Introduction

The issue of environmental activism though has received wide salience in the literature of social sciences yet it lacks systematic presentation and expression. For the students of Sociology of Environment, the word has special significance for its very implicit inclusion of people’s action towards environment either for its protection or for its regeneration. The issue is particularly significant at the present juncture with the alarming deterioration of the environment worldwide. This not only calls for critical reflection on the causes of environmental degradation but also for people’s action at different levels—local, national and international—in order to mitigate the problem and find out ways and means for an alternative mode to fulfill human needs in a sustainable way. There is also a need to look at the issue of people’s action towards the environment in a systematic manner. While the issue of environmental degradation is widely discussed in the social sciences and environmental science literature, the issue of people’s action is insufficiently discussed and delved into. As a result, there is little clarity about the concept with different people using it in different ways. To achieve conceptual clarity we need to closely examine how scholars and activists alike use the term. Again, it is not only the concept that needs to be closely examined there is also a need to revisit the theories to understand the activism at different societal contexts.

The present study is concerned with environmental activism in North East India with special focus on environmental movements and the role of action groups operating in the region. India’s North East falls under the eastern Himalayas, one of the two biodiversity hotspots of the country,¹ is known for its rare and exotic varieties of abundant flora and fauna. The rich and verdant rainforests spread over the hills and plains not only provides unique glimpses of nature’s bounties they are also inseparably connected with the socio-cultural and economic life of the people. The region is the abode of different ethnic groups. About 25.81 percent of the region’s population comprised tribal communities. In some states tribes constitute over 80 percent of the total population of the state. Many of

¹ For details see chapter II.
these communities fall into what some describe as 'ecosystem people' who share symbiotic relationship with nature and depend on its bounty for their livelihood.

Interestingly, the North East with its diverse flora and fauna, mineral resources and subsistence livelihood is now facing a threat brought by the modern growth oriented development paradigm. Though the region itself records a very low rate of industrialization it has been perceived as the storehouse of raw materials valued by the industries outside the region. The continuous timber logging by the contractors throughout the region has led to considerable loss of forest cover in the region, which is also causing severe loss of wildlife and wildlife habitats, including endangered and endemic species. Moreover the forest-covered areas are not sufficiently protected. Encroachment by people migrating from neighbouring states and countries has not only become a serious threat to the wildlife of the region but also to the human settlements in the nearby areas of wildlife habitats. The increasing incidence of intrusion of pachyderms\textsuperscript{2} into human habitations in Assam routinely reported in local newspapers is a clear example of such a threat.

Besides the ecological degradation, the growth oriented development paradigm adopted by the state has also threatened the traditional pattern of livelihood of the people of the region. Most of these people not only depend on nature for survival, their beliefs and value systems are also intricately linked to it. Hence their traditional way of life is also threatened by the modern development process whose technocratic approach comes into sharp conflict with the traditional belief and values of the people.

The above facts thus automatically raise the following questions: whether these environmentally hazardous activities encounter any protest from the local people inhabiting in these areas? In what way do people in the region respond to such condition? Whether this region experiences any kind of environmental activism?

From a preliminary survey of the problem, it has been found that the region records the presence of a large number of NGOs involved in the protection of the environment. The survey also brought out vital information on grassroots-level movements and protests in the region, some of which are led by peoples' action groups operating in the region.

\textsuperscript{2} It has been seen that the wild elephants from the nearby jungles do enter into the human settlements, destroying crops, houses and sometimes killing people which is highly observed in Sonitpur district of Assam and in some other districts too.
But the environmental issues, particularly the issue of environmental activism, has hardly been studied by the researchers and academicians. As a result, there is very little information available on the environmentalism of the region in the existing social science literature.

The present work is a modest attempt to examine the environmental activism present in the region. The work seeks to explore the environmental movement in the region, with a specific emphasis on the role played by different action groups in the region mainly in Assam.

