The Troubled North East and the Prospects It Holds out

The northeast region of today is comprised of eight Indian states situated at a strategically important location surrounded by China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan. Though geographically the northeast is a part of south Asia, culturally it is much closer to Southeast Asian countries in terms of its racial characters. The North East India has also been a melting pot for varieties of communities where enduring military campaigns for independence, ethnic affirmation and linguistic separation have long been features of its political and social mosaic. For generations, this has been a frontier land for settlers and there are not less than 66 large indigenous groups—some anthropologist say there are not less than 210, speaking almost as many dialects, if not languages, who live in a landscape of just over 222,00 square kilometers. This region where parts of South East Asia, as it were, have migrated over many hundreds of years, with the customs, cuisines and cultures of these distant lands.

Northeast India displays a distinctive ‘geo-ethnic character’. About three quarters of the region is covered by hilly terrains and one quarter is made up of the four plains areas such as the Brahmaputra Valley and Barak (Surma) Valley of Assam, the Tripura plains and the Manipur plateau. While the major part of Assam is composed of plains, some part of Tripura and Manipur are hilly. The dominant physical feature of the region is the Brahmaputra River and its powerful tributaries.

In Northeast region of India, most of the tribal communities do not have much writing tradition to express themselves, and most of them even find it difficult to do that as, following the spread of Christianity, new powerful cultural forces of the West have reached out far into these areas. Several ethnic communities embraced new faith which encourages retention of their earlier belief system and cultural practices. Along with that, began the inflow of outside people and new business ideas characterized by profit making into the tribal cultures, causing social tensions. The new cultural situations that introduced tool using, market oriented initiatives, have had the impact on
ecosystem-based sustenance and philosophy of the indigenous people, thereby causing severe social, cultural and economic strains.

In the region, the question of isolation is frequently raised. It is generally held that the British administering the region kept the hill tribes socially and culturally isolated from the plains people. Because of the 'Inner Line Regulations' introduced by the British Administration in 1873 people living in the plains could not enter into the hill areas without a pass from the district authorities. Further, the entire hill area of the region was administered as the backward tract directly by the Chief Commissioner although the administrative pattern was changed to the system of Excluded Areas, and Partially Excluded Areas under Indian Government Act of 1935. Whatever might be the aims and objectives involved in this policy the system hampered free and frequent interactions between the hill people and the plains people resulting in the growth of isolationism among the tribes. And this has played an important role in the emergence of autonomy movements among the hill tribes of the region. These movements have been demanding either a separate state within Indian Union or independent state outside Indian Union or separate autonomous district or region within the state.

In 1947, there was one composite province called Assam, two mostly hilly native states of Manipur and Tripura, 25 lesser chiefships in the Khasi hills and an unadministered Naga ‘tribal hill area in Northeast India. With the partition of British India a Bengali-speaking and Muslim majority district of Assam called Silhet went to East Pakistan. The Khasi chiefships were annexed to Assam while Manipur and Tripura were left as separate states within India.

The sense of alienation has been there, not just because of what is perceived as economic neglect of the region but because of the predecessor state, the British Raj, which deliberately distanced administration of Nagaland and Manipur.

In the region, political boundaries inevitably cut across the ethnic, religious or linguistic boundaries, and this has created minority problems. Broader adjustments of
Assam with Bengal, Manipur and Tripura in the 19th century, not only created problems for the Assamese but split numerous tribal groups like Garo, Khasi, Mizo and Naga. The separation of Burma in 1937 and the partition of British India gave international significance to their borders and have restricted the mobility of neighboring countries. Finally, the establishment of district boundaries affected most of the tribal groups and created multiethnic districts. With the transformation of administrative districts into political entities, inter-district borders created political problems.

Today, one of the salient features of the politics of integration in the Northeast India is a confrontation between tradition and modernity. At the material level, tradition has vested interest in perpetuation of the old order of chief-ship and its related oligarchy. Modernity stands for an elective ‘open’ elite system. Modernity further demands an individualistic property system to replace the so called system of communal property through which the chiefs and their retainers appropriated most of the uncultivated lands including the forests and the mines.

During the days of the colonial rule, commonly referred to as the British Raj, it was comparatively easy to distinguish the traditionalist from the modernist in the indigenous cultures of the northeast. In the hill areas of Northeast India, the traditional elite has a strong populist base, and the class of professional politicians that has cropped up as the functionaries of the modern state has to reckon with them. In the context of the northeast Indian hills the assumption that the elite in the underdeveloped countries is a more or less homogenous group emerging from the traditional leadership but combining with them the legitimacy of modernity of western education does not seem to be valid.

Part of the ethnic complexity of the region must be traced to ethno-cultural factors. Migration from different directions from the prehistoric period has completely confused the racial picture. It is probably because of the complexity of the ethnic situation in Plains Assam, theoretically expressed in the phrase, ‘cross-cutting cleavages’, that the region has weathered the 1972 reorganization of Northeast India.
The plains tribal movement in the Brahmaputra Valley is stigmatized by the lack of regional compactness as well as the articulate middle-class elite. The hill districts of Assam administered separately from the plains since the British day, have, on the other hand, emerged into separate hill states precisely because of their compactness and elite articulation. The frontier tracks have become Arunachal Pradesh purely through administrative initiative and without any agitation.

In the hill areas of northeast region, the important consideration for each socio-economic modernization is not so much on account of class consciousness as in new group consciousness. The question of regional imbalance has been stressed from time to time and this has been reflected through the common identity of clan, culture, language, race or religion. This has led to the concept of ethno-nationalism which is invoked to justify the highest level of ethnic militancy. This type of militancy is represented by insurgent groups of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura.

In the northeast Indian context, when anthropologist Verrier Elwin advocated that the tribes of this region should be left alone, some scholars sharply reacted asking whether they should be seen as mere museum pieces. This debate has not been resolved till date.

Since 1947, the effort to run an all-hill agitation could not fructify in spite of appeals to racialism and even religion. The hill state agitation only united two hill districts – the Khasi and the Garo which made Megalaya. The other hill states are only hill districts: Naga Hills as Nagaland, Mizo hills as Mizoram. This political division on ethnic lines clearly dates back to the British period.

