CHAPTER-III
Environmental Activism in North East India

We are preparing to launch various forms of agitation programmes against the state government's refusal to review its decision to construct the dam. We plan to go for a general strike first and if the Government continues to be indifferent to the sentiments of the people, we will impose an indefinite economic blockade.

The above announcement made by the convenor of Action Committee against Tipaimukh Project in Manipur reported in The Telegraph, a national daily of India, may make the environmentalists and laymen of the country to wonder about the existence of environmental problems in its north eastern part, but for the people and activists of the region, these environmental issues are of serious concern and has given rise to a spurt of environmental activism in many parts of the region. The environmental activism has received its place in the academic discussion, policy making and activism of the region. Before we go into the details of environmentalism in the North East, a brief look at the history of environmentalism in the Indian subcontinent could be in order.

Though the rise of environmental activism in India in the typical sense of the term can be regarded as a phenomenon of the 1970s and onwards mainly with the event of Chipco movement as the turning point, the environmental concern can be said to be present among people decades and centuries ago. The forests were central to the civilization of India and India's culture was known as Aranya Sanskriti or forest culture. The human understanding of the fundamental ecological utility of forest ecosystems and their economic importance had led to trees being treated with respect and veneration. The ecological role of forests in soil and water conservation constituted a vital part of the indigenous stock of knowledge which finds reflections in the restrictions imposed on the felling of trees in ecologically sensitive areas. The sacrifice of 363 Bishnoi lives to resist

86 The Telegraph, June 21, 2006.
the felling of Khejri trees by the axeman of the king of Jodhpur in 1730 AD clearly signifies the deep ecological sensitivity of the ecosystem people.\textsuperscript{87} The fight for rights over land, water and forest is recorded even during the colonial period too. While analyzing Chipko movement Ramachandra Guha maintains that a "historical approach contributes to a decentring of Chipko, by showing it to be a part of a much longer tradition of peasant movements in Himalaya."\textsuperscript{88} Guha maintains that a sociological perspective significantly reveals that the most celebrated environmental movement in the Third World is viewed by its participants as being above all peasant movement in defense of traditional rights over forests and secondarily, if at all, an environmentalists or feminists movement. The relationship between colonialism and environmental degradation though is crystal clear but very few endeavors have been given on this by the sociologists and historians alike. The penetration of state capitalism in the colony of India not only degraded the economy of India but also degraded the ecological structure of the subcontinent.\textsuperscript{89} The reckless appropriation of forest resources by the British in the colonial period and subsequently by the Indian state in post independent period has encountered lot of protests from the indigenous people or sons of the soil.

The post colonial India experienced a number of environmental activism mainly after 1970. While the UN was busy with its environment and development program followed by the Stolholm conference, the women of Tehri Garhwal region were busy in embracing trees to save them from the wood cutters. Evolved into an ecological movement in its later phase it was aimed at the maintenance of the ecological stability of the major upland watersheds in India.

The movement began in the early 1970s in the Uttarakhand region of the undivided state of Uttar Pradesh. The region has a long history of struggles on forests and over the rights of the locals to forests widely discussed by Ramachandra Guha.\textsuperscript{90} For Guha it was the culmination of this long historical process, accentuated by commercial exploitation of forests. Deforestation which has been going on for decades, increased land

\textsuperscript{87} The people who live in proximity with nature and depend on nature directly for their survival.
\textsuperscript{88} Guha, 1989.
\textsuperscript{89} For further reference see Guha 1989, also see Sinha A.C. 1993.
\textsuperscript{90} Guha, op.cit
erosion and landslides, reduced fodder and food availability, caused serious flood during the rain, and made water scarce in the rest of the seasons.

The Chipko movement was not only the movement to protect the trees but also to protect the ecological balance of the Tehri Garhwal region and thus that of the Eastern Himalayas and gradually to maintain the ecological stability of the major upland watersheds in India.

The protest of the people against deforestation was also observed in other parts of the country too. Inspired by the Chipko, the Appiko movement in southern India is actively involved in stopping illegal felling of the forests and in replanting forests lands with multipurpose broad leaved tree species. The spontaneous resistance of people for saving vital forests resources also took place in the Jharkhand area of Bihar-Orissa border region as well as in Baster area of Madhya Pradesh where there were attempts to convert the mixed forest resources into plantation trees.

A major achievement is also observed in Karnataka, in checking the blind drive of the Forest Department towards what has been called 'eucalyptisation of all available land. A public sector company, Karnataka Pulpwood Limited (KPL) was entrusted with 16,000 hectares of Government land for the purpose. The VOs mainly Samaj Parivartan Samudaya (SPS) working in Dharwad district of Karnataka and youth organizations working in the Shimoga district of Karnataka protested against this project as an infringement of the rights of the locals over their common lands, and filed a legal suits against the government. Ultimately after a prolonged struggle of over five to six years, the Chief Minister of Karnataka with the directive from the Union Ministry of Environment and Forest announced the decision to wind up KPL. The impact is also observed in Forest Department's emphasis on community forestry with stress on local species of fruits, firewood and timber needed by the people.

Both Chipko and Appiko depict the fight for protection of ecological balance too which gradually got added was the fight for right to forest resources. The fight against KPL also shows the fight for right to natural resources. While Chipko generated a spontaneous protest from local womenfolk which later took the shape of a mass

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91 Bandopadhyay and Shiva, op.cit
92 Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997 Varieties of Environmentalism, OUP, New Delhi.
93 Nadkarni, M.V 2005, 'Voluntary Organisations on Greening India' in Pawar et al. p. 87.
movement, the fight against KPL was generated by the voluntary organization consisted of conscious youth.

The movement against dam is yet another arena which registers highly in the literature of environmental Sociology. A major movement that merits mention is the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The Sardar Sarovar Project, the third and the largest dam on the river Narmada directed to transform and develop the Narmada valley has received protest from the villagers and from social and environmental activists for its tremendous social and environmental effects on the people of the effected villages. The project invited widespread protest from the people as it threatened the displacement of about 100,000 people from 243 villages of whom 60 percent are tribals. Of the 243 affected villages, 193 fall in the tribal concentrated state of Madhya Pradesh, while the command area of major beneficiaries lies in Gujarat.

The movement against dam can be seen as a fight against protection of right to the homeland, livelihood, traditional belief system and culture of the people in the downstream which was threatened by the construction of dams and submergence of vast chunk of land and homesteads leading not only to disruption of their healthy and smooth life but also forced displacement from their traditional habitat. The case of Sardar Sarovar Project depicts this. Another example of the same type is the Koel Karo hydro-electric project in Jharkhand, which fall in Bihar before Jharkhand came up as a separate state. The project was spread over three districts, namely, Ranchi, Gumla and Singhbhum, to dam the river south Koel at village Tetra and Majhkera in Gumla district and North Karo at Lohajimi in Torpa Block in Khunti Sub-division of Ranchi district. The project involved acquisition of a total of 47,000 acres of land. As a result, 25,000 persons faced displacement causing a great deal of unrest and resentment in the area. The initial attempts at land acquisition met with stiff resistance from the local population. A movement emerged, more out of spontaneity than any kind of organizational efforts. There were persistent demands to spell out in concrete terms, the blue print for rehabilitation. A civil writ Petition bearing number 13666-67 of 1984 was instituted before the Supreme Court of India. The petition was filed by an individual, V.P Lakra, seeking to restrain the government from using force to get possession over the land till such time as the full compensation was paid to the displaced persons, and the measures of rehabilitation were comprehensibly decided. The Supreme
Court accordingly issued an injunction prohibiting the government from taking forcible possession over the land.\textsuperscript{94}

Though the above movements came up as protest to protect the right to livelihood of the affected people they depict the fight for maintenance of ecological balance. But the picture is not same in case of all movements and their success stories. The successful campaign till early 1980s against the Silent Valley project in Kerala proved to be a trend setter against environmentally destructive projects and shows a major difference. The movement grew mainly for protection of biodiversity led by the educated youth who were working with local people to popularize science and technology and protect the most treasured resources of earth. Though initially conceived in 1963, the proposal for the project took concrete shape in the 1970s to generate 240 MW of electricity and irrigate 10,000 hectares of land. The campaign against the project was rather unique in the sense that there was no direct threat to local population. On the contrary, local people were initially sympathetic to the project expecting employment benefits and increased availability for local needs. What was at stake was the rich virgin tropical forests with tremendous biodiversity. Several rare species of flora and fauna were threatened with extinction. Several voluntary organizations launched a nationwide campaign against the project, which was led by Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP). This Parishad has been actively working with people in popularizing science and appropriate technology and in campaigning against environmentally destructive development projects. In this campaign also, the VO educated local people about the long term importance of preserving biodiversity. The campaign resulted in abandoning the project and declaring the Silent Valley a National Park by the government.