**Operational definitions:**

**Environmental activism:**

Though the phrase environmental activism is commonly used in literature of social sciences, the term is yet to be clearly defined. To a lay person the term may denote any sort of action directed to save and protect the environment, but the action related to environment can not be always social in typical Parsonian or Weberian sense of the term, until and unless it is performed with a social motive. Moreover the term activism is very often found to be used to describe acts that critique the state's inability to manage its natural and social resource efficiently. According to Upendra Baxi\(^3\), activism is based on some manifest or latent critique of the organization of the distribution of power in society. Since it questions the organization of power, it helps people to understand that their exploitations are an outcome of the socio-economic and political arrangements and institutions. While a major part of literature on activism emphasizes on the critique of power distribution, it overlooks the empowerment dimension of activism. One can always criticize the inefficiency and inability of the state to manage its resources: social and natural, but at the same time, there remains another side of the coin, the role of people to ameliorate their situation. Thus activism not only questions the distribution of power, but also has an orientation to have an alternative source of power, in its turn tries to empower people to achieve their own goal, either in the form of militant activism thus using violent

---

\(^3\) Baxi, Upendra, 'Activism at Crossroad with Signposts' in Bava (ed), 1997.
means, or moderate activism simply by using moderate means without being involved in any direct encounter with state machinery.

Though environmental activism seems to denote action that seeks environmental justice for the victim of environmental degradation, the term has other implications as well. Broadly, this can be classified into two types: 1. Activism that questions the dysfunctions and malfunctions of state machinery and in turn seeks the state to function efficiently. 2. Activism that believes in the role of people to protect environment with a latent critique of the failure of state. It is also often maintained that activism is a politics outside the arena of party politics. This later kind of activism is thus very often oriented to mobilize and motivate people’s action to meet their own environmental end. The former may be considered as the rights-based activism, while the later may be considered as duty and role-based activism.

In general, activism is spurred by two interrelated processes: 1) the pathology of the state machinery in relation to the distribution of power and resources. 2) the helplessness of people to meet their own end.

The activists are generally found to intervene at either of these two levels. In certain cases they are seen to mobilize people to develop a critique of state to secure the social, cultural and legal rights, for example, by mobilizing people to demand for compensation to be met by the state for the loss of their resources. There are also examples of activism that mobilize people to form organizations that can monitor the status of forest and upgrade the quality of forest by plantation. While in the former, the state is directly encountered, in the latter though there is a latent critique of the state (forest department) it at the same time recognizes that people have a role to play to meet their own end. The activists of the second type are generally non-violent mainly involving advocacy as the means to empower people to preserve the environment. A major chunk of NGOs registered under the Societies Registration Act fall under this category, while in case of the former the activism does not wait for any recognition by government laws and Act/s and emerges spontaneously as opposite force of state. Notable examples of this are action groups that came into existence to protest against dam construction.
Environmental movement

Defining environmental movement becomes difficult as different scholars view the phenomenon in different ways. For Prasad⁴ environmental movement is an umbrella term used to describe a series of local struggles and conflicts that highlight issues of livelihood and ecological security in the development debate. There were several struggles for forest and water rights that raised larger ecological concerns such as, restoration of community rights in forests, rehabilitation and displacement through large projects and unsustainability of large dams and green revolution. Thus according to the definition given by Prasad we can include all tribal and peasant movements, which are oriented towards establishing rights over natural resources within environmental movements. In the language of Dwivedi,⁵ environmental movement is best understood as an envelope as it encompasses a variety of socially and discursively constructed ideologies and actions, theories and practices. For him, contemporary environmental movements are characterized by diversity of actions, actors and issues. In his view, environmental movements emerge from the caustic chaos of industrial society in which the natural environment undergoes radical and often unintended but permanent transformations having far reaching socio-ecological consequences.

According to Ghanashyam Shah,⁶ environmental movement covers bigger contours of movement that includes a series of conflicts or struggles related to the environment. In Shah’s words ‘more often than not the struggles of the people on the issues of their livelihood and access to forest and other natural resources are coined as environmental movements’.

Guha and Gadgil defined the environmental movement as ‘organised social activity consciously directed towards promoting sustainable use of natural resources, halting environmental degradation, or bringing about environmental restoration’⁷. Though the concept of environmental movements varies in scholarly discourse, the definition has a

scope to include different issues such as livelihood, forest resource, water resource, as well as issues of direct environmental concern. Since the term environmental movement has occupied enough space in the social science literature arriving at clear-cut definition of the same is of utmost importance for a better understanding of the research problem. The environmental movement can be considered as a new social movement where a group of people collectively act to protect the environment to bring about change in the status of environment for a healthy and comfortable life.