Northeast India as a region has been deeply characterized by political unrest of various kinds. Since India's independence in 1947, the region has not seen a single decade of calm political atmosphere. The insurgent movements of a section of the Nagas, Mizos, the tribals from Tripura, Meiteis, Kukis and Zeliarongs of Manipur, of late the Assamese movement on the issue of infiltration, the ethnic assertion of the

xi
Kabirs, Khasis, Garos and Arunachalis in hills and the Bodos, Kacharies, Tiwas, Rabhas, Mising, Ahoms, chutias, etc. in the plains are the manifestation of urges and aspirations of these ethnic communities for their all round development.

Since the beginning of the 20th century many social movements have occurred mostly among the Tribal societies of northeast India. Some of the movements started during the pre-independence period were considered as revolts or insurgencies against the British Rule. These movements, though suppressed by the British laid the foundation for the subsequent political developments among the tribal peoples of the region. In the post independence period, numbers of movements among the different tribal groups have multiplied rather fast. Today, in every state of the northeast India some type of social movement has been going on, making the region a movement prone area of the country. This may be accounted for by varieties of factors such as the geophysical situation, historical background, legacy of the British Administration, and socio-cultural isolation from the rest of the country, etc.

In the region, insurgency took roots in Nagaland and Manipur in the early fifties, immediately after the establishment of the Republic of India, in Mizoram in the sixties, in Tripura in the seventies, while in the case of Assam it has arrived in the eighties. Meghalaya and Arunachal are just now menacingly militant, not yet insurgent though; Karbi Anglong district of Assam too is equally poised. Thus, these insurgency movements have rocked five of the seven states at one time or another, and regionalism and sub-nationalism based on ethnic group infested all the states. Insurgency as a movement of an ethnic group can be treated as an extreme form of ethno-political upsurge. There are milder forms of geo-ethnic politics for which terms such as regionalism and autonomy movement have been appropriately used. The studies on the movements suggest that tribals want security of their land and natural resources, their culture and language, whether it is the question of political autonomy or cultural identity or the ethnic solidarity movement, the problem is the same, that is the apprehension of losing their traditional economic base which means land, forest, and forest products, their customs and tradition, languages, and also the fear of social and
economic exploitation and political dominance by others in the changing social, political, and economy systems of the country. These are all reflected in the objectives and issues of the movements of various tribal groups of the region. The emaciated secessionist movements are surviving through recruitment from the disgruntled section of educated elite. The calls for self-determination in the northeast, where communities increasingly identify themselves on the basis of ethnic groupings, language and territoriality, have turned the region into the administration's nightmare.

The politics of these movements is fundamentally circumscribed by the power of modern state. There is a notion that the old chiefly class is no longer powerful enough to retain the secessionist stand and its aspirations. At the same time, the root of these movements for autonomy lies in the economic backwardness of the tribal areas generally in an economically backward Indian state. Movements of this kind fundamentally reflect economic and political frustrations which have been the reasons for them easily attaining a larger public interest.

The ethnic intensity, awareness, and behavior of any people can be affected by impersonal social forces such as social and geographical mobility. People of the region are also affected by human agencies as well, such as governments and politicians. In the early stage of ethnic formation, economic development and education may also create ethnic consciousness among the people who share some objective ethnic characteristic. For example, the gap in the economic or education level between any two people may further strengthen the 'we' and 'they' attitude. The same is the tendency with the growth of urbanization and the spread of communication which have added to the growing rate of migrants from outside the region. The needs of administration, tea plantation and oil industry caused the bulk of migration in the 19th century and even the 1961 census showed the urban areas of Assam as mainly inhabited by the non-Assamese creating the critical problems of another kind.

Immigration has its inevitable impact on the people of the region. Whatever their origin, they occupy the common property resources (CPRs) that are the tribal
livelihood and the centre of their economy, culture and identity. That is why they resist it but the country often treats tribal resistance to the alienation of their livelihood as insurgency and a law and order issue. As for the immigrants, whatever their region of origin, they react to similar push and pull factors. The push factors are poverty and feudal system of their area of origin. Most of them are landless agricultural laborers in such feudalistic region where land reforms have not been implemented properly. Their low wages and poverty push them out of their regions. The pull factor is the fertile land in the Northeast and the legal system that allows them to encroach on it. Much of the land in the tribal areas of the region is community owned although individual ownership is on the rise. This disjunction between the formal and informal system makes it easy for the immigrants to encroach on the CPRs and cultivate them. Another pull factor is the local need for cheap labour and services that the immigrants provide as skill and unskilled manual workers. Construction and other contractors seem to have developed a vested interest in their cheap labour. However, the issue of immigration has added to the complexity of the region and results in conflicts because many immigrants occupy land. Most such conflicts that began in the colonial age were land-related and usually had an ‘outsider-insider’ component. Therefore, today, the local people are ambiguous towards the immigrants. On the one hand they oppose them as encroachers on their land and for taking up their jobs. On other hand, their low wages have become a vested interest with the contractors as well as agriculturalists. Thus, land loss to immigrants and ethnic stand-off has been intensified over the years. During the conflict or on account of displacement for a development project the law was unable to prevent the alienation of their CPRs which forced them to take a new look at their relationship with land.

During the colonial era, the British had earmarked Assam for tea and later for petroleum and mines and that required massive acquisition of land and labour. But the colonialist needed the hill areas of the region less for land than for trade to popularize the finished products of the industrial revolution. To achieve it they destroyed or commercialized tribal craft to prevent competition with the Manchester textiles.¹ So to

---

most hill and some plains tribes, colonialism represented trade based on a monetary economy with which they were not familiar.

One of the most important causes of the slow development of the northeast region has been the continuation of tribal and feudal society with a little of capital formation and commodity production for a long time. During the pre-British period, the indigenous accumulation and capital formation did not take place. As such trade and commerce did not grow sufficiently to bring the heterogeneous tribes and ethnic communities together by absorbing them in a common market. Besides during the colonial rule, the infrastructure necessary for indigenous economic development had not grown adequately. On the contrary, the imperialist rulers exploited the natural resources without reinvestment for the development of the region. However, the British rulers who did not have much interest in their land restricted their rule to collecting revenues.