Towards the end of the 1970s a similar issue rose in the Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka when the Bedthi project was proposed for generation of 420 MW of power. This would have resulted in the displacement of a few thousand people. Initially the campaign against the project was launched by local people under the leadership of Anusua Sharma, a woman MLA from the district. Soon intellectuals and voluntary organisations joined the

\textsuperscript{94} Sinha, B.K. 1995 'A Case Study of the Koel Karo Hydro-Electric Project in Bihar' in \textit{Social Action} Vol 45 July-Sept.
campaign. A national seminar was organized in December 1980 at Sirsi supported by local people and institutions as part of the campaign in which KSSP and stalwart environmental activists like Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Sundarlal Bahuguna etc participated. The weakness of project evaluation prepared by the Karnataka Power Corporation was expounded in the seminar. The Government was forced to defer the project.

The fight against mining is yet another domain that counts well in the list of environmental movements and its literature. The mining project of Bharat Aluminium Company (BALCO) in the Gandhamardan hills can be mentioned here. The project is being opposed by the local youth organizations and tribal people whose survival is directly under threat. The peaceful demonstrators have claimed that the project could be continued 'over our dead bodies'95 In large parts of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh the protests against mining is widely reported.

Thus the environmental activism and environmentalism have been seen to involve a large contours of issues starting from fight for land to fight for right to forest resources and fight for survival of tradition and culture and thus make it difficult to bring them under common theoretical frame. Known as new social movements, these movements not only depict different issues but also different actors, and mode of operations.

India's North East is yet to open its chapter in the literature of environmental activism. As stated earlier, environmental activism is a recent phenomenon in the region and the literature is yet to come up. Although activism of various sorts has been observed decades ago, environmental activism is a recent development. Even if we go through the history and development of environmental organizations most of them are seen to emerge only from the mid 1980s.96 But before going into the discussion on the hardcore environmental activism a history of colonial penetration and the protest by the indigenous people in the region can be looked into. Though the region's experience of encounters with the British and indigenous kings are plenty, we are not going into that history rather our discussion will be focused on the fight for right on resources by the local people.

95 cited in Bandyopadhyaya and Shiva op. cit.
96 See chapter V
When the colonial state wanted to exercise its control over forest resources, it has been observed that it triggered a number of conflicts in the region. The introduction of forest legislation by the colonial power led to what Tiplut Nongbri maintains one of the first ethnic conflicts in North East India. It was the Garo agitation at the turn of the 20th century which can be regarded as one of the first major agitations against the reservation of forests in the district. About one lakh Garos from the Garo Hills and adjoining Goalpara district came together to counter the series of legislations and conversion of their jungles and jhum lands into reserved forests. Under the leadership of Sonaram Sangma, the Garos demanded that Government put a stop to the policy of forest reservation in their territory. Nongbri states that “though the arrival of the British released the Garos from the clutches of Zamindars, reservation of forests not only impinged upon their rights and deprived them of their traditional sources of livelihood but also placed them under a new system of domination.” The Garos challenged the way the British took away their traditional rights over forest resources and demanded for the restoration of their rights to compensate them for the loss incurred there of. Forced to respond to the situation, the government appointed Mr.Arbuthnott, the Commissioner of Surma valley and hill districts, to look into the problem. The investigation upheld the Garo’s charge. However while accepting the report of the inquiry the Government of India agreed not to proceed with further reservation but refused to accept the demand to return the disputed land to them.

The activism in colonial North East can be seen as people’s response to the colonizing effort to the life world of people by the colonisers by reserving the forest and snatching away the right of people over the forest to which they are highly attached for their livelihood and way of life. The activism in post independent North East shows a multiplicity of issues starting from conservation of nature, quality of life in urban centres, fight against mining projects, construction of dams, to fight for protection of livelihood right. In the section that follows we shall take a close look at environment related activism in North East India.

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97 Nongbri, Tiplut, op.cit  
98 Ibid
Activism and conservation

A major concern for environment revolves round the issue of conservation. The forest department has a plea to find out area of ecological significance and convert it to a conservation site. A number of protected areas can be identified in this regard. While a good number of protected areas in the region came out as a result of the peoples’ groups’ effort, the demand to incorporate larger areas is continuously increasing. The success of Nature’s Beckon for getting Chakrashila Hill Reserve declared into Chakrashila Wildlife Sanctuary \(^9\) needs to be mentioned here. The unique forest patch of Dhubri district of Assam was declared wildlife sanctuary due to the presence of the Golden Langur which is found only along the Bhutan and Assam border harbouring other rare species of flora and fauna. Mobilized by Nature’s Beckon, a non-governmental organization that emerged in 1982 and got registered in 1991 under Societies Registration Act, Chakrashila Wildlife Sanctuary (CWS) is now guarded by villagers round the clock. The mobilization of the villagers at the fringe of the Chakrashila Hill Reserve to protect the trees from timber smugglers was a major step taken by Natures Beckon which ultimately ended up with the demand for the upgradation of the Chakrashila Hill Reserve into the status of Wildlife Sanctuary. Inspired by the success of CWS Nature’s beckon has also demanded for the conservation of rainforest of the Brahmaputra valley which harbour a wide range of flora and fauna, some of which are endemic and endangered. Hoolok Gibbon, the only ape species found in India has their largest concentration in these rainforest. The proposed Joydihing Wild Life Sanctuary comprised of Joypur, Upper Dihing and Dirak Reserve forest of Brahmaputra Valley is yet another chapter of conservation movement which will be discussed in the next chapter.

The activism related to conservation of nature is observed with most of the NGOs in the region. In November 2004, the Aranyak Nature’s Club, \(^10\) a Guwahati based NGO had organized a public meeting on “Community Participation in Conservation of Golden Langur” at Shankarghola, about 35 km southwest from Bongaigaon town in Assam. The meeting was attended by a number of people from nearby villages. The meeting stressed on the importance of conservation of the Golden Langur. The meeting was followed by a

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\(^9\) Dutta, Soumyadeep in Gadgil (ed) *Community and Conservation*

\(^10\) See Chapter V
three day workshop for the in situ conservation of Langurs which are present in the proposed Bhairobchura reserve forests, the small patch of what is protected by the local people of that area.

Conservation of Rhinos and its habitat is yet another concern of the peoples' group in the region. While the region boasts of the presence of the famous Kaziranga Wildlife Sanctuary that harbours the rare one horned Rhino, the Park suffers from poachers, intrusion of the national highways, erosion threat by the river Brahmaputra, pollution of wetlands inside the park and threats by militant organizations. The Protected Area Update reported the death of 485 Rhinos that have been killed in Assam since 1985.\textsuperscript{101} The direct or indirect involvement of militant organizations like National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) has also been reported in the same update. The update also reported the pollution of five wetlands namely Daflong, Kathpura and Arimora, Sohola and Donga inside the park.

