was told that even children just picking fruit in the forest ran the risk of being physically assaulted by him. It was also said that if he approached Rabha women while they were collecting firewood, he beat them and call them whores and thieves. I spoke with Molakhar myself (before this event took place), and he bluntly stated that the majority of the Rabhas in Paro were criminals. Interestingly enough, Molakhar was later transferred, and in connection with his transfer the Forest Department inquired into allegations against him of being involved in illegal activities.

This event place the issue of deforestation in the new context of wildlife conservation, and hence to the new regime of the *tiger-sahibs*.

CONSERVING THE WILD – PROJECT TIGER

More and more land in India is being converted into Protected Areas (PA). There are 75 national parks and 428 sanctuaries, covering a total of 142,924 square kilometres, which is about 4.2 percent of India's geographic area. The over 500 protected areas today can be compared to the 131 PAs existing in 1975, i.e. 20 years earlier (Kothari et. al. 1995:2755). The increase in land under wildlife protection represents the increased demands voiced by influential concerned actors for the preservation of certain endangered species like the tiger, rhino and elephant. The World Wide Fund for Nature (as the World Wildlife Foundation, WWF, is now called) launched the Operation Tiger in 1972 as a response to the alarming decrease of the world tiger population. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was also central to the process, and she supported the new Wildlife Act of 1972, which banned the hunting of tigers. In 1973 the Indian Government, with financial support from WWF, also inaugurated Project Tiger.[12] Today there are twenty-one tiger reserves in the project, and after little more than two decades Project Tiger has become the prime symbol of wildlife conservation. To its supporters Project Tiger is regarded as a success story; not only has the tiger been saved from extinction,[13] but through the founding of the tiger reserves whole ecosystems have been preserved. To the critics, on the other hand, Project Tiger represents a mistaken conservation strategy based on 'guards and guns' and the displacement of local people. It is a well known fact in India and elsewhere that the goals of preserving wildlife often clash with the needs of the local people.[14] To the wildlife conservationist nature is perceived as a place 'free of humans', as Vandana Shiva put it (1991:343). Forest dwellers and other local people who enter the forest are consequently seen as the main obstacle to wildlife conservation. Project Tiger was clearly founded on such a philosophy. This was also the case with the 1972 Indian Wildlife Act, which stopped all human activity within (not related to wildlife conservation) within 'national parks'. In 'sanctuaries', the other category of Protected Area, activities like the collection of forest products may be permitted if sanctioned by the wildlife authorities (see Kothari et al. 1995:2758).

Project Tiger has often been charged with displacing forest dwellers and with not considering the needs and well-being of the people effected by the establishment of reserves. Whole villages have been uprooted and forced to leave their ancestral lands, sometimes without compensation or with insufficient compensation, to begin a new life elsewhere. Others have lost their grazing grounds or simply been cut off from the forests and the forest resources on which they have long been dependent.[15] In 1993 there were reports of severe poverty, malnutrition and epidemic diseases killing large numbers of infants and children among the Korku tribals in Madhya Pradesh. These tragic circumstances appear to have been partly caused by the establishment of the Melghat Tiger Reserve, which hit the fragile economy of the Korkus hard.[16] Not only has the tiger project proved disastrous for forest communities like the Korkus; even for the tigers things have begun to look less bright. Strong anti-tiger sentiments among the local people have created a favourable setting for poachers. Poaching has also increased alarmingly during the last years. With a large market demand particularly for tiger bones, which are used in various medical products in China and Southeast Asia, the future of the tiger once again seems insecure. Even dedicated naturalists have started to question the dominant paradigm of wildlife conservation. B. Seshadri, author of celebrated books on India's wildlife, writes that a 'fundamental mistake of Project Tiger was its neglect to recruit the local communities in conservation and running of the reserves' (1994:237). Seshadri is not alone in arguing for a larger involvement by the local people, more or less all the actors involved advocate a larger element of popular participation in the management of protected areas today. But even so, 'collaboration in conservation is still a relatively rare story ... the more frequent tale is that of people-wildlife and people-state conflict', as Kothari, Suri and Singh have recently argued (1995:2756).

