

Movement For Rainforest Conservation In The North-East India During 1990s – 2000s: ‘New Social’ Activism Of Nature’s Beckon In Assam

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Abstract: The ecological crisis in the developing countries like India has its own unique features, as unlike the developed nation-states of the West, in case of the former, the process of development and economic growth is essentially connected with the goal and the process of ‘nation-building’, which has still not been accomplished to its fullest. Nature’s Beckon, an activist group representing North-Eastern India has been doing some tremendous jobs in the arena of environmental concerns of the region from the 1980s till date. In the last two decades (1990s-2000s), the issue of rainforest conservation in Upper Assam was central to its agenda and policy framework. The connected forest areas of Upper Assam constitute the most isolated, unspoiled and dense tropical rainforests in India.

Key words: Ecological crisis, Developing countries, Nation-states, Nation-building, Nature’s Beckon, Rainforest conservation, Upper Assam.

1. INTRODUCTION:

“To many outsiders, Assam is no more than a land of mountains and malaria, earthquakes and floods and the Kamakhya Temple. To others it is a green woodland where slothful serpents, insidious tigers, wild elephants and stealthy leopards peep and peer with virulent eyes and claws. Assam to most of the people is mentally a distant horizon like Bolivia or Peru – less known and more fancied.”- this statement penned by Hem Barua in the introductory part his famous work *The Red River and the Blue Hill* (1954) perhaps is not an exaggeration, though it was written only a few years after national independence, and the green woodland has undergone drastic changes down through the following decades. The State of Assam is located in the eastern most part of India between 24°.07' N to 28°.00' N Latitude and 89°.42' E to 96°.02' E Longitude and has a geographical area of 78,438 sq. km. The recorded forest area of Assam, according to the Forest Report of 2011, is 26,832 sq km accounting for 34.21% of its geographical area. According to their legal status, Reserved Forests constitute 66.58% and Unclassified forests 33.42% of the total forest area of the state. Whereas at national level, around 53% of the forest area fell under the first category, and about 18% constitute the latter category. By the end of the last century, large swathes of forest areas in Upper Assam have been converted to anthropocentric land-use forms. Besides, several pockets of the forest areas in the region have been severely degraded. Under such circumstances, several activists and NGOs have been doing crucial works to conserve the ancient cover of Rainforests in the region. Among these organizations, the Nature’s Beckon has been a pioneering one, being active in addressing the ecological concerns of the North-eastern region since its inception in 1982. It was by Soumyadeep Datta, an Ashoka Fellow and got registered under the Registrar of Societies Act, India in 1991 with its head office being located at Dhubri, Assam. In 1988, for the first time in the environmental history of Assam, Nature’s Beckon organized a state-wide ecological consciousness building programme namely the Brahmaputra Barak Valley Natural Environmental Awareness Campaign. The organization is deeply involved in conserving the wildlife as well as their habitats in the sanctuaries, national parks and other forests areas of

Northeast India. Its catalytic role in the late 1980s and early 1990s, influenced the government to declare Chakrashila Reserved Forest (recognized in 1966) as the Chakrashila Wildlife Sanctuary (1994), making it a major story of achievement in the conservationist movement of Assam. Thereafter, the activists of the organization came up with another demand for the protection of contiguous rainforests in the Upper Brahmaputra valley concentrated in the easternmost districts of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia. The Nature’s Beckon has been raising its voice against the expansion of state-sponsored developmental activities in and around the rainforest areas, as well as against the prevailing nexus between the competent authority and the anti-social interest groups. In this movement, the organization has been experiencing a variety of responses from the state machinery ranging from scepticism to apathy, and partial response. However, before assessing the various aspects of the movement, it is necessary to understand both the ecological and anthropocentric importance of the rainforests.