The preservation and promotion of this well known habitat has become the concern of a large number of people in India and abroad who have come together to form the Friends of Kaziranga Forum. The forum was formed on the concluding day of the Kaziranga Centenary celebration on February 17, 2005.\textsuperscript{102}

Members of the Forum include prominent Indian Businessmen, American Rhino Specialists and few Indian wildlife experts. The forum resolved to maintain and enhance the ecological integrity of the existing protected area network of the north eastern region of the country, as well draw national and international attention to the inextricable link between the preservation and ecological viability of Kaziranga. Experts on the Rhino and biodiversity resolved to ensure exchange of traditional and scientific knowledge and technological innovation for conservation and sustainable development of Kaziranga. The resolution also promised to mobilize support for seeking an alternative route to the proposed express highway by expansion of the existing National Highway-37 passing across Kaziranga for the safe movement of the wildlife in Kaziranga. Besides Kaziranga Forum, there are many other organizations which are involved in protecting the Park and

\textsuperscript{101} PAU nos. 34 and 35, Feb 2002
\textsuperscript{102} "Friends of Kaziranga Forum Formed," The Sentinel, February 28, 2005
its flora and fauna. Kaziranga Wildlife Society in Assam is an example of this, which is discussed in more detail in chapter V.

Besides these the decrease in river dolphin also generated some sorts of activism in the region. Conservation of River Dolphin has been demanded by the Dolphin Conservation Society (DCS), a registered society working for conservation of dolphin in Brahmaputra and other rivers of North East India. The fall in the number of dolphins reported in the 2002 River Dolphin census carried out in Assam by the same organization led to a genuine concern in the environmental group DCS which has appealed to the state government to declare a Dolphin Sanctuary of the areas surrounding the river bed of Kulsi.\(^\text{103}\)

Thus there are demands for conservation of the endangered species of the region. The activism which mainly revolves round the conservation of Hooloock Gibbon, River Dolphin, one-horned Rhino, Golden Langur of Assam also received widespread support from other organizations in the state. In this case the activism is observed to take place in two forms: one, to protect the protected areas as is found in case of development of Kaziranga Forum and two, to identify ecologically sensitive areas and demand for declaration of these as new protected areas as is observed in the case of Chakrashila Wildlife Sanctuary and demand for Dolphin Sanctuary. Here the activism is mainly based on western conservation ideology which has some continuity with the conservation and preservation ideology followed by the British in the reservation of forests

**Concern for quality of life and urban environmentalism**

Though the concern for quality of life is regarded as ‘affluent environmentalism’ and a phenomenon generally associated with affluent countries than that of Third World countries, today the concern for quality of life and health is no longer the business of the affluents only. While the *Limits to Growth* thesis brought out by the ‘Club of Rome’ is the northern chapter of environmental consciousness, *The Citizens’ Report* published a decade later by Centre for Science and Environment (CSE, 1982), can be considered as the Indian chapter of the same. The Citizen’s report had a major impact throughout India. The impact

\(^{103}\) *Protected Area Update no Aug 38, 2002*
of hazardous industries on surrounding environment, industrial accidents and urban pollution are some of the concerns shared by the government and people as well. The establishment of Central Pollution Control Board and State Pollution Control Board are indicators of such concerns of the Indian Government. Besides, a number of non governmental organizations are also taking up the issues of environmental degradation and its impact on health.

In North East India concern for the quality of life has also registered its place which is reflected in the activities of civil society and peoples' organizations. The concern for the urban environment is particularly common among them. A survey of the NGO Directory published by the Centre for Environment Education in 1997, shows that majority of voluntary organizations consider pollution as an important issue where intervention can be made.

The concern for the role of municipality and development authority in environment management has also been seen in many of the agendas of different organizations and civil bodies.

At a meeting in Guwahati organized by the environmental sub committee of Assam Science Society, one of the major non governmental organizations on scientific research and action, several speakers described the new building bye-laws proposed by the Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA) as illegal. The meeting was held to prepare a public statement on the bye-laws proposed by the development agency. It was reasoned that the bye laws were formulated and proposed at a time when the new master plan for the city was under preparation. Moreover, it was also discussed that according to section 123 of GMDA Act the bye-laws are to be prepared according to the master plan.104

Commenting on the ambiguities of the bye-laws proposed by the development agency, some of the participants pointed out the fact that the bye-laws failed to make a clear cut statement on the structures coming up by the side of drains, water bodies or natural channels. The bye-laws also did not attempt to have legal provisions to monitor the structure. As a result, this made it impossible for any of the engineers and architects who design the structures to inspect the construction works and report, if there are irregularities

104 *The Assam Tribune*, August 27, 2005
committed by any of the builders. It was also seen that the complaints lodged by the engineers and architects on such issues have failed so far to attract any action from authorities concerned. The speakers also expressed that the building byelaws should include the provision of open spaces in the localities so as to meet eventualities arising out of earthquakes and other calamities. Some of the participants also expressed that there should be some fixed limits for road levels and plinth levels in the city areas.

The participants at the meeting were of the opinion that there was a need to include the results of micro-zonation study and ground water zonation study in the new master plan as well as to project the population of the city accurately.

Some of the participants also expressed the view that there should be a transparent provision for examining the opinions of the residents of those localities in which new multi-storied buildings are allowed to be constructed. Different NGOs and GOs came together on various issues at this meeting.

The Save Guwahati Build Guwahati (SGBG), a city based NGO of Guwahati has alleged that the state government was trying to eliminate the city green belt. According to Dhiren Barua, the President of the NGO, Himanta Biswa Sarma, the minister who was looking after the Guwahati development portfolio, had announced the decision of the government to ignore the zoning regulations meant for protecting the city's green belt at the recent consultative meeting for preparing the city's new master plan. For Barua, the hidden agenda of the state government came to light when Sahara India, a private organization allegedly bought landed property for developing a township in a vast area under the west Guwahati legislative constituency that fell under the city's green belt area. It was alleged that some builders and estate developers from outside the state were trying to get the zoning regulations amended. The Government or the ruling party was bent upon doing away with the green belt because of its hidden agenda to satisfy these builders and estate developers. If the government succeeds in doing this, the sufferings of the city's common people will grow, as the natural calamities will multiply in the city in the near future. Barua also pointed out that the city has already been facing serious problems because of the reckless destruction of its forest areas, hill areas and water bodies, among others.
The president of SGBG also maintained that in the name of revenue earning the
government has leased the entire Brahmaputra bank between Kacharighat and
Bharalumukh to some private parties. This goes against the legal provisions and will of the
people of the city. The people of the city have been demanding constantly for the past
several decades that the river bank should be left undisturbed. There has also been a
demand by the people to develop a park in this part of the riverbank for the benefit of the
common people. Barua also mentioned that there was a clash between the common people
and a section of the businessmen in the nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies on the right
over this portion of the river bank.

In the face of popular protest, the government was now trying to shield its design
on the wrong interpretation of Barua committee on the city green belt zone. The said
committee had never recommended the elimination of the city green belt zone. However,
the government and the Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA) have
been asserting that going by the recommendations of the committee they would allow land
allotment in the green belt areas. Barua saw this as the government’s ploy to protect the
interests of the big capitalists from outside.

Barua appealed to the state government to take the matter seriously and with an
open mind so that the people of the city do not suffer due to its wrong policies.

While the concern for city bye-laws and city green is the concern of certain groups
the concern for non bio-degradable products is yet another matter that very often comes
under the agenda of action groups. The issue of plastic bags and its ban in the city of
Agartala, Tripura is an example of peoples’ activism in this field. ARPAN, an Association
for Research on People and Nature had come up with a survey report on the use of plastic
leading to a major hue and cry in the city followed by a total ban of plastic use in the state.
It has been pointed out, of the total wastes produced, plastic bags contribute ten percent.
Plastic bags also made an equal contribution to waterlogging in the city. 105

The use of the plastic bags is a common concern of most of the NGOs working on
the issue of environmental problem in the region. As is reported in The sentinel, a
newspaper published from Guwahati and Tinsukia, Irab Kirab, an NGO of Dibrugarh

105 PRAKRITI, the souvenir published by ARPAN in 2003
Assam, has come down heavily on the Pollution Control Board for failing to initiate any measure to curb use of plastic bags. The organization has been appealing to the people not to use plastic bags but to adopt use of paper bags as an alternative.