Within Project Tiger the solution has been labelled 'ecodevelopment'.[17] Programs for ecodevelopment were launched in the early 1990s as the main Government strategy to win people's trust in the cause of wildlife conservation.[18] In short, ecodevelopment aims at creating new economic facilities for the communities in the buffer zones and surrounding of the tiger reserves, and to make them less dependent on resources inside the parks. Fuelwood and fodder plantations, improved animal husbandry, irrigation and soil conservation, energy-saving schemes and various minor income generating projects, are the main activities brought under this heading.[19] In 1991, WWF sponsored ecodevelopment projects in the buffer area of Ranthambhore National Park. Between 1991 and 1992 the Government launched a Rs 10 crore (one-hundred million Rupees) scheme on ecodevelopment around national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. But the real money entered the picture after the Rio Conference when the World Bank intervened with a new organ called The Global

Environment Facility (GEF). In 1993, approximately 300,000 US dollars were released for consultancy and reports,[20] and recently the World Bank has announced a 67 million US dollar project, for ecodevelopment in seven Protected Areas in India. The Buxa Tiger Reserve in Duars is one of the reserves selected for such World Bank financing, and ecodevelopment has become a key concept to the regime of wildlife conservation.[21]

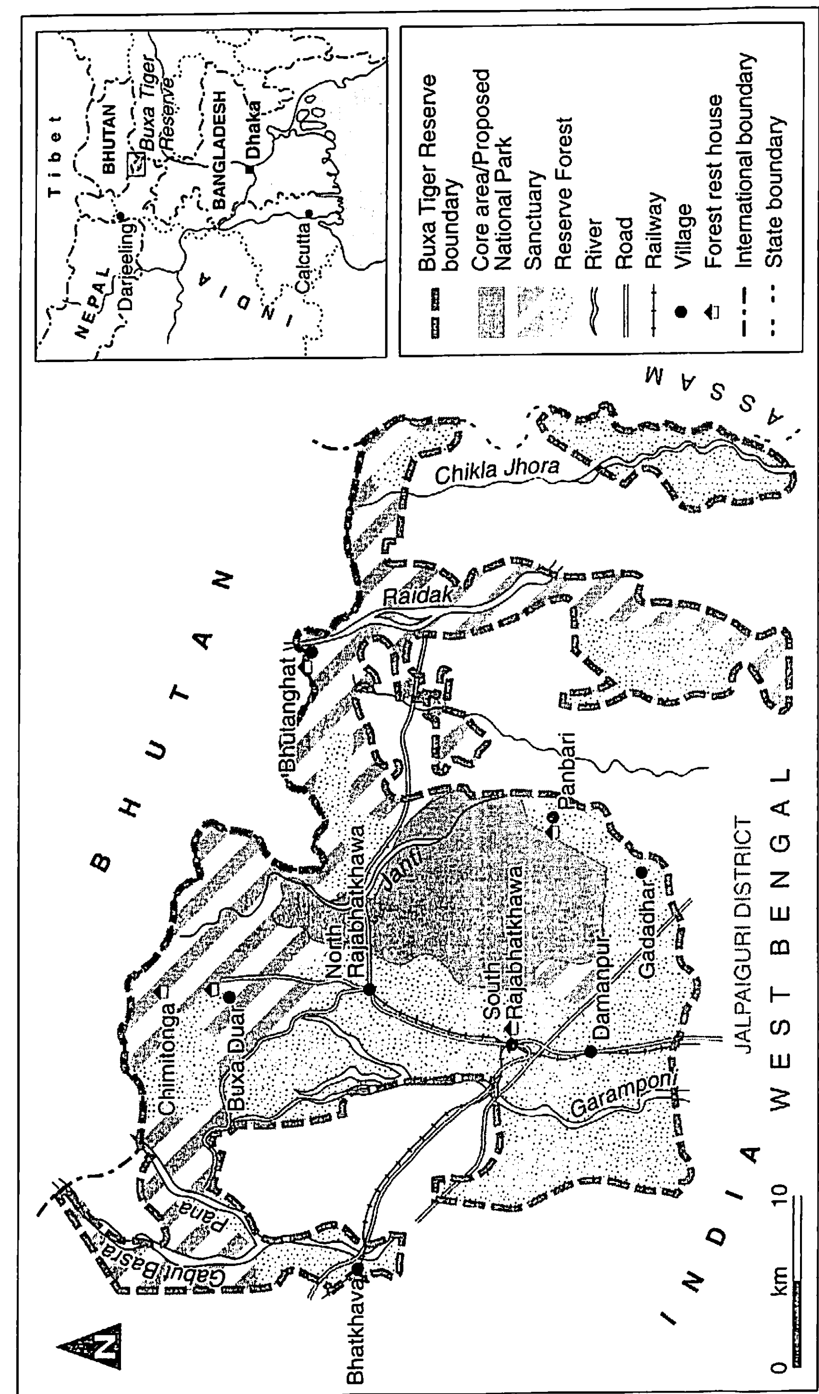
The Buxa Tiger Reserve were launched in 1983, demarcations started in 1986, and in 1992 the core area and buffer zone were finally under the control of the field director.[22] The reserve covers 761 square kilometres, out of which 314.5 square kilometres constitute the core area (declared a Sanctuary, including a National Park on 117 square kilometres).