**Action Group**

Action group has been variously interpreted and defined by various scholars and administrative bodies. These are variously called as voluntary organizations, voluntary agencies, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), peoples’ organizations etc. The word action group derived its meaning from the following definition given by the UN: “Those non-profit organizations which are not part of the government machinery and which have not been established as a result of an agreement between governments. NGOs can include research institutes, trade unions, private foundation, environmental groups, indigenous agencies, grass root level developmental bodies and any other organization of a non-governmental nature.” Different scholars however tried to define NGOs and action groups in their own way. For instance, S L Sharma\(^8\) emphasizes on micro action group having localized setting, thus different from organized movement.

S L Sharma has given two conceptualizations of action groups depending upon the kind of concern: 1) a group working for a cause which signifies its concern for human, or animal, or environmental protection, 2) a group working for the cause of the poor and the deprived sections to enable them to be equal partners in development and radical transformation. Sharma says the first is a broad conception covering diverse varieties of action groups, the second is specific as it refers to such social action groups as are engaged in restructuring class and power relations in a localized setting. Sharma considers the second category as social action groups. By social action Sharma means the conscious collective action against exploitation and oppression at a local level.

---

\(^8\) Sharma, S.L. 1992, ‘Social Action Groups as Harbingers of Silent Revolution’ in *Economic and Political weekly* 27, pp2557-61
For Sharma, social action groups have certain distinctive features. First of all, these are micro-action groups and hence different from organized movements. Secondly, these operate at grass-roots level in a localized setting, i.e., in a small manageable area. This distinguishes them from wide spread mobilization sponsored by big organizations. Thirdly, social action groups represent spontaneous initiatives of the sensitized or radicalized middle class youth. Fourthly, born out of deep stirrings of consciousness, these groups work for and with the poor and the deprived to better their prospects by involving them in self-reliant development project. Fifthly, these groups seek to conscientise and mobilize the deprived and the oppressed sections to enable them to take control of their destinies and transform the same. Finally, these groups generally undertake non-violent actions, though sometimes they tend to be militant.

In another way, Sharma also conceptualizes them as non-government, non-party, non-institutional and non-professional formation.

Harsh Sethi⁹ maintains that Voluntary Agencies or Non-Governmental organizations or Action Groups are loose categories. They represent a bewildering mix of ideologies, objectives, working styles, social compositions, funding and support sources, size of organisation and operation, which precludes any possibility of putting this heterogeneous collection under a single rubric. For Sethi, the only common characteristics of such organizations at the formal level is that they are registered under the government’s Societies Registration Act, are not expected to make any profit on their activities, and are considered non-governmental and non-political: non-governmental only in their not being part of the official machinery and non-political only in their non participation in any direct manner in electoral processes. Most of the groups Sethi discussed have been in existence since 1965, ‘having internalized the experiences and critiques of official development strategies as well as the more political of the movements led by the left parties.’¹⁰ For Sethi these groups are organizations composed mainly of sensitized / radicalized middle class youth, working for and with the oppressed and exploited strata with a view to transform society. They are involved in a range of activities from development with a political perspective to militant organization of the masses. These activities take place outside the

---

¹⁰ Ibid
control of government and political parties. There is no primary focus on the capture of state power.

While the above definitions provide a broad organizing umbrella, Sethi says a better way is to develop a classification by looking at the activities and the organizations behind them. The activities may be classified into a number of broad domains: a) Relief and Charity b) Development c) Mobilization and Organization d) Politics e) Political Education.

The organizational classification would be:

- a) Development and charity groups
- b) Action Groups involved primarily in the process of conscientisation, mobilization and organization of the oppressed without an explicitly stated political perspective (very often such groups pose as being non-political or even anti political)
- c) Political groups carrying out tasks very similar to action groups but formed with reasonably clearly defined political perspectives and goals.
- d) Pre-Party Political Formations, political groups formed with the purpose of quadrating on to the level of political parties.
- e) Support groups carrying out specialized tasks of bringing out journals, documentation and resource centres, lawyers forum etc working in tandem with some other groups and /or political parties.