Changing land relations caused by encroachment on it have led to a new interpretation of the indigenous status in the region specific to which is the insider-outsider, bias given to it. That turns the struggle into an ethnic conflict. Whatever the interpretation of the indigenous status, most conflicts are around alienation of their livelihood resources of land, water and biodiversity, the foundation of their culture, economy and identity. Because of a feeling of threat to their livelihood, alienation leads to hardened ethnic identities and exclusive claims over the depleted resources. In reaction to what they consider attacks on their livelihood, many ethnic communities rewrite their history in order to declare themselves the original inhabitants of a given area and lay exclusive claims to its resources. Such changing land relations are basic to the conflicts also because after 1947 this issue has touched the hill areas where the colonialist did not need land. But today, land shortage becomes the setting for hardened ethnic identities and exclusive claims to resources. Home to various ethnic groups, the relations between the hills tribes and non-tribals in the plains are coloured by suspicion and occasional hostility. Ethnic conflicts have thus to be seen in this context of high
dependence on land, low urbanization and its process, low investment in industries and suspicion of outsiders.

In fact, the basis of conflicts is not immigration or the indigenous status in themselves but land loss and the exclusive claims over the resources. Since the land plays a crucial role, land relations in the form of ownership and tenancy are of critical importance in the region. In the rest of South Asia, the colonizers changed the land and forest laws in order to ensure their control over them. This policy had enacted several social reform laws but implemented very few of them for fear of alienating the dominant classes whose collaboration they needed for the success of their economic enterprise. They enforced the land and forest laws that were the kernel of colonialism. After 1947, land has become a major source of conflict because of low investment in industries and the consequent lack of livelihood alternatives. The region is rich in minerals but very few industries have been set up so far. In 1996, the seven states of the region together had only 166 large and medium industries.

Besides, it was after 1947 that the legal changes took the form of the Sixth Schedule or recognition of the customary law through amendments to the Constitution. In these Sixth Schedule areas, the village court or the District Autonomous Council deals with civil offences. Autonomous District Councils exist in Karbi Anglong and North Cachhar Hill district of Assam and the whole of Meghalaya and Mizoram. Nagaland never had district councils but a constitutional amendment in 1963 introducing Article 371A enabled it to follow its customary law in civil matters. Most tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur follow their customary law but the Sixth Schedule does not apply to them. Tripura does not have the Sixth Schedule but Autonomous district Councils were introduced because of the emerging unrest among the tribal people.

---

In the region, development issues have been highlighted in such a way as to give an instinctive impression that development is a prerogative of only the government and state machinery. Therefore, it has been often argued that it has made people far too dependent on the government and damaged their creativity, innovativeness and undermined the existence of otherwise traditionally voluntary society. Community based development ethos which was a pillar of the northeast was eroded by government actions. The development orientation has been based on a visible mismatch between the thinking of the planning agencies, use of resources and institutional back up. Development per se has always been regarded as a pure game of money and finance. The Centre has pumped in money without thinking about the needs and priorities, institutions and development managers. Since development institutions were never set up in a planned manner, the related issues always remained in the arena of ad hocism, departmentalism and marginalization. There has always been no cohesive and scientific attempt to build institutions that could provide continuance, consistency, effectiveness and sustainability to development actions.

In fact, the northeast region is known for its rich mineral resources like oil, natural gas, coal and limestone. Beside there is fertile soil for producing tea, rice, jute and immense forest resources like timber, rivers, waterfalls with enormous potentialities to produce hydroelectric power.

However, the key for success of such development is 'participation'. It is just not possible to implement a plan unless people are involved in the process. Such participation could take the form of a permanent quadripartite dialogue and negotiation around development strategies and contract setting the responsibilities of the stakeholders and adding up into a development compact. Despite this, there seems to be little opportunity for participation in the planning of large developmental projects in the region. However, there are two contradictory streams of thought that emerge from the ongoing process of developmental planning and policies in the region: one, in the context of the loss of natural ecosystem and cultural assimilation forced by
industrialization and on the other, in the context of strains faced by small communities while trying to retain their cultural conditions.

Recently, the Government of India has found an area of interest with existing water potential of the region as well as its strategic location, being a connecting route towards the South-East Asian countries. As a part of India's Look East Policy, the northeast region has been considered a focal point for mapping the sub-continent. While doing this, the backwardness of the region itself may be conceived as an important constraint to the process, for which a path for development is immediately required. Therefore, the exploration of the resources of the region has now become a must for the planning process. Meanwhile, the rich ecosystem and natural resources such as forest products, water potentials, etc. which are the source of livelihood for people of the region became a centre of attraction for the planners.

The large water potential of the region has attracted not only the policy makers but also international monetary agencies like the Work Bank, Asian Development Bank, etc. Therefore, the issues emerging out of the intervention by these monetary agencies in the development of these isolated tribal blocks of the region have become an area of concern for academic circles as well as in the public domain. This has led to the making a platform for debate on how these developmental paths have to be managed with an understanding of socio-economic and political culture of people in the region.

The political unrest which is the main criteria to define the region has to be dealt with while taking up any planning which lies within the environment of the region. Since there are already different claims, economic and political demands among various self identified groups of people, it is important to carefully understand the nature of these claims and bring some means to contain the crises before any form of intervention on the land of this region is taken up. At the same time, without a critical understanding of both the merits and the demerits of these existing developmental projects and major causes of their failure, the developmental planning in the region will
remain a point of criticism in a region where social and political movements command the loyalties of significant sections of the populace.

Among the states of the northeast, this study is centered on the state of Manipur which has been the problem child of the region for various forms of complexities. The state is today known for its socio-economic and political turmoil of numerous kinds such as identity crisis and claims among large number of different ethnic groups, economic backwardness, insurgent movements, misuse of resources, and the lack of industries and so on. The contestation with regard to available resources and their impact on sustaining the economy of the state could be a source to examine the region. Besides, conflicts of various forms are the norm of the day in the state which stand as major constraints qualifying the developmental process in the state. The state is also now experiencing a kind of failure with regard to developmental planning which has multiplied the problems further.