The tiger reserve covers the earlier Buxa Forest Division and also a smaller part of the Cooch Behar Forest Division. The reserve harbours thirty-seven forest villages with a total population of 15,608 according to the 1991 census.[23] A field director instead of the earlier divisional forest officer is in charge of the reserve. Establishing a tiger reserve implies new tasks and working routines for the forest administration, or, as the present (1995) field director, S.S. Bist, put it in the Buxa Tiger Reserve Newsletter, it requires a change 'from revenue-based forestry to conservation-based wildlife management'.[24]

A tourist leaflet declares that viewed from a satellite the Buxa Tiger Reserve reveals the largest remaining dense forests in West Bengal. With an 'astonishing bio-diversity of animals', the reserve, according to the leaflet, attracts more than 20,000 nature lovers a year. The main attractions are the tigers, numbering twenty-nine according to the official Tiger Census of 1992, and the large population of wild elephants (Duars is one of India's most important elephant tracts). And Buxa Tiger Reserve also harbours several other rare and endangered species like the leopard, wild buffalo, Chinese pangolin, hog deer, different varieties of python, the large land tortoise and several others. The famous Jaldapara Sanctuary is situated not far from the Buxa Reserve. The Jaldapara Sanctuary was established as early as 1941 to protect India's remaining one-horned rhinoceroes (Seshadri 1995:111–114). A similar rhino sanctuary that was established even earlier in Kaziranga in Assam, today is a national park and harbours India's largest rhino population.

WILDLIFE AS VERMIN AND THE COLONIAL HUNT

Prior to the British annexation of Duars wildlife was abundant, and the British perceived the wild animals mainly as hindrances to the colonisation of the area. Particularly the Forest Department had problems in carrying out their project of scientific forestry, due to constant interference from wild animals. There were safety problems, and it was impossible to get forest villagers to settle in some plantation areas as the jungle was too infested with tigers and other dangerous animals (Shebbeare 1946:34). The wild pigs were also a hazard as they loved the young sal plants, and for several years pigs destroyed large parts of the Forest Department's new plantations.[25] Deer, wild pigs, elephants and rhinos also



Map 4 Buxa Tiger Reserve (from the World Bank report)

proved a plague to the Forest Department. As late as 1920, G.S. Hart, Inspector General of Forests, argued that protection of these animals should be lifted and that 'a fair number of guns' should be supplied to the forest villagers in order to eliminate them. Regarding elephants he claimed that, even though their number had gone down substantially, they caused enormous damage to the plantations:

> ... particularly the solitary males which should be classed as dangerous pests and shot on sight, while herd elephants damaging cultivation, either village, forest or tea, should be dealt with similarly (in Note on Tour Inspection , page 19 [see previous note]).