Though Harsh Sethi’s concept of action groups appears quite satisfactory elaborately covering different aspects of their activities and organizations, his emphasis on registration under the Societies Registration Act, does not appear satisfactory, as there are different micro action groups which are not formally registered but actively engaged in similar activities performed by the registered societies.

Rajesh Tandon in his paper ‘Government-NGO Relations in India’ categorized voluntary organizations broadly into four types. The first type is the service provider. Many voluntary organizations have served and continue to serve important needs of deprived sections of population in such diverse areas, namely, education, health, drinking water etc. The earlier role of charity and welfare for the poor and destitute has assumed a service provider role in recent years. The second role voluntary organizations

---

play relates to development interventions. These are primarily in the areas of environment, income generation, irrigation, agriculture etc. In the last two decades an increasingly large number of voluntary organizations have been involved in development activities. The third role of voluntary organizations in India has been conscientising and organizing the poor and the marginalized to struggle for their rights, for access to resources and for expression of their perspectives. In recent years, such voluntary organizations have been called Social Action Groups. Fourthly, a new form of voluntary action has emerged in respect of networking and providing support for people and organizations /groups at the grass roots level. There are state and national level networks as well as research, training, documentation, support organizations at various levels. Many of them specialize in particular sectors, such as, education, women, health, environment, etc, while some provide generalized support.

According to Korten and Quizon,\textsuperscript{12} NGOs represent a diverse range of interests, activities and perspectives on development issues. They also vary in their linkages to or alienation from the establishment. Therefore, though NGOs are often associated with people centered development perspectives, it would not be valid to suggest that all NGOs share a commitment to this orientation. In fact substantial majority of NGOs that work with the poor are engaged primarily in relieving the immediate consequence of poverty and have given little attention to questions of development theory and vision.

Korten and Quizon talked about two types of NGOs: Social Development NGOs and Advocacy oriented NGOs. For them many Social Development NGOs defined primarily by their concern for the poor, trace their origin to a very straight-forward human impulse to right a wrong. Their response commonly takes one of three forms: charity, self-help, capacity building or protest. Until recently, the attention of most social development NGOs was focused on immediate field activities or protest actions. Little attention was devoted to serious examination of question of development theory, policy and institutional structures or their implications for the conditions of the poor.

NGOs engaged in issues of human rights, peace, environment, consumer rights and discrimination against women are more likely than social development NGOs to be

\textsuperscript{12} Korten and Quizon 'Government, NGO and International Agency Cooperation : Whose Agenda?' in Heyzer and et al., 1995 Gogovernment NGO Relations in Asia, Macmillan Press Ltd.
engaged in policy advocacy through such actions as lobbying legislatures, exposing illegal
activities and human rights abuses in the press or other fora, pursuing class action suits in
the courts, staging demonstrations and promoting letter writing campaigns. At the same
time, they also vary in the extent of their linkages to the establishment and their
commitments to social activism.

Korten and Quizon also maintained that in general, social development NGOs
have been slower to recognize the centrality of policy advocacy to their concerns. By the
same token, however it has been rare until very recently for the more advocacy oriented
groups to see themselves as concerned with development issues. In the early 1990s, these
distinctions have begun to blur on both sides, and at an accelerating rate.

Thus an examination of definition of the Action Group shows that different
scholars focused on different criteria such as localized setting, being non governmental,
non political, having registered under Societies Registration Act etc. But none of these
scholars could come to an unanimous concept of Action Groups. Hence reaching to a
particular definition is very much difficult.

For our operational purpose Action Groups can be conceptualized as Social Action
Groups for which orientation for betterment of society is very much embedded. These may
be registered or unregistered and could even include a group that emerges for a particular
purpose and disappear after taking up one or few actions. Many instances are there where
there is growth of small organizations which function for a short period of time and
disappear without meeting the purpose for which it was formed. Yet, they count
significantly in the literature as these develop with a motive of social action. Hence any
organization which does not have a profit motive and is oriented for the betterment of
society, whether formally registered or disappear after a short span of activity beore getting
registered or do not register at all, can be considered as action group. Environmental action
groups can be considered as those social action groups which consider environmental
problems as equal problem of the society and believe that the members of the society have
important role to solve this problem.
North East India : A General Overview