At the same time, the state lies at a geographically strategic location where the rest of the country could connect to the South East Asian countries for trade and other commercial purposes. The rich natural resources and the nature of their exploitation in the past and at present provide a rich context for the study of the development aspect of the state. Another reason to select the state of Manipur as the central focus of study is the nature of the existing politics of hill-valley divide in sharing the resources of the region.

Large hydro-electric projects are the central theme of this study for they have been projected as the main prospect of the development of the region. With its high water potential being untapped for economic development of the region as well for rest of the country itself, there are several hydro-electric power projects coming up in the region for the supply and export of electricity. The region itself is short of power and if this demand is met it can play a major role for the growth of industries and other forms of modern technologies.
However, the emerging issues related to these projects have now arrived at a point that they need to be reviewed afresh. Although the issue of dams is new in the region, there is a sign of widespread debate in the public sphere on this issue because of its immediate adverse impact on the socio-economic and cultural status of the people of the region. These debates highlight the mismanagement rampant in several of these projects which has led to opposition to many of them. Such debate can be highlighted through the case of Manipur in an eminent way.

Literature Review:

The foundation of this study is based on an extensive survey on existing literatures on the subject matter of this study. This survey is an attempt to draw the theoretical linkages between the trends of hydro power project operation and its issues within the parameter of developmental perspectives and complexities. There are already numerous literatures on the concept of development and its dimensions. Many theories have been put up and debated with a care attention from different disciplinary circle of intellectuals. Still the fruits are not being yielded enough with satisfaction against the interests invested on it. Due to vastness of complexity and difficulties to define the term itself, the meaning and strategy of development have been still a centre of attraction to have an investigation.

At the outset, it is important to note that the role of natural resources is an important issue that foregrounds this study. The foundation of the study therefore lies in an investigation of the existing literature on natural resources and their bearing on development. One of the important contribution in this regard is Jefferey D. Sachs and Andrew M. Warner's *Natural Resources and Economic Development: the Curse of Natural Resources* in which they try to assess the importance and uses of natural resources for the economic growth of any country. Another similar kind of work that specifically focuses on water is *Water Resources Planning And Management* by V.K. Sharma which argues that the endowment of rich stock of natural resources could be a means to rapid economic development but he at the same time emphasizes on the proper management and exploitation of such resources as the criteria for sustaining the
natural resources for long term use. His work also discusses the role and potentiality of water resources which influence not only human life but the entire ecosystem in various ways. Similarly, in his *Water: Perspectives, Issues and Concerns*, Ramaswamy R. Iyer has highlighted the policies involved in water resource development planning in India and he argues that the regional imbalances in monsoon has contributed to the disparity of agricultural production for which he calls for a kind planning that provides integrated water resources to each region. On similar lines, A. Vaidyanathan and H.M. Oudshoom’s (edited) volume, *Managing Water Scarcity: Experiences and Prospects* emphasizes the importance of the quality of environmental and natural systems in managing water resources. Their main argument seeks a balance between the concerns of the environment and the imperatives of development. Similarly, Tom Tietenberg in *Environment and Natural Resource Economics* lays emphasis on the importance of maintaining hydrological cycle for long term availability of water resources. Another work, specifically dealing on rivers is Munir Zaman’s (edited) volume entitled *River Basin Development* which argues that the limited utilizable water on the earth’s surface has now become an area of concern for formulating conservation programmes.

In fact, most natural resources are always shared by two or more parties in the history of mankind. However, the limited stock of natural resources has now led to the emergence of competing claims over them leading to the present impasse in several fronts. In a piece entitled ‘Fuelling War: Natural Resources and Armed Conflict’ Philippe Le Billion theoretically discusses many sources of conflict resulting from resource exploitation and argues that such conflicts have now become an influential element of political, social and economic processes throughout the world.

With this, the connectivity between water and politics has now become a part of the strategy for the formulation of developmental planning. Moreover, there is already sign of growing water-sharing disputes all over world at both global and local contexts. Paula A Williams in ‘The Common and Uncommon Political Economies of Water’, discusses the issues and the factors leading to such disputes. Another work of this kind is David G. LeMarquand’s *International River: The Politics of Cooperation* which
agues that the monopoly of upper riparian states with rich technological resources for exploiting the available water potential has inflicted major losses for the lower riparian states. Patrick McCully in his *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology And Politics Of Large Dams* attempts to formulate a kind of harmonious relation between the ‘up-streamers’ and ‘down-streamers’ of a shared river system. By highlighting the attitude of Indian government in sharing trans-boundary river courses, Gopal Siwakoti’s work entitled ‘Linking the River, De-linking the Relation’ condemns the domineering role of India in sharing river waters in the subcontinent. Similar argument is found in the work ‘The Farakka Barrage: A Diary of India’s Coercive Diplomacy in Practice’ by Ashraf-ul-Alam Tutu who has brought together the existing scenarios of water sharing between India and Bangladesh and India’s disposition to violate periodic agreements made between the two countries.

The study has a direct bearing on the concept of development, which necessitated a revisit to the debate on development. In *Development Theory*, P.W. Preston sees development as a social change and attributes many of our social ill to it. He goes on to discuss how the existing pattern of development originated in Europe as a particular cultural form and eventually drawing all the existing local cultures all over the world into its vortex. A work entitled *Towards a Re-definition of Development* edited by Alain Birou, Paul-marc Henry and J.P.Schlegel, indicates the definitional problem of the term and argues that any approach to development needs to assess the socio-cultural range and quality of human life. Therefore, planners have to focus on their strategies in accordance with the character of prevailing societies. Another work of such kind is Jordi Borja and Manuel Castells’ *Local and Global* which sees development as increase of material wealth and increase of quality of life alongside the reproduction of social, material and institutional conditions. R.P.Misra’s book, *Development Issues of Our Time* sees development not only as increase in economic well being of people but also as transformation of people into new human beings. The book discusses about the importance of different developmental paths for different sections of people. A voluminous work entitled as *Resource, Environment and Population- Present Knowledge, Future Option*, edited by Kinsely Davis and Mikhails Berstan focuses on
the meaning of 'growth' and 'development' and argues that development is the evolution of a society from one state to another with a better perception and greater control over its own environment. Thus, the book connects the elements of development to the environmental conditions of any society.