The above accounts bring to the fore the concern for conservation and preservation of wildlife and the concern for quality of life in urban centers. In both the cases the activism generated strikes a close similarity with the environmentalism of the west. Here the diffusion of western philosophy is observed in the concern shown to the environment differs from the environmentalism that focuses on people’s right to natural resources and livelihood. Most of the cases involve groups formed mainly by educated youth who registered themselves as voluntary organisation under the Societies Registration Act with the prime objective to conserve biodiversity and wild life. Example can be given of Aranyak Nature’s Club and Nature’s Beckon. Similarly, the concern for quality of life is the concern of the people who are equally influenced by ideas from the west on health hazards and other discomforts that occur in urban centres mainly because of over-population and pollution that pose a threat on the health in urban centres.

While a large part of the activism is directed at the conservation of nature and maintaining quality of life particularly in urban spaces which is our concern in this section, the presence of activism is equally observed in other areas too, such as, against hazardous projects like mining, dams etc.

**Activism and Mining**

Mining in North East is an important industry and the region occupies an important position in so far as its mineral resources are concerned. The region has a rich reserve of coal, limestones, sillimanite, uranium, oil etc. The mining of the mineral wealth of the region has evoked protests and activism in some parts of the region. Among different minings, mining of coal, limestone and uranium have generated wide protests in the region. The proposed mining of Uranium particularly has created a major contradiction in the region. This yellow cake, the most precious of metals generated a lot of protests and demonstrations when it was proposed to be extracted and a mining project was established in the region. Though the deal was primarily between Uranium Corporation of India

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106 The Sentinel, January 14 2006.
Limited (UCIL) and the Government of Meghalaya, the project has generated lot of protests from NGOs, opposition parties, students union and local people. When UCIL received the permission from the headman of the uranium rich village on the promise of development, the Khasi Students Union had made an appeal to the village headman to withdraw the permission.107

It has been reported that before 1991, the Atomic Mineral Division of the Department of Atomic Energy discovered Uranium in the West Khasi Hills in Meghalaya. In the name of samples they took vast quantities of ore running into hundreds of tons. Now the Uranium Corporation of India Limited has decided to acquire the land for the purpose.

To stop this effort, the protesters of the region sent a letter to the Prime Minister and the Department of Atomic Energy was asked to explain and in its response to the letter it was said that mining will only help in removing the uranium which is the source of radiation in this area.

Indeed the UCIL had planned to have the Domiasiat mining operational in 4-5 years. While the UCIL received permission to begin Uranium mining in Domiasiat village in Meghalaya, the opposition from the local Khasi tribe had prevented UCIL from developing the mine. The uranium project in Khasi hills brings forth the competing claims between the state government on the one hand and District Council on the other. The Khasi District Council states that as per the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution it owns the land and the state government or the federal authorities can not acquire it without its approval. The district council has granted permission to UCIL to conduct exploratory surveys but not to undertake commercial mining. On May 20, 2003, Hill State People’s Democratic Party (HSPDP), a constituent of the ruling Meghalaya Democratic Alliance coalition, opposed the Government’s decision to begin extraction of Uranium in the state saying it would endanger the health of the people. HSPDP president H.S.Lyngdoh observed that Uranium extraction would not only produce radiation effects on people but also on cattle.

Strong opposition also came from the Meghalaya People’s Human Rights Council (MPHRC) on the ground that radiation from the mineral would pose health hazards to people besides affecting the environment.

In defense of the government, the Chief Secretary said that the state government was not involved in the process when the UCIL conducted the geo-physical survey at Domiasiat. The Secretary of Mining and Geology, S.S Gupta stated that his department would soon submit a proposal to the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) for setting up a high level committee which would comprise some Ministers and senior Government officials to examine all issues relating to the project including health issues and would give its recommendations to the cabinet for approval. Further, in case of any decision by the government to grant mining lease to the UCIL, the committee would recommend the terms and conditions relating to such lease. The managing director also maintained that UCIL is ready to pay compensation to those land owners whose lands would be acquired. The UCIL also stated that the project will not be started without the consent of the local people.

With a view to get the consent of the local people and to impress them about the safety of uranium mining a visit to the Uranium mining site of Jaduguda in Bihar was organized. The team comprised the Ministers of Mining and Geology and Labour along with the representatives of local NGO namely MPHRC, Hynriewtrep Environment Status Preservation Organisation (HESPO). Contrary to UCIL’s expectation, the team alleged that the mining of the yellow mineral has resulted in widespread health hazards in the vicinity of mines. These organizations organized a protest march through the streets of Shillong on the occasion of ‘World Anti-Uranium Day’. On this occasion Meghalaya Chief Minister announced that the decision on mining would be taken after examining all aspects including health and safety, while the UCIL maintained that it has got consent of the landowner of the proposed mining area.

Not withstanding this assurance, the student’s organizations such as KSU and North East Students’ Organization protested against the proposed Uranium mining and on December 14, 2004, a general strike was called by KSU. Besides a coordination Committee against Uranium Mining comprising 11 organisations including the KSU, MPHRC, Western Youth Welfare Organisation (WYWO), and Lai Lyngdoh Welfare Organisation (LYWO) decided to launch a movement in the region to prevent the mining. The Committee decided to hold a public rally at Nongstoin to highlight the negative impact of the project on people.
On April 12, 2005, the organizations and the landowners of the area where the mining has been proposed erected a gate at Domiasiat in West Khasi Hills in order to check unauthorised entry into the area. They warned the people against passing through the gate to the area identified for the proposed project without seeking prior permission of the land owners who had set up the gate. It was said that the gate was set up as a symbol of people’s protest against the project. The Dorbar Shnong (village council) of Domiasiat also extended full support to the protest.

After the visit to Jaduguda the representative of the Government maintained that the team did not find any ill effect of uranium mining in Jaduguda, but the tribal council leaders stated otherwise. They also condemned the stand of the Khasi Hill Autonomous District Council (KHADC) and also maintained that the land owner of the villages and people should go by the opinion of the unbiased experts. He also appealed to the people to make a judicious decision as neither the UCIL nor the State Government has clarified about the relocation and compensation of the families.

In the verge of protests from different corners the Langrin–War-San Lyngdoh Development Organisation (LWLDO) held a big rally at Wahkaji village near Domiaset attended by people of several villages which decided to welcome the proposed Uranium project. The organization composed of Ranghah Shnongs and Sirdars (headmen) of these villages. Thus the mining of uranium too brings into forefront the conflicting interest of state government and local people and also between local organisations. The protest has two major grounds; first is the concern for ecological balance and the threat of health hazard anticipated from the proposed mining and the second being the issue of displacement and rehabilitation measure as nothing is clear from the state government about the relocation and compensation of the affected families. Though both the local people and state government are at loggerheads regarding the project, the protest has got a major credit for its sustained effort aimed at putting a stop to the project. This has created serious problems for the state government to carry out its preparatory work thus stalling the start of the project.

The limestone mining in Shella is yet another activity that received protests from the people of Meghalaya. Organisations like the MPHRO and other NGOs alleged that mining of limestone along a one km stretch in Nongtrai would alienate the people from the
land. They also questioned the patron of the project Shella based MLA Donkupor Roy about the real benefits of the project that would accrue to the government and the people of Shella.  

The coal mining in Tirap district of Assam is yet another issue that invites protests and movement by local people. Besides, the presence of a number of stone quarries in different parts of North East India has also raised lot of hue and cry at the local level.

A close examination of the people’s protests over the mining projects show two major concerns: one, the effect of mining on the physical environment and health of local people, and two the issue of compensation and relocation of the affected people which depicts the issue of human rights over land and livelihood.

