CHAPTER V

Environmental Action Groups in Assam

A study of environmental activism may remain incomplete without studying the environmental NGOs which are already registered under the Societies Registration Act or under any other regulation of national or international nature and have taken a formal shape of organization and demonstrated their presence by taking up certain actions in the field of environment protection. Study of NGOs also appears significant when the very growth and function of NGOs are considered. NGOs can be said to emerge out of perception of failure of state as a manager of its resources. A very common understanding about state is that it has the responsibility and ability to take care of all the needs of its citizens. Hence when it fails to do so, there develops the growth of civic bodies which take care of those needs. In the initial stage voluntary organizations emerged as philanthropic organization with the goal of doing good deeds to mankind. Gradually we find voluntarism has changed its notion of charity works and focuses on people's right and empowerment, i.e., helping people to fight for their rights and to build their capacity so that they can make their own decisions. In whichever form, these organizations are oriented to work for the society, which has a latent reflection of state's inability or inefficiency to meet the needs of the citizen. This gives us an orientation to examine the activities of environmental NGOs which can make our understanding of activism towards environment clearer.

As has been defined in the introductory chapter, environmental activism is not a simple process, rather involves diverse ways and strategies. It is the shaping of people's behaviour towards environment, to protect it and to nurture it. It also involves environmental justice. But over and above it involves a critique of state's inability to manage resource in a sustainable and healthy way. The intervention takes place in different forms and at different levels. The first and foremost step in this regards is seen in making people aware about the environmental problems. In this, the action groups generally identify different areas of environmental problems, such as, pollution of air, water, soil,
depletion of forest cover, extinction or endangering of species. After that the organizations used different means such as by supplying reading materials, organizing theatre, drama, showing films related to environment, public rally, calling a public meeting etc to create awareness among people about environmental degradation. Once people were made aware, the next job was to involve the people in solving the problem. Sometimes they are seen to involve people in afforestation or preservation of existing wildlife or sometimes to keep a vigil on poaching of wild animal and other wildlife crimes. While most of their activities directly revolve round the protection of the environment by making people participate in the process of preservation, capacity building of the people and sometimes channelising financial support for these actions. A major concern of action groups is the searching and enabling people for alternative livelihood. This is mainly seen in case of people who live in the vicinity of protected areas, who live in close proximity with nature and depend on natural resources for their livelihood or people displaced by dams or establishment of National Parks and Sanctuaries.

Before we examine each NGO and their involvement in environmental activism, a preliminary understanding of NGOs of Assam would be helpful. A look at some NGO directory may partly serve the purpose. According to the directory of Centre for Environment Education (North East), Assam records 152 NGOs which are involved in environment protection. Out of the total number of NGOs mentioned in the directory, 9 NGOs are solely concerned with environment while the rest (about 143 NGOs) take up environment protection as only one among a range of other activities they are concerned with.

Table-1 gives the state wise distribution of NGOs and their areas of concern in the region.
### Table 1

Number of NGOs and their areas of concern in North East India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States</th>
<th>Total Number of NGOs</th>
<th>NGOs solely concerned with Environment</th>
<th>NGOs concerned with Environment along with other issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arunachal Pradesh</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipur</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meghalaya</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mizoram</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaland</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tripura</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Since the directory was published in 1997, the table is not inclusive of NGOs that came up after 1997.

In so far as the emergence of these action groups are concerned, it has been seen that the upsurge took place mainly in the last two decades of the twentieth century with 57 organizations recorded in the 1980s and 47 organizations recorded in the 1990s. Although there are some mention of the presence of NGOs in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, the numbers were very small. Only 10 organizations are found to have emerged prior to 1950, while the sixties and seventies recorded a scanty presence of 9 and 19 respectively.
Table 2
Decade wise emergence of NGOs in Assam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Number of NGOs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before 1950</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950-1959</td>
<td>06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960-1969</td>
<td>09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970-1979</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-1989</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-1997</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Directory of Environmental NGOs, CEE-NE, 1997.

Again according to the Directory of NGOs on environment of World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Assam records 66 NGOs which are engaged in environmental protection, 58 of which are registered societies and 2 registered as trusts. The registration status of seven organizations has not been mentioned.

The organizations are spread over different parts of Assam such as Guwahati, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Nowgaon, Lakhimpur etc. Significantly, some of the organizations that are located in Guwahati extended their area of operation beyond Assam and the North East. Of a total of 66 NGOs operating in the state, 28 operated in Assam and 15 worked on issues beyond Assam. Around 23 NGOs did not record any geographical area of operation. As far as issues of focus are concerned, it has been seen that around 31 NGOs have mentioned environment as the sole focus of their activity. Organizations focusing on

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environment along with other issues of intervention such as, education, health, child
development, rural development, gender issues, upliftment of poor etc. are 33 in number,
while the focus of two organizations are not known.

The WWF directory however is not exhaustive of all NGOs, as many of the
organizations popular in their geographical area of operation have not been included in the
directory. Some of the missing names from the directory are: Green Heart Nature's Club,
Nature's Beckon etc., which shows that there are much more to be explored about NGOs
of Assam. Moreover, quite a good number of NGOs included in the directory are not seen
to be active for a prolonged period of time and are not able to make their presence felt in
the state except in name. Further, according to an office bearer of CEE-NE, though the
directory was prepared on the basis of the information provided by the organizations, the
viability of their existence and activities could not be guaranteed as the CEE itself
discovered that some of the NGOs that filled up the forms supplied to them for information
were later found to have failed in making their presence in the map of the active NGOs
working in the state. This has led CEE-NE to be reluctant to upgrade the information
provided in the directory.

Notwithstanding the above drawbacks in compiling the directory of NGOs, the
presence of environmental NGOs in large number is indicative of environmental activism
in Assam as well as in North East India as a whole. A detailed study of the activities of
these organisations may help to understand the way and the extent of activism generated
by these organizations. The present chapter hence seeks to focus on the activities of certain
purposefully selected NGOs of Assam involved in environment protection and through it
intends to gain a sharper insight into environmental activism in Assam. Though it is not
possible to give a complete list of NGOs working in Assam, drawing from different
sources, such as, CEE and WWF directory, it can be said that around 150 NGOs are in
some way or other, involved in activities related to protection of environment. Since it will
be difficult to study all the organizations in greater detail within a restricted time, around
nine NGOs have been taken up as case study to arrive at a detailed understanding of their
activities and the kind of issues they are involved in.

In the following pages we provide a brief account of the organizations covered in
the study:
1. **Kaziranga Wildlife Society**

Though the conservationist stand of state comes up with its protective measures by forming different National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries and Biosphere Reserves, these are not always sufficient to counter the degradation of the environment. The gradual decline in the number of the particular species, deterioration of the ecosystem of the protected area makes civil society respond to such situation. The Birth of Kaziranga Wildlife Society partly depicts that reality. The society came up from a sense of responsibility for protection of Rhinos and the Kaziranga National Park when some officials, working in forest department, soil conservation and tourism department stationed at Kohora in the Golaghat district of Assam found the role of people equally important to conserve wildlife as is the role of the Park Authorities. They found a number of weaknesses in the Park authorities which they realized could be overcome if the people also take an active part to protect the park and its wildlife and biodiversity. The society initially emerged as Rhino Club to promote and preserve the endangered Rhinos of Assam. Later on it was renamed as Wildlife Club when it expanded its interest to promote and preserve wildlife of Kaziranga and that of Assam and North East India in general. Late Padmashree awardee Robin Banerjee, a medical doctor by profession and also a naturalist was the pioneer of the organization and also its first president.