In *Democracy and Development*, Adrian Leftwich discusses the role of the state and its politics as a necessary ingredient to the pace of development. In order to spur and shape development, he emphasizes on a kind of politics that will determine the kind and quality of governance and effectiveness of its developmental capacity. According to him, it is the primacy of politics and the character of the state that has to be the focus of attention not the form of governance or the institutional ideal of good governance although the latter is indisputably necessary for development. He draws our attention to the issue how the prospects for an enduring democracy will depend critically on the politics of balancing the diverse and distinctive demands of very different interests groups.

John Weiss’ edited volume, *The Economics of Project Appraisal and the Environment*, pursues the theoretical question on why there is a rise of new environmentalism when an attempt is made at reconciling development and environment. The main thesis of his work is that 'the growing recognition that environmental considerations must be incorporated into development strategies is starting to have some influence on policy making and planning in developing countries'. Following the sustainability argument, he goes on to discuss about the recognition of the potential importance of environmental assessment for new developing projects.

Focusing on the relationship between economy and environment, Charles Perrings’ work, *Economy and Environment: A theoretical Essay on the Interdependence of economic and Environmental System*, assesses how coercive systems are directly analogous to the more familiar exploitation of nonhuman environments in order to maintain the economy. Similarly, Herman E Daly, and
Kenneth N Townsend’s work *Valuing the Earth Ecology Ethics* emphasizes on the requirement of new institutional framework supporting the generation of environmentally benign strategies, insight and attitudes, based on a deep awareness of cultural and ethical dimensions of sustainability.

In K. Mahadevan, Chi-Hsien Tuan and V. Balakrishnan Nair’s *Ecology, Development and Population Problem: A Perspective from India, China and Australia*, an attempt is made to investigate on how different stage of development leads to a dramatic rise of productive forces and deep changes in productive, demographic, ecological and other social relations.

Looking towards the positive side of modern technology, in his edited work *Alternative Paradigms of Development*, Malcolm S. Adisheshiah welcomes a kind of development which means a better life for all people. His central argument is that current developmental paradigms, both capitalists and bureaucratic socialist, have tended to institutionalize a cultural imperialism, where dominant metropolitan cultures have suppressed other cultures, particularly those of minorities belonging to linguistic, ethnic, religious and regional affiliations. The book further suggests economists to probed into whether development strategies, are ecologically and environmentally sustainable and how to assess them?

Looking into the developmental strategies in India, Sushil Mittal and Vaman Rao’s ‘Development and Change in India’ discusses alternative paths of development that truly reflect local traditions and genius. Showing unease regarding the outcome of efforts invested on developmental planning in India, Arjun Sengupta’s article, ‘Delivering the Right to Development: ESCR and NGOs’ argues that the major factors for the slow pace of development in India are centralized Planning Systems with archaic organizational structures, the use of outdated methods of planning and undue political interference in planning and decision-making. Asserting the need to relate to large scale development projects to the emerging environmental and social issues, an article by R.N. Sharma entitled, ‘Involuntary Replacement: A few Encounters’ reflects
the need to establish linkage between ecology, development and regulation of population growth..

With the growing importance of dam construction to achieve the growth rate of demands in the modern age, large dams are a fact of modern life. However, the way these large dams are designed, negotiated and executed in India have thrown up several issues related to socio-economic and ecological in affected assess. This in turn has led various scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds to pay attention to these issues. In his article, 'The Dam- Its Past, Present and Future', Tarak Mohandas gives an account of the evolution of dam construction in India and, analyses both its positive and negative impact on the human ecology. Mention can be made of another book on large dams, that of Kamta Prasad’s Water Resources and Sustainable Development: Challenges of 21st Century, which comprises of 37 papers selected from over 80 papers presented at the International Conference on Sustainable Development of Water Resources: Socio-economic Institutional and Environmental Aspects, organized by the editor under the auspices of Institute for Resource Management and Economic Development, Delhi in November 2003. The work argues that conflicts of developmental projects are caused by wrong principles adhered to by policy makers, their limited vision, lack of sensibility, unwillingness to share information and politicization. The book also discusses large dam construction and its impact in India. He argues that the process for deciding whether a dam should be built in a particular location and with particular specifications should be part of the process for deciding how to provide goods and services to the people of a region and help solve some of their main problems. It argues that social issues and demerits of large dam projects can be avoided if proper planning for displacement, re-habilitation and employment opportunities is managed. Other works which have focused on the same theme are Roli Asthana’s ‘Involuntary Resettlement: Survey of International Experience, Vejai Balasubramaniam’s ‘Environment and human rights: A new form of imperialism, A.Kothari’s ‘Environmental Aspects of Large dams in India: Problems of Planning implementation and Monitoring’ and Smritu Kothari’s ‘Whose Nation? The displaced as Victims of Development.’
Apart from mainstream Indian literature, there are some works which have focused on the pattern of developmental processes in Northeastern India. Talking about politics of the region, S.K. Chaube’s work, *Hill Politics in Northeast India* provides a fine historical background and evolution of tribal societies. With a rich deployment of ‘facts’ that one could gather on the region, the book traces the process of political development and its ailments since the British rule. His main intention is to reinvestigate the socio-economic and political discourses in which he sees a reason for the present crises in the region. He further looks into how the different tribal communities run their political affairs and how they have changed with the arrival of the democratic processes in the region. Another work of this kind is *Northeast Frontier of India- Structural Imperatives and Aspects of Change* of A.C Sinha, which tends to focus on the evolution of the state a political unit in the region.