**Hydroelectric projects and environmental activism**

When the director of Centre for Science and Environment, Sunita Narain maintained that the strongest environmental protests in India have centred around dams and displacement, a close look at the North East makes it more clear. North East is regarded to have the potential to be India’s largest Power House. The preliminary ranking study on the nation wide potential of hydroelectric schemes in October 2001 conducted by the Central Electricity Authority (CEA), gives Brahmaputra the highest potentiality mark. The ranking study considered 168 schemes which have an installed capacity of 63,328 MW and 149 of these were given A and B ranks, indicating high viability. In addition to these over 900 mini and micro hydel projects have been identified to meet the local needs of the North East while the major portion of the power generated from the large dams will be evacuated to other parts of the country.

The harnessing of hydropower has however led to a lot of resistance from the people of the region. The strongest protests in the region are mainly against the dams that are to be constructed on the river Barak and Brahmaputra. Besides dams on Loktak and

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Tipaimukh in Manipur and on the Gomti river in Tripura have also invited strong resistance from the people.

As mentioned earlier that Brahmaputra alone has the potentiality and because of it, a number of dams have been constructed on the different tributaries of Brahmaputra. Of its seven states, Arunachal could singly produce most of the megawatts required to fulfill the country’s national policy to generate 50,000 MW by 2012 to provide cheap electricity for the needs of the teeming millions and the growing economy. The major projects i.e., mega projects include Subansiri multipurpose dam project the proposal of which include three dams namely 1) Upstream of Daporjio near Menga village on Subansiri river 2) On Kamala river upstream of Tamen 3) Gerukamukh at the original site of Subansiri river. The second the Siang Multipurpose Dam Project presently modified into three alternative dams at 1) Upstream of Yingkiong near Pugging village on the river Siang 2) at 15 km. upstream of Kaying on the river Siyom near Raying village. 3) Upstream of Pasighat near Routung village.

The mega projects including the Lower Subansiri (2000) and three projects in the Siang basin have already been handed over to the NHPC for preparation of detailed project reports (DPR). The public hearings have already been held for four projects – the lower Subansiri, the Siang middle project, the Ranganadi Hydro Project State II (RHEP-II) and the Dikrong, now called Pare Hydro Project.

The lower Subansiri inter-state hydroelectric project proposes to harness the hydel potential of the lower reaches of the Subansiri river. The 116 m. high dam would submerge 3,436 ha. of forests. The total requirement of forest land for the project is in Arunachal Pradesh and 856.3 ha. In Assam survey and investigation works have been completed and the Detailed Project Report (DPR) is presently undergoing the techno-economic clearance required from the MoEF.

The submergence area of the lower Subansiri dam will extend over 70 km. upstream along some of its tributaries such as the Kamala and the Sil. Since the submergence area is a gorge with steep slopes and rugged topography, relatively few villages will be directly displaced. According to the project authorities the dam will

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submerge the agricultural lands of two villages, Gengi and Siberite. The families to be affected belong to the Gallong tribe, a subgroup of the Adis. These are agricultural communities practicing jhum cultivation, terrace rice cultivation and wet rice cultivation near the river bed. Besides they also depend on forest for their livelihood. So, all these resources will no longer be available once they are displaced. According to the EIA report prepared by WAPCOS, New Delhi, for NHPC, the project affected people (PAP) will be offered housing and homestead land, cultivable land (one hectare), civic amenities, schools and vocational training in animal husbandry, horticulture, weaving and other activities. It has been seen that the Resettlement and Rehabilitation plan spelt out for the PAFs 38 hectares of cultivable land (one hectare for each family) and 200 sq. km. of homestead land for each family will be given as compensation for a total 960.11 hectares of land.

The issue of the impact of hydroprojects in North East and especially in Arunachal Pradesh may seem insignificant because of its scant and sparse population, as compared to projects like Sardar Sarovar Project in Madhya Pradesh. But the bourgeoing consciousness and reaction to these by the people of the state and the region reflects the seriousness of the impact of these dams on people.

A major reaction and opposition from peoples’ organization and environmental experts in the region came up because of the projects’ failure to adhere to the legal processes created to safeguard public interest. The organizations that strongly opposed the dams are Arunachal Citizens’ Rights (ACR), Dam Displaced People (DAP), Probable Project Affected Peoples Committee (PPAP), Downstream Peoples’ Committee (DPC), Proposed Project Land Affected Peoples’ Forum, Yazali (PPLAPFY), Subansiri Bachao Committee, Siang Valley Bachao Andolan etc. Citing the example of the impact of Koptai dam in Bangladesh which has displaced thousands of Chakma to this region the Chairman of the ACR says, “We don’t need to go anywhere to see this; we have an example right here. Rehabilitation, no matter how good the intention, is just not possible.”111

The experience of the people with the projects seems to create a crisis of confidence in the government particularly its department of environment and forest. The activists allege that the process of project clearance in the stages of site selection, making Preliminary Feasibility Report (PFR), Detailed Project Reports (DPRs), Environmental

111 Ibid
Impact Assessment (EIA), public hearings into stage managed affairs where the peoples' voices were not allowed to emerge, ignored or cleverly manipulated to suit the project. Neeraj Vogolikar an environmental activist and closely associated with the problems of environment in the North East maintained that MoEF has ignored the plea of the several organizations to the ministry for looking at the serious problems in the clearance process of the Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Project and granting the clearance for the projects. He states,

On June 23, 2004, the MoEF changed a condition in the Stage I forest clearance letter according to which a sanctuary/national park needed to be declared before granting Stage II (final) forest clearance. The new condition asked for this declaration after the granting of final forest clearance with no specified time frame. The very next day, June 24, 2004, the MoEF issued the final forest clearance, while other important conditions of Stage I clearance were yet to be fulfilled! This violation was apparently pointed out to the MoEF by the Supreme Court (SC) appointed Central Empowered Committee (CEC), following which the illegal clearance was withdrawn on July 2, 2004. Finally, the Stage II clearance was reissued on October 12, 2004, after the conditions of Stage I clearance were apparently satisfied.112

Twenty NGOs and voluntary organizations based in North East have come together under the banner of the North East Dialogue Forum to register a combined protest against the building of large dams in the region.113 The office bearers maintained that apart from the displacement of huge sections of people and infringement of land ownership rights, the proposed dam will also have a negative impact on the downstream residents of Assam, effect on whom had not been studied in detail. K.K. Chandradhara, Secretary of the Peoples' Movement for Subansiri- Brahmaputra Valley (PMSBV), who was also present during the media briefing insisted that this flouting of rules and norms has been brought to the notice of the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests by the activists of PMSBV.

113 3, August, 2006, The Assam Tribune
which has been at the forefront of the opposition to the project since its inception. The case for the construction of mini hydel projects in place of big dams to meet the power short fall in the country have also been stressed.

The Siang valley Bachao Andolan (SVBA) has been opposing the dams since 1984, when Siang project was first conceived in 1984. This would have submerged the Along town. They fought against it. Later on the original Siang dam project proposal of 1984 has been modified into three alternative dams. However, SVBA maintained that government and dam building corporates have modified their plans not in deference to peoples’ protest rather as an improvement to their earlier single dam plan.

Tipaimukh

While the Subansiri project could generate protest against dam at the regional and national level, the protest against the Tipaimukh dam project in Manipur could have ramifications beyond the border. As one of the major and ambitious power projects in the North East to be located in Tipaimukh, at the confluence of Tuivai and Barak rivers adjoining Bangladesh, the project was to harness 1500 megawatt energy at an estimated cost of Rs. 6800 Crores at the recent price level. The proposed 162.8 m. high rock filled dam aims basically at production of 1,500 megawatt of hydroelectricity, irrigation of the agricultural fields and prevention of flood in Barak valley of southern Assam and the development of ecotourism, to be implemented by NEEPCO.