2. GLOBAL SIGNIFICANCE OF RAINFORESTS:

A Rainforest can be described as a tall, dense jungle. The reason it is called a ‘rain’ forest is because of the high amount of rainfall it receives per year. The climate of a rain forest is very hot and humid. The animals and plants that exist there must learn to adapt to this climate. These incredible places cover only 6% of the Earth’s surface but yet they contain more than half of the world’s flora and fauna. Tropical rainforests are regarded as the “jewels of the Earth”. There may be many millions of species of flora and fauna still undiscovered in the rainforests across the globe. Rainforests are known as ‘world’s largest pharmacy’, as they reportedly contain over one quarter of natural medicines. Besides, they are responsible for 28% of the global oxygen turnover. The rainforests provide timber and animal products. Throughout the 20th century the area covered by rainforests was shrinking around the globe and still the process of deforestation is drastically going on in different regions. These forests areas have been subjected to heavy legal and illegal logging and agricultural clearance. The rainforests deposit precious metals and fossil fuel (oil and natural gas). These resources are vital for the

developing countries of the world to promote economic growth, which has been one of the inalienable aspects of nation building. Several tribes or indigenous groups belonging to Central America, Central Africa and South-East Asia have been traditionally dependent on the food resources of rainforests.

a. NATURE'S BECKON'S 'NEW SOCIAL' OUTLOOK:

The environmental movements in India have been occupying a significant portion in the history of New Social Movements (NSMs) in India. Environmental movement may be defined as a type of "social movement that involves an array of individuals, groups and coalitions that perceive a common interest in environmental protection and act to bring about changes in environmental policies and practices" (Tong, 2005, pp. 167-168). Till the early 1980s, the notion of 'collective action' in the context of Indian social movements had largely been interpreted and understood in terms of Marxian socio-political ideology. The perspectives of a large number of academicians and activists within and outside India were grappled with Marxist assertion, and they maintained that the historical responsibility of bringing about radical social transformation across the world would be shouldered by the organized movements of workers and peasants (Baviskar, 2010, p. 382). However, several intra and inter-national events across the globe from the mid-1960s onwards, the gradual decline of the East European Socialist regimes, and their eventual collapse in the late 1980s jolted the very foundation of the conventional Marxist thought on social transformation and progress. Those turbulent decades witnessed the emergence of a series of social movements which have been multi-stranded and interconnected in nature. Students' movement in USA and Germany in the late 1960s against the Vietnam War, and the students' increasing involvement in the Civil Rights movement and the Second Wave of the Feminism sparked off a series of new waves in the domain of social movements which would result in a gross epistemological transformation in theorizing social movement. This transformation was further accelerated by the movements for nuclear disarmament in the Western world and growing environmental concerns on pollution and ecological degradation. The inception of Green politics in the early 1970s and the growing popularity of Green political parties in Europe in the following decades, based on the principles of environmentalism, social justice and non-violence, can be dubbed as the by-product of anti-nuclear movement to a considerable extent. NSMs in both the developed and developing countries share certain commonalities at least in terms of their ideological stand and innovative thrusts, which is more apparent in terms of the growing concerns across the globe. The concerns of the NSMs correspond to the notion of 'communitarianism' in the sense that they tend to reclaim a typically rational condition of livelihood in the world that had been diluted by the philosophy and practice of modernism, and simultaneously they correspond to the idea of 'cosmopolitanism', for these movements are universalist on the ground that their politics permeates the conventional class struggle and the problem of resource allocation and distribution. NSMs, therefore, in view of Habermas, are united in a 'critique of growth' (Habermas, 1981, p. 34). These movements can be defined as the by-products of post-industrial social and state apparatus where