Even the rhinoceros, which was then drastically decreasing in number, was, according to Hart, not to be shown any mercy. Nobody would be 'worse off' if they disappeared from the Bengal side of the Sankosh River (Hart 1920:19). Hart's aversion to wild animals was in no way exceptional. As Rangarajan put it, 'the drive to wipe out vermin, including virtually all large predators' was part of the colonial project of controlling forest lands (1995:20). But perhaps Hart was unusually harsh in treating elephants and rhinos as pests. The elephant was, as we will see, the first wild animal to get legislative protection in British India. Further, the person behind the Jaldapara Sanctuary and the protection of Bengal's rhinos was one of Hart's colleagues, none other than E.O. Shebbeare, who we know as the successful developer of *taungya*-plantations in Duars (and later Conservator of Forests in Bengal) (Seshadri 1995:112). Shebbeare was not the only forest officer who became dedicated naturalist or wildlife conservationist towards the end of British rule. But prior to that, Hart's approach of wiping out vermin was clearly the dominant approach during the colonial period.[26]

The wild animals also meant game hunting for the British. The royal Bengal tiger was the ultimate game trophy for the British sportsman. Duars and the neighbouring Assam forests were famous hunting grounds for high colonial officers. Special tiger hunts were arranged in Duars for the Viceroy or the Governor of Bengal and other potentates of the British Raj (Shebbeare 1958:90). The Maharaja of Cooch Behar, Nripendra Narayana Bhupa, was a dedicated hunter and important British guests were always invited on his annual hunts. Among them was the Viceroy Lord Curzon. In his hunting biography, *Thirty-seven Years of Big Game Shooting in Cooch Behar, the Duars and Assam*, the Maharaja writes that the record was five tigers killed within twelve minutes (Narayana Bhupa 1908:354). And during his thirty-seven hunting years (between 1871 and 1907) 365 tigers, 311 leopards, 207 rhinos, 48 bison, 438 buffaloes and 133 bears and all sorts of smaller game, were killed on such expeditions (ibid:449). The hunting diary is filled with photographs of proud English hunters and their kill in classic victory poses, in the background there are glimpses of local villagers who were needed for the dangerous task of beating the bush, driving the tigers towards the hunters, who waited with their guns on the back of an elephant.[27]

In a novel study of hunting and conservation in the British colonies, John MacKenzie describes how hunting became a central feature of imperial rule in India (1988). Being a good hunter could, for example, be of great significance for

Plate 5 Lord Curzon with his first tiger, shot in Madarihat, in Duars 1904

advancement in the colonial administration. For military personnel and foresters it was almost a prerequisite. The forest officers had the best opportunities to hunt, and young Englishmen often went into the profession for the sake of hunting. Hunting also, as MacKenzie says, 'represented an increasing concern with the external appearance of authority' (1988:171), a display of power, in which the hunter (re)established the British Raj when he conquered nature with his gun. Hunting and war were also perceived and discussed in the same terms (ibid:194–195). To cite another more recent study on the colonial hunt:

> Shikar or game hunting in India was one of the best sites on which the colonial project tried to construct and affirm the difference between its 'superior' self and the inferiorised 'native' other. In legitimising colonialism, the self was presented as risk-taking, perseverant and super-masculine; and the other was constructed as utilitarian and effeminate (Pandian 1995:239).

Tiger shootings were highly orchestrated events, and if imperial nobility took part, naturally they had to bag (kill) the largest tiger. But the colonial attitude towards tigers remained somewhat paradoxical. Beside being the most potent trophy, the tiger was regarded as vermin to be exterminated. The Government continued well into the 20th century to pay high rewards to professional Indian hunters for killing tigers, including harmless cubs. To the British hunter it was the form or way in which the hunt was carried out that was central, and merely slaughtering a large number of tigers was actually looked down upon. The true

sportsman was expected to be 'unselfish' and save tigers for other hunters (MacKenzie 1988:181). The very semiotics of the colonial hunt were founded on the distinction between the British 'sportsman' and the native 'poacher'. By upholding certain rules and codes of behaviour, the British regarded themselves as the only true hunters. Indian hunters, on the other hand, who were in it for other more material or utilitarian reasons, were regarded as using both cowardly and cruel methods of hunting (ibid:173, 195).