The project has been the bone of contention between the government and the affected people. The project is anticipated to submerge 275.50 sq. km of land surface in the state and to affect 191 sq.km. The dam is also anticipated to doom all the potentialities of the Barak catchment area. The project will submerge the national highway no. 53, the only alternative to Imphal Dimapur lifeline (NH No.39). Hence new alignment of the submergible points on the road will add a distance of another 60 kms to the existing Imphal-Jiribam-Silchar road. Though Manipur and Mizoram have been promised 12 percent of the output as royalty, the critics have long been warning that the dangers far outnumber the potential benefits. For instance, the Naga leaders claimed that the dam

114 Dainik Yugasankha, December 13, 2006
115 Dainik yugasankha, December 13, 2006
would submerge the socially and economically important places. The site chosen for the
dam on the Tuivai river was also prone to intense seismic activity. The dam will also
submerge various historical and legendary sites and sacred groves with vital spiritual and
cultural significance to the communities and lead to destruction of rich biodiversity which
is threatening the peoples' right to life and livelihood. Like other development projects in
the north east, here too, the people that are most adversely affected are tribes: the
Zeliangrong a constituent of three Naga tribes and the Hmar will be the direct victims of
the project. Ms. Aram Pamle, the secretary of the Naga Women Association, Manipur
(NWAM) observed in a letter to the editor of the Economic and Political Weekly made the
following observation:

The Zeliangrong people who live in these areas, like any other tribal people, do
not lead an individualized commodity-governed life but live in a well knit web of
community life. Their ancestral emotional bonds to their land, the mother earth,
constitute their cultural and psychological frame of mind that they can not be
compromised or negotiated. The submergence of the Ahu (Barak) waterfalls, the
biggest and the most beautiful natural gift in Manipur, will destroy an important
aspect of their heritage ---the innumerable myths and legends which are an
inalienable part of their bank of memories inherited through centuries. The high
watermark of the dam will also destroy five most important lakes located just
above the Ahu waterfall where the magical sword of Jadonang, the national hero of
the Nagas, is believed to be hidden. All these priceless and inalienable parts of
their cultural heritage can not be left to the mindless destruction by the dam project
authorities"  

The Dam has encountered opposition from the very day of the proposal. There has
been vociferous campaign against the project for its adverse impact on environment. A

committee named Commiee against Tipaimukh Dam, which constituted various people’s organizations was formed to creare mass awareness on the negative impacts of big dams and mobilize public opinions for resisting the controversial Tipaimukh High Dam. But the Union Power Ministry has continued to pursue the construction of the dam despite the continued protest from the project affected people. Various representatives from the Committee Against Tipaimukh Dam (CATD), NWUM (Naga Women’s Union, Manipur), NPMHR (Naga People’s Movement for Human Right), UNC (United Naga Council), ANSAM (All Naga Student’s Association, Manipur) including the ZU (Zeliangrong Union), ZWU (Zeliangrong Women’s Union), ZSUM (Zeliangrong Students Union, Manipur), ZYF (Zeliangrong Youth Front) called on the Governor and the Chief Minister of Manipur to apprise them about the feelings and stand of the people regarding the construction of the Tipaimukh dam. In reply, the Governor said all have the constitutional rights to preserve their cultural identity. He said that he knows Barak waterfall and Zelliad lake are the cultural heritage of Manipur. Similarly, the Chief Minister O. Ibobi Singh while listening to the people’s concern shared that a project of such magnitude should very much have wide consultation with the people who are to be adversely affected by the dam. But all opinions and commitments could hardly bring any reflection in the activities as the Dam Action Committee was very often brought the fact of lack of accountability of the Manipur Government in the preparation of different reports on the fate of the dam and its impact on people.

Five Naga organizations of Manipur: UNC, NWUM, CATD, NPMHR, ANSAM in another move have petitioned the centre to shelve the Tipaimukh Dam, citing threats to the existence of 18 Zeliangrong Naga inhabited villages and several sites held sacred by the community. The organizations in a memorandum to Union Power Minister strongly stated that the dam was not conceived with the interests of the tribal people in mind. They also threatened the Manipur government that they would go in for more stringent action if the government failed to shelve the project.

The organizations also demanded that the Nagas should not be denied the right to information on environmental assessment and for participation in any development project that affect their livelihood and dignity. The dams can not be allowed to be constructed if it

is inevitably going to destroy one section of society. Besides the *Citizens Concern for Dams and Development* (CCDD) have demanded that till informed public scrutiny of the project is not accomplished, the project should not be taken ahead. CCDD also demanded that the project should follow WCD guideline\(^\text{118}\).

On January 4, 2005, altogether 17 organisations from the country and abroad have objected to the then Union Minister of state for Industries and Public enterprises Santosh Mohan Dev who convened a meeting of the Chief Secretaries of the three states of Manipur, Assam and Mizoram at New Delhi for discussions on the project. The indigenous people spearheaded the people's movement in these two states arguing that the proper documents relating to the assessment study were not supplied to the people by NEEPCO authorities.

The public meeting on the assessment report called by the Mizoram Pollution Control Board on December 2, 2004, had to be postponed following wide spread public protest. Environmental groups alleged that the NEEPCO authorities have been ignoring the demand of the people to supply them with details of the environment study report despite the statutary provisions for supply of such reports to the people. They also alleged that the authorities concerned have paid no attention to the demand for holding public hearings in Manipur and Assam, which will also be affected by the project. Also, compliance with the international norms for consulting the riparian countries in case the river in question is an international one is also ignored by the authorities concerned in this case.\(^\text{119}\)

\(^{118}\) Dams, Rivers and People update, *SANDRP*, February, 2003

\(^{119}\) Following are some organizations who came together to register their protest against the Tipaimukh dam:

- Citizen’s Concern for Dams and Development (CCDD), Manipur
- Committee Against Tipaimukh Dam (CATD), Manipur
- All Manipur United Club Organisation (AMUCO), Manipur
- Brahmaputra Barak Rivers Watch, Assam.
- Rural Volunteers Centre (RVC), Assam.
- Human Right and Law Network Mizoram.
- Human Right Network of Indigenous Peoples North East Chapter, Mizoram.
In a communiqué to the authorities concerning the dam, on January 9, CCDD said “any decision on the Tipaimukh power project should not be taken without the prior and informed consent of the people of Manipur. An independent accountable and participatory Environmental Impact Assessment must be undertaken involving full participation of people of Manipur.” CCDD also maintained that there are no concrete plans for resettlement and rehabilitation of the people who will be displaced by the project. It also added that no environment management plan, risk management plan or cost benefit analysis have been conducted.

Besides protest against Tipaimukh multipurpose project in Manipur another project that has generated protest in Manipur is Khuga dam, a multipurpose project. A Dam Action Committee has been formed in Churachandpur district of Manipur to mobilize protest against the dam. On Wednesday, the 14th December of 2005, the activists of the dam Action Committee staged a sit in protest near the site of Khuga dam. The protest was against the government’s failure to provide adequate compensation to the affected villagers. While some of the representatives were meeting the chief minister O. Ibobi Singh in Imphal to sign a memorandum of understanding, it has been seen that despite opposition expressed by the people, the Manipur government went ahead with the construction work of Khuga dam.

Late in the evening, the protest of the action committee activists reportedly turned violent which resulted in the security men opening fire on the protesters. Meanwhile, two activists were killed while another member succumbed to injury on his way to Regional Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) at Imphal. A total of 16 other activists were injured during the incident, while five others were picked up by the police.

Delhi Forum, New Delhi South Asian Solidarity for Rivers and People, Kathmandu
Kalpavriksh, Pune
Bangla Praxis, Dhaka
Angikar, Bangladesh

120 December 15, The Assam Tribune, 2005
To settle the ongoing tension a memorandum of understanding was signed between the representations of the Dam Action Committee and Manipur Government. As per the six point Mou signed by Dam Action Committee leaders on behalf of the people and the Chief Engineer of Irrigation and Flood Control Department, it was agreed that the compensation should be made for the cultivable land within the submersible area for which compensation was not paid within December 30, 2005, would be paid with no delay. Besides it agreed to make payment of rehabilitation or resettlement package to the left out families of the affected villages.