Kaziranga National Park which hosts two thirds of the world’s Great one-homed Rhinoceros has got the recognition of World Heritage Site. Kaziranga boasts of the highest density of tigers among the protected areas of the world and declared as Tiger Reserve in 2006. It is a home to a large breeding population of elephants, wild water buffalo and swamp deer. The Birdlife International for Conservation of Avifaunal Species recognized it as Important Bird Area (IBA). However, Kaziranga has been suffering from the problem of poaching of Rhinos and other wild animals, deforestation etc. Hence the KWS found it necessary to join hands with the forest department to stop the wildlife crime. It started its activity by donating rifles to KNP which can help the officials to patrol and fight against the poachers. Beside it joined hands with the forest department to carry out wildlife census...
from time to time. To facilitate the KNP authorities and the employees who sometimes do not have proper infrastructure, the society has been supplying 300 torch batteries a month since 2004, which was sponsored by Everyday Industries Limited. It has also donated fifty steel framed enclosures usable for protection of saplings to KNP in synchrony with World Environment Day.

For extensive research on wildlife in general and that of KNP in particular, the society has established Mahi Miri research centre with fund from MP’s local area development fund. A herbarium has been set up by KWS at Mahi Research Centre. More than 100 samples have been collected by the field assistants employed by the society. In recognition of the importance of its effort the project got a sanction of around four lakhs from Numaligarh Refinery Limited. Besides, a reference library called Robin Banerjee Library has also been opened at KWS complex to promote knowledge of wildlife in general and that of Assam in particular. The society also organized periodic seminars and study circles in different parts of Assam on various issues like encroachment, dwindling forest cover, wildlife and its protection etc.

The KWS has realized the importance of health condition of the wildlife. It organized health camps for the wild animals and distributed medicines for ailing animals from time to time. To promote wildlife tourism as a way to sustainable development the society organized different programs for mahout and guides. It has also constructed public toilet in KNP for promotion of wildlife tourism.

The society has also realized the importance of capacity building of the local people and their active involvement in the conservation of wildlife in their vicinity. With this end in view it arranged training in scientific approach for selected people to become guide with a value to protect the wildlife and environment who in turn could motivate the students and others to look after the environmental aspect. Fifteen schools around the KNP area were considered to be the best motivating agency and accordingly the orientation and training program for school children had been arranged.

The society does not restrict its activities only to KNP and to provision of scientific expertise, capacity building or educating people, students and other about the significance of wildlife, but also participated in different conventions on biodiversity conservation and raised voice against government if required so. It was one of the twelve NGOs which came
together to appeal to the state government for declaration of Joypur, Upperdihing and Dirak rainforests of Assam (covering an area of 500 sq. km) as wildlife sanctuary. It also joined hands with other nature lovers to protect the wasteland area behind the DTO’s office at Guwahati where the government had planned to clear the big trees that housed Adjutant Stork, an endangered species of Assam.

An analysis of activities of KWS shows that the main goal of the organization is preservation and conservation of wildlife. All its activities are centred around this. But the strategy involves diverse means. One of which is joining hands with the park authorities to protect the Rhinos. Secondly, it involves villagers in the process either by giving them an orientation to earn an alternative livelihood or use the resources in a sustainable way. Thirdly, networking with other organizations for a common environmental cause which sometimes involves raising voice against insensitive action of any governmental or private bodies towards environment and sometimes to demand for new legislation or policies for protection of wildlife.

2. Environ

Environ emerged as an organization to intervene in the sphere of urban pollution. It was started by a college teacher in 2003. The organization has an advisory board consisting of faculty members of university while the executive committee consists of members from different spectrums of society such as entrepreneurs, teachers, journalists and educated youth with qualification in environmental sciences. It has a support base of general members that comprised mostly bonafide students below 25 years of age. In other words, the organization is primarily based on student membership. Sometimes it co-opts volunteers from colleges, National Yuba Kendra, National Service Scheme etc. to carry out different activities.

Environ claims to be the sole organization which works in the area of solid waste management in urban areas, though it is also concerned with urban pollution in general.

The organization is mainly dependent on membership fees. Besides it also gets fund from government organization. The major objectives involves survey of natural resources and utilization of natural resources in a sustainable way. It thus focuses on hospital waste management and regulation of fees of doctors/private nursing home as well
as for better provision of doctors/nurse facilities in the urban area. The organization is highly critical of the use of non biodegradable cups e.g. plastic cups in tea stalls, any functions, seminars and conferences. As an alternative, the organization started to distribute earthen cups. Organising awareness camps comes under its regular activities.

The organization had taken up a six month pilot project for recycling of plastics. Three thousand households have been selected for the mission in the greater Silpukhuri area. The organization circulated bamboo baskets as dust bin for collecting plastics which would be recycled and reused for various purposes eg, as decorative items in houses, garlands etc. Again, for the management of non biodegradable garbage, the organization distributed bamboo dustbins to nearby households for depositing the plastic bags, packets and wrappers used for daily eatables like biscuits, snacks, chips, etc. and advised people to dump them in a separate ground so that it does not mix with other bio-degradable garbage that leads to soil pollution and loosens soil composition.

Environ recognized that solid waste management is an area that is often neglected but very important to intervene. Hence to tackle the problem, it focuses on resource base of trained personal who can take leadership role in waste management in particular and environmental protection in general. The organization is strongly dependent upon bonafide students to take up different initiatives in this regard.

Though it is difficult to assess the success of Environ in its nascent stage, the very growth of this organization and its functioning shows that there is a felt need by the organization to intervene in the matter and direct people to behave in an environmentally responsible way. Though the harmfulness of the use of products which are not biodegradable is nowadays known to a good number of citizens, their behaviour towards use of these products does not reflect so. Hence action groups try to bring these to the notice of the people and motivate them to behave in a manner which is environment friendly.

Though small as an organization and new in the chronology in the development of NGOs in Assam, Environ adds to the numerous efforts made by action groups to shape peoples’ behaviour as responsible members of society. The garbage management and solid waste management is yet a serious threat to environment particularly in urban areas. However, both the government and the members of society show a kind of aloofness and reluctance to recognize the problem. The city which has exodus of population is more
vulnerable to the threat of such kind of pollution. By bringing this threat to the attention of people, Environ adds another dimension of individual's role in the society, not only to produce and reproduce for his own needs but also to recapitulate for a future state of environment.

3. Early Birds

Early Birds, located in Guwahati is another major organization involved in environmental activism. It was established in the year 1991 and registered in the following year i., e., 1992. Though Early Birds initially emerged as an organization to protect the diverse species of birds of Assam, it has gradually incorporated the preservation and protection of wildlife of Assam in its objective. The organization operates mainly in 13 protected zones out of 25 protected zones of Assam.

The regular activities of the organization include organizing health camps for animals and birds, rescue of wildlife if trapped in certain parts of the jungle or in the human habitation. Though it is basically a welfare organization and is counted as one of the eight welfare organizations of Assam recognized by the Animal Welfare Board of India, it involves itself in different spheres of activities starting from awareness campaign for conservation and preservation of wildlife, raising voice for protecting wildlife etc. by bringing up pamphlets and booklets rich in information related to wildlife and distributing these among people or sometimes by networking with other organizations.

Organising health camps in Protected Areas is a major activity of the organization. Till the time of my field work, it has organized more than 115 health camps in different parts of Assam. Besides looking after the health of wildlife in Protected Areas, it also keeps a watch on the health of domestic animals adjacent to these zones as these animals are feared to cause and spread diseases in protected areas.

The history and development of the organisation

The organization has its root in the romance for nature exhibited by some of the trekkers from Oil India Refinery Limited (Guwahati) who used to trek in Himalayan hills. The pioneer of the organization who was also the president of the organization, was amazed by the diversity of birds found in the Himalayan hills and got an inquiry done to
find out the status of birds in Assam. From its parental body, the Refinery Employees Trekkers Guild, the Early Birds came up as a full fledged wildlife NGO registered in 1992 under the Societies Registration Act. From its original interest in birds, the organization has gradually spread its activities, which include the protection and preservation of other animals in 13 protected zones of Assam.