the public welfare mechanisms of the modern nation-states have made the classic forms of deprivation and exploitation a myth, but generated certain new forms of alienation which are essentially connected with the models of 'economic development' and 'nation-building' adopted by the states. Pramod Parajuli, while analyzing the genesis of NSMs in India, argues that "The political significance of these struggles is that they challenge the notion of the integrationist and developmentalist Indian state" (Sharma, 2014, p. 243). Arturo Escobar, a renowned post-'development' thinker has asserted that 'development' is a discourse, that relies exclusively on the modern Western 'knowledge system', and its uncritical adoption by the so called Third World countries is leading to the disqualification, marginalization and extinction of the non-Western or indigenous knowledge systems (Sharma, 2014, p. 243). In a vast multi-ethnic and multi-racial developing country like India, the notion of 'indigenous knowledge' often corresponds to the 'life-world' of the relatively marginalized indigenous groups, which are generally labelled as 'tribal' people. The Environmental movements in India incorporate the hitherto lesser represented groups like the marginalised rural communities, Adivasis and women. While forcing the governments to introduce affirmative policies in the forms of new provisions and laws, the participants of these movements have largely appeared to be non-violent in their means to secure the goal of sustainability. These characteristics and dimensions of the NSMs are being manifested in the various missions and activities of Nature's Beckon. The Mission statement of the activist group states that "The mission of Nature's Beckon is working with the people to conserve, protect and increase wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the people." In the above mentioned statement, the concluding part – 'continuing benefit of the people' may be dubbed as 'anthropocentric' by the 'Deep Green' thinkers or the radical ecologists, who emphasis on realising the 'intrinsic' values embedded in nature. However, one must not forget that it is the character of 'interconnectedness' and 'interdependence' that makes a collective action a 'New Social Movement' in true sense, in line with the prevalent theoretical discourses on NSMs.

Key differences between dominant attitude to the environment and those of deep ecology:

Dominant attitude	Deep ecology
Domination over nature	Harmony with nature
Nature a resource, intrinsic value confined to human	Natural environment valued for bio-centric egalitarianism
Ample Resources or substitutes	Earth supplies limited
Material economic growth a predominant goal	Non-material goals, especially self-realisation
Consumerism	Doing with enough/recycling
Competitive lifestyle	Co-operative life-way
Centralised/urban-centred national focus	Decentralised/bioregional/neighbourhood focus
Power Structure hierarchical	Non-hierarchical/grassroots democracy
High technology	Appropriate technology

Source: Doyle & McEachern (2008).

It is worth mentioning that the relentless efforts and activism of this activist group forced the state government to declare a portion of the reserved rainforest areas of the Joypur, Upper Dihing River and Dirok regions on June 13, 2004 as Dihing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary across the boundaries of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts, occupying an area of 111.19 sq km. This achievement of the group involved almost a decade long struggle (1995 - 2004) of the activists associated with it. However, the group considered this achievement only as the partial fulfilment of its objectives and claims that the connected rainforests area of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia district are occupying around 800 sq km, which constitute the only surviving largest 'inseparable' forest areas of the of the Brahmaputra valley (Datta, 2012, pp. 110-111). In the mid-1990s, Nature's Beckon informed several international environmentalist groups about the rich biodiversity of this area and the urgent need for the conservation of its green cover. Today, the group takes part in the Asian Waterfowl Census, South Asia, which works under International Waterfowl and Wetland Research Bureau (IWRB). From a typical 'Cosmopolitan' point of view one may argue that the activists of these organizations are "acting globally so that" the indigenous groups and species may "live locally" (Eckersley, 2006, p. 104). The movement initiated by this group is essentially "New Social" in terms of Soumyadeep Datta's claim that – the group for the first in the history of social movements in Assam introduced the concept of 'rainforest conservation'. The group organized the first ever movement for the conservation of rainforests as well as for giving permanent protection to these forests in North-East. Reportedly prior to their initiatives, the people of Assam were never informed by any governmental (including departments of Forest and Tourism) or non-governmental agencies that these connected forest areas of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia district contained every essential feature to be regarded as 'rainforest' (Datta, 2012, pp. 74-75). Apart from emphasising on the global cooperation and communication in the drive for forest and bio-diversity conservation, Nature's Beckon maintains that the 'Traditional knowledge' of the indigenous communities has to play a crucial role in conservation of forests and biodiversity. Traditional knowledge of the indigenous groups and the forest dwellers has been generated by the experiences of thousands of years that are being transferred by one generation to the other. This consideration of the group corresponds to the 'Communitarian' perspective on environmentalism which upholds that a local community's intimate psychological attachment to, and the deep knowledge of, its habitat can transmute into a motivational force behind the effort. Communitarians' emphasis on 'bioregion' suits the idea of 'eco-communitarianism', which promotes the idea of living sustainably within a particular bioregion on the basis of the local intimate knowledge. Robyn Eckersley citing the example of the 'national parks' opines that the eco-system of a region can be regarded as a part of the national community, and on the auspicious of this 'eco-nationalism' the indigenous fauna and flora would be glorified (Eckersley, 2006, p. 98). In this connection, it is worth mentioning that the ethnic Morans concentrated in Tinsukia district traditionally consider 'Hollong' (*Dipterocarpus macrocarpus*) trees of their neighboring rainforests as a 'sacred tree' for the Moran society. Hollong is today the