Aiming to draw a path for economic development of the region, Gulson Sacheva’s *Economy of the Northeast: Policy, Present Condition and Future Possibilities* discusses the resources and impediments for development. Similarly, in his *Northeast India 2000 A.D.: Perspective for Futurology*, B. Datta Ray makes an attempt to restructure the developmental paradigm of the region. Suggesting that capital stocks of a special type be created through co-operation between man and nature, he argues that involving the people in the protection and regeneration of forests should be an important component of the strategy in formulating development planning in this region. *Development Priorities in North East India*, an edited volume of Bimal J. Deb and with 18 papers from eminent social scientists, is one of the resourceful works which addresses the various problems and constraints of development in the region, from multi-dimensional angles. By examining the contemporary social and economic institutions in India, ‘Development Dialogue’ of Amalesh Banerjee underlines the need to organize public initiative to spur the government into action. In the same edited volume, A. K. Misra presents a comprehensive review of resources of the region as a spring board for sustainable development in the twenty first century. In his view, the status of resource availability in the region is not disputed but it is all the more important to control forces which jeopardize resource sustainability. Therefore, he
suggests a theoretically sound integrated development approach for natural resource management, environmental protection and overall well being of the people. Similarly, P.C. Dutta explains about the population and environmental crises in the region emphasizing the importance of planning efforts to direct towards the improvement of a standard of living and quality of life. Finally, the book goes on to discuss on the role of non-governmental organization in the economic development of Northeast India.

Pointing out the necessities of water management, ‘Zonal Planning in Water’, an article by D.C. Goswami, discusses about the water potential and its physiographic condition in the region. The same author’s in ‘Estimation of Bed-lock Transportation in the Brahmaputra River’ shows the factors leading to ecological degradation and vulnerability of the river system. C.V.J. Varma and A.R.G. Rao’s Aggradations in the Brahmaputra River in Assam, traces the changing eco system of the river bed and its catchment areas.

By keeping in mind that forestry is a sector for which environmental issues are central, T. Nongbri, in her Forest Policy in Northeast India reflects the status and management of forests in the region. Her main theses is that any policy to protect the forest of the region needs to pay greater attention to the socio-economic and cultural maladies affecting the tribal people whose means of living have been the forest products. P.S. Ramakrishnan’s Land Use Dynamics and Sustainable Development in Arunachal Pradesh, traces the way forest land is maintained and exploited within the tradition of the tribal community in the region.

It is also a known fact that land is major resource caught up in developmental projects. Moreover, land has now become a source of conflicts in the Northeast region where contesting claims of territoriarity are high in the political agenda of each ethnic community. Dwight H. Perkins and other’s Economics of Development is one of the voluminous works which can contribute in understanding the dynamics of land and land relations in the region. Mention can be made of another work entitled ‘Land Reforms and Challenges’ by Mukul Sharma who highlights the broader idea of land
reform programmes and its difficulties in India. In Ashis Kothari and N. Pathak’s *Sharing Benefits of Wildlife Conservation with Local Communities*, a comprehensive discussion is made to deal with forest lands and the response of the local people in the process of protection and conservation of forest resources.

In Northeast region, recently there are a series of studies on land that are seriously conducted focusing on socio-economic and political spheres of the region. Walter Fernandes and Melville Pereira’s work *Changing Land Relations in Northeastern India: A Comparative study of Six Tribes and One None-Tribal Community* is one of the recent works on land related issues of the region. The work discusses the nature of traditional land holding system and the trends of changing land relations among the different tribal communities of the region. Another work *Alienation of Tribal Land and Indebtedness* edited by B. N. Bordoloi highlights the various issues related to land among the different tribes and brings out the importance of tribal economy in strengthening the national economy. *Tribal Land System of Manipur* by P. Binodini Devi could be one of the key sources in understanding the dilemma of land in the region as well as the state of Manipur.

The complexity of the ethnic composition and the politics of ethnicity within these complexities has been a major constraint which has impeded the region’s developmental process in the past and at present. Keeping this phenomenon in mind, the meaning of ethnic identity and the process of identity formation through the politics of ethnicity have now become major issues of study on the region. Chandra Shekhar Bhat’s *Ethnicity and Mobility* can be a good analytical guide in this endeavour as it provides clarity on the meaning of ethnic identity and assesses the process of identity formation. In Urmila Phadnis’s *Ethnicity and Nation Building in South East Asia*, a criteria to mark off ethnic identity from other identities is formulated to help understand the complex interaction of social forces in South Asia. Anjali Kurane’s *Ethnic Identity and Social Mobility* is a work in this trend. She argues, since most of the identity formation is based on the self claimed uniqueness of the group, it is important to note how the other groups respond to such claims. In Ambro Pinto’s *Basic Conflict of ‘We’*
and 'They' between Social and Ethnic Groups', an extensive investigation is made to understand the nature of ethnic relations and the basic factors leading to the conflicts among different group identities. Paul Brass in *Ethnicity and Nationalism* essays the process and types of identity formation leading to the concept of nationalism. His main argument is that consciousness of group identity must possess some distinctive quality to claim for itself a distinct nationality. Similarly, M.E. Burgess in *The Resurgence of Ethnicity: Myth or Reality*, projects the notion of ethnicity as possessing the quality and character for motivating the power and recognition of group identity. Robert H. Jackson in his *Ethnicity in Analysis* discusses the factors leading to and forms of conflicts that have emerged out of contested claims.

As the nature and complexity of ethnic formation process is unique in the case of Northeast India and where the story of ethnic conflict is an imminent possibility, there are numerous investigations on the ethnic relations in the region. In Chandan Kr. Sharma's 'The Indian State and Ethnic Activism in Northeast India' an assessment is made of the process of ethnic upsurge in the region. His central argument is that the geo-political and cultural uniqueness and lack of socio-economic development of the region is the main cause for ethnic assertion in the region. Bhagat Oinam's 'Dynamics of Ethnic Conflicts in Manipur: Towards a Proposal for Solution' argues that due the process of politicization of tribal identity, the tribes with larger collective consciousness based on shared cultural and political life have now emerged as separate political identities in a new form of ethnic community.

