

## Chapter – 4

### Development and Environment- Critiques of Development

Eminent Assamese film maker and director Jahnu Baruah in his award winning film *Xagaroloi Bahudur* portrays the story of a development project in a village of Assam. The film narrates the story of an old boatman who used to earn his livelihood through his small boat. This film provokes certain questions regarding development and how it fails to meet the needs and necessities of the common people. Jahnu Barua tries to portray the psychological conflict of the poor boatman by taking the bridge as a metaphor. The storyline narrates the reality of life of a poor boatman in a developing society for whom the bridge is a threat. While everyone else is curious about the new bridge, the poor boatman cannot come to terms with it. He was scared about losing his traditional means of livelihood. This is an example of media representation of a realistic picture of the development scenario of Assam. Thus, the film captures the reality of life in societies of India for whom development is an imposition.

Moving on, there have been many protest movements in Assam against the construction of big dams in the different tributaries of the Brahmaputra. These anti-big dam movements in Assam will help to know about the strands of environmentalism in Assam on the one hand and the course of development on the other. It also helps us to see the different power relations and the formation of different kinds of subjectivity in connection with the protest against the construction of big dams in the region. The study reveals the structure of political economy of rivers in the larger context of developmental politics.

#### 4.1 What is Development Anyway?

Development is commonly regarded as a yardstick of economic progress. Today, it can be safely assumed that there is no universally agreeable notion of development; in fact, it has come to be seen more in terms of the perspective from which it is looked at. In any case, the idea of development originally fed on western notions such as capitalism, modernization and progress. In this sense development was associated with industrialization. Modernity was conceived as the outcome of the development process and modernization was always equated

with development. Development, it was thought, meant “higher living standard” and “modern attitude”. Till the first half of the twentieth century, development implied the changes brought about by capitalist expansion. It promised a better life and future for human beings. Development, from this perspective, was closely linked to progress. This understanding of development emerged out of the optimism of the project of enlightenment.

Amartya Sen discussed development as freedom. He proposed his argument that development is a process of expanding real freedom which people can enjoy. He argued that “Viewing development in terms of expanding substantive freedoms directs attention to the ends that make development important, rather than merely to some of the means that, inter alia, play a prominent part in the process” (Sen 2000, 3). He again states that “Development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom : poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states” (Sen 2000, 3).

However it can be asserted that it was the industrial revolution that gave a new meaning to the process of development. It seriously impacted our understanding of what constitutes natural resources.

When colonialism followed industrialization, the scale of resource flows between and within societies hugely increased. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the invention of new technologies within and the colonization of new lands without, together led to a massive expansion of the resource catchments owned by Europeans (Guha 2010, 6).

The industrial revolution inspired the colonial masters to expand their colonies across the world. The colonial masters enjoyed the fruits of the industrial revolution and the entire system of production got a new fillip. These production processes increasingly depended more and more on natural resources. The relationship between the global north and the south thus underwent a change. Large scale production of goods entailed subjugation of nature leading to serious consequences:

In the heydays of colonial expansion, the colonial territories constituted not only a source of wealth, to be exploited by the colonial administration, but also a convenient workshop in which to invent and try out the new development doctrines. (Schech & Haggis 2000, 7)

The vast literature on development shows that it was earlier identified with material progress as well as with the improvement in quality of life. But after the Second World War, the idea of development came to be viewed from new perspectives. The colonial intervention of development was deeply criticized. “It appears as if today, near the end of the century, a cycle is coming to a close. It was opened by Columbus, as he set out on his journey across the Atlantic Ocean, more than 500 years ago. With his departure from Palos in search of a direct route to Asia – thinking of God, Spices, and gold – he unknowingly set the sails for the expansion of Europe to the ends of the world.” (Fischer and Hajer 1999, 23)

The post- development theorists (Sachs, Escobar, Rahnema) viewed development as a pervasive cultural discourse. They have applied Foucault’s notion of power and control. They criticize the Western idea of development as hegemonic and also contend that it is behind the construction of all the aspects of social reality in the third world. Sachs writes in the preface to “The Development Dictionary: A guide to Knowledge as Power” (2010) “Development, in short, became denationalized; indeed, globalization can be aptly understood as development without nation states” (Sachs 2010, vii ). He has pointed out the changing geography of development ideology. He mentioned about the two events i.e. Beijing Olympic 2010 and World Expo. “The Olympics and the World Expo are secular shifts that occurred around the turn of the millennium: the ascent of China and other countries of the Southern hemisphere- to the exclusive club of global powers” (Sachs 2010, vi). This book is a significant attempt to throw light on another dimension of development thought. Several new concepts of development have come up as a result of discussion. The contributors of this book have tried to give a relook to the concepts like development, environment, equality, market, population, poverty, production, progress, resources, science, standard of living, state etc. They analyzed “development as a particular cast of

mind” (Sachs 2010, xvi). He goes on saying, “For development is much more than just a socio- economic endeavor; it is a perception which models reality, a myth which comforts societies, and a fantasy which unleashes passions. Perceptions, myth, and fantasies, however, rise and fall independent of empirical results and rational conclusions; they appear and vanish, not because they are proven right or wrong, but rather because they are pregnant with promise or become irrelevant” (Sachs 2010, xvi).

However, development is nothing but an idea or philosophy or a concept or a perception. It is all about people. Development is generally perceived as a power to enhance the quality of life of the people. It directs the lives of people and determines their choices. Development has become a dynamic theoretical field and a pervasive cultural discourse. It is one of the important matters of political debate. “Development is a matter of life and death. It is both an urgent, global challenge and a vibrant theoretical field” (Edelman and Haugart 2005, 1).

#### **4.2 The Issue of Big dams- The Indian Context**

“Decision about the levels and products of technology are mediated by broader developmental policies, which in turn are the outcome of sociopolitical and economic forces. So a chosen technology reflects both a vision of society and the means by which that vision may be realized. This is often symbolised by one particular technology, such as nuclear energy in the west, or big dams in India” (Krishna 1996, 216). She again states, “That technology then becomes the epicenter of all the conflicts about the goals of society and the means of achieving them. This is why it is so difficult to unravel emotion from reason in the debate over big dams” (*ibid*). The significance of peoples’ perspective within the discourse of environmentalism has made the big dam a much debated topic in India. The construction of big dams in the rivers of India has been facing serious challenges from the popular front.