State / National Tree of Assam, and is generally found in Upper Assam, comprising the forest divisions of Dibrugarh, Doomdooma and Digboi. Interestingly the famous Moamaria Rebellion of the 18th Century Assam started in the form of a protest against the state act of felling down trees in the jungles. Assamese chronicles have recorded that the Morans raised the banner of revolt against the Ahom government's order to cut down large trees in the forests of Namrup, then an isolated territory inhabited by the Morans. The woods that would be acquired from those trees were supposed to be used in making dhak or drums by the authority. It was a protest movement by the indigenous Morans against the extraction of natural resources by the Ahom Government in their areas, as the former had begun to label the latter as an alien power or intruder. Even in this 21st Century, the ethnic Morans concentrated in Tinsukia district are often labelled as Habitolia (people from jungles) section of the Matakas, whereas the rest of the Matakas are known as Mokolial (people from open areas). Though it would be anachronistic to label this historical incident as the signifier of a classic form of 'eco-nationalism' to preserve rainforest; no one can deny its symbolic importance, and the incident may be recognized as a crude form of 'eco-ethno-nationalism', which became a means to express their disloyalty to the state. The 'Rainforest Conservation and Livelihood Support Programmes', 'Conservation and Awareness Drive for Five Big Mammals (Elephant, Tiger, Gaur, Water Buffalo and Rhino)' and several other ecological missions undertaken by the Nature's Beckon during 1996-97 reflect communitarian insights to a considerable extent. The group largely emphasises on the role of indigenous groups and local village communities in preserving the forest areas – 'The Tribal people live there – where the Jungles exist, and the jungles exist there – where the tribal people live' (Datta, 2012, p. 215). If the age-old relations between the 'tribes' and the 'jungles' cease to exist, it will result in the dilution of both the 'tribal identity/existence' and the jungles' 'perpetual power of natural production' (Datta, 2012). The contiguous rainforest areas of the present-day Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts have been historically connected with the habitats of a number of indigenous ethnic communities with their rich socio-cultural heritage. Some of these groups are the Ahoms, the Morans, the Tai Phakes, the Khamyangs, the Khamptis, the Singphos and the Noctes. The organization has taken several steps to create awareness about the importance of the rainforests and for the socio-economic development of the indigenous people. They have been organizing village meetings, workshops, capacity building programmes for the local youths, women's training for sustainable livelihood, joyful learning for children, field training for identifying wildlife and their habitats. Moreover, they organize poster campaigns, nature camps and distribute pamphlets during the photographic exhibitions. Besides, they train the village youths for resource management and infrastructure building.

b. ANALYSIS:

Civil society has emerged as one of the most celebrated political concepts of the 20th and the 21st Centuries. Currently the desired idea and role of civil society closely corresponds to the expected role of 'intermediate voluntary associations' as put forward by Alexis de Tocqueville.