In Manipur, a huge body of constructing the genealogy of ethnic formations thrives today. But most of such literature faces some or other form of criticism due to the lack of authenticity. Many theories have evolved in defining self identity of a group with little acceptance of the claims from other groups. Some of the noteworthy titles in this respect T.C. Hodson's *The Meitheis*, Abdul Ali's *Notes on early History of Manipur*, Chongtham Budhi Singh's 'Metei Ethnonym, Ch. Manihar Singh's 'The Meitei: Origin and Affinity', R.K.Jaljit Singh's *A Short History of Manipur*.
In fact, Manipur is today a tense state, a cauldron of ethnic clashes. The internal factors of such clashes can be observed through the works of Amrita Basu and Atul Kohli’s edited volume *Community Conflicts and the State in India*, B.B. Goswami’s *The Mizo Unrest*, U.A. Shimaray, ‘Ethnicity and Socio-Political Assertion’, W. Nabakumar’s ‘The Inter-Ethnic Relationship of the different Communities of Manipur: A Critical Appraisal’, Senjam Mangi Singh’s ‘The Kuki-Paite Clashes (1997-98) in Manipur: A Study’, etc, which have an extensive discussion on the dimensions of ethnic conflicts in the state. The impact of these conflicts is also reflected through the edited volume entitled as *Dimension of Displaced People in Northeast India* by C.J. Thomas and Tarapot Phnjoubam’s *Bleeding Manipur*.

With the increase in the number of hydel projects to hasten the pace of development of northeast India, environmental groups and academicians have intervened to highlight certain issues. The most comprehensive effort of this kind is a special volume of the Ecologist Asia which comprises 21 articles focusing on different issues emerging from different schemes of hydel projects in the region. Several articles in this issue describe the serious impact on the biodiversity and socio-economic condition of the people that these projects are likely to have. Some of the articles also focus on the viability of these projects, while some other discuss about the way the Environmental Impact Assessment is being conducted to get the clearance. Some of the articles in this issue raise some of concerns central to this study.

**Hypothesis:**

i. Large Dams which hold immense economic prospects for the Northeast region enjoy little popular legitimacy and have become issues of deep political contention.

ii. Large Dams are likely to redraw the political and ethnic map of Northeast India affecting ethnic identities and conflicts in a big way.

The study is based on the assumption that in tradition bound societies of Northeast India, the process of development will only be able to succeed with proper
involvement of people and their communities in the decision making process. The
process of development initiated by consciously designed programmes aligned to the
tribes and their social and economic milieu has led to problem of development being
impounded by the up coming elites among the tribes. The nature and roots of the
ongoing conflicts among the different communities have to be understood within the
mainstream developmental paradigm.

The lack of transparency and of democratic institutions allowing for an effective
social in Northeast India has been a cause to the limited intervention of public voice
during the project implementation processes in the past. But the rise of public concern
on the emerging issues of development have targeted large dams to a severe critique.
As participatory democracy increasingly asserts itself, transparency in the working
process will be a growing demand in the volatile public domain in the Northeast.

At the same time, due to the fragile ecological status of the region, 'proper'
investigation of its ecosystem and viability of large developmental projects in such a
region have to be issues of serious concern. A kind of environmentalism which is
suitable to this region of rich biodiversity with economically backward tribal belts has
to be foregrounded for a development strategy to take off in this region.

Similarly, without due benefit to the local people and proper rehabilitation of
project affected people, these projects are likely to create another social crisis in an
ethnically tense region of Northeast India. The lack of a fit on the claims over the
resources by each section of people in the region is in fact likely to retard the execution
of projects such as big dams.

Objectives:
First of all, the basic element to be investigated in this study is the role of natural
resources in the process of development as well as the nature of utilization and the
underlying relationship between the theoretical notion of development and the natural
ecosystem. The study also makes an attempt to reflect on the ways natural resources
could be harmoniously utilized within the natural ecosystem. It also underscores ways of exploitation of natural resources which cannot be reasonably defended today.

It probes into the nature of development process and issues closely bound up with it. Taking the developmental process of Manipur in view, it raises questions such as: have the development needs and objectives been formulated through an open and participatory process at local and regional levels? Has a comprehensive opinion regarding assessment for water and energy resource development been done? Have the social and environmental factors been given the same significance as techno-economic aspects in assessing options? Do the planners have a basin wide understanding of ecology of the rivers and the dependence of local communities on them? Other questions that follow from these are: how will these up coming projects upgrade the standard of living of the local people? Will the tectonically fragile area of the region be able to support such massive structures and the reservoirs they create? What will be the effects on the region’s rich biodiversity? As an extension to these questions, it is also imperative to inquire into the roles played by the planning agencies in the decision making process which claim to pursue the development in the northeast.

Given the socio-economic and political vulnerability of the region, the study will look into how these processes of development will cope up with these challenges. It is well known that the region experiencing is various forms of conflict often leading to ethnic clashes and different identity claims over natural resources like water, land, etc., are pitched endlessly.

Large dams, the most vulnerable developmental projects, due to their multiple adverse impacts on both humans and nature, are the main focus of this study for which an extensive analysis is undertaken of the processes underway in the Northeast.

Manipur is the most vulnerable state with its state of socio-economic and political turmoil marked by growing insurgent movements, ethnic conflicts among contested identities, underdevelopment, etc., which have been deeply affected by
multiple adverse impacts of dams. This study will explore issues revolving around
dams in the state.

Methodology:

This study involves revolves around multiple complexities of both existing and
emerging issues which have necessitated contextualizing various terminological
definitions related to the area of study. Defining these terms and phenomenon required
widespread survey of the relevant literature. The survey of literature has helped related
meanings of the terms intertwined in the study as well as to lay a theoretical foundation
for the arguments of the study. The method of literature survey is meant not only to
search the meaning and the theoretical understanding of the terms and definitions but
also to connect them meaningfully. Large Dams and their impact is the focal issue of
this study. There is an enormous literature on large dams. But, issues besetting large
dams are different from one place to another. In order to understand a specific dam
project, in a particular place or region, one has to extensively investigate multiple issues
revolving around it. Any study on large dams is an attempt to assess its adverse impact
on natural environment as well as its benefits to the people. Keeping in mind the fact
that construction of dam itself is a way of resource exploitation, the study through its
relevant literature brings out the complexities in such a process.