Since its inception Early Birds has mobilized people and diverse organizations to come under a common umbrella to protect the birds and wildlife of Assam. Besides organizing program by drawing on fund generated by the members, the organization has availed financial support from different national and international organizations such as WWF-NE, WWF Tiger Cell, Assam Science Society and Rhino Foundation.

It has arranged different health camps, nature camps etc. To sensitise and mobilize people around Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary towards the protection of wildlife and environment, the organization has formed two eco-clubs in the schools around the sanctuary, one at the higher secondary and the other at the ME school level. The eco-clubs had twelve members in the executive body. The major activities of the eco-club are observation of World Environment Day, Earth Day, Wetland Day, Wildlife Week etc.

The organization has undertaken a project for the treatment of wildlife of five protected areas of Assam. The project was funded by the Government of USA, rooted through Rhino Foundation, Assam. The five protected areas it covered included Kaziranga National Park, Manas National Park, Nameri National Park, Pobitora National Park and Orang National Park.

The health camp was organized twice a year and thus in five years ten camps had been organized by the organization in each protected area.

The organization is also highly concerned with the vultures of Assam which are under threat of extinction. Hence it felt the need to make people aware about the protection of vultures. In 1994, a major awareness campaign for preservation of vultures was organized by Early Birds under the National Science Awareness Campaign with financial aid from Assam Science Society, a premier NGO of Assam. The organization also delved into the issue of threat to the survival of Adjutant Stork. It has been observed by the members of Early Birds that the adjutant stork has very loosely knit sac which falls on the ground and which needs to be restored for their proper growth. In 2003-2005 the
organization took steps to rescue Adjutant stork with financial support of Rs. one lakh from Wildlife Trust of India. It also organized an awareness campaign for the preservation of greater and smaller Adjutant Stork around the breeding places in north Guwahati in 2007.

The organization though is highly concerned with the preservation of birds and seeks to orient people's behaviour towards the protection and preservation of these, it realizes the importance of wildlife itself for the preservation of total bio-regime and takes up other activities which help to add to this motto.

Though Early Birds came up as a welfare organization for wildlife, it considers conservation and preservation of bio-regime equally important. Hence it not only takes care of the health of wildlife but also tries to secure protection of total bio-regime without which welfare of wildlife is impossible. Thus, besides its regular activities of organizing health camps for the animals, Early Birds also focuses on formation of eco-clubs in the school to take care of the environment in the surrounding area. The main activities of these eco-clubs are organizations of different environment programs like celebration of Earth Day, Environment Day etc. These clubs play a major role in creating awareness about the environment among people. The organization considers organizing awareness campaign a major way to involve people in environment protection. Thus it has taken major lead to generate awareness among people regarding the endangered species of Assam like Vultures, Adjutant stork, etc. Though the routine activities of the organization is organizing health camps for animals it has an orientation to make people aware regarding the causes of the threat to wildlife and help to orient people in a way which can help to protect wildlife. The organization considers its formation of eco-clubs in schools has been successful attempt as it generated a sense of responsibility towards students for protecting wildlife. That the organization has succeeded to make some sense of responsibility in the minds of the people is evident from the fact that many times it gets reports on wildlife crime even from ex students and ex members of eco-club which helped them to take action accordingly.

4. Ed-En

Ed-En came up as a registered body in 2000 under the initiative of few college teachers of the department of Botany of Tinsukia College in upper Assam. The society is basically
concerned with environment education as it believes that environment education is very essential for sustained development. But it also takes up diverse issues of environmental concern from time to time eg. plantation and raising voice against environmentally insensitive activities of Governmental and private organization, eco-development programs, documentation of environmental problems etc. The society organizes training program for school teachers so that they can involve students to protect trees in their vicinity. For example, on January 4-5, 2001, the society organized a two-day teacher training program at Tinsukia, where 25 teachers from 15 high schools besides environmental NGOs participated. The workshop was held under the guidance of Centre for Environment Education-North East, and was supported by SBI, Tinsukia.

The society had been trying to do documentation of various environmental issues inflicting Tinsukia district of Assam pertaining to tea, oil, and coal and the problem of pollution in urban areas. It had prepared slides on various environmental issues in Tinsukia town and entire district and through visual slides it has tried to create awareness among school children. In the wildlife sector it has documented different birds of Tinsukia. In its reaction to the environmental pollution caused by Digboi Oil Refinery in upper Assam the society submitted a memorandum on 14th November, 2000 to Member Secretary, Central Pollution Control Board, New Delhi and IG (Forest ) MOEF, GOI, expressing concern over the environmental pollution caused by Digboi Oil Refinery. As a result, the C.P.C.B. asked Assam State Pollution Control Board to take up the matter. ASPCB issued a closure notice to the refinery after the reply to the show cause notice was found unsatisfactory. Following representations from the refinery, the Board has taken a bank guarantee of five lakhs from refinery as security and kept the closure notice in abeyance till further order.

The organization also keeps a watch over wildlife crime. In March 2003, Ed-en expressed serious concern over the killing of a deer by army personnel at Kokrajhar on March 10, 2003 and sent memorandum to Mr. Balu, Union Minister, MoEF, Mr. George Fernandes, Union Minister of Defence and Mr. Pradyut Bordoloi, Minister of State, Environment and Forest.

Ed-En also shows similar trend. Though it focuses on environment education by making and creating knowledge on environment problem through survey and
documentation of environmental problems mainly of Tinsukia district and its surrounding area, it considers the task as broad based. It not only creates a knowledge base but also tries to involve people by making them aware about the problems and imparting them skills to tackle the problem through training programs, educational camps etc. It realized that mere creation of knowledge base and making people aware of it can not meet the demand of the solution of the problem. To solve the problem, it needs people's active involvement in environment protection. Hence it organizes plantation programs and other related activities that could help people to live a healthy and environmentally safe life. The organization also keeps a vigil of the wildlife crime, and raises voice against these.

5. Nature's Beckon

The organization came up in the year 1982 as a premiere group to conserve the wildlife of Assam. In its initial stage it organized an all Assam environment awareness campaign known as Brahmaputra Barak Valley Natural Environmental Awareness Campaign which was supported by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India. In 1991, the organization formally registered under societies Registration Act. The major objectives of the organizations are as follows:

- Preservation of the forest and wildlife through people's participation.
- Afforestation and conservation of the biodiversity of the hotspot areas along with the cultivation of traditional food plants of the forest villages.
- To create the environmental awareness among the people in general.
- To impart environmental education to students and youths for developing trained manpower for conservational works.
- To work for social and environmental justice.

The organization undertakes capacity building program, awareness program for conservation of endangered species, prevention of wildlife crime, scientific studies, baseline survey and documentation, networking, advocacy and dissemination of information related to wildlife and its protection.

The organization has played a major role in the conservation of non human primates in the state of Assam. After the discovery of the golden Langur by the members of Nature's Beckon at Chakrashila Hill Reserve in the year 1982, the organization took active
initiative to save the non-human primates throughout the state. The awareness programs of
the organizations in the form of poster campaign, writing articles on primates in leading
newspapers and journals, organizing meetings and workshops and advocacy with the
policy makers for primates motivated other NGOs of the state to work for the conservation
of several species of non human primates of Assam which are ‘unique and proud
possession’ of the state. It has relentlessly and successfully lobbied with concerned
bureaucrats, state legislators and ministers to declare Chakrashila Hill Reserve as Wildlife
Sanctuary and has been successful to upgrade the status of CWS.

When the government evicted villagers from a protected green belt in Chakrashila,
Nature's Beckon facilitated the forest communities' resettlement in the fringe areas, and
trained people of sixteen villages around the sanctuary to regenerate their own forests
around Chakrashila and establish sustainable food security and income-generation. A
combination of indigenous irrigation methods and traditional forest-based food and
cash-crop cultivation has led to substantial improvement in the quality of their lives. Annual
income has gone up by Rs. 10, 000 (US $232). The model conflict resolution center within
Chakrashila called Tapovan set up by Nature's Beckon has broken the antagonism between
villagers and bureaucrats. Nature's Beckon's efforts in this regard has not only won it
state's appreciation but also spurred successful grassroots campaigns for governmental
accountability on social-sector spending. In Topoban, health and education programs are
also offered to children of different ethnic groups.