Tocqueville opines that a vigorous system of voluntary organizations or groups can act as counterweights to the state power (Gaubas, 2013). They can publicise and crystallise opinions that may go unheard otherwise. There is, however, no universal agreement about the proper location of the 'sources' of civil society, which actually can and ought to restrain and moderate the state (Khilnani, 2002, p. 13). In this context, two groups of scholars are upholding two mutually contradictory positions – the 'liberals' maintain that the effective powers of civil society basically reside in economy (in property rights and markets), where such rights may be enhanced and freely exchanged; the 'radicals' on the other hand, trace the roots of civil society in a societal apparatus that is independent of the state and economy, where associations are freely formed, ideas freely exchanged and interests discovered. Foley and Edwards put forth the opinion that "there are two versions of civil society – civil society is dependent in democratic states and asserts independence under authoritarian states – and therefore they operate in two neatly distinct contexts" (Gudavarthy, 2013, p. 9). Ajay Godavarthy on the other hand, argues that in the context of Indian democracy both versions of the civil society work in parallel. In fact, in case of the modern states, the democratic and authoritarian aspects are not mutually exclusive, because the state allow for representative democracy to function only with the backing of certain kind of authoritarian coercive powers, while the authoritarian use of state powers is legitimised by the representative democracy via law and court. Now if we consider Nature's Beckon as a 'green' civil society, the emerging question in connection to the state-civil society relations would be "whether the group is pursuing its ecological objectives 'within' the apparatus of state, or its actions are 'anti-state'?" If one observes thoroughly and critically the actions and endeavours of the organization, it can be realised that the group upholds these two seemingly opposite perspectives in parallel. When Nature's Beckon in the late 1990s raised demand for converting the connected 'reserved forest' areas (Joypur, Upper Dihing and Dirak rainforests) of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts to a 'wildlife sanctuary', to justify their proposal, the group asserted that as these forest areas are contiguous with the forest covers of Arunachal Pradesh, if the government recognised the area as a 'sanctuary', it would help resolve the boundary dispute between Assam and Arunachal in that area. It is the juncture where the political affairs of the state get embedded with ecological concerns, which may become mutually conducive in the long run. In fact, among all the hitherto institutions created by human knowledge and imaginations, state has been primary centre of all political ideas and imaginations. The ecological optimists maintain that the success of several ecological movements is not sole outcome of their individual efforts – rather they derive it from 'the extent to which they tie states into a continuing and institutionalised process of negotiation'; whereas the ecological pessimists uphold that the overestimation of human/state capacity to control the natural environment tends to overshadow the existing unpredictability, non-linearity and complexity in state-ecology relations (Hurrell, 2006, pp. 174-175). In this context, Nature's Beckon however, appears to have been successful in upholding a balanced and desirable position as an 'intermediate

voluntary platform' between the state politics and the ecological concerns. The group has been organising a series of meetings and discussions with the ministers concerned and the other representatives of the government to make them aware about its organisational objectives, and to make the state more considerate about the ecological concerns associated with the rainforest. In turn, those activities have increased the group's influence and popularity among the masses as a reliable, active and dedicated green activists' platform, which makes their demand more strong and relevant before the competent government authority. This positive outcome of the state-civil society interactions corresponds to the views of the ecological optimists, who believe in the effectiveness of a dialogical approach between the ecological activism of the civil societies and the states' drives towards development at ecological cost. It is interesting to note here that Nature's Beckon itself introduces it as a 'pressure group' and that it exerts pressure upon the government to make the latter more considerate about and responsive towards the ecological concerns. A part of its organisational statement goes as follows- "Nature's Beckon takes active part in advocacy and lobbying for the protection and conservation of wildlife and their habitats. Nature's Beckon tenaciously persuades the state government to fulfill the rights of the forest villagers and provide them with all the facilities as per the sanctions of forest laws. Nature's Beckon remains ever vigilant to prevent corruptions of the corrupt forest officials by exposing such corruptions through news media and creating public opinion against the corruption." However, there are certain activities and policies being pursued by Nature's Beckon, which may be labelled as 'anti-state' at least from a bird's-eye view. The organization draws our attention to the "ontological irony" created by the nomenclature "Reserved Forests", which came into existence during the colonial practice of commoditisation and exploitation of natural resources. This categorization leads to the creation of a wrong perception among a large number of people, especially in Assamese that the reserved forests are those forests which are being 'reserved/protected' (Sangrakshita in Assamese) by the state. But in this context, the term 'reserved' in real sense means 'reserved for revenue', i. e, the reserved forests are the "most unreserved forests" in practice (Datta, 2012, p. 217). On the other hand, the indigenous people have no right over these forest areas. The reserved forests are like the 'estates' of the Forest Department, as the latter can conduct the process of leasing the soil, woods, sand and other resources of the forests to the public and private entrepreneurs, it can permit open digging in the forest lands and so on. The Forest department was created by the colonisers to exploit the natural resources, which was aimed at implementing their capitalist designs. Thus, the department from its inception has been learning the culture of earning money at the cost of the forest covers, and it has become a 'Trained machine' in that respect (Datta, 2012, p. 118). Interestingly the group holds responsible 'the lack of minimal nationalist feelings' among some high ranking officials of the Forest Department for their apathy towards the conservation of rainforests (Datta, 2012, p. 118). Therefore, although Nature's beckon has always been raising its concerns and voice against the unjust involvement of the state in the forest management it does