In the history of industrial development in India there are instances of several dams. Those dams were planned before independence. Among them Periyer Dam in Kerela, Krishnarajasagar in Mysore, Mettur in Tamil Nadu, Nijamsagar in

Hyderabad, Tungabadhra in Andhra Pradesh, Bhakra in Himachal Pradesh and Hirakud in Orissa often come to the mind.

After attaining Independence in the year 1947 the first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, proclaimed that India had made her 'tryst with destiny' (Baviskar 2004). He expressed his keen desire for development and modernity in all aspects. At that time most of the nationalist leaders of India held the view that the adoption of western model of industrialization is the only way to make India progress. "In this perspective, as contrasted with the dynamic and progressive West, India was a once-great civilization that had stagnated and atrophied under the dead weight of tradition. Its revitalization could only come about through an emulation of the west, intellectually through the infusion of modern science, and materially through the adoption of large-scale industrialization" (Gadgil and Guha 1992, 161). Among them the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was the most enthusiastic one.

In the post-independence period the need for growth in all the sectors created the need of more power, energy and other raw materials. "The attempt to achieve modern industrial growth has been based on two interrelated processes: one, the unchecked use of the earth's natural resources; and two, the transformation of people, often against their will, into a dispossessed working class. These processes were not new; they had their antecedents in India's history of colonial and post colonial extraction, and they continued after independence, though they were legitimized in different ways"(Baviskar 2004, 35). Water was regarded as an important pre-requisite for all. Government made enthusiastic plans to use river water of the different rivers of India. "The harnessing of river waters for irrigation, flood control, and the generation of hydroelectric power became a central feature of development policy" (Krishna 1996, 217). The building of multipurpose dams in the rivers of India was the fulfillment of nationalistic zeal for some leaders of independent India. They used the idea of 'national development' to legitimize their action. Thus the construction of big dams was a welcome fact at that period.

In the later part of 1970s the big dam entered in the public space as a much debated topic. “The debate on big dams in India emerged only in the late 1970s, after the controversy over a proposed hydroelectric project in Silent Valley- an uninhabited, biologically- rich tropical rain forest, one of the last remnants of its kind in the country. Despite the persistence of the pro-dam Left Front government in Kerela, environmentalists succeeded in pressuring the central government to abandon the project” (Krishna 1996, 217). In the later years there are several instances of protest movement against the construction of big dams in India. Among them Bedthi of Karnataka, Bhopalpatnam of Madhya Pradesh and Maharastra, Tehri of Uttar Pradesh, Suvarnarekha of Bihar, Inchampalli of Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh, Sardar Sarovar in Narmada and more recently the agitation against the proposed and ongoing construction of mega hydro-power projects in north -east India are the significant instances of its kind. Among them the case of Narmada has become generated a lot of interest not only at the national level also in the international stage. Different fronts interpret Narmada differently. The following lines by Sumi Krishna explain this point logically. “Today, the international movement against the Narmada dams has become the celebrated symbol of the ‘green’ cause. Gujarat considers the Narmada waters and the Sardar Sarovar dam in particular, as its lifeline to an era of prosperity. The state does not have other equivalent options to provide water to the drought- prone lands. But for popular environmentalism, anti- dam campaign has come to symbolise the struggles to alter the course of India’s development, to wrest power from governments, and to ensure that people are involved in decisions about their future” (Krishna 1996, 222).

### **4.3 The Context of Assam**

The early geography of Assam shows that the place was ecologically benign. In due course of time, Assam became a part of the British Colony. The signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo on February 24, 1826 literally paved the way for handing over the administrative power of Assam to the British Raj. Since then the entire meaning of resource-use and production mechanism underwent a change. The nature and the natural objects became the source of capital and got a new meaning. The British adopted a new forest policy by which forest resources

became one of the greatest sources of revenue. The upland areas of Assam were transformed into large tea estates which coincided with the migration of various groups of people from outside (I have discussed it in detail in the first chapter). “British imperialism could not wipe out the population of India – ironically, it set in motion a process of demographic expansion – but it did certainly disrupt, perhaps irrevocably, the ecological and cultural fabric of its society.”(Gadgil & Guha 1992, 242)

Assam is currently facing the clash or conflict between the stakeholders of development and the native dwellers and the question of human security has become extremely pertinent for all the players. Within the Indian subcontinent, Assam is generally regarded as culturally vibrant, rich in bio-diversity and natural resources but slow in terms of economic progress. At this juncture, development is a crucial question that needs to be freshly addressed. “Contrary to popular post-colonial expectation, North East India did not receive much attention in the developmental agenda of the post- colonial Indian state; a manner very similar to the legacy left behind by its colonial predecessors. Obviously, this has been a major irritant in the integration of the North East with the rest of the country” (Hussain 2008, 98).

Various strategies of development adopted in this region have caused serious concern about indigenous cultural traditions as well as the environment. The crisis of nature and crisis of justice need to be taken as related in this regard. The region is in the grip of environmental insecurity. Population-explosion, various development initiatives such as road construction, oil extraction, coal mining, dam construction and natural calamities have led to environmental insecurity in Assam. This is true not only in the case of Assam; the entire North-Eastern region is faced with the problem of environmental insecurity. The main effect of environmental insecurity is felt in land ownership, deforestation, soil erosion, changes in the pattern of cultivation, particularly in hill areas. These have impacted the local populations who have pursued their livelihood for ages by interacting with the environment in a sustainable way. This has led to internal displacement, a manifestation of the passing away of the earlier ways of life.