After its success in upgrading the status of CWS, the organization has undertaken
further steps to preserve and protect the primate and nonhuman primates of North East
India. It has appealed to the state government and the concerned authorities to declare the
contiguous patch of rainforests of the Joypur, Dirak, and Upper Dihing, a Wildlife
Sanctuary as Joydihing Sanctuary.

Organising awareness programs is a major device by which the organization
seeks to involve people to protect the environment. During 2000-2001, Nature's Beckon
had organized 61 awareness programmes in different parts of Assam to create awareness
on the preservation and conservation of biodiversity, conservation of endangered species
and their habitats, giving protection to wildbirds and the preservation of wetlands and their
biodiversity. Apart from organizing the awareness programs in the major towns and
villages of Assam it took special drive in creating awareness in the peripheral villages of
the National Parks and Sanctuaries.

The organization also fights for social justice along with its fight for environmental
justice. On 28th July, 2006 a big public meeting was organized by Nature's Beckon in
Kohora, the main centre of Kaziranga. All the village heads and prominent citizens of the
area participated in this meeting. The Chairman, Pollution Control Board, Assam,
Secretary, Guwahati Press Club, Principal, Kaziranga National Park School, youth leaders
of *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti* and others took part in this meeting. At the meeting all
the speakers demanded that the villagers living on the periphery of Kaziranga should not
be deprived of their livelihood to live with symbiotic relationship with the park and the
forest department should work in close cooperation with the fringe villagers honestly for
the protection and conservation of wildlife of the Kaziranga National Park.

On 14th August 2006, the members of Nature’s Beckon formally informed Shri
Rakibul Hussain, the Minister of Forest and Environment, Assam, about the actual
situation of the Kaziranga National Park and the peripheral villages. But it has been
informed that the forest minister did not pay any interest for the protection of Kaziranga
National Park.

This indifferent attitude of the forest department towards Kaziranga National Park
compelled the villagers to protest and sit on *dharna* in front of the main gate of Kaziranga
National Park. Nature’s Beckon also took part in this dharna held on September 11, 2006.
It has come to the knowledge of protesters that huge amount of grants and donations are
received every year for the welfare of wildlife and maintenance of the Kaziranga National
Park. But most of these funds are made to vanish by the corrupt forest officials and the
politicians under whose guidance the officials operate.

It can be said that Nature’s Beckon is a prime example of environmental activist
groups. Though conservation of rainforest is its major goal, to achieve this goal it realized
the need for a number of actions to be undertaken. It considered people’s participation as
very essential to preserve and conserve forest and wildlife. Along with cultivation of
traditional food plants in the forest villages, it considers the afforestation and conservation
of biodiversity as equally important. Hence it realized the need for dissimination of
environment education and creation of awareness of environmental problems in the people.
The organization not only stops there, but it goes beyond the routine practice of plantation and awareness campaign to the issue of the livelihood of the villagers living in the fringe areas of protected sites who are directly dependent on the resources of these protected areas. Hence it not only seeks rain forest conservation but also seeks the preservation of right of the people who are intricately bound to these forests. It also works for social and environmental justice and capacity building of the people.

The activism of Nature’s Beckon can be observed in different aspects. First, in its success in getting Chakrashila Hill Reserve to be declared as Wildlife Sanctuary. Second, its ability to involve villagers to protect the WLS mainly in keeping vigil of wildlife crime. In the words of Datta, “Once the villagers had a confrontation with a large gang of smugglers. They were successful in driving the smugglers out of the forest area and in seizing a huge quantity of their saws, axes, and other tree felling equipment.”

Again on another occasion, the villagers with their bows and arrows, surrounded a gang of poachers inside the forest and seized four guns with ammunition and handed over the weapons to the then deputy Commissioner of Dhubri. Besides the villagers do keep a round the clock vigilance of the forest and help in regeneration of forestry.

6 Aranyak Nature’s Club

Aranyak Nature’ Club is located in Guwahati, Assam. It is a registered society working in the field of biodiversity conservation in North East India since 1989. The activity sector of the organization is Environment and Forestry. The club aims to conserve the biodiversity of North East India for the future generation and stop illegal trade on wildlife comprising floras and faunas of the region. The society though had undertaken different action programs and raised voices and continues to raise voice for wild life conservation and protection, it presently focuses mainly on research projects. According to the general secretary there are lots of people who raise voices for protection and conservation but there are very few with professional expertise to undertake research on environmental conservation which is extremely important to protect wildlife in a culturally diverse region such as North East India.

Aranyak is run by young professionals from diverse fields as lawyers, life scientist etc. dedicated and committed to the cause of conservation. About 34 professionals from different fields mostly from the field of life sciences, environmental sciences are working with Aranyak on various research and conservation projects in different aspects of biodiversity in the region. Aranyak emerged as a major activist NGO in the region and has influenced the policy making procedure in the state through its presence in committees like ‘Steering Committee for Formulation of New Assam Forest Policy’, Rhino Task Force and State Wildlife Advisory Board of the Government of Assam.

To minimize the man-elephant conflict, Aranyak launched a project called ‘Harmony with Elephants’ in Assam with support from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Primarily focusing on upper Assam, the project tried to fulfill two main objectives. First, to motivate the people for elephant conservation through environment education process and second, to increase the level of awareness of the state administration and planners to make them realize the importance of the problem.

The organization has also undertaken a project to build the infrastructure for assisting the forest staff of the Oraon Wildlife Sanctuary which will help to protect and conserve the endangered species like Rhinos and Tigers in the sanctuary. The budget for the said project was stated to be at Rs. 500,000-2,500,000.

As part of the World Wetland Day celebration, the society has organized a three day long eco-restoration workshop from 1-3 February 2005, at the Indian Institute of Bank Management, Guwahati Assam. The workshop was aimed to provide basic awareness and training to selected participants on the philosophy and principles of restoration of ecology in the techniques and practices of eco-restoration, restoration of wetland and forest ecosystem.

One of the salient projects of Aranyak was the ten years wireless communication support project to Kaziranga National Park in Assam in association with the David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation (DSWF) of United Kingdom.

The organization has networked with a number of NGOs operating in Assam like WWF, CEE-NE, Ecosystem India, to form ‘Manas Conservation Alliance’ for conservation of Manas Biosphere Reserve. The main purpose of the alliance is to minimize duplication of work and to ensure that each and every organisation’s strength is
channelised properly. Aranyak has also entered into an alliance with WWF and Eco System India for human elephant conflict mitigation.

Though the organization emphasizes on research, at the same time it frequently raises its voice at appropriate forum against the government’s inaction and other illegal action related to wildlife and thus involve in different kinds of activism. The organization had been working closely with the forest department of Nameri Wildlife Sanctuary and asked the Government to declare it as National Park which took place in 1997. They have lodged PIL against deforestation, encroachment etc. The High Court though gave verdict to clear the forest from encroachers, still forest areas are not free from encroachers. ANC had organized a press conference along with five other NGOs to express their concern against the poaching of Rhinos in Kaziranga National Park.

Thus the involvement of ANC can be observed to take place in many ways. First, by identifying the environmental problems in the region through research and documentation. Secondly, it works with forest department by extending its support either by providing information or by facilitating or training the staffs of government departments. Thirdly, by networking with other organizations to arrive at solutions to the problems. It is also involved in finding out the faults and illegal actions committed by any private or government body towards the environment.

7. Nature’s Foster

Nature’s foster is a registered society located at Bongaigaon in lower Assam. Set up in 1995, the thrust of the organization is to ensure the protection of the environment through engagement in environmental research, wildlife conservation, environmental education, tree plantation, development of educational material etc.