not uphold a vague 'anti-state' outlook, and the green activists associated with the group have appeared to be keenly interested in pursuing their ecological activism in collaboration with state. Corbridge and Harriss maintain that "it is misleading to assume that people are always empowered in opposition to the state, or they fail to seek power from within state structures" (Gudavarthy, 2013, p. 247). They press on the continued relevance of state and the democratic apparatus to make the voice of the subaltern better heard, making their image more visible in the broader political context. In this respect, the devoted green civil societies like Nature's Beckon have to do a lot of novel duties to address the various internal challenges associated with the task of forest conservation. They can pressurise and pursue the government for bringing about democratic reforms within the government organisation entrusted with protecting and preserving the forest areas. Nature's Beckon indeed had to come across certain bitter experiences with the authorised agencies of the state. When the representatives of the group visited Govinda Chandra Langthasa, the then Forest Minister of Assam in 2001, seeking his consent to their demand for recognising the concerned reserved forests as 'sanctuary', the minister reportedly replied that "I just cannot help you by any means, as my hands are chained by the order of the Supreme Court. I cannot give permit to anyone, even if I wish to do so. I know that there are a lot of coals in Jaipur, but the Court does not permit us to cut trees, dig coals or to do anything else" (Datta, 2012, p.155). Soumydeep Datta believes that mistakenly the Forest Minister treated him as a 'broker' of the illegal coal-mining business (Datta, 2012, p. 156). He asserts that it is a matter of regret for the state of Assam that such a person was looking after the forest department of the state, who could not even think of the intrinsic values and other aspects of the rainforest, except logging and coal-mining. The study highlights the prevailing dichotomy between the role of the executive and the judiciary regarding the way the state ought to pursue in managing the reserved forest areas – as if in view of the forest department, the Supreme Court has become the major obstacle in the path of pursuing economic wellbeing on the basis of forest resources. However, the fact is that the verdict of the Apex Court considerably reduced the opportunities of a section of forest officers and the interest groups having nexus with the former, to exploit the resources of the rainforests for their individual benefit. For instance, until 1996, when the Supreme Court slapped an order on tree felling in north-eastern India, the plywood industry had heavily exploited the lowland rainforests of Upper Assam. The levels of ecological concerns grew throughout the 1970s and 1980s and the activists struggled to incorporate environmental issues into the policy agenda. However, several governments and significant groups have refused to recognise that ecological degradation ought to be treated seriously. Further, they have resisted efforts of green non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to put environmental concerns on to the political agenda. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan, the then President of the United States of America tried to undermine the environmental concerns in the name of pro-market reform. In the first decade of the 21st Century, George W. Bush (Junior) adopted a far more pro-business approach. However, by 2006, with the oil price soaring, this president went on to