Introducing North East India from its social, political, cultural and economic point of view is also very much required to have an understanding of environmental activism in the region. The region popularly known as the land of seven sisters with Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, has also developed its consanguinal tie with Sikkim following the declaration by NEC to add the later to the seven states. Though all these are federal states under the Indian Union, owing to its geopolitical location and substantial number of tribal population in the region gets a special status in Indian Constitution in the form of the special provision of the Sixth Schedule and Article 371. Although ethnically and linguistically diverse, the states of the region share certain similar features. Geographically they were attached to the rest of India via East Bengal before the partition of Bengal and creation of East Pakistan. But after partition the region is connected to the rest of India by a small strip of twenty two kilometers known as ‘Assam Corridor’ in Bongaigaon district of Assam which makes the region a remote place to the rest of India and a periphery of the Indian core.

The population of the region is a conglomeration of plain and hill people. The major ethnic groups are Khasi, Naga, Mizo, Kuki, Garo, Dimasa, Tripuri, Riang, Bodos, and Karbi etc. The plain people consist of Assamese, Bengali, Meitei and some business groups mostly Marwaris, who are mainly inhabiting in the plain areas of Assam, Manipur and Tripura. The tribal areas of the region have been given special status under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution. The states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh are the predominantly tribal states where as, other states such as Tripura, Manipur and Assam also have considerable number of tribals in them along with the non-tribal plain people. Each ethnic group is very much distinct from other groups in respect to their culture. The Nagas of Nagaland are so diverse that there are around thirteen groups each with a distinct language, culture and system of governance. To communicate with each other the Naga had to rely on a mixture of Assamese and tribal languages popularly known as ‘Nagamese’ which has become the lingua franca of the state. Racially the tribals of the region mostly belong to the Mongoloid group. Besides most of the ethnic groups in the region have an ethnic connection with the communities inhabiting the neighbouring
countries. According to Anthropological Survey of India’s monumental ‘People of India’ study most communities of India had their origin outside India, though the people themselves believe that they are indigenous to the soil. The bulk of them would be internal migrants within the confines of Indian territorality, whereas most communities of the North East either have their roots outside India or have migrated into the region from the Indian heartland. Ahoms were the offshoot of the Tai who had their origin in the great Shan stock of South East Asia. Some of the Naga tribes have their counterparts in Myanmar. Similarly, some of the tribes of Kuki-Mizo constellation have their counterparts in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Some of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the Singphos, for instance, have their agnates in Myanmar, Yunnan province of China, Thailand and Laos. The Bengali speaking people of the entire region scattered in almost all the states have their counterparts in Bangladesh.

North East India by virtue of its location at the meeting points of South Asia, South East Asia, and through Tibet it had traditional commercial ties with central Asia. The border trade plays a very important role in the region. In the words of one scholar, the “peculiar location coupled with poor infrastructure facilities within the region as a whole had led to a situation where each of the seven states is looking more to the neighbouring countries than to the mainland India for economic relations.” In recent years with the liberalization of the economy and the new emphasis given to economic cooperation with the South East Asian countries through what is popularly known as the ‘Look East Policy’, the region has assumed a significant position in the economic map of the country.

While the distinct cultural and racial elements gives the region an image of a cultural museum it is the same factor that is one of the causes of development of insurgent outfits in the region along with other politico-economic causes such as exploitation, isolation, neglect by the mainstream. In the minds of mainstream Indians, this has produced a picture of North East India as an insurgent prone area.

At the same time, the uninterrupted infiltration of ‘Bangladeshis’ and people from the big states to the small states like Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and even Assam has caused serious concern in the minds of the natives.

13 Thomas, Joshua C 1998, ‘India’s North East and Border Trade with Neighbouring Countries: A Case Study in Indo-Bangladesh Relations’ in Liberalisations in India’s North East, Das and Purkayastha (eds).
in these places. The people in the region feel that their identity, customs, land and traditions may one day be eclipsed by the continuing influx of outsiders. The youths in the region feel that their economic opportunities have been taken over by the outsiders. For this reason various insurgent outfits have been waging an armed struggle in the North Eastern Region. According to Tarapot, there are 18 underground organizations operating of which five or six organizations are highly active. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) is one of the most well known organizations in the region. It spearheads an armed revolution for an independent Assam with the objective to restore power in the hands of the ethnic Assamese.