The organization primarily confines its operations to the state of Assam with most of its members hailing from Bongaigaon in someway or other linked to Bongaigaon. The source of fund is donation, contribution by members and other national and international bodies which subscribe to the objective of the organization.

The major activities of the organization include forest conservation, wetland conservation, community conservation and empowerment, capacity building, study and research on environment and wildlife.
The organization came up after efforts by like minded people concerned about the environment, mainly forestry of Kakoijana Reserve Forest in Bongaigaon. A chance notice of the presence of the Golden Langur in the area led the members to appeal to the government to declare the Kakoijana Reserve Forest as Wildlife Sanctuary. However, with the attainment of further knowledge they gradually realized that wildlife sanctuary alone can not solve the problem of protecting wildlife as people of the fringe areas are dependent upon forests for their fuelwood and other source of livelihood. Hence they felt that a combined effort involving people who are dependent on this forest is required to protect the environment.

With the above realization the organization shifted its focus from Kakoijana Reserved Forest to the protection of Manas as a whole. By forming alliance with other organizations working in the fringe areas, Nature's Foster formed Manas Biosphere Conservation Forum to protect Manas as a whole. These include:

1) Green Forest Conservation, Kokrajhar which has a volunteer force of more than hundred people and also has memorandum of understanding with the Forest Department.

2) Biodiversity Conservation Society, Ultapani Kokrajhar.

3) New Horizon, Koilamoila which has twenty volunteers.


Nature's Foster is working in collaboration with Community Conservation (USA). While the organizations as Biodiversity Conservation Society, New Horizon and Ecotourism and Social welfare Society are financially supported by CC, Green Forest Conservation is supported by Forest department. The role of Natures Foster is coordination of different organization of the forum.

In 2005, Nature's Foster organized a major festival, 'Manas Biosphere Conservation Festival' in Ultapani, the first of its kind, to bring awareness about Manas Biosphere Reserve which is bigger than Manas National Park as it realized that the protection of fringe area is also equally coming under the aegis of Manas Biosphere Reserve.

In March 2008, the organization formed a group of villages into a federation for the protection of the environment. During the course of my field work, the villagers caught
a person cutting trees and handed him over to the forest department, on whom a fine of Rs.1000 has been imposed. In addition to the engagement in environmental protection the villagers are organized into self help groups for regeneration of alternative source of livelihood.

Another thrust area of the organization is protection of wetlands. Surveys were conducted on wetlands of Assam. It has been found that in Bongaigaon district alone there are around 7 wetlands in Bongaigaon itself.

The organization is maintaining records of winter visitors, both migratory and local birds. The organization has observed that the wetlands are getting shrunken and polluted because of encroachment, change of course of rivers and pollution by factories and industries.

It has also conducted a survey of waterfall centre in Bongaigaon with financial support from BNHS which was coordinating the work.

Another major activity of the organization is the rescue and rehabilitation of wildlife. Due to the shrinking habitat, many wildlifes such as snakes, (sometimes python) have entered human settlements in the town. In one year alone it rescued ten pythons by members who had no training for the handling of such dangerous reptiles.

Nature's Foster is yet another organization which counts significantly in the environmental activism in the state. Though its objective includes a number of issues, it has so far dealt with the issue of two protected areas: Kakoijana Reserved Forest and Manas Biosphere Reserve, besides engaging in the documentation of status of wetlands in Assam, especially of the Bongaigaon district. Besides the regular activities of plantation, rescue of wildlife, awareness generation, the organization is also engaged in the empowerment of village people of fringe areas by providing them environment education and training for self employment. The organisation also make people to take part in protecting forest area which is observed in case of their vigil to wildlife crime, a serious problem of protected area.
8. Centre for Environment Education, North East (CEE, NE)

This organization is located in Chenikuthi, Guwahati. The organization is the regional branch of CEE Ahmedabad which was established in 1984 under the aegis of Nehru Foundation for development. It was the same year that MoEF came which was more action and policy oriented. So a need was felt to have an organization that would look after the educational aspect of the environment. The organization promotes the objectives of the MoEF by providing educational training and material. Initially CEE reached out through different volunteers and partners but gradually as it started expanding its activities a need was felt to have a full fledged office in the region.

The main thrust of CEE is education for sustainable development. Its activities comprised three major components: capacity building, field study demonstration, and policy intervention. The organization works through advocacy, dialogue. As part of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), CEE emphasized the point that environment education can not take place in isolation, rather all learning can take place through habitat.

The main goal of the organization is to protect the environment of India through the creation of awareness and education. The objective can be mentioned as training and sustainable development. The organization is highly professional with trained professionals absorbed in different fields.

To save the tigers of protected areas in North East India, the organization has started a project, Save the Tiger project (STP) with a financial support of Rs.4.5 lakhs, from National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. One component of the project is to develop material on tigers of protected areas which included development of CD ROM and stickers on tigers. The project covered Manas Tiger Reserve, Namdapha Tiger Reserve, Nameri National Park and Pakke Wildlife Sanctuary. The other component is capacity building of different categories of people namely NGOs, teachers, forest staff and local entrepreneurs working on alternative livelihood. One hundred schools had been selected in four different locations having 25 schools in each location. Each of these clusters was led by local NGOs. Inspired by CEE two more NGOs have joined the move.

The organization considers the program relatively successful as it could bring together on the same platform CCF, media people, students, NGOs, different managers of Protected areas, and also because it could intervene at policy level.
In order to instill a comprehensive understanding of and perception on tiger in the students it organized an exhibition on tiger, where some children from America who had never seen tigers were asked to draw and give their observation on the animal and the students who have seen and suffered from the tigers in the fringe areas are asked to picturize the tiger.

To promote eco-tourism in the state under the guidance of the Union Ministry of Tourism, CEE has taken up a project sponsored by UNDP in Sualkochi village famous for the production of silk, for capacity building of the people of the village. The construction of infrastructure, however, remained the responsibility of the District Administration which has so far constructed 3 cottages, 1 Kalakendra (community hall), one cafeteria, a welcome gate and an open theatre the later, (though has yet to be completed).

The communities have been provided training in hospitality and management of the site. They have been imparted special training in tourist guide skill, human resource skill and skill of communication. The project was for two years and was to end in 2008. Besides, different types of activities have been initiated for capacity building which includes formation of SHGs, vocational training, promotion of bamboo and cane crafts, special education on banking etc.

In 2002, the organization has launched a program called National Green Corps funded by MoEF. To run the program the state level nodal agency is the state structure where as the resource agency is the CEE. At district level there is District Implementation and Monitoring Committee (DIMC) and an NGO. In the first phase of the program in 2002-2003, 100 schools were selected and in each school one eco-club had been formed.

In the second phase of the program, 2006-2007, the number of the schools was increased to 250, nearly 150 more. In every school an eco-club was set up and one teacher was selected as the in-charge of the eco-club having 40-50 students. Each eco-club gets a grant of Rs.2500/ per year, from MoEF and utilized the grant for environment education. While the nodal agency conducts training for the selected teachers, CEE provides technical support.

Thus CEE-NE's main work has been in the field of environment education. It works not only in collaboration with government departments such as, MoEF and MoT, but also with international bodies which is revealed by the funds acquired by the organization. As
the organization considers environmental education vital in the process of solving environment problems, it uses a variety of methods such as, capacity building and intervention at policy level. Though the organization does not consider that it is involved in any environmental activism, as is claimed by the other organizations studied, except Nature’s Beckon, this kind of claim can be considered to be made because of the lack of clarity about the very term. It has been found that most of the NGOs do not have a clear understanding about the term activism and therefore very often claim they are not to be involved in activism. A common notion of these organizations about activism is to involve in direct criticism of state’s action and non participation and non partnership with state. Thus CEE-NE also considers itself not involved in any sort of activism. But as has been defined clearly in the introductory chapter, activism not only involves directly challengeing state power, but also involves any sort of action which is based on a latent critique of state. The advocacy and capacity building of people does always have an activist orientation as it has a covert necessity of making people empowered. Moreover the very intrusion of fund from foreign sources and its utilization in environmental protection also speaks the weak role of state in environment protection. Such kind of action also has a latent critique of state’s ability and a covert orientation of environmental activism.