admit that USA needed to 'break its addiction to oil' (Doyle & McEachern, 2008, pp. 50-51). In the case of the developing countries too one can observe the growing schism between the developmental policies of the governments and that of the green NGOs because most of these countries of the so called Third World have adopted the Western model of modernisation and industrialisation as a means to accomplish their goal of economic growth and nation-building. Nature's Beckon had to face several conspiracies against its ecological activism. Those conspiracies were designed by some high ranking officials of the forest department, stakeholders of some entrepreneurs, and even by the members of some green NGOs, whose over-ground behaviour appeared to be eco-friendly, but below the surface they were being motivated by profit-making attitude. The relentless struggle of the group for rainforest conservation posed a formidable threat against the nexus of those anti-ecological forces. In 2003, a foreign company namely Premier Oil was illegally permitted by the forest department to explore oil in the interior of the rainforests. Reportedly the Company had a project of 1,000 million rupees, and to implement the project the company offered the forest department more than 3.5 million rupees (Datta, 2012, pp. 342-343). When Nature's Beckon raised its voice against this agreement, some officials of the company unsuccessfully tried to bribe the activist group. On the other hand, the company talked about introducing several eco-development projects in the nearby tribal villages. However, the neo-colonial designs of the company did not remain unnoticed by Nature's Beckon, and the latter labelled the activities of the company as the beginning of a process that would convert the sons of the soil into slaves. In this move, the activism of the group was morally supported by some journalists and writers associated with the newspapers and periodicals like Amar Asom, Assam Tribune, Hadin, Prantik and Satsori, and by some academicians across the world, who with their writings, tried to boost the morale of the movement. Moreover, the All India Radio (Dibrugarh) and the mouthpieces of several schools and colleges played a remarkable role in popularising the movement of Nature's Beckon. Thus, a border network of civil societies emerged to shape the green activism of the group as a 'mass-movement'. It is interesting to note that in the meantime, United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), an outlawed insurgent organisation of Assam, extended its support to the ongoing rainforest conservation movement through its mouthpiece Freedom. It is worth mentioning that when in the late 1980s and early 1990s, ULFA established its camps in the Saraipung Range of the reserved Upper Dihing Rainforest; the outfit severely punished some black-marketers, which resulted in the decrease of deforestation in the area for a short period. Now, some high ranking officials of the Premier Oil, especially its Country Manager Rob Marshall decided to use this statement of ULFA as a pretext to defame Nature's Beckon and its pioneer Soumydeep Datta. They tried to dub the activist group as an anti-state outfit, and even went on to raise demand at the Guwahati Press Club for arresting Datta by accusing him of being a link-man of ULFA. However, they were countered by some local journalists and intellectuals who were in favour of the green activism of Nature's Beckon. Besides, some officials of the forest department too organised press meets to defame the

activities of the group, but without any success. Subsequently, the multinational company became bound to stop their digging and deforestation activities in Upper Dihing. The relentless efforts and dedication of Nature's Beckon finally bore fruit, and in 2004, the Dihing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary was created by the state of Assam, which today covers a portion of the contiguous rainforests areas of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts. However, this partial inclusion of the rainforest areas into the sanctuary could not satisfy the activist group thoroughly. The organization has been raising demand for recognising the Poba Reserved Forest of Dhemaji District as a sanctuary, which is an important 'elephant corridor', linking the Dibru-Saikhowa National Park and the foot hills of Arunachal Pradesh via the proposed Kobu Chapori Reserved Forest. The peripheral area of this rainforest is inhabited by several ethnic groups like Mising, Sonowal Kachari, Bodo and Hajong (Rabha), many of whom are economically marginalised, and are traditionally dependent on the forests for a considerable part of the means their livelihood. Poba forest is under serious threats from natural calamities particularly erosion by the Siang river, and illegal anthropocentric activities like poaching. The 70th Session of Assam Sahitya Sabha held at Dhemaji in February, 2009 under the Presidentship of Rongbong Terang, urged the government to convert the Poba Rainforest into a 'sanctuary' to preserve its rich bio-diversity. The quest for preserving bio-diversity is inherently associated with the concept of Sustainable Development, which was initially hinted at the Stockholm Conference (1972) and clarified at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, with the publication of Agenda21. The concept is based on the claim that the survival of sustainable environments is linked to the scope for sustainable economic growth. However, sustainable development cannot be recognised as a radical green concept because it accepts the prime need for economic growth. The activities of Nature's Beckon can be viewed in the light of ecological post-modernism. The environmental movements of the world have always been including the individuals who have rejected the state-sponsored project of modernity. They see deforestation and environmental damage as an outcome of modernisation and industrialisation. The Eurocentric notion of modernity and technology is seen to have produced as many problems as it has solved. Post-modernists tend to prioritise the importance of locality and difference as against centralisation and homogenised sameness. In recent decades, industrialism has become more global and thus the Enlightenment project continues. Increased economic growth is still the focal point of the project of nation-building, but it has been accepted by most of the national governments that improvements in environmental efficiency and management is the urgent need of the hour. Nevertheless, the green activism of Nature's Beckon still has miles to go to create a broader network of civil societies for addressing the emerging ecological challenges, and in this move the group has to work in conscientious collaboration with the state.