Northeast India has been the theatre of this study. Keeping the socio-economic
and political complexities of the region in mind, the study has attempted to gather and
analyse the literature on existing complex issues. The question of resource sharing
among different communities with distinct identities has called for a critical
investigation on the issue of underdevelopment, territorial claims, ethnicity, etc. within
the parameter of development. Although there is a lack of extensive literature on large
dams in this region, the ongoing debate between pro-dam and anti-dam groups has
generated useful information for this study. The study also incorporates information
provided in governmental documents like annual statistical reports, census reports and
that projected in the media on a regular basis.
The study is also based on information collected during the field visits conducted for three months from March to May 2006 during which time, most of the dam construction sites like Tipaimukh, Mapithel, Khuga, and Loktak Project were covered and related information on these projects was gathered. Besides personal observation, interactions with local peoples were immense useful for the study. Participation in a public rally in Imphal on 3 April 2006 and a public meeting in Tamenglong against the construction of proposed Tipaimukh dam on 23 April 2006 provided vivid glimpses of the public opposition as well as the campaign against the dam in the state. The documents circulated by the organizations who organized such protests have been important inputs in this study.

Similarly, frequent interactions with Loktak project affected villagers who are still fighting for compensation for loss of their land has provided sufficient information on how their livelihood has changed due to the project. Most of the legal documents incorporated in the study are provided by their committee called Committee on Loktak Project Affected Areas, under whose banner a legal battle has been fought for more that 15 years in the Gauhati High Court.

A three day visit to Mapithel dam sites and meeting with project affected villagers has provided me with a glimpse of the way villagers are treated by the project authority with their promise to provide compensation. At the same time, the influx of migrant labourers at the project site was visible everywhere.

During these field visits, there were a series of seminars, conferences and discussions on the issue of Tipaimukh dam in the Barak basin and they have been a major resource for study. At the same time, the media has played an important role in bringing the Tipaimukh dam issue into public domain. The field visit provided an opportunity to collect information as well as to observe the emerging politics of the Tipaimukh issue.
During the field visit, relevant documents were collected from the governmental offices as well as non-governmental organizations like, CORE, FIPA, CCDD, etc. which helped in making the study inclusive.

Chapterization:

The first chapter of the study highlights the importance and role of natural resources in the process of economic development. It assesses the type of politics involved in exploiting and regulating these natural resources and its impact on the viability of a society that claims such resources. It discusses the types of governance which is required to manage the natural resources in a desirable manner. It reflects on the nature of conflicts that have emerged due to dominant mode of resource exploitation and their utilization. It makes the case for a development path that is sensitive to the cultural ethos of people living in the environment.

This chapter focuses on water as resource on the earth’s surface and value of water in the growth of any civilization. It also reflects on the sources of water potential in India and their role in the growth of country’s economy. The chapter also discusses the kind of politics involved in sharing water resources among the riparian countries of a river bed. As India’s river courses are shared with its neighboring countries in both upstream and downstream regions, an extensive discussion has also been made highlighting India’s approach in sharing the water of these river courses.

Of late, the water potential in India’s northeast region has been accorded top priority for developmental purposes. The region with its high precipitation coupled with mountainous terrains of heavy rainfall has now become a watch-point for planners to develop a kind of technology to tap the water for the economic growth. The concluding part of the first chapter therefore discusses the water potential and physiographical status of the Brahmaputra river system of the region.

Emphasizing the term ‘development’ as a key concept in this study, the second chapter begins with a theoretical discussion on the notion of development and the...
ongoing debates surrounding it. This section tries to formulate an argument on the model of development which is desirable for sustaining the economy of a society on a long term basis. This argument projects a kind of development where well being is central.

In fact, the entire study is based on issues related to large dams. Therefore, this chapter also deals with the evolution and logic of the development of large dams in the past and the present and their prospects in the future. The adverse impacts they have had on the human and the natural milieu are the central themes of the chapter. The chapter also highlights the working pattern of internationally accepted rules and regulations concerning large dams and the politics involved in carrying out the criteria.

In the third chapter, the characteristics of the state of Manipur which is the most vulnerable state of the region are highlighted. It discusses the roles that dams have traditionally played in the growth of the state’s economy and the kind of impact they have had on the ecosystem of the state. The issue of concern in this chapter is the changing scenarios of water body which are the source of livelihood for a large section of the population of the state. The chapter argues that adverse impacts on the ecosystem of the water body have led to various forms of socio-economic and cultural maladies among the project affected people of the state. The chapter also highlights the importance of the water body in sustaining the living standard of the communities settled around the water system.

Further, the chapter looks into the case of upcoming large hydroelectric power projects in the state and the process in which such projects are formulated by the planners. It traces adverse impacts on the human and natural ecosystem which have led to popular resistance against these projects.

By emphasizing land as an important resource for development prospects as well as a major source of conflicts in the state, Chapter four focuses on the land related issues of the state and demonstrates the bearing that large hydro-electric power projects
have had on the state of Manipur. The chapter argues that proper utilization and control of land is indispensable for living in harmonious and prosperous manner in this region. The chapter also throws the light on an appropriate land holding system which can enhance the growth of agricultural productivity of the state.

In this context, it investigates the shortcoming of the existing laws and regulations related to land belonging to the tribal societies of the hill areas as well as the valley. It brings out the complexity of the traditional land holding system prevailing in the hill areas of the state at present. It argues the case for an integrated law on land for both the hill and the valley and the difficulties of pursuing the same in the hill districts of the state. The final chapter makes a theoretical detour on the making of ethnicity and the process of identity formation in which in Manipur form the foundation for different claims over the natural resources of the state.

As ethnic conflicts become a fact in the state, the chapter also discusses reasons and factors leading to such conflicts which have contributed to the breaking down of socio-economic and cultural relations among the ethnic groups of the state. The chapter highlights the bearing that large dams have had in fomenting and containing ethnic conflicts in the state.