A brief look at the political history of Assam will give us some insight as to why the organization resorted to this movement. To begin with, to serve the purpose of the tea industry the colonial rulers brought a number of tea garden laborers from parts of Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh etc. mainly from the Chotanagpur region of undivided Bihar, as the local people were not considered to have the skill required for the purpose. Along with the labour force, the British brought many other people mainly from Bengal, to serve the purpose of administration. The development of industries and trade also led to the increase in the number of businessmen from outside the region.

Though Assam became an independent state after independence the problem was not reduced, rather it got further accelerated due to the uninterrupted influx of people from neighboring Bangladesh, [former East Pakistan]. The large scale presence of the immigrants caused serious concern among Assamese speaking people as they feel that they are slowly becoming minority in their own state. The Bengali Hindus were initially brought into Assam by the colonial administrators to work in the province. First they moved into administrative positions but gradually they entered the modern professions. At the same time Bengali Muslims who were primarily cultivators, confronted with the scarcity of cultivable land in Bengal, started migrating to Assam in search of fertile land. When the country was partitioned following Independence, thousands of refugees entered Assam from East Pakistan. Again the war of liberation of Bangladesh in the beginning of the 1970s resulted in the influx of Bengali refugees on a large scale to Assam. The presence of these people is seen as a threat to the cultural, political and economic life of the

Tarapot, Phanjohbam 1993, Insurgency Movement in North East India.
people of Assam. The All Assam Student’s Union (AASU) raised the issue of illegal entry of foreigners and demanded their deportation. The Youth felt that unless the illegal entry is stopped, Assam will be exploited in all respects. This led to the eruption of Assam agitation in 1979. The AASU activists and their sympathisers finally formed the United Liberation Front of Assam. What added to the seriousness of the problem was the support of ULFA activist by the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) to overthrow Indian exploitation and to establish a free Assamese state. Although now, the intensity has come down the movement still continues and its force directed against state power.

While the Assam movement had its genesis in the exploitation of the state by the outsiders and the centre, there are yet other movements which came up as a result of the perceived exploitation of the people by the state governments. The Bodoland movement is one such example. The feeling by the Bodo people of Assam inhabiting the Kokrajhar district and the nearby areas in Assam that the state government does not care for the needs of Bodo people, resulted in the movement for a separate state of ‘Udayachal’ in which various Bodo organizations joined hands with each other.

The oldest movement in the region was the movement for autonomy of Naga Hill district by the Naga people of Nagaland. The movement started under the leadership of Phizo. The Naga Nationalist Council (NNC) formed by Phizo aimed to achieve freedom for the Naga people. But the declaration of Nagaland as separate state under the Indian Union led to the disappearance of NNC. With the signing of the Shillong Accord in 1980, Phizo and other members of NNC accepted the Indian Constitution under their own volition. The Shillong Accord was signed by the Indian government and the NNC leaders. However, some NNC leaders did not support the Memorandum, formed the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN, Isac and Muivah group) which has been active in Manipur, Nagaland and parts of Assam, the NSCN (Khaplang) based in upper Myanmar has formed Indo-Burman Revolutionary Front (IBRF) along with United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam). The IBRF’s avowed aim is to liberate what it calls Indo-Burma region (the North Eastern Region of India and North Western part of Burma).

The insurgency in Tripura first appeared in 1949 with the formation of Sengkarak whose aim was to merge Tripura with Pakistan but failed to achieve its goal. The
organization re-emerged in 1967 with the goal of immediate deportation of Bengali refugees from Tripura. There are number of insurgent outfits in Tripura that emerged on the basis of the demographic revolution in Tripura that reduced the tribes of Tripura into a minority (presently near about 30 percent) following the partition of the country, unlike the previous status where the tribes were the majority. But the insurgent activity has declined in Tripura because of ideological difference between different outfits and also among the members of the same insurgent organization and the government of India’s initiative to restore peace in the state. After the Tribal National Volunteers (TNV) signed an accord with the government in 1988, the insurgency had declined in the state and All Tripura Tribal Force (ATTF) remained as the only active underground organization in Tripura.

