Concluding Observations
In the present study, I have discussed and analysed theoretically and empirically the local level institutions and their governance of common property resources in ecologically fragile regions in India, viz Van Panchayats in Almora and Forest Protection Committee in Midnapore. The focus has been primarily on institutional change, their nature and role in affecting collective actions and outcomes and their effectivity and efficiency in the management of resource held in common. In the process few important insights have come to the fore which requires further research and analysis.

In development literature as well as in ordinary conversation, resource degradation is mostly linked to overpopulation and market forces. They are perhaps the most potent metaphors in discussion about environment. It is indisputable though that growth in population and increase in the number of towns and markets have resulted in greater pressure on the overall resources of the districts, especially the forest resources which are integrally implicated in the agricultural livelihoods of the population, however to concentrate on these factors would be to ignore other issues associated with such problems. It overlooks the manner in which the impact of population pressures and market forces on forests is mediated especially at the local level by institutional arrangements. Further scarcity which then arises due to resource depletion is not necessarily linked to these external factors. It is also an outcome of specific mode of production and consumption. The idea of scarcity makes sense only in terms of level of demand and supply which are governed by humans, but in ways that are
crucially always and without exception are mediated by institutions. The scarcity of timber, fodder or fuelwood and changes in land use are a consequence of particular mode of consumption that creates demand, production that may be wasteful and accumulation that intensifies use distribution that creates massive inequalities in production, consumption and accumulation.

Though the institution at the local level has ways and means to counteract scarcity, their performance and effectivity in resource management is influenced both by conditions of scarcity and abundance. The incentive to cooperate is lowest in any of these situations as the option to be better off or worse off is nearly absent and does not bring about any substantial difference in the overall condition of the user. Consequently it is seen that the tendency to free ride is utmost here. In conditions of resource optimality, the management is efficient because with the neglect of the same the chance of being worse off high and therefore to avoid the situation the resource conditions induces efficient management. Hence it is necessary to link exogenous factors with endogenous ones in analysing institutions.

An important aspect relating to institutional functioning is its tendency towards generality in contrast to traditional management system which were more specific and local need based. For example there are general rules of use and consumption for Van Panchayats in the ‘Niyamavali’ which may be more applicable to villages around Almora and Nainital than in Pithoragarh which is at a higher elevation. Further there may be differences in the livelihood and consumption pattern of communities based on the degree of remoteness, agro forestry zone, primary and supplementary sources of income etc. There exists differences in communities not only region wise but also among communities
within the region. Treating them as a single homogenous entity will be to neglect micro level specificities. While it is difficult to formulate separate institutional arrangements community wise, the way it can be counteracted is that the local level institutions be vested with power to devise their own arrangements of resource management based on specific local needs. Institutional autonomy and participatory decision making in formulation and implementation of rules and regulations need to be considered both by policy planners and social scientists.

In analysing institutions it is also necessary to focus on political regimes within which it operates. The point here is to identify factors which probably affects functioning of institution. In the study it is concluded that political regimes have been catalytic not only in accelerating institutional change but also the process of change. For example in South West Midnapore, the ruling party is quite active at the grassroots level in identifying local leadership which has proved effective in mobilising community’s commitment to forest management. Further where the broader objective of the political party in power coincides with initiatives like JFM, it was been quite supportive and the process of change has been faster, as enhances and strengthens the party identity at the local level. At the same time these parties also determine the internal functioning of these institutions as all important position are being absorbed by party affiliated members. On one hand while it helps in creating a local base for community mobilisation, it dictates institutional functioning where again decision making gets concentrated in few hands based on primodial loyalties.

Lack of adequate representation of women in these local institutions is quite paradoxical. Though Van Panchayats and FPCs have emerged as significant institutions in resource management, presence of women have been
negligible. This is despite the fact that they are more dependent on CPR and are the direct beneficiaries of resources like forests. They play a critical role in the forest economy depending on it for subsistence and economic needs. Specifically their interface with forest lands include gathering, wage employment, production in farm forestry and management of afforested areas in community plantations. Their non involvement in decision making process both at the micro level reflects to a larger degree the gender equations and inequalities vis-a-vis division of labour and access and control of resources. This marginalisation has it impact not only on their overall socio economic condition but has led to limited awareness regarding their rights and privileges vis-a-vis natural resources. However in West Bengal, the level of awareness is much more due to the populist agenda of the ruling party which reaches out to different sections of the community. An attempt to provide them a forum has been made by NGOs in Garhwal and Kumaon region by forming women collectives called 'Mahila Mandals' to involve them in the development process as the panchayats and van panchayats are dominated by men. The prime concern therefore is to devise concrete plans and programmes to make women active partners in resources management rather than being mere implementors.

While these institutions use government support to function uniformly, at the same time too much interference have made them appendages rather than independent entities. Internal monitoring which is otherwise more cost effective in a traditional rural society gets replaced with continuous external supervision entailing high transaction cost. This has been apparent in the institutions understudy. The absence of well designed and regularly enforced institutional rules in villages or strong interventions by the government to change local
patterns of resource have affected resource management and therefore resource condition. The village communities in both the cases have proved capable of protecting local resources and using them sustainably in some instances. In others they overconsumed and degraded their resources. What therefore distinguished the unsuccessful from the successful cases were lack of enforcement rules, fractious internal village politics, absence of local leadership, excessive government interference and subsequent erosion of local customs and norms which endorsed resource management.

Ownership of resource is indirectly linked to its maintenance and utilization. This entails not only access to but also control of resource which provides incentive as well as an assurance to cooperate. Lack of clarity in resource ownership and complexities in CPR and PPR (Private property resources) have affected governance. This is because peoples relatedness to the resource is affected when the local is controlled by the non local. This alienation induces free riding as the stake in the resource gets marginalised and the responsibilities get transferred to external agencies. For e.g. in Almora while forests under Van Panchayats are separately demarcated as panchayati forests, in Midnapore the forests continue to be with the state and consequently community dependence on the state is indirectly imposed.

What is suggested therefore is that local level institutions need more flexibility and independence in crafting their own over rules specific to their local needs and conditions. Further they require more punitive powers to function effectively. The 1993 draft notification submitted in the Van Panchayat Sarpanch Sammelan held in Haldwani in December 1994, demands greater control over revenue and management of Van Panchayat lands. Their demand
include that (a) revenue be given directly to the van panchayats and members be allowed to use 50 percent of the revenue for afforestation and land development and rest for development programmes such as Jawahar Rozgar Yojna and (b) Garibi hatao be implemented through Van Panchayats (c) Sarpanch should have the right to sanction at least Rs. 500/- from the Van Panchayat budget (d) Van Panchayats members be able to independently enforce rules (e) thirty per cent of the van panchayat seats be reserved for women and they be coopted in development and afforestation programme. If this demands are met, it is felt that it will provide wider scope for decision making and participation of both men and women in community management.

Similarly in the case of FPCs, the Forest Department should provide flexibility and independence in functioning of these institutions. For this villagers need to have a more direct involvement in micro level planning and in rule formation and more importantly in its implementation. The Department should have a facilitating role than being directly involved in the day to day activities of the committee to make them function independently.

This thesis thus studied institutions. In assessing the influence of institutions on resource use, it proposes that population and market pressures are less significant explanations of resource use patterns than are institutional arrangements. It attempted to specify factors which facilitated and hindered effective functioning of these institutions and suggestions to forfeit the same.