Within the reserved forests, hunting was completely prohibited for indigenous forest dwellers, and, although the culprits seldom were found poaching could lead to severe punishment. The Forest Department reported continual offences, mainly by tea garden labourers, who hunted collectively (mainly deer). The Department found it difficult to curb this illicit hunting. As the Annual Progress Report of 1933–34 says, organized poaching of deer went on throughout the year 'with the usual difficulties of detection and arrest of the offenders', and in several cases forest guards who tried to intervene were 'fired at or threatened with bows and arrows'.[28] But if hunting was prohibited for the natives, British officials were allowed to hunt within the reserved forest, and this access was commonly organised by a system in which so-called 'shooting-blocks' were opened and closed, which periodically left the game undisturbed to recover (MacKenzie 1988:283). In 1920, in both Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts the Forest Department started to lease hunting rights to newly formed shooting clubs, mainly consisting of foresters, tea garden managers and government officials. Interestingly, the Forest Department expressed hope that the clubs would take an interest in game preservation and put a check on poaching, which was perceived as a growing problem.[29]In other words, the Forest Department, also had (or felt) a responsibility for game preservation, however destructive the wildlife was to effective forest management.

The first British legislation on wildlife preservation was the 'Madras Act of 1873' and later the all-India 'Elephant Preservation Act of 1879', which banned hunting of wild elephants (except in defence of life and property). These were followed by other protective measures in the beginning of the 20th century, such as the 'Wild Birds and Animals Protection Act of 1912'. Similarly the rhino was protected under the 'Bengal Rhinoceros Preservation Act of 1932'. Jim Corbett and other well-known hunters were driving forces in this work, and among other things they favoured the abolition of the system of paying bounties for the killing of certain animals and banning the sale of hunting trophies. And further they called for the creation of game reserves and sanctuaries/national parks that were completely closed for hunting, like Corbett's own Hailey National Park (later renamed Corbett National Park) and the Jaldapara sanctuary mentioned earlier. Preservation also has an interesting precolonial history in India reaching back to Asoka's reign in the 3rd century B.C.; after his conversion to Buddhism he advocated the protection of animals and trees (Gadgil & Guha 1992:88–89). With the Moguls an elaborate system of hunting reserves, so-called *shikargahs*, was established, some were even protected by walls to keep intruders out (Rangarajan 1996:13–14).[30]

In spite of these initial steps, wildlife conservation through the establishment of national parks and sanctuaries came to the forefront first after Indian Independence (MacKenzie 1988:289–290). Project Tiger, which took shape in the early 1970s, was the beginning of a new era of conservation, and since then the number of Protected Areas has increased radically in India. The British Raj's systematic elimination of tigers has turned into independent India's opposite project of saving the tiger. To return to Duars, vast jungle tracts were converted into tea gardens, or monocultural tree plantations, or cleared for agricultural settlements, and only small pockets of high forests remained for the wildlife to take shelter in. Today, if one omits the tigers artistically painted on signboards together with catchy English slogans like 'Save the Trees, Save the Tigers' or 'Save the Tiger – Save an Eco-system', few tigers are actually to be found.

The Rabha's usual comment is, 'Why all the fuss about the tigers, when there no longer are any around?' They also question the official figure of twenty-nine tigers in the Buxa Reserve, and do not accept the explanation that the tigers hide out deep in the interial forests, and particularly in the upper portion of the Reserve towards the Bhutan border. As a proof that there are not so many tigers it is mentioned that not even in the villages situated in the central part of the reserve are there losses of cattle to the tigers (the cattle are left to graze all day in the forest, often without protection). However strong the doubts expressed by the forest dwellers concerning the number of tigers, the officials in charge of the Reserve claim an increase in the tiger population. During my visit in 1995, the Forest Ranger carrying out the Tiger Census said his findings indicated a