The present scenario in Assam provides several examples in support of this. “The government of India has pumped huge funds for the development of the region in recent times. It has made a separate ministry named Development of North East Region (DONER) at the centre to take care of the region’s developmental needs...The Government of India also awards ‘peace bonuses in monetary terms to an individual state of the region if it succeeds in maintaining peace in the state. Here, the meaning of peace has been used in an extremely narrow sense, that is, the reasonable absence of violent incidents compared to other states of the region” (Hussain 2008, 100). Apart from that the use of water resources for economic gain inspired the stakeholders of development to construct large/big dams on several rivers in huge numbers to generate power. There is a perception that has increasingly gained ground among the masses that this may cause serious problems in respect of the environment as well as in continuance of their culture and tradition. The power problem of Assam or the entire region is quite grave and the stakeholders believe that the government can do far better than build mega-dams in a highly seismic zone of the region. Stakeholders claim that the industrial and urban bias of the government is only the continuation of capitalist expansion in the post-independence era. The perception is that the ‘ecological watershed’ which coincided with the destruction of cultural tradition during the colonial period is still continuing in the name of development.

The development initiative taken by the government has changed the pattern of land use. Many projects of development have their immediate impact on the agrarian structure of the state. In any agrarian society the access to land, land quality, regenerating the quality of soil is very crucial in respect of human security. The post-independent period witnessed a steep increase in the number of internal displacements due to various development projects. The growing number of landless people in the region poses a serious threat to human security. It leads to rapid deforestation and several other problems in the society. Displacement from the land is also a displacement from culture. It will destroy the socio-cultural fabric of the society.

Contemporary Assam is facing serious challenge from development-initiatives and serious threat from environmental security. Development is at crossroads



now. Recent stories of big dam construction in this region have initiated a serious debate in the civil society where the matter of culture and environment is frequently debated. It is debated that the construction of the big dams poses a serious threat for the environment as it can lead to the destruction of the socio-cultural structure of the society. The cultural traditions of Assam, from food habits to performance traditions, are all connected to the environment. Therefore, the protest against dam construction has brought to center-stage the victims of development, peasants and different indigenous communities. The development initiative in Assam is felt to be largely the exercise of the same kind of power or hegemony which occurred in the colonial period.

Arguably, developmentalism has been the shared ideology of Indian nationalists, regionalists and identity activists alike: they all desire ‘development’. Some identity activists may emphasize the unevenness of development as a process and argue that Northeast India’s natural resources are exploited to benefit the wealthier parts of the country. Others may accuse regional political elites of ignoring the developmental needs of poorer sub-regions. Yet identity politics in Northeast India has been mostly about getting a better deal: to ‘close the development gap’ or to ‘catch up’ with more ‘developed’ areas. There are no obvious tensions between the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution: the two have coexisted quite comfortably. But this political paradigm that fuses identity politics with the ideology of development is under strain today” (Baruah 2012, 1).

#### **4.4 Environment and Development Trajectory in Assam: The Anti Big Dam Movement in Perspective**

Assam experienced strong opposition against the construction of big dams in the region. Recent debates and discussions in Assam point to a marked divergence in perceptions about dam construction and its environmental impacts. The long standing opposition towards big dam can be regarded as a significant marker in the context of larger perspective of environmental movement in Assam though it has narrowed it down into an anti-big dam movement. The supporters of dam generally discard the belief that the construction of dams in this region can cause

considerable environmental damage. On the other hand, the civil society has been vocal in its criticism of such projects. This difference of perception has resulted in serious disputes. Different political equations and activism used in the protests describe the position of environmentalism in Assam.

Civil society actors have politicized the construction of big dam in nationalist terms. It has become the cause of insecurity in all spheres though they are talking about the environmental insecurity. It has also become a bone of contention between the two states of the north-eastern region of India – Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

The big dam movement has made significant contributions in environmental movement in India. It has become an important political dialogue of the recent years. For a long time in Assam, the civil society and the government welcomed dams as the harbingers of development. They favoured dams as it was considered to be the natural source of generation of electricity. The WCD (World Commission on Dam) report on the impact of big dams across the world has created awareness among the public to stand up against this model of development. The Ranganadi Hydel project of Assam in the Lakhimpur district, bordering Arunachal Pradesh, was the turning point in this regard. Since the year 2007 this power project has been causing tremendous floods and contributing to displacement in the affected area. With the capacity to produce 405 MW of electricity the Ranganadi Hydal Project in Arunachal Pradesh has also been contributing to erosion and sand casting in various places of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji. There are several other cases in Assam that are similar to Ranganadi. In central Assam, the district of Marigaon and Nagaon are regularly flooded by the excess water which is released by Karbi-Langpi, Kapili and Umtro dam. The significant point is that the capacity of these dams is between 50 to 100 MW. In comparison to the proposed dams in different tributaries of Brahmaputra situated in Arunachal Pradesh, a North- Eastern State of India those dams are considered as small. Another dam Kurichu situated in Bhutan is causing flash floods and destruction in various districts of lower Assam. But the capacity of that dam is only 60 MW. The newspaper stories of the time tell the hard realities of the happenings. Therefore the locals of this region are worried about the coming up

of with 168 dams in this region. “Built on the logic of “development”, big dams have wreaked havoc on indigenous communities in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh with regular flooding. By pursuing predatory development the central and state governments are equally culpable of visiting disaster on the region” (Gohain 2008, 19). The Lower Subansiri project with the capacity of producing 2000 MW electricity was near completion when it became the epicenter of anti big dam movement in Assam. There are many democratic protests, strikes, blockades going on against big dams. Various social organizations, students’ bodies, and activists have been vociferously opposing the construction of big dams in this region.