In Tripura, the construction of Gumti Hydel project generated similar environmental awareness and fight for right to land among the people of Tripura. This 30 km. high gravity dam has been constructed across the Gumti river about 3.5 km. upstream of Tirthamukh in South Tripura district for generating 8.60 MW of power from an installed capacity of 10 MW. The dam submerged a valley area of 46.34 sq. km. This was one of the most fertile valleys in an otherwise hilly state, where arable flat land suitable for wet rice agriculture make up a mere 28 percent of the total land area. According to official records, 2, 558 tribal families were displaced from the Gumti project area. But this number only includes families who could produce land deeds to their land as proof of ownership of the submerged land leaving out a large number of families who could not do so.

According to Subir Bhowmick, the official estimates vary between 8, 000 to 10, 000 families or about 60, 000-70, 000 tribal people displaced by the project.121

The project has attracted major criticism and protests. Since the construction of dam involves large scale alienation of tribal land, the project has acquired an ethnic colour. The tribal insurgency gathered momentum by 1970s. In certain parts of South Tripura District, as much as 60 percent of the tribal lands were alienated and sold in distress conditions as a result of unequal economic competition with Bengali settlers. Along with the steady land loss suffered by the people, the submergence of a large swathe of arable land owned by the tribals in the Raima valley disturbed the ecological balance in the region. As Bhowmick says, this project not only disturbed the fragile ecology of the Raima valley, it also left a permanent scar on the tribal psyche. All tribal organizations including the communist backed Gana Mukti Parishad fiercely protested the commissioning of the

121 Bhowmick, 2003, in The Ecologist Asia Vol 11, no.1, January-March
Gumti hydroelectric project. But the protest was crushed by the Congress led Government which was determined to augment Tripura’s power supply. This led to the augmenting of tribal unrest by dispossessing and denying thousands of their only source of livelihood, the land. Though the project was ultimately decommissioned for its inability to harness sufficient power, it has generated a new consciousness about the value of land and environment in the minds of people.

The fight against dam in North East India is observed to take place not only to protect the environment but also to serve better deal for livelihood and compensation. It has been found that people are skeptical about government’s assurance. It has been found that many decisions are taken by keeping people at bay, as people’s participation is not observed when Environmental Impact Assessment and other formalities were met. The case of Khuga dam highly reflects the people’s concern for compensation to be met by the government.

The above discussion on hydroactivism was highly based on construction of dams. Besides this, the interlinking of rivers is yet another arena of hydroactivism which has generated loud hue and cry in the region. In December 2002, the central government set up a task force to interlink rivers, reviving the National Perspective Plan (NNP) prepared by the Ministry of Water Resources (MoWR) in 1980, for the optimum development of water resources envisaging inter-basin water transfers from surplus to deficit areas. The proposed benefits include flood and drought mitigation, increased irrigation, hydro power development, etc. To give it practical shape, National Water Development Agency (NWDA) was established in July, 1982 to carry out technical studies. The plan for Himalayan rivers development involve the construction of reservoirs on the principal tributaries of the Ganga and the Bramhaputra in India, Nepal, and Bhutan. The plan also proposed linking canal system to transfer surplus flows of the eastern tributaries of the Ganga to the west. The linking of the main Brahmaputra and its tributaries with the Ganga, and later with the Mahanadi was also proposed.

While the plan was questioned on account of its economic, technical, political, environmental and social viability, it has also generated resistance from the people of the region. Environmentalists and Hydrologists have cautioned against this hasty adoption of
the scheme.\footnote{122}{The Assam Tribune, June 30, 2003} The linking of rivers met with opposition from different corners. The All Assam Students Union (ASSU) made it clear that it would never compromise on the issue of linking of rivers and would launch a mass movement, if necessary, to oppose the central government's move in this regard. Accordingly, ASSU president maintained that a delegation of ASSU would visit New Delhi in July to put pressure on the central government to withdraw the move.\footnote{123}{Manju Menon et.al op.cit}

In another incident hundreds of people on June 28, 2003, made a unique demonstration against the proposed interlinking of rivers by forming a human chain on the bank of the river Manas which is also included in the project mooted by the centre. Braving the incessant drizzle since early morning number of people including students and women assembled at Manikpur in Bongaigaon district at the call of the ASSU and formed a human chain shouting slogans against the interlinking move. Asom Unnati Sabha also joined the protest. Later, AASU issued a statement that under no circumstance will the water of Brahmaputra or any river of the state be allowed to be taken out of the state. The ASSU further lambasted Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, former Chief Minister Prafulla Mahanta and Union Minister Bijoya Chakraborty for their consent to the project. Opposition leader Brindabon Goswami was also criticized for his shameful silence on the matter.

The hydroelectricity and the politics of generating it have put the region into regular newspaper reports. At the same time the region registers vehement protest to it. It was seen in the combined effort made by the Citizens' Concern for Dam and Development and organizations mostly from the region itself and rest of the country in the two day long meeting of 2nd consultation on Dams in North East India. On August 22, 2004, a strong opposition to the construction of the dams came out in Shillong. The meeting was participated by 50 participants from all the North Eastern states including the affected people from the Loktak, Mapithel and Tipaimukh project in Manipur, Gumti in Tripura, Pagladia in Assam and representatives of NGOs from lower Subansiri, Siang, Teesta, Bhairabi etc, were also present. The speakers warned that the proposed mega dam projects within the fragile ecosystem of the region, with half a dozen geological faults would cause
unimaginable catastrophe. They dwell on the adverse impact of these dams on the indigenous population. They also focused on the dubious and undemocratic methods used by the implementing agencies as NHPC, NEEPCO.

Thus a networking among NGOs of the region and the rest of the country on the issues of common concern is a recent trend that is observed in the new century on issues of common concern. The two day long dialogue on Dam, Development and Displacement: Land Rights and Seismic Survey in the Brahmaputra which was held in the Gauhati University on June 7, 2007 concluded with a stress on the need for a larger alliance. The leader of the NBA present at the seminar also maintained that the indigenous people of the region would be brought under the umbrella of National Alliance of Peoples’ Movement. The dialogue stressed the need for a greater coordination among the various struggling groups of the region to remove misunderstanding and conflict of interest among people living in the upstream and downstream vicinity of the rivers.

In comparison to the other parts of the country, the projects are anticipated to have more serious impact on the region both in environmental and social terms. The region is not only situated in a highly seismic zone but also inhabited by tribal groups with distinct kind of institution of property. The land is conventionally distributed among the members of the clan without the individual ownership right. Hence relocating and resettling them and paying adequate compensation may become difficult. Therefore dealing with the issue of displacement became a matter of serious concern for the activists of the region.