9. Society for Appropriate Technology

The organization was established in the year 1988 and is registered under Societies Registration Act in the same year. It is also registered under section12A and 80 (G) of Income Tax Act 1961. The mission of the organization is establishment of a society free from poverty, loss of livelihood, unemployment and underemployment, through a socially appropriate and sustainable technology.

The executive members of the organization belong to different fields: technology, architecture, banking etc. The organization has 1, 500 ordinary members from 100 villages in Kamrup district.

The organization has set up field offices in Bijoypur–Khetri of Kamrup district and in Bamunpara – Goalpara of Goalpara district.
Membership of the organization is restricted to village dwellers for which no fee is required. The sources of fund are membership fees, donation from outsiders, funds from different departments of Government.

Besides engaging in effort to generate income through different programs, such as, development of SHG s in the Dimora Tribal Developmental block of Kamrup and in some parts of Goalpara district, with a financial support from RGVN and NEDFi, it organizes health camps to educate the people about ways to counter diseases like Malaria, Diabetes, AIDS etc.

The organization also organized a number of environmental awareness programs amongst the students of schools, colleges, farmers, villagers. The SAT has done an exploratory research on traditional science and technology in North Eastern India. The disciplines covered are: Traditional Human and Veterinary medicine, Traditional Environment Management, Traditional Crafts and Industries, Traditional Agriculture and Pest Management etc. In 2005, SAT has implemented a project of Neem gaon where mass neem plantation has taken place. The project has a grant of Rs.3 lakhs from CAPART. The Neem village has coverage of 700 bighas of land. The organization is also planning to produce Neem oil, Neem pesticides, neem cake and bio-fertilisers for sustainable agricultural development. With financial aid from KVIC, the SAT has initiated a natural dye technique with the help of the village women and introducing an indigenous technology for production of colored textiles by using natural dye and trying to find a good market for it. The project grant was Rs.5 lakhs.

The organization considers that its major achievement has been in a tribal development block near Guwahati where the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides were at maximum. The villagers were made aware of the ill effects of the chemical fertilizer and gradually changed from chemical to organic fertilizer. This has considerably minimized the negative effects of chemical on the land and crops. Thus for SAT this is a major success in the silent drive towards a cleaner and safer environment.

Besides its stress on employment generation and cleaner environment, the organization has also been involved in networking with other organizations on certain common issues of concern., related to the poor and the distressed. The organization participated in the convention organized by North East Social Research Centre (NESRC)
to protest against State Water Policy. In this it keeps a close vigil on the government department’s intrusion into the ‘lifeworld’ of people.

10. Bharat Jana Vigyan Jatha (BJVJ)

Bharat Jana Vigyan Jatha, is located in Dighalipukhuri, Guwahati, Assam. The association was established in 1992 as a voluntary organisation by a group of science communicators in a meeting organized by the Assam Science, Technology and Environment Council (ASTEC), supported by the Department of Science and Technology, (DST), Government of India.

BJVJ was a program of DST established in 1992 at the national level for the popularization of science. In Assam the program was operated through ASTEC which called upon various organizations to come together to form a committee under a common umbrella. As a result, different organizations like Students Science Society, Nature’s Beckon, Assam Science Society etc participated in a program organized by ASTEC. After the program the residual participants of Students Science Society formed the BJVJ. The present General Secretary was the first General Secretary of the Organisation.

The organization is not basically oriented to environmental cause, but it considers environment as one of its major arena.

Though located in Assam, the activities of the organization are not restricted to the state. Several of its projects and activities are outside the state and extend to North East India as a whole. Since it works under the guidance of DST and undertakes projects and programs for the benefit of society, according to the General Secretary the organization takes the laboratory into the field and thus helps in popularizing science among the laypersons. In this way BJVJ undertakes environmental issues and issues of sustainable development.

In 2001, the organization had undertaken a project of collection and preservation of indigenous medicinal and fruit trees of Assam. The project was funded by UNDP through Ministry of Environment and Forest, which distributed the task to different NGOs through the Centre for Environment Education, North East. The project cost was Rs.3.58 lakhs. Under this project, the organization selected school campus to develop garden with

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139 Though similar program was adopted by DST in 1986, but in 1992 it was adopted as BJVJ.
the help of school teachers, students and the local people. Accordingly, five schools in five districts were selected, namely Tinsukia, Nalbari, Sonitpur, North Guwahati, Morigaon.

The project was completed in 2004. The project aimed to identify indigenous medicinal and fruit trees with the help of the knowledge of local people and plantation of these trees in the selected school campus by handing over the responsibility of the environmental preservation to the school authorities and students body.

Though the project aimed to develop gardens, only three gardens out of five gardens could come up successfully. Two, one each in Sonitpur and Morigaon did not succeed because of flood problems and lack of proper follow up. A major problem identified by the organization was the lack of fund, as adequate fencing could not be done because of that. The fund was allocated for purchase of local bio-materials, which have short life span and get spoiled within few days. As a result, the bamboo fencing got destroyed and the trees though identified and planted could not be grown in certain cases. The organization is hopeful of proper growth of the other three gardens in Tinsukia, Nalbari, and north Guwahati.

In 2001, Bharat Jana Vigyan Jatha organized state level workshops for developing resource persons and orientation of nature camps for children and teachers in Meghalaya and Assam. It was a DST funded project of Rs.1, 90,000 which has become a regular activity of BJVJ.

To protect planet earth, it organized signature and oath taking campaign to instill a sense of responsibility in citizens towards the environment. The organization has made the Chief Minister of Assam to sign the Shapath Nama. The signatures were then forwarded to ASTEC.

The regular activity of the BJVJ involves science popularization, educating students about the importance of trees and animals by taking them to visit forests and other natural sites, tree plantation, holding of quiz competition on science, organization of nature camps, health camps etc.

Though BJVJ emerged as an organization under the aegis of DST, its activities extended beyond the popularization of science into other forms of activism as is observed in case of its oath taking campaign to promote environment friendly behaviour. In awareness campaign BJVJ works both along with the state departments as well as
independently. As such, the organization does not simply question government or state policy but also participates in different networks and forum which organize protests and criticisms against state’s action.

The study of environmental action groups shows that in Assam, the concern for environment emerged in nineteen sixties and seventies, which shows a trend similar to the scenario at world level and also which shows that the rise of environmental organizations is a phenomenon mainly in the post 1960. Moreover it is seen that most of the organisations came up under the leadership of educated middle class people, mainly youth and many having teachers and educated youth from University with degree in environmental sciences or related background. Examples can be given of NGOs which gives environmental education as priority as ANC, Nature’s Beckon, Environ, Ed-En etc.

A study of fund flow shows though most of the organizations depend on donations and the fund they generate from their own contribution for their day to day activity, many take up projects sponsored by the Government and by International Non Governmental Organizations (INGO). It has been observed that not all the organizations have equal support base, hence the smaller organizations work with bigger organizations as partners, that way a networking or alliance is established as a means of reaching their goal as is seen in case of Manas Alliance. The sources of fund also shows that there is a commonality of goal of local NGOs that connects the grass root level NGOs of Assam with the national and international organization which makes all these organizations part of the common goal of environment protection.

The study of the select action groups of Assam shows that concern for environment is very much prevalent in the state with different organizations taking up different lines of actions to protect the environment. The study also shows that though the NGOs are established institutions, with formal recognition by government of India vide the compulsory registration under the Societies Registration Act and also financial assistance, yet they exhibit high degree of autonomy in so far as their objective is concerned. As is seen many times these organizations don't hesitate to point out the fault of the government and then raise voice to rectify these faults. Besides by trying to empower people to meet
their own ends they not only question the viability of the state but prove them as an important force in society and the state.