“On June 30, a well-attended public meeting in Guwahati convened jointly by a peasant organization, a Mishing tribal students’ organization from Arunachal Pradesh, attended by many NGOs and individual social activists denounced, using strong language, the policies of the central government and various state governments of the north-east. They accused these governments of promoting “development” at the expense of the lives and livelihoods of the people” (Gohain 2008, 19). In the year 2008 in the month of June North East Electric Power Corporation (NEEPCO) suddenly released water from Ranganadi dam for the safety of the dam which caused heavy flood in the district of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji. Gohain has mentioned about the news coverage of the month,

The newspapers in June were full of horror stories. Twenty-one lives were lost in one week. Prosperous farmers saw their cattle swept away by powerful currents and some lost their lives in attempts to rescue them. Young children and the elderly were particularly vulnerable and touching stories of a grandmother and grandchild clinging desperately to the topmost parts of a bamboo grove for three days and nights, of huts and cottages sailing down the inflated bosom of the river like large vessels, and families sheltering on roofs of tall houses without food and sleep for a week and dreading every moment about the collapse of such makeshift shelters aroused widespread pity and indignation (2008, 19).

The All Assam Students’ Union and the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti have taken the initiative in making the people conscious about the ill effect of big

dams. They also took a strong stand against the policy of central government of India. Several other organizations of Assam and Arunachal took part in this movement. This movement got an impetus when well-known activists like Medha Patkar, the iconic figure of the Narmada Bachao Andolan joined the movement. She addressed a huge mass gathering against the construction of mega dams at Chauldhowa ghaat of Lakhimpur district on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2012. She said that this movement had the potential to turn into a national movement (Assam Tribune, February 24<sup>th</sup> 2012).

Thus there is a wide array of discourses doing the rounds in Assam and each of these are related to particular ways of looking at the notion of development. The inclusiveness of the big dam dispute in terms of its wide impact offers a diverse set of actors and allows the possibility of diverse perspectives towards its purpose. These varying perspectives are conflicting and sometimes complementary to each other.

Here, I attempt to review these reactions to the recent environmental events in the region which are reported by the print media and other literatures. Discourse analysis will be applied as a method of analysis of that literature to identify the different perceptions about dam construction and environment interactions. The use of discourse analysis to analyze the anti big dam movement, particularly in Assam, will help to show how environment and development have become contested topics. The aim of this chapter is to examine how different environmental discourses are articulated, presented, reproduced as well as published by different stakeholders of the anti big dam movement. The study will offer a critical understanding of the issues and try to answer the following questions: Who are the different stakeholders? Which discourses influence the stakeholders? Whose knowledge is communicated by the stakeholders? Who is allowed to speak?

“By studying the construction and conception of environmental ideas in science, politics, media, art, social movements and everyday life, it is possible to come to grips with how discourses are used to frame what?...Discourses determine what is and what is not possible to do, as well as who should or who should not do it.

Which discourse is articulated and communicated is therefore crucial to the outcome of environmental actions...” (Gustafsson 2013, 40). Therefore to have a critical understanding of the issue of environment- development trajectory within the anti- big dam movement in Assam it is essential to analyze and discuss critically the discourses shaping its articulation.

#### **4.4.1 Literatures on the Feasibility of Big Dams in Assam: An Overview**

The texts used in this study are Hiren Gohain’s *Brihat Nadibandh aru Axomor Biparjay* (2010), *Brihat Bandh Aru Axom* (Talukdar and Kalita,2010), *Marubhumi Aahe Lahe Lahe*(Gogoi,2011), *Swarna Upatyakar para Mritu Upatyakaloi: An analysis of Large dams in North East India*(Chatradhara,2012) and a Special Issue of ‘Asam Bani’( Assamese newspaper) on bigdams (24 Feb, 2012).

These texts are viewed as collection of different discourses on large dams. Together they are all successful in presenting the larger picture of big dams and various issues related to it. The texts create a snapshot of various discourses which construct the issue of big dam in this region. These texts can be thereby regarded as useful tools for the reproduction and consolidation of a specific understanding of the issue of big dams in common perception.

The contents of the book Hiren Gohain’s *Brihat Nadibandh aru Axomor Biparjay* (Big Dams and the Dangers for Assam) (2010) contain a collection of articles on big dams by the author. The book is in Assamese.

Another book *Brihat Bandh Aru Axom* (Big dams and Assam) (Talukdar and Kalita, 2010) is a bilingual book containing articles by different writers from different field.

*Marubhumi Aahe Lahe Lahe* (Slowly Comes the Desert) (Gogoi, 2011), is a collection of articles which are written by Akhil Gogoi, an RTI activist and a leader of the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti which has been at the forefront of the anti big dam movement in Assam.

Swarna Upatykar para Mritu Upatyakaloi: An analysis of Large dams in North East India (Chatradhara, 2012) is written by K.K.Chatradhara. This book is based on the research carried out by the author.

The special Issue of *Asam Bani* on big dams (24 Feb, 2012) is an important text to understand the issue of large dam in north east India, specifically in Assam. Besides these, different articles published in different journals, periodicals, newspapers are also taken into consideration for the study.

#### **4.4.2 The Question of Geography and Environment**

The region possesses a distinctive identity regarding its topography which includes hills and plains. The Brahmaputra valley is surrounded by hills and its population density is relatively high. Brahmaputra is one of the largest international rivers which starts at China/ Tibet, flows through Assam and ends in Bangladesh. It has several tributaries which all together structures a distinctive ecosystem. The people living in the floodplains of Brahmaputra depend mostly on agriculture and its related activities. Brahmaputra remains the life blood of the culture and tradition of the people of this land. The food habit, cultures and traditions of indigenous communities are directly or indirectly influenced by the river Brahmaputra. The region is rich in bio-diversity. But it is situated in a highly seismic zone and geographically it is very fragile. Huge earthquakes occurred in 1897 and 1950 changing the nature of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries. They become more turbulent after the earthquake of 1950. The local narratives recount the destruction caused by these earthquakes.

The Brahmaputra and its tributaries present the potentiality of the rich water resources which have attracted the interest of several hydro-power generating agencies. The central government of India is also in support of producing hydro-electricity by constructing several mega dams on these rivers, apparently with intent to satisfy the needs of other parts of the country. We can see how the sense of deprivation and marginalization has affected all environmental discourses in the context of Assam. The issue of big dams is no exception in this regard.