Besides the protests against dam project with its far reaching ecological threat and submergence impact threatening the livelihood of the affected people, there were other projects and steps of the government that came in conflict with the interest of the people. It is found that when the Forest Department of Assam submitted a proposal to the Central Government for declaration of Dibru Saikhowa National Park, around 12,000 residents of the forest villages of Laika and Dodhia, located in the core area of the park decided to take recourse to agitation for being “overlooked” by the department. The villagers recently formed a committee, the Laika Dodhia Unnayan Sangram Samitee, to spearhead the campaign for a better deal. The committee was planning to begin the agitation with a demonstration before the office of the Tinsukia Deputy Commissioner. The villagers were of the view that the area proposed for relocation was unfit for cultivation. The villagers
also suspected that they would be deprived of compensation if they agreed to leave their land. The residents also demanded the conversion of fringe village to revenue village so that they can reap the benefit of various state and central government schemes, which they had been getting for several years until Dibru Saikhowa was declared a national park.\footnote{The Telegraph, September 6, 2006.}

The concern for livelihood voiced by people's group took an interesting turn when the Assam Forest Department issued a notification on May 29, 2002 to scrap the 1989 draft notification declaring the Deepor Beel as a Wildlife Sanctuary due to the opposition of a large number of people who depend on the beel for their survival. The proposed sanctuary was feared to affect the livelihood of 400 fisherman families. Conservation NGOs like Arranyak Nature’s Club, Nature’s Beckon, and Nature’s Banyapran strongly condemned the Forest Department’s action which has led the Forest Minister to maintain a status quo and preparing the feasibility study for declaring the Deepor Beel as Wildlife Sanctuary.\footnote{Protected Area Update, No.38, August, 2002}

The livelihood issue has sparked a series of movements by the inhabitants of Doyang and Tengani, parts of Doyang and Nambor Reserve forest of Assam, too. Doyang has a population of 1.20 lakhs, parts of which was settled by the British in 1905 in four villages and rest gradually came as Tongyas (temporary settlers in forests) as a result of flood and river erosion. While Tengani came into existence in 1835-38, along with Barhola, the two villages in Golaghat district bordering Nagaland were declared as Reserved Forest 40 years later in 1878. Both the areas had been gradually occupied by the Tongyas illegally as they were not officially allowed to stay in the forest areas beyond three years. Besides, many other affected people from nearby areas have also started to settle down in these areas gradually.

The problem started when the Assam Forest Department considered all inhabitants of these two villages as encroachers and started evicting the inhabitants indiscriminately treating them as spoilers of the forest and the cause of ecological imbalance.

The eviction drive generated major protests from the inhabitants of these areas. The eviction drive affected three categories of people:
1) The inhabitants of forest villages in Doyang who were settled in the area by the British since 1905 under forest village system in the fringe area of the Doyang forest to take care of the plantation;

2) The settlers who settled under tongya system who migrated to the forests because of flood and erosion, and were not allowed to settle in one place for more than three years;

3) The other migrants who started inhabiting in forest areas besides these two categories.

The people of Doyang RF were already settled by the British. The problem started when the tongyas started settling down in Doyang permanently from around 1960s onwards against official norms. Besides a systematic encroachments started from 1960s onwards, many of the cases were backed by political forces of Bodo origin from nearby districts (for expansion of Bodoland). Hence Forest Department of Government of Assam started different eviction drives but was protested by the people with the backing of some political parties. The AASU and CPI(M) started an anti eviction movement in early 1970s and one school girl died in the eviction protest. When the Socialist Party came to power in 1978, after merging with Janata Party, the Chief Minister of Assam declared the Doyang area as unreserved forests. From that time the people of Doyang received different grants and welfare schemes from the state government. The peasants who settled in the area started to demand for land entitlement from different governments of Assam. In 1973 AASU joined the movement. But the movement lost momentum after Merapani havoc caused by border disputes between Assam and Nagaland.

Doyang is part of Doyang Reserved Forest and Tengani is part of Nambor Reserved Forest. Together the population of the two villages comes to 120.4 lacs spread over 153 villages.

Tengani was introduced as revenue village by the British government in 1935-38. Tongya people were brought into the area to take care of forests. From 1960s encroachment started in the north bank of the Nambor Reserved Forest mainly by people from the nearby flood affected areas. The government has tried to evict them in different drives, but without success. Like the settlers of Doyang, the people of Tengani were also affected by the government’s move to evict them from the forests.
The inhabitants of Tengani have many stakes in their favor. First, according to a document 100 families had been given settlements in the Tengani Sadhugaon of Borpather Mouza. Secondly in 1993, the full fledged Tengani Gaon Panchayat was constituted. There are number of government schools in this area. The area has also been receiving the benefits of the development blocks and other government schemes. The area has got different grants from the fund of the Chief Minister, but the great eviction drive in June, 2002, in these areas have led to a mass movement for land rights and livelihood. To protest the eviction which included incidences of burning of houses, destruction of crops and death of a couple of people, an organization called Brihattar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti was formed. A march from Tengani to Golaghat town (around 30 Km distance) was taken out on August 7, 2002. The march forced the Deputy Commissioner to assure that any step regarding eviction will be taken after discussion with Sangram Samiti.

The Sangram Samiti made the Forest department of Assam defunct in Tengani. The Samity decided that the resources of Tengani would be owned by the inhabitants of Tengani only. The authority of adjacent rivers as Doyang and Dhansiri was also taken over by them, even the revenue received from the ghats of Tengani. They defied the authority of all government machineries and developed their own machineries as village committees and Community Bisar Committee making PRIs defunct.

The Sangram Samiti was put in a helpless situation as there was no support from political parties. Hence to sustain the movement the samiti started to expand its activity and the movement has now spread to Doyang.

A joint procession of Doyang Tengani was taken out in Golaghat town on June 9, 2004, which was brutally attacked by police and CRPF leading to the premature delivery of a stillborn by one of the women participating in the movement. This tragic incident triggered the movement. As a result, an all Assam protest was started by democratic forum which led to the joint ministerial statement saying land entitlement will be given to landless people of Doyang and Tengani.

The movement got a major momentum with the launching of padayatra from Guwahati to Doyang Tengani from March 6-21, 2005, which has got wide response from

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people in different forums. As a result, on April 8, 2005, the Legislative Assembly of Assam adopted a unanimous resolution to provide land entitlement to the pre-1980 forest dwellers. A cycle rally was taken out by the Sangram Samiti from June 20 to July 20. An all Assam organisation called Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, Asom was formed in Tezpur as a consequence on the eve of Assembly Election manifesto. The KMSS thus started movement in three districts of Assam—Nowgaon, Golaghat and Dhemaji, where there is the highest concentration of forest dwellers.

As a result, a Task Force was formed to take necessary steps towards settlements of forest dwellers with the Additional Chief Secretary as its Chairperson, including representation of KMSS and environmental organizations. With further apprehension of national and international problems, KMSS has added certain other issues in its agenda. These include: opposition to seismic survey, opposition to the draft water policy, opposition to the big river dams, along with its original demands such as

1) Land to the landless peasantry
2) Patta to people cultivating land without patta,
3) Land reform,
4) Permanent solution of flood and erosion problem.
5) Irrigation facilities to all the cultivable land.

Thus a roving on environmentalism in North East India shows that the activism in the region is observed in all fields of environmental problems, as of conservation of biodiversity, maintenance of quality of life, activism related to dam construction etc. Besides there are also concerns for livelihood and human right issue embroidered with land and environment as is observed in case of the inhabitants of National Parks as Dibru-Saikhowa and Reserved Forests like Doyang Tengani which shows the diverse nature of environmental activism existing in the region. Both the protest by the inhabitants of Dibru-Saikhowa, Deepor Beel and Doyang Tengani though do not show the concern for the environment by the protesters, these focus on a sort of movement that took place because of the step of the government for the protection of environment like keeping the forest free from the encroachers which came on the way of livelihood of the people dependent on the land proposed for protection.
Again, the above discussions on activism related to environmental problems in North East India is indicative of the existence of people’s and peoples’ group’s consciousness to the environmental problems in the region. Not only that it also reflects the conscious attempt by the people for better management of the environment as is observed that many a times these groups ask for government’s action to protect the environment as is observed in case of Aranyak Nature’s Club, Nature’s Beckon, Dolphin Conservation Society who not only identify the areas of environmental importance but also demanded for protection of wildlife by bringing them under the protected area under the aegis of state’s department of forest department of forest of the state. While there is a demand for inclusion of areas of importance under protected area of state, there is also activism that asks the government for adequate compensation to the people for the effect that is estimated to be caused by the developmental projects like dams, mines etc. undertaken by the government. Though the chapter is not based on any first hand field work, rather highly based on secondary information, it is successful to find out the ‘varieties of environmentalism’ and activism in the region. The following chapters will make a detailed endeavour to understand the activism in the region and in Assam which is highly based on a first hand fieldwork by the researcher.