Though development of the action groups took place out of a felt need to change the degraded status of environment and form part of the bigger movement at the global level, it is difficult to characterize the activities of these organisations as environmental movement. Very often they develop as an institution, with a structure of bureaucratic organization and loose the spontaneous rigor of movement spirit and are concerned more with routinised projects and action. Since the degradation of environment can not be upgraded in a day or two and is also a complex process that requires long term goal, it is difficult to assess their success or failure in one or two projects. It can be seen that these action groups developed as sustained body to meet the larger environmental goal and their viability can not be judged by a study of their activity in few years. While most of these organizations are highly influenced by the ideology of conservation and preservation, they also take up livelihood issues mainly alternative means of livelihood for sustainable development a concept which also go with the very vision of preservation of nature.

Three trends have been observed in so far as their intervention is concerned. First to educate and motivate people for sustainable use of natural resources and to generate environmental balance by plantations, abstaining from destruction of flora and fauna and by protecting the same. Second, to intervene at governmental policy level to take up right decisions and steps to protect the environment, examples can be given of Nature’s Beckon, Aranyak Nature Club, Ed-en. These organizations do protest, object and criticize any sort of negligence by the Government officials (forest) to maintain the flora and fauna. Sometimes they mobilise demonstrations against government officials and ministers, campaigning by net or by press release or by assembling in public for protest demonstration e. g., participation in the convention organized by North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati to protest the state water policy, raising voice against encroachment in the forest etc.

The study of action groups shows that most of these groups in some way or other are involved in some sort of activism using different means to achieve their goal ranging from moderate means like strikes, intervention at policy level, mobilizing people to protect against environmental degradation and government’s inaction to put a check on these.
Conclusion

North East India appears worthy for sociological inquiry in so far as environmental activism and movement is concerned. The term seems to be at odds with the region popularly known for its pristinity. The region comes under one of the two biodiversity hotspots in the country with its lush greenery that is a feast to the viewer’s eye, generally does not leave much scope to believe in the existence of environmentalism. But a look at the bourgeoning environmental groups and their action and activism related to the environment protection and regeneration naturally makes a keen researcher to delve into the issue in greater detail. The present work on environmental activism is an initiative on the researcher’s part to gain deeper understanding on the issue. Here an inquiry into the persistence of environmental activism in North East India is sought for with an emphasis on Assam and the environmental movement therein. As discussed in the introductory chapter, the work is aimed to look into the nature and kind of activism throughout the region. The activism is observed to raise its head in all kinds of environmental issues starting from preservation of nature to fight for livelihood as has been discussed in chapter III. An inquiry into peoples’ response both in terms of formally established NGOs and spontaneously emerging action groups have been made on different environmental issues for a general understanding of people’s involvement in different sorts of activism related to environment.

The study thus found three major strands of environmentalism co-existing in the region

- Conservationism.
- Urban environmentalism mainly concerned with pollution and quality of life
- The environmentalism of the poor

The activism related to conservation of nature is observed in the routine activities of established NGOs in the form of undertaking welfare programs, tree plantations,
identifying ecologically significant areas and demanding for its protection in the form of National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries, and Biosphere Reserves etc. While there is a trend of activism for preservation and conservation of components of ecosystem, which is highly visible in the early phase of environmental activism in the west, there is also activism related to the urban ecological system for maintenance of quality of life which is spelt here as urban environmentalism. This kind of activism is also observed in the region which deals with industrial accidents, urban pollution, legislation of bye-laws for construction of buildings, roads etc. There are action groups which raised the issue of urban environmental problems eg., Environ, Ed-En, Save Guwahati Build Guwahati or ARPAN and these have been trying to minimize these problems if not eradicate these. While the above two issues do not show any difference in terms of the origin of such environmentalism, as both emerged in the west, but equally mark their appearance even in the Third World countries and so also in North East India. But there are other environmental issues around which the activism in the region is observed. These are mainly related to development-induced projects undertaken by the government of India which are not only environmentally destructive but also have negative bearing on the lives and livelihoods of the people of the areas where these projects are located. Thus the work also brings forth activism which revolves round these projects, such as, mining projects, hydro-electric projects etc.

The activism of the third type is the dominant mode of environmentalism of the Third World countries. The livelihood of the people is not only affected by resource extractive projects, such as, mining or hydroelectric projects, but also are equally affected by the government’s initiative for conservation and preservation of nature. These issues come out clearly in the problems faced by inhabitants near Deepor Beel, Guwahati which was declared as Wildlife Sanctuary. The loss of livelihood that this introduced led to a major protest by the inhabitants of the area with the support of NGOs in Assam.

The chapter III on general overview of environmental activism in North East India however did not attempt to analyze the nature of activism in the way it is dealt in the chapter on environmental movements and action groups in Assam in chapter IV and V.

140 Though the epithet Third World has been critiqued by many scholars due to its pejorative connotations the absence of suitable substitute made me to use the term.
respectively. The case studies of environmental movements help us to understand the major environmental problems of Assam and the involvement of people to reduce or eradicate them. Out of the five cases of environmental movements, the movement for rain forest conservation shows two dimensions. First, the involvement of people to protect the rain forest, where the action group has mobilized people to protect it and also to pressure the state to declare the area as protected area. The other dimension involves the empowerment of people not only to protect the rainforest but also to find out an alternative source of livelihood for themselves. The movements against Pagladia dam, mining, and pollution by Digboi Oil Refinery are the movements by the affected people not only against the destruction of ecological balance but also against the effect of these projects on their life and livelihoods. The people not only are highly critical of the projects but also stand out strong critique of the state for lack of concern for the affected people. Here, activism involves people's critique of state's action for management of resources which involves protest for such projects and abandonment of them. The issue of depleting forest cover involves diverse dimensions again, as it is of complex nature. The depletion of forest cover is seen to be caused by illegal forest cutting mainly by timber smugglers and encroachment of forest areas by people. The major steps observed to be taken by the government for maintaining forest cover were of timber ban and eviction of encroached people from forest areas. While timber ban could not generate much protest in Assam, the eviction drive met with a number of oppositions from both the affected people and some NGOs in the state. The movement here is simultaneously directed against the Government's utter neglect of the needs of the people living in the forests for years and the inefficient management of the natural resources.

Thus the analysis of the five cases of environmental movements shows how the state witnesses environmental activism of different sorts. In the first case, people and action groups came together to protect environment by initially identifying the importance of rainforest and then demanding the state to adopt suitable measures for its protection. The group did not stop there but involved the people to keep vigilance against wildlife crime and also to find an alternative solution for livelihood. Thus the movement for rainforest conservation by Nature's Beckon involves even the recent concept of conservation, where the protection of wildlife and biodiversity is sought not only by
declaring some areas as protected but also by finding out an alternative means of livelihood for the people who are depend on these areas for their livelihood. Thus the activism involved in rainforest conservation witness both types of activism i.e., criticizing the inefficient role of state machinery and making them to take measures for proper management of resources, and the other one that recognizes the role of people to protect the environment with a latent critique of the role of state. The keeping of vigilance against wildlife crime and finding out alternative source of livelihood is indicative of second type of activism.

The cases of movement against open cast mining, dam projects, pollution by Digboi Oil Refinery involves the first type of activism which is critical of state’s utter neglect of the environment and the livelihood of the people of the areas and demands for right measures to safeguard the interests of the people of the affected areas. The impact of mining launched by the state, on the health and environment of the people of the affected areas has been pointed by the people of the project affected areas, which show the critical appraisal of government’s action by the people and action groups in the area.