According to one section (bearing the strong force of sub-nationalist ideology) the Indian State treats North- East India as the future powerhouse of India. In this discourse the Indian state's treatment of this region is "step motherly". They condemn the Indian Government for showing utter disregard for the feelings and sentiments of the people of the region. As this region is seen as "backward", development becomes a necessary prerequisite. They hold the view that the north-east has been regarded as India's future powerhouse where the government is going to build 168 dams in the rivers of this region, completely undermining the aspirations and hopes of the indigenous people of the region. The Government, by promoting the idea of clean energy, has tried to convince the masses to accept the government's decision. The Indian state puts all its effort to complete the project.

Among the 168 dams the lower Subansiri hydel project is on the path of completion and it has generated a lot of debate during the recent years. A lot of the fear about the construction of such mega dams arises out of concerns about the downstream impact. All the proposed one hundred and sixty eight dams are to be built in Arunachal. The upper streams of different rivulets of Brahmaputra supply the majority of the water flowing into the Brahmaputra. They are constructed and planned in Arunachal but lakhs of families will be affected in Assam. Assam will not get any benefit from this project but the people of the state have to suffer a lot once these dams come up. Hence the anti big dam activists have strongly resisted its construction.

#### **4.4.3 The LSHEP: A Brief Historical Account**

LSHEP stands for the Lower Subansiri Hydro-electric power project. Within the anti-big dam movement the Lower Subansiri Hydel Project has become the centre of attraction. The plan to construct big dams in this region was conceived a long while back. The regular floods and erosion encouraged the policy makers to search for a permanent solution to the problem. Various short and long term plans were taken for a permanent solution of the problem. For that purpose, embankments were constructed. But it has turned into a failed project. Then they planned to construct big water reservoirs in the upper streams of the river which

will be helpful for irrigation as well as for the production of electricity. At the same time it was planned as such to solve the flood problem permanently. The big dams on the river basin of Subansiri and Siang are the result of these ambitious projects.

During the first half of the 1980s the plan to construct two big multi- purpose dams as Subansiri and Dibang, the two rivulets of Brahmaputra with the aim of irrigation, flood control and to generate hydro-electric power had been started. At the initial stage the Brahmaputra Board was in charge of this project. In 1983, in the month of April and May, the board carried out the initial ground work for the project. After those initial investigations the board decided to produce 4800 MW and 20,000 MW electricity from these two projects. The board was asked to finalize and present the detailed project report. After the completion of the report the government of Arunachal Pradesh did not give permission as two of their towns were expected to be submerged. They did not give the NOC and stood against the dams. In due course of time, many changes took place. The project was handed over to the NHPC in place of the Brahmaputra Board.

In the year 2002 the government of Assam issued NOC regarding the construction of Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Project. But NHPC did not sign an MOU with the Assam government. This project is situated in the border of Assam and Arunachal. At first various political parties and other social organizations urged to complete the dam as it was planned as such to control flood and erosion. Electricity generation was its secondary aim. In due course of time the production of hydropower became the sole aim of this project. Likewise it apparently began to ignore the downstream impact and this led to resistance.

The Subansiri River is one of the chief rivulets of the Brahmaputra. Different literatures have offered romantic interpretations of the Subansiri River. In the famous novel *Miri Jiori* Subansiri is described in a fabulous way. Subansiri is an international river. It originates in Tibet, China and flows through Arunachal and Assam of India. It enters Assam by crossing the Assam Arunachal border at Dulungmukh- Gerukamukh hill area. It joins Brahmaputra at Luit –Khabalu. Subansiri supplies 10% of Brahmaputra's total water.



The Subansiri has a significant place in the cultural history of Assam. According to the Purān the ancient name of Subansiri was 'Swarnasri' which means 'river of gold' or 'the golden beauty'. In the Vedic era Subansiri was known as 'Swarna Ganga'. In Hindu rituals the water of Subansiri was regarded as spiritual offering to god.

The Subansiri also has a special importance in the economic history of Assam. The sand of Subansiri was the repository of gold. During the Ahom period of Assam, the process of collecting gold from Subansiri had a special importance. A special group was appointed for collecting gold. The process continued till the British period. The Subansiri river basin is also rich in biodiversity. Different varieties of fish and other aquatic creatures live in the river.

#### **4.4.4 The Stakeholders**

To understand the nature of the anti dam movement, the people's perception about big dam and the ideology behind the people's assertion one has to first identify different stakeholders. The first stakeholder is the group that consists of the educated – specialists in the subject, social activists, intellectuals who are opposing the construction of big dam in this region. They are largely from the middle class. They have pointed to the grave situation as a result of big dam in a highly seismic zone. They strongly oppose the government's decision regarding the construction of big dams. They organize meetings, rallies, and strikes as a part of their protest.

Secondly, there are the rural poor for whom the environment is the source of livelihood. Their very sustenance, identity, economy, social systems are dependent on the environment. They have established a symbiotic relationship with the environment.

Another group of stakeholders is of course the dam builders and the state. According to them the environment is a product with economic importance. They possess a colonial kind of attitude. Their understanding of the environment is that it is only a source of profit for economic gain. They treat these resources only as raw material.

Other stakeholders include the state and its organs. Their main task is to control the land, water, mines, forests and other environmental resources by enacting and implementing laws. Very often they are functioning as a repressive agency by following the colonial model. They have collaborative and commercial relationship with those industrialist groups who are using the environment for their commercial profits.

#### **4.4.5 Interpreting the Meaning of Dam**

Big Dam has become a much-debated topic which informs the development debate of North-East India, particularly in Assam. It faces collective resistance of different communities, peasant groups, intellectuals and social activists. This part of the chapter seeks to unravel the manifold discourses which have contributed a lot in the development of whole debate. It is located within discourses of environmentalism, social justice, development discourse and many others. The entire process of protest around the issue constructs the image of big dam and its feasibility in this region. It also constructs the image of different stakeholders within the issue. As Nayar says, ‘Narmada as sign generates, in other words, a grammar of protest, whether this grammar is of ecological ethnicity, emaciated bodies, mythification and romanticisation of the land, environmentalism or corporate greed. The grammar of protest around the river constructs Narmada as a national popular (and eventually a global) icon and therefore a readily recognizable, sign (Nayar 2013, 293). The anti big dam upsurge in Assam can also be interpreted in the same way. This movement “introduces a certain semantic and taxonomic consistency (due to the protests around it) across contexts (development, state power, dams, nuclear power, modernity, globalization), events (other dams in India, refugees and displacement) and places(all over India) (Nayar 2013,293).