c. CONCLUSION:

"Once upon a time there were 'sacred forests' in entire North-Eastern India. In our region, those areas were known as 'Mair Than' (shrine of mother). It was an unforgivable

crime to fell down trees from those forests. Thus, those forests were preserved by the folk-belief, and consequently the bio-diversity of those regions was conserved naturally." The statement mentioned above was made by Kulendu Pathak, a prominent academician of Assam, who was closely associated with the environmental activism of Nature's Beckon. The statement highlights the crucial role once played by the traditional knowledge system of the indigenous communities and the tribes of Assam. After the advent of colonialism, the traditional knowledge system was considerably overpowered by the hegemonic Western system of knowledge, which has become popular as 'modern knowledge'. This new sort of knowledge promotes consumerism and commercialisation of the natural resources by denying the intrinsic values embedded in the latter. Moreover, the state-controlled process of development driven by the Western model modernity presses on homogenisation, and it often appears to be indifferent towards the tribes or the indigenous groups which have been living in close socio-cultural connection with the adjacent forest areas since time immemorial. Nature's Beckon as a green civil society has made a dedicated effort to revitalise those traditional relations between community and jungle around the rainforest areas. Besides, as the pioneer of a New Social Movement in Assam, the group emphasised on including a variety of groups and coalitions including the relatively marginalised categories like the tribes and the women. Though some activities of the group have appeared to go against the development-centric goals of the state, it has always been working in compliance with the legal-constitutional norms and frameworks of the state. The group maintains that the state apparatus can be made more capable of mitigating environmental challenges by bringing about certain internal reforms. The activists of group emphasis on improving the working conditions of the grass-root level workers of the forest department who are dedicating their days and nights in serving the forests, but are being ignored by the higher authority. There are several instances, where the group has voluntarily provided some essential materials or stuffs to the forest workers that are necessary to work in the environment of rainforests. Promoting internal democracy within the department is crucial to make it collectively more responsible and dedicated towards its duties. Escobar goes on to argue that "social movements in the global South do not articulate 'development alternatives' so much as 'alternatives to development, that is the rejection of the entire paradigm altogether'" (Sharma, 2014, p. 243). However, in the case of the activism of Nature's Beckon this logic does not appear to be suitable, as it has always been emphasising on generating a 'sustainable' mode of development, placing some counterweight to the exclusive and anti-ecological developmental activism of the state and non-state agencies. It is the emerging global concern that the states ought to be more considerate about the ecological issues to ensure a better tomorrow for the future generations. It may be argued that the ideologies and the principles followed by Nature's Beckon in their struggle for rainforest conservation considerably correspond to both the Crusading Gandhian and the Appropriate Technologist trends of the environmental activism in India, the former being reflected in the assertion of the group that the broader acceptance of Western materialist ideology and

consumerism makes the people of the Eastern world morally indifferent towards ecological degradation; and the latter being portrayed in the various programmes organised by the group aimed at capacity building and promoting sustainable livelihood among the indigenous groups.

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