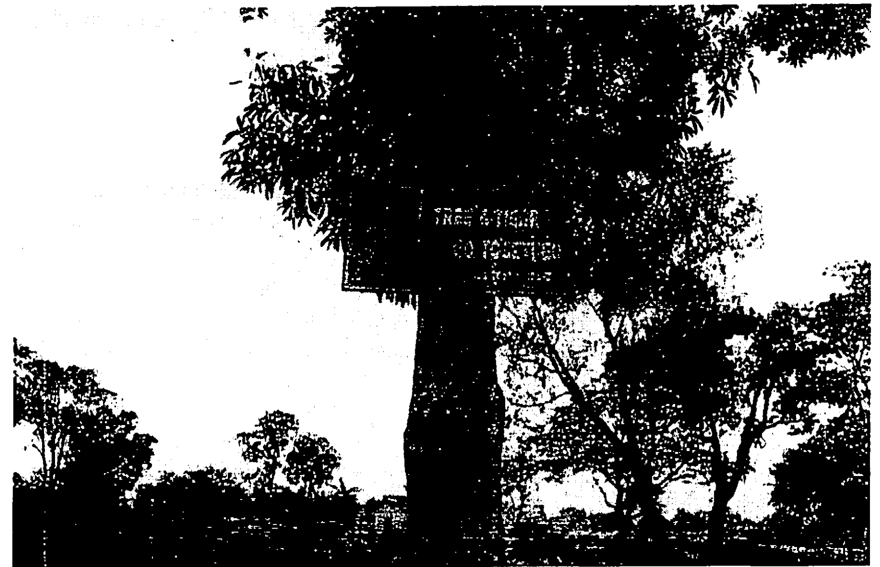


Plate 6 Signboard 'Tree & Tiger Go Together'

preliminary figure of thirty-nine tigers in the Buxa Reserve[31] (i.e. an increase of ten tigers since the 1992 Census).[32]

DUARS AS A CONSERVATION AREA

The Jaldapara Sanctuary and the Buxa Tiger Reserve, in a recent survey of the nature reserves in the Himalayan region, are described as one of:

> ... the most important conservation areas in northern India, providing a refuge for potentially viable populations of several threatened species (tiger, elephant, rhinoceros, ...) and critical as a corridor for wildlife moving between Bhutan and Assam (Green 1993:167).

There are also plans to extend the area of both reserves (ibid:163). In the future, Duars is also likely to come under another large-scale wildlife operation called Project Elephant, which, as the name reveals, concerns the survival of the Asian elephant. Duars has, in other words, become an important centre for wildlife conservation, and the powerful wildlife lobby will accordingly try to impose restrictions on the local people's access to the remaining forests. Wildlife and forest conservation has become a central concern for the Indian Government. In the draft of a new forest act called 'The Conservation of Forest and Natural Ecosystems Act', the Government has clearly shown, as Ramachandra Guha writes, that it wishes 'to continue a century-old process of discrimination against the rural and especially tribal poor' (1994:2196). Guha says further that, if the present Draft Act is passed into law, it will represent a victory for the forces or interest groups that plead for strict conservation and strict state control (ibid.). Even the industrial sector's interest in exploiting the forest comes second to the conservationist's interest. Though, as Guha also states, in practice the Forest Department always has put industrial exploitation first (ibid.:2193), and some acceptable compromises are likely to have to be worked out to please the industry. The losers would be the people who live in and around the forest and depend on the forest for their daily survival. But, as most researchers dealing with the forest today argue, saving the forest can only be done in collaboration with the local communities and by finding ways of combining conservation with sustainable uses of the forest by the forest dwellers (see for example, Baviskar 1994, Colchester 1994, Gadgil & Guha 1992, Kothari et.al 1995, 1996). India has internationally been regarded as the forerunner of such forest polices through the renowned project of 'Joint Forest Management' first developed in the state of West Bengal. In this project thousands of Forest Protection Committees have been organized. Within these the villagers work together with the Forest Department to protect and regenerate the forests, and finally also get a share of the profits from sale of timber or other forest produce (see Maholtra & Poffenberger 1989, Poffenberger 1995). Various agencies and researchers applaud the project as a great success. Among them Ramachandra Guha and his colleague Gadgil Guha, who say it embodies their 'core message': the need for blending 'ecology with equity', bringing the power to control natural resources from 'corrupt bureaucracies' to the people who depend on these resources (1995:189).