#### **Nehruvian Discourse**

The first discourse in and around the big dam movement was the discourse of development and modernity. The Nehruvian model of development regarded dam as the marker of development. The quest for development according to the Nehruvian model is planned to achieve through rapid industrialization. In his

inaugural speech of Bhakra Nangal Canal on 8<sup>th</sup> July 1954 the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru famously termed dams as “the temples of modern India”. Nehru’s idea of development is embedded in a discourse of nationalism. The trend in Nehruvian discourse was to interpret every development policy by incorporating the idea of national interest. This has become the official discourse for building modern India. This myth of development stands as an influential discourse in support of construction of large dams in the North-Eastern region. The state is sponsoring this discourse as dams are expected to bring prosperity to the region though a large numbers of people have to suffer. “The most enduring cultural stereotype around the dam and the river has been that of an indifferent modernity represented in the characters of the Indian State” (Nayar 2013, 300).

### **Discourse of colonialism**

The discourse of development is translating the discourse of colonialism. The analysis of vast array of literature related to the anti-big dam movement in Assam in particular and the north-east India in general reveals that the development ideology of the government is criticized by the other stakeholders of the debate. Countering the discourse of development, the dominant discourse popularized by the Indian state, the protesters treat the approach as rather colonial. It is true that after independence to achieve the goal of development and modernity the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru adopted the policy of rapid industrialization. Nehru and some other nationalists believed that the prosperity could only be achieved through the incorporation of western science, “modern science”. “Most Indian nationalists believed that India’s reconstruction could only come about through an emulation of the West” (Baviskar 2004, 21). They believed that “through intensive industrialization and urbanization, fostered by a strong nation state, India could overcome the handicap of its colonial past to catch up with the west” (Baviskar 2004, 22). But this rapid industrialization following the model of “industrialize or perish” is rather a replica of the colonial model. It only satisfies the interest of a section of people who are economically powerful. This tradition has been continuing till date. This model of development has changed the structure of land and water. “Ironically, the bulk of development policies, justified in the ‘national interest’, actually *diminish* poor people’s ability

to control and gainfully use natural resources. Every 'national' project is presented as beneficial for the masses even though it requires some poor people to surrender their land or their livelihood"( Baviskar 2004, 32). The north- east region of India is rich in biodiversity as well as geographical diversity which has become the fertile ground for several hydro-electric power plant as mentioned above. The politics of decision regarding the construction of large dams in this region is also following the same logic. By justifying the larger 'national interest', 'the greater good of the nation' the leaders are taking steps to implement certain development policies which are perceived as impositions from outside for the native dwellers of the region. Hence many have criticized this process of development as internal colonialism. "To meet the needs of the corporate sector and the consuming classes, the government has encouraged a new scramble for resources in the tribal areas of central India and in the Northeast. These regions are on their way to becoming our "internal colonies", as a wave of mining and hydroelectric schemes undermine local ecologies, and disrupt and displace local communities, creating widespread discontent" (Guha 2012).

The British implemented various development activities i.e. development of road, rail road, mail system etc for the purpose of transporting oil, tea and other natural resources from this part to other parts of the country. Tilottama Misra remarks, "It is possible to point out some of the characteristics of Assam's economy which fit in exactly with classical definitions of 'colonialism' (Misra 1980, 1357). At that period, development and progress were directly linked with the interest of the British. To date it is argued by the civil society actors the Indian State is also showing a similar attitude towards the north- eastern states for their bountiful natural resources. Their views try to focus that the liberal economy has been translated into a colonial economy in the context of the North East of India.

### **Discourse of science**

A lot of the concern centering rounds the coming up of big dams is in terms of loss of the ecosystem which is expressed in a scientific discourse. The stakeholders of the protest movement have expressed their concern for the

ecosystem, focusing primarily on maintaining the ecological balance of the rivers. Here is an excerpt from an article:

Northeast India, consisting of the eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim, is known for its biological and cultural diversity and the unique Brahmaputra and Barak river systems (Vagholikar & Das 2010, 1).

The protestors of dam use various scientific descriptions about river as they describe it as an ecosystem. The dam will disrupt the ecosystem of the river. Akhil Gogoi, a pioneer of the anti- big dam movement in Assam, narrates:

The river does not only mean the amount of water which is flowing towards the sea. The changing river bed, the soil of the bank and ground water are indispensable parts of river. Even the plants and other forest cover on the river bank, water returning to the river after floods are also a part of the river. On the other hand, the river itself is the part of the environment. Rivers not only carry water to the downstream, it also carries a huge amount of sediment yield, minerals, dead and lived species and plant wastes. Nothing can change a river except a dam (Gogoi 2011, 8).

The web of relations within a river is itself a system. The protesters of the mega dam are making use of the ecosystem discourse in describing the Brahmaputra river system. It is stated that this system thrives on a relationship of inter-dependence. According to the narratives,

A unique river, it drains such diverse environments as the cold dry plateau of Tibet, the rain-drenched Himalayan slopes, the landlocked alluvial plains of Assam, and the vast deltaic lowlands of Bangladesh. An extremely dominant monsoon interacting with a unique physiographic setting, a fragile geological base, and active seismotectonic instability together with anthropogenic factors have moulded the Brahmaputra into one of the world's most intriguing and gigantic river systems.....The river system is intricately linked with the floodplain ecology of wetlands (*beels*) and grasslands in the Brahmaputra valley (Vagholikar 2010).