The movement revolving round depleting forest cover shows another dimension where the Government’s decision of eviction drive has not been welcomed by the people who encroached the forest area. Here too people are critical of state’s management of resources and neglect of the right of people to the land and livelihood.

Thus the five cases of environmental movements depict both kinds of activism i.e., critique of role of state for environment management and demand for state’s action to meet the need of the affected people. The other is the role of people to protect their environment and right to nature and natural resources. In both the cases the mobilization is observed for certain actions to be undertaken for the protection, preservation and regeneration of environment.

The study of selected action groups reveals a similar story. The existence of action groups in large number shows that concern for environment is very much prevalent in the state. These action groups are observed to be included in various sorts of activism. The growth of these NGOs in one way or the other gives us an impression of state’s inefficiency to meet the environmental need of the people. Most of these NGOs are involved in advocacy based activism first by educating and informing people about
environmental problems and then by making them to take some steps to meet their
environmental need like tree plantation, restraining themselves from environmentally
destructive activities like cutting of forest, wildlife crime etc. and also motivating the
people to join the volunteer force formed to keep vigilance against eco-crime. Though in
many cases the NGOs work in collaboration with government where they receive financial
grants from MoEF, this did not deter them from being critical of the state’s role in
aggravating environmental degradation. Though they receive fund from different sources,
most of these NGOs emerged and consolidated their position from their own contribution
in the form of membership fees. Yet time to time they utilize resources what they avail
from diverse national and international sources to meet their own end.

One major observation is that most of these NGOs do not recognize the fact that
they are involved in activism which may be due to lack of conceptual clarity about the
term which made me to deal with it in more sincerity. It has been observed that these
organizations also involve themselves in environmental activism, first by their critical
approach to state’s inefficiency and second by making people to take some actions as an
way out to that which is reflected in many of the activities of people and so also of these
NGOs. Examples can be given of plantation, vigilance of wildlife crime and opting for
alternative means of livelihood by village people. Besides these many of them very often
criticize Government’s steps which sometimes go against environment or people. Here
mention can be made of Nature’s Beckon’s criticism of the state’s Forest Department in
monitoring the wild life crime or the criticism of declaration of Deepor Beel as Wildlife
Sanctuary which go against the livelihood interest of the people dependent on Deepor
Beel.

Thus the study of environmental movements and environmental NGOs of Assam
shows how environmental activism is very much prevalent in the state discussed in the
context of environmental activism in the region.

While persistence of environmental activism is clearly observed, whether a study on
different environmental problems and response of people to that is concerned or a
study of activism of environmental NGOs are concerned, but the approaches to understand
the cause of such activism needs further discussions.
The study of five cases of environmental movements and the activism of formally registered NGOs of Assam depicts the similar trend as is observed in case of North East India in general. While livelihood approach which can be applied to understand the move against development projects, is the dominant mode of environmentalism in Third World, the conservationist and preservationist ideology and urban environmentalism which is equally helpful to understand the activism of the formally registered NGOs, depicts the sort of environmentalism which has been diffused from the west. Here observations of Kullard and Parsoon\(^{141}\) can be referred. While talking about Asia’s situation they say

There is also proliferation of national parks now covering about 4.5 per cent of Asia’s area which has deprived local farmers of important grazing land and arable land. Conflicts over use versus nonuse of natural resources are often a result of initiatives from NGOs based in Western Europe or North America. International organizations, motivated by the values found predominantly among a western urban middle class concerned about degradation caused by their own lifestyle, may thus pose a threat to local people and cultures as the latter’s access to life sustaining resources are being curtailed.

Besides these observations, the study of environmental activism in North East India brings out certain specific observations because of its unique social and geographical features. While there is little doubt to except that state as a ‘bad manager of resources’ which is reflected in its strategy of development which sometimes comes on the way of balanced ecological set up of the region and sometimes on the way of social and psychological set up of the people. Besides the issue of encroachment clearly depicts this. It has been

observed that forest is continuously being encroached by people from nearby states and countries which disrupts the forest cover. Again when people spend decades of their life in those forest land, which sometimes counts thirty or forty years and develop some congenial relations with the physical set up, the government suddenly comes up with stringent measures to evict them, which is a statement often made by the respondents wherever the issue of encroachment is raised. This is highly seen in case of government’s approach towards protection of forest cover either by eviction drive or in its conservationist strategy to declare a patch of forest area or any other area as Protected Area that comes on the life and livelihood of the people living in forest area itself or in fringe areas of forest.

Besides the issue of management of forest and land resources, the approach of government towards development again is highly criticized. North East India, where high concentration of tribal people is observed, the situation becomes more complex. This is observed in two ways: first, the projects conceived is mostly either in tribal land or going to have impact on tribal land affecting tribal people in any ways. Moreover when the question of resettlement or rehabilitation comes, they seem to suffer more. The colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894 which continues to inform the land policy in the state limits compensation to patta holders. This is a serious issue which comes on the way of proper resettlement and rehabilitation of the tribes. The tribal institution of land ownership does not give land right to a single person, the land is traditionally distributed among the members of the clan by the head and it does not have any government record. As a result it comes on the way of proper compensation. This is observed in case of Gumti dam, where a majority of the affected people was deprived of rehabilitation. The same thing is also observed in case of Pagladia dam and is anticipated in case of other dams as Subansiri, Tipaimukh, etc.

Again, the prevalence of deep sense of ethnicity also sometimes gets clubbed together with the issue of environmental problems and right to land. The clash of interests of groups sometimes takes ethnic colour as is observed in case of Ledo open cast mining, where the concern for identity and self determination came on the way of coordinated effort for combating mining in the region. The movement against Pagladia dam could get
momentum because of the Bodoland movement as the dam is going to affect a vast chunk of Bodo people. This has been maintained by Monirul Hussain too.

Besides fueling ethnic feeling, the institution of communal ownership to land many times brings the state into conflict with the people. The legacy though can be traced to colonial time with the reservation of forests in Garo hills and resistance by the Garo people for dereservation of the forests. Interestingly, the independent Indian Government continues to practice the same despite its declaration of areas under Sixth Schedule and Article 370, to have a control over resources owned by people. Highly observed in Meghalaya, communal ownership right to land found to club with the issue of environment and health of people making state as symbol of exploitation. The protest against Uranium mining and the debate on Lafarge in Meghalaya depict such kind of fact.

Besides its ethnicity and system of communal land ownership among the tribal people, the region having intertwined with state and international borders worsen the situation. As the encroachment of forest land is the safest and easier way to encroach the nearby state. The border conflict of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, Nagaland and Assam, Mizoram and Assam can be said to create this kind of problem as is observed that it is the forest areas which are more vulnerable to encroachment by people from nearby political jurisdiction either from proposed Bodoland or from other states as Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram.

Thus the study of environmental activism in North East India not only reflects the different trends of environmentalism equally coexixting in the region with a critique of prevalence of livelihood approach as dominant trend in Third World and so also in India. It also reflects the unique ground to analyse the role of people to attain environmental justice and social justice, while in most of the cases state is found to come on the way of interest of the people either environmental or social. The activism which spurt with colonial penetration in pre-independence period though simply depicted people’s agitation against the colonization of the lifeworld of people, the present form of activism discussed in this context is also oriented against state’s appropriation of the resources which is not only environmentally unjust but also socially and economically too.

142 Hussain, Monirul op.cit
The critique of state as bad manager of resources thus brings forth two kinds of activism: one, that is to attain environment and social justice which is reflected in the move for appropriate rehabilitation and resettlement package and the other, to come out as a parallel force to protect and regenerate the environment which is observed in case of mobilization by action groups mainly by formally registered NGOs. Though sometimes Western in origin, the conservationist ideology adopted by the NGOs are equally apparent in the activism in the region which is very effective in case of any effort to protect environment by people. Even when a new group emerges in the field, it consolidates its position first by making some tree plantation done as a mark of their existence not only in the registers of NGOs but also in the registers of environmental activism.