During my stays among the Rabha, various rumours about the tiger project have circulated. In 1992, as mentioned earlier, people were saying that, with the tiger projects the World Bank or the 'Americans' would take over the forests. This was because the Bengalis had proved incapable of taking care of the forest themselves. And in one Rabha village, a visit by a team of *sahibs* from the World Bank, was interpreted as confirmation of the shift of power in the forests. When I later passed through the village, I was taken for a World Bank employee, and narratively situated as part of the takeover of the forests. A return of the *sahibs* appears to carry mainly positive connotations. As I earlier pointed out, the Rabhas regard the earlier British rule as more favourable to them than the present rule of the Bengalis. However, the tiger project has stirred up much anxiety. The Rabhas do not know what will come of it, or if they will have a place in the new regime of the *tiger-sahibs*, as the Indian officials in charge of the tiger project are called. The villagers have been called to several meetings and tiger-teams have visited their villages, and every time giving new information that often leaves people more confused then before. After one meeting the men who attended told the villagers that large parts of the forests would be closed, and that the Forest Department not would allow anyone to collect firewood or graze cattle there. At another meeting they were informed that some of the forest villages had to be transferred to new locations outside the forest, but no one could tell what villages would be effected or when the transfer was supposed to happen. Nothing was clear regarding compensation. The planned displacement therefore caused speculation, for example, that all the *faltus* were going to be forced to leave. Or, similarly, that all Rabhas were going to be thrown out of the reserve because of their involvement in illegal fellings. The general sentiment was that displacement is unacceptable and that they will take up their bows and arrows if necessary.

Other speculations relate to possible benefits arising from the tiger project. In different meetings the *tiger-sahibs* are supposed to have promised all kind of things, for example, irrigation canals, drinking water facilities, and also newer things like schemes for beekeeping or the introduction of a special type of highly productive milk cows. Rabhas from two neighbouring forest villages were one day called to the beat office for a meeting. After several hours of waiting, the tiger delegation finally arrived, and they asked the villagers who were gathered to express their needs and hopes for the future. As the voices of their villages the *mondols* did the talking, except for minor comments by some other men. The delegation particularly asked the women to speak up and voice their grievances, but they remained silent. Women seldom speak in front of government officials, and most women have difficulties expressing themselves in Bengali. After the meeting, people criticised the *mondols* for not properly describing the hardships they were facing and for not raising any substantial demands. Particularly in one village the *mondol* was attacked for agreeing to construct an irrigation canal without payment, receiving only the building material from the Reserve. The villagers argued that they were entitled to daily wages for such work, as is the case in the

panchayat village close by. The villagers also know that the World Bank has given money for the development of their forest villages, and they suspect that, as earlier, none of it will actually come to them. Complaints have already been raised about the *tiger-sahibs*, saying that they only care for the wild animals and pay little attention to the needs of the people living in the forests.

Even if people still await large and radical transformations, the tiger project already has brought about visible changes. For the Rabhas, they are not for the better. Plantation work and Departmental tree fellings have been reduced during the past years. This means fewer working days and a substantial drop in their cash income. In some areas, the villagers have been informed that in the future all such work will be dropped altogether. Instead of planting trees for the production of timber, barren forest land has been replanted with elephant grass and other plants favourable to the wild animals. Trees will be left to regenerate naturally in these areas. The Rabha already have a hard time keeping elephants and other wild animals out of their paddy fields, and consequently fear a large increase of wildlife. They are entitled to compensation for damaged crops and destroyed houses, or if someone is crippled or killed, but the procedure is slow. The beat officer has to authorise an application and forward it, if compensation is approved, it will arrive much later and not be in proportion to the actual loss. Often people do not even go through the trouble of reporting damages. So, instead, the villagers remain out in the fields at night during harvest time, keeping watch from a tree for elephants. If elephants come, other villagers are summoned and by shouting loudly, beating drums, throwing fireworks, and even by running up to the elephants and beating them with a stick or throwing stones at them, they make the animals leave.