Akhil Gogoi's argument is that dams will disrupt this web of relationship. The anti-big dam activists like Akhil Gogoi therefore rely on scientific methods and

techniques along with a scientific vocabulary to drive home their point. They are translating a scientific discourse to the emotive level of the people with a view to visualize the seriousness of the situation. Krisak Mukti Sangram Samiti leader Akhil Gogoi goes on saying which is quoted in an article, “Technical issues are important. But the dam’s debate in the region cannot be restricted to these issues alone. It is a matter of our rights over natural resources. These resources are being handed over to power companies and our rivers transformed dramatically by political decisions taken in New Delhi and within the State Governments of the region. This requires a political response from people of the region and that will be our focus in the coming days” (Vagholikar and Das 2010, 19).

**Discourse of disaster:**

The possible disaster that could be brought about by the big dams has been repeatedly asserted in the discourse of the anti big dam movement in Assam. Fear of repetition of the disasters like the earthquake of 1894 and 1950 as a result of the construction of the mega dams have become rather strong forces within the discourse of anti mega dam movement. The protesters have pointed to the cataclysmic disaster that could be wreaked by big dams in this region.

The question of safety, geology and hydrology of the project are significant points of focus for the anti big dam protestors. It is argued that the mountains on which the dam is being constructed or planned to be constructed are seismically very active. The placing of such large dams in this area is a great risk as it may lead to great devastation. The downstream impacts of these dams are also devastating. Here is an excerpt from an article where the author narrates about the probable disaster from the big dams. The author narrates,

The downstream impact concerns raised in Assam over the hydel projects being built in its neighbor include: loss of fisheries, changes in wetland ecology in the floodplains, impact on agriculture on the riverine islands and tracts, disruption of intricate socio- cultural linkages of indigenous communities with the river systems, increased flood vulnerability due to massive boulder extraction from river beds for dam construction and sudden water releases from reservoirs in the monsoons, dam safety and associated risks in this geologically fragile and seismically- active region. One of the

key issues that have come up is the drastic daily variation in river flows, which will take place after these dams are commissioned, particularly in winter (Vagholikar and Das 2010, 8).

The author again narrates;

After commissioning of the 2,000 MW Lower Subansiri project, flows in the river in winter will fluctuate drastically on a daily basis from 6 cumecs for around 20 hours (when water is being stored behind the dam) to 2,560 cumecs for around 4 hours when the water is released for power generation at the time of peak power demand in the evening hours. Thus, the river will be starved for 20 hours and then flooded for 4 hours with flows fluctuating between 2 per cent and 600 per cent of normal flows on a daily basis.

The flow during peak load water releases in the Subansiri river in winter will be equivalent to average monsoon flows. Such flow fluctuations in rivers like Lohit, Dibang, Siang and Subansiri will severely impact breeding grounds of critically endangered grassland birds like the Bengle Florican, foraging areas of the wild water buffalo, habitat of the dolphins and important national parks like Dibru- Saikhowa and Kaziranga (Vagholikar and Das 2010, 8-9).

Henceforth a comprehensive and technical analysis of the project has been going on regarding the safety of the big dams. This crisis has further transformed into environmental metaphor which is used to appropriate certain images and values. The protesters used to define big dam as disastrous, big dam as big fund, big dam as big hoax, big dam as big politics, big dam as big flood, big dam as water bomb etc.(Talukdar and Kalita 2010). Along with that they have pointed out that big dam will destroy the community life of people living in the downstream. It will mess up the animal habitat. It can create great devastation. Contact with dam will change the course of river and it will result in a desert like situation in the downstream. Big dam is like great devastation for river valley civilization. The mega dams will impact char areas, trends of migration, and will also deliver a telling blow to the socio-economic and political life of the region. Mega dams will be responsible for the displacement of the people. These are derived from the narratives of the stream against the construction of mega dams in this region. For them, the issue is to save the Subansiri River, the Brahmaputra river and other

rivulets of Brahmaputra from the “cruel” hands of “corrupt” few (Narratives of the protesters). Their narrative argues; “The Brahmaputra will meet its end. It will be a dead river. After completion of all the dams the corporate houses can conduct pleasant tour on the dead body of the Assamese nation” (Gogoi 2011, 154). He goes on to say, “River is the mother of wetlands. If the natural flow of the river stops, the wetlands will dry immediately. As soon as the wetlands dry different variety of local fishes will disappear” (Gogoi 2011, 155). Thus the fear of big dams has been a reason for their rejection in this region. The sense of fear generated by the big dams has helped to strengthen the anti- dam movement.

### **Discourse of Indigeneity**

The anti- dam movement has produced the discourse of “ecological ethnicity”. It “foregrounds the ancient and intimate links between land, river and people. The emphasis on *local* cultures, festivals and modes of agriculture foregrounds both nature and culture...” (Nayar 2013, 297). Nayar has discussed this point while he talks about the Narmada River. The same argument holds good in the case of Assam. The Brahmaputra is the life blood of Assamese culture. Popular songs and literature represent Brahmaputra as the back bone of culture and tradition of the indigenous people of this land. They are directly or indirectly dependent on the Brahmaputra. In a similar vein, Akhil Gogoi asserts the cultural meaning of the Subansiri for the Misings:

The Subansiri is the mother of the Mising people. For them Subansiri is *Āne Subansiri* or mother Subansiri....People living beside the river used to collect fire wood from the river. In Chauldhowa Ghāt approximately 350 families have been living by selling the firewood collected from the river....The potter class used to collect a unique variety of soil from there. In the *chapolis* there are thousands of Nepali people who have been earning their livelihood by rearing cattle (Gogoi 2011, 157-158).

Right over water or other resources are variously defined both by the supporters of big dam as well as the protesters. The government supporting the big dam states about ‘the first users right’ as Brahmaputra is an international river connecting three countries. At the same time China’s river conversion as well as



the construction of dams over the Brahmaputra has entered into their myth making process regarding the issue of constructing big dams on the upstream of various rivulets of Brahmaputra which are located in Arunachal Pradesh. The following narratives can be used for the purpose of strengthening the analysis.