In Arunachal Pradesh, the sole underground outfit, the United Peoples Volunteers of Arunachal Pradesh has already run out of stream in its early stage following the surrender of its head. The demands of the Achik Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA) and Hyniewtrep Volunteer Council (HVC) in Meghalaya and Hmar Peoples Convention in Mizoram, are within the framework of Indian Constitution. Besides various movements are also emerging day by day as Barakland movement for autonomy of Barak valley, the Rabha militant insurgent activities observed in Goalpara district to liberate the Rabha people from Indian colonialism etc through an armed struggle, Dimaraji movement by the Dimasa People of Assam etc.

Again, while there are the insurgency movements against the political organization, be it central or state, for autonomy or cessation, there are also conflicts between different ethnic groups found in various sub regions of North East India. Some of the well known ones are the Naga-Kuki conflict, Paite-Kuki conflict, Dimasa-Naga, Garo-Khasi conflict etc.

**Objectives of the study:**

The study will focus on the following objectives:

1. To gain an understanding about the status of the environment in the region.
2. To inquire into the different issues of environmental concern of the region.
3. To inquire into how far and to what extent the environmental problems contribute to the rise of environmental activism in the region.
4. To know about the nature and type of environmental movement of the region mainly in Assam.
5. To find out the role of action groups in mitigating these problems.
6. To understand the nature of environmental activism in the region

**Why Assam has been chosen as the site of study:**

North East India comprising seven states experiences different kinds of environmental problems and hence the activisms around these also differ. Since it is time taking to focus on each and every issue of all the states, a general overview of the activism in the region has been drawn. It has been found that Assam experiences most of these problems and exhibits the highest level of activism around them. For this reason, it has been selected as the focal area for the present work. The state is confronted with different environmental issues such as, deforestation, loss of wild animals many of which are endangered species, adverse effect of dams on the environment and human settlement, frequent flood, water and soil pollution due to unscientific mining of coal and non compliance to environmental regulations to the oil industry etc. The research though focuses on environmental movements, the role of action groups will be analysed as it has been found to play a major role in the activism in the region. The field work is restricted to Assam as it is difficult to cover all the states of North East within a stipulated time frame.

**Methodology**

The data were collected from both the primary as well as secondary sources. The data related to general information in the study area were collected from secondary sources by visiting different libraries of universities, institutes, governmental and non governmental organizations and different offices. The literature survey is based on published books and journals, while the lists of NGOs were collected from NGO directories from different libraries of non governmental organizations and website.

Most of the primary data are collected from the field by applying different methods. The field work has been carried out in three phases; first a pilot survey was done to observe the activities of different organizations by participating in workshops and conventions and involving in informal discussion with the environmental activists. Most
fruitful remained the participation in the ‘Sixth Convention on Conservation and Livelihood Network’ organized by Nature’s Foster in Bongaigaon, Assam in collaboration with Kalpavriksh, Pune.

The second phase of the field work involved collection of primary data on select cases of environmental movements on five issues:

a) Rain forest conservation
b) Open cast mining in Ledo Margherita
c) Pagladia dam resistance movement
d) Digboi Oil Refinery and pollution in its vicinity
e) Issue of depleting forest cover in Assam

This phase of field work is mainly based on case study method for getting a holistic picture of these movements.

The third phase of the field work consists of studies of action groups in Assam. The selection of ten action groups has been done on the basis of a combination of a purposive sampling and snowballing method to identify major environmental action groups in Assam. The key persons of the NGOs have been interviewed on the basis of interview guide to have an overview of the structure and functioning of these groups and their involvement in environmental activism.

Organisation of the work

The thesis is presented in five main chapters. In the introductory section the foundation of the thesis has been dealt with. The work is thus based on the problem discussed under the heading ‘Statement of the problem’. Besides, a short description of the Universe of the study, i.e., North East India, scope of the study, objective of the study, methodology, operational definitions etc. have been chalked out. Chapter I deals with the approaches to environmental activism and movement, while chapter II deals with the status of the environment in the region. The activism related to the environment in North East is dealt in chapter III, while Chapter IV deals with the environmental movements of Assam with special focus on certain cases of environmental problem and activism. Chapter V
deals with study of few notable NGOs of Assam. The summing up of the work and the final conclusion of the thesis is drawn in the concluding chapter.