The forest villagers have repeatedly asked the Forest Department for some type of fencing for protection, but, except for some attempts to use electrical fences, the Forest Department has not done much to solve this urgent problem. Other than compensation, the general solution in wildlife conservation is to separate men and wild animals by relocating the first. Such transfers have, as I discussed earlier, taken place in many tiger reserves in India and have caused much resentment (see Fernandes 1993:20).[33] A recent Government review of Project Tiger also points to the problems of relocating villages from the core areas of the reserves, and states that project officials 'have neither had the means, nor the temperament to adequately compensate villagers for their financial, social and emotional losses' (1993:31). In Buxa there is discussion, and it now seems that only those few forest villages (probably five) situated inside the core area will be relocated. According to a representative of a local environmental organisation, the Forest Department earlier planned to resettle all the forest villages situated within the Tiger reserve (i.e. both those in the core area and those in the buffer zone).

In 1992 the field director, P. Sanyal, told me that only two villages had to be transferred, and that the villagers in both had agreed to this transfer. The following day I went to one of the two villages, Panijora (an ethnically mixed village of Rabhas, Garos and Oraons), and heard a completely different story. More or less all of the villagers were opposed to the transfer. They said that the Forest Department had threatened them, saying that unless they moved there could be no further work, and that they would not receive any compensation if their houses or crops were damaged by wild animals. And, they had been informed that when they moved only registered villagers would get new land and quarters. The *faltus* would not get anything. Nor would anyone get compensation for betel palms, other fruit trees or small gardens. Further, the villagers said, their new land would be on the south side of the highway, cut off from the forest where they had everything they needed: fodder, fuel and various foodstuffs. So the villagers had decided to stay on, even if it would mean a lot of trouble. In 1995 neither of these two villages had yet been transferred.

The World Bank *Staff Appraisal Report* on ecodevelopment in India, in relation to the Buxa Reserve, mentions that, 'officials are discussing relocation of one forest village' and more preliminarily for two other forest villages. No names are given in the report, but perhaps the latter two are those mentioned earlier, and the first is Bhutia *bustee*, a forest village situated close to the Bhutan border and consisting mainly of buffalo herders. During my last fieldwork period in spring 1995, the relocation of the Bhutia village had already started. According to local information, about 25 families out of 40 agreed to move, and have now settled with their cattle in a new village close to the highway. The Forest Department hopes that the rest will follow later. But already problems have emerged. Squeezed between the highway, tea gardens and forest plantations, the large number of buffaloes and cows have nowhere to graze. Cattle have been caught after entering a nearby tea garden. The problem of finding grazing has made some of the herders bring their livestock back to their former village, which naturally functions as a warning to those still there. Villages from other parts of the Buxa Reserve are supposed to be relocated to this area (south of the highway some eight kilometre from Alipurduar town). The place will become completely overcrowded, the *mondol* in a nearby Rabha village told me. He had been informed that only two cows will be allowed per family, and instead of large herds that have to graze in the forests, the *tiger-sahibs* will provide new 'Jersey' cows to be kept in the village and fed with specially cultivated grass. The latter is apparently part of the ecodevelopment strategy, and aims at bridging the conflict between the needs of the local people and the protection of threatened wildlife habitats.

FOREST PROTECTION COMMITTEES

Parallel to the strategy of ecodevelopment the Forest Department has also started to form so- called 'Forest Protection Committees', to make forest communities part of the project of saving the forests. Forest Protection Committees (FPC) were developed in the early 1970s in the Midnapur District, in the southern part of West Bengal. A forest official together with local villagers managed to work out an arrangement by which the villagers received a 25% share of sal timber and other minor forest products (leaves, fruits, mushrooms, medicinals) in exchange