The Environment Minister, Jairam Ramesh, admitted that environmental decision-making on dams in the region has indeed been insensitive until now and promised reform. But he also made a pitch for dams on the Siang in Arunachal Pradesh for strategic reasons, to supposedly strengthen India's position in future negotiations with China on the Brahmaputra waters. While India and China have an Expert Level Mechanism (ELM) on transboundary rivers since 2007 to share river flow data and discuss issues, there is no specific treaty on the Brahmaputra waters. The argument being made by some is that if we build dams on the Siang we can establish our 'user rights' over the river. The water resources technocracy in the country has also argued that to safeguard against the impact of possible reduced flows, due to any proposed diversion of the Brahmaputra waters by the Chinese, we build large storage reservoirs in upper reaches of major rivers in the Brahmaputra river basin such as the Subansiri, Siang and Lohit to store monsoon waters (Vagholikar and Das 2010, 18).

However, the activists and protestors have seen this discourse as a kind of imposition. On the other hand, the opposition to big dams in this region has been seen as seizing control over the rights of the people over their resources. They (the group of people who resist the construction of Big dam) argue that since the colonial regime Assam has been losing all its resources, water remains the last in this queue. According to the narratives;

Already we have lost oil and tea. We have been fighting for the cause for control over resources, but in real sense the central government has destroyed all the resources without any help of Assam. Now they have their eye on its water and forest covers (Mahanta in Asom Bani 2012, 21).

The right of common people over the resources has become important for resisting the government approach to resource use. It was one of the important reasons of the famous Assam movement. Later this issue was diverted as this

movement was only concentrated on illegal immigrant issue. Now the issue of big dam is also concentrated on the discourse of right. The right over the water resource, who has the right over the water, is the basic point of debate within the anti big dam movement. According to the narratives:

The right of water has been gradually transferring from the hands of common people. It has transformed from the community property to the state property, then to the Indian government and at last to the corporate sector.....Hence the anti big dam movement is not only for protecting the resources it is also second stage of the independent movement(Gogoi 2011, 28).

### **Discourse of Regionalism**

Newspaper reports that are titled as “North-East India: a future power house of India” or “Centre treats North- East as a buffer zone” reflect the kind of regional sentiment that has engineered the anti- big dam movement. Regionalism can be identified as the major cause of the strong sense of protest. The emotional basis of the movement is holding the strong sentiment of regionalism. The genesis of movement is rooted in the emotional basis of the Assam movement of 1979. The rhetoric of neglect is skillfully crafted by the civil society actors for achieving the emotional support of the people towards the movement.

The anti big dam protest in Assam generates different faces of protest by involving different classes of people. It brings together various civil society organizations, NGOs, intellectuals, educationists, researchers, government officials, students, common people for one cause. Civil Society organizations take active part in this protest. The grammar of protest in anti mega dam movement is flavored with indigeneity and the rhetoric of nationalism. The following lines are written in the home page of a website campaigning against big dam in this region: “It is the fight to protect our land, our future and our existence” (<http://assamagainstmegadam.blogspot.in/>). Various images of protesting big dam published through different medium of communication herald a new grammar of protests.

The anti big dam movement has become the amalgamation of various discourses of environmentalism as well as social justice. These discourses perform as useful tools to establish the anti big dam agenda as popular idiom. It has become the struggle for seeking environmental and social justice. Participation of Medha Patkar, the most visible face of the Narmada Bachao Andolon, in the movement is an effort to publicize the movement. The following argument can be appropriately used to discuss this point. “The anti-dam protests have been projected as ‘symbolic of a global struggle for social and environmental justice’, and the NBA as a ‘symbol of hope for people’s movements all over the world that are fighting for just, equitable, and participatory development’ (Nayar 2013, 305). Anna Hazare, Arvind Kejriwal also put forward their support to the anti big dam movement in Assam. The National Alliance of People’s Movement supported the anti big dam movement in Assam. The anti big dam movement in Assam is engineering the people’s movement in Assam.

Various narratives of anti big dam movement generate the idea of social justice in the context of development. The protesters raise their voice against big dam. They said that they support small dams. They are against the injustice regarding the distribution of electricity. They have criticized the process of signing MOUs. In most of the cases Assam did not play a role in signing the MOUs in spite of the fact that the state will have to bear the brunt of the downstream impact. All the dams are planned to be built within the political boundary of Arunachal and therefore Assam will not get any profit from these. But the people of Assam will have to pay lot for that. Henceforth the anti mega dam movement in Assam has entered the site of conflicting discourses (State vs People) where environmentalism, humanitarian disaster, environmental disaster and risks, social justice and development discourses are in the same front. It generates “furious debates about the state’s role, corporate greed and civil responsibilities’ (Nayar 2013, 307). It has become the political, cultural, sociological debate in around contemporary development efforts made by the government.

This is another phase of environmentalism in Assam where nationalism and indigeneity creates a new space. The state is here seen as being against the interest of the indigenous people. The people exercise their strategy of power

through the protest to resist the construction of big dams in this region. However it is proved from the analysis that the actors such as social organizations and public forums are using the Gandhian philosophy to demonstrate their protest. They are in the move of 'governing' the huge masses by manipulating their power through discursive strategies. They try to focus the point that, "What is occurring in the Brahmaputra Valley today is resisted by a riverine people against powerful elites bent on pursuing a strategy of accumulation by dispossession, and trying to turn their lives into free fuel for hydropower plants, in utter disregard of their lives and livelihoods" (Baruah 2012, 41).

The discussion of all the chapters provides us the basis to have an idea about the environmental politics in Assam. They give us some idea about the formation of various discursive strategies and how they are internalized as cultural discourses. Apart from this, the discussion on gender is another important point to study the environmental politics of one society. As part of a third world country the issue of woman demands a separate place. The multiethnic settings of Assam and the distinctive socio- economic condition are significant factors in constructing women's environmental subjectivity. The next chapter to follow is the discussion on the women- environment juncture of Assam.