

Chapter-1

Introduction

The later decades of the twentieth century was marked by various kinds of development in the social, political, cultural as well as economic life of people around the world. The rapid development of science and technology during this period transformed human life at all levels. A radical transformation was noticed in the various disciplinary structures at that point of time. This transformation changed the entire world view of people as reflected in diverse aspects of human activity. One of the fallouts of this was the criticism of existing philosophical traditions.

The concern for ecology and environment has come to occupy a place of great importance in the academic circles. Like many other movements of the world, environmental consciousness can be termed as a product of the 1960s. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) is regarded as a pioneering work in the emergence and growth of environmental consciousness. As a part of the counter-cultural critique of "technocratic society" and the widespread questioning of the dominant values of consumer culture, environmentalism emerged as a new political cause, a new historical project (Roszak 1973, Morgan 1991, Jamision 2001, 16). In contemporary interdisciplinary thought, environmental issues constitute an important topic for discussion. The natural and social sciences have been taking interest in studying the human–environment relationship from their respective perspectives. Several issues relating to destruction of nature such as global warming, greenhouse effect, disappearance of lush green forest areas, exploitation of natural resources, and massive disruption of the critical ecosystem constitute the predominant discourse of contemporary times. Many universities around the world have established departments related to environment, governments have set up environmental protection agencies, and parliaments passed new laws and created new courts in order to enforce them and motivate people to take part in the environment protection programme and to strengthen the environmental movement at large. Environmental issues have entered the international political agenda; in fact, in many cases foreign policy matters have

come to be dictated to a great extent by a country's policy vis-à-vis environment. Consequently, the need has been felt for a worldwide consciousness for the sake of preservation and conservation of wildlife along with the protection of the greenery of the planet for the future of human kind.

In due course of time changes occurred in the direction of the environmental movement. "Over two decades ago, environment seemed an idea whose time had come. *Time* magazine even made earth 'The Planet of the Year' in 1989, in place of their usual choice of a man or a woman"(Rangarajan 2012,xiii). The situation of the 1960s and the 1970s was not the same as the situation of the 1990s. Jamison says, "The apocalyptic tones, the bad news that characterized so much of the environmental debate in the 1960s and 1970s, have tended to give way in the course of the 1990s to the encouraging, good-news rhetoric of sustainable development. The emblematic depiction of doom, identifying "limits to growth" and "population bombs" came to be replaced by more upbeat messages and conciliatory slogans: "changing course", "greening of industry", "ecological modernization", "partnership ethics" (Fischer and Hajer 1999, Jamison 2001).

In contemporary times, the process of "greening" the world can be seen everywhere. The media plays a crucial role in shaping environmental discourse. The growing consciousness among the people of the world to "go back" to nature has compelled/inspired industries to produce eco-friendly objects and to use eco-friendly approaches. Today, environmentalism has become an "emerging culture" in itself and it has become the dominant discourse of sustainable development. Andrew Jamison in his *Making of Green Knowledge: Environmental Politics and Cultural Transformation (2001)* has quoted literary critic and novelist Raymond Williams while describing environmentalism as an emergent culture:

By "emergent" I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created. But it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture.....and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it: emergent in the strict sense, rather than merely novel (Williams 1977, 123).

Jamison goes on to say, “As experimental practices, an emergent cultural formation is continually being formed and reformed, and, as Williams also emphasized, it is an inevitable struggle with the dominant culture. In particular, an emergent culture must contend with the complex forms of “incorporation” that the dominant culture develops in response to the new practices and visions” (Jamison 2001, 41).

Henceforth the environmental issues were discussed largely in terms of the way in which the debate is carried out both inside and outside the academic circles. This has led to the emergence of many new concepts regarding conservation and preservation of the natural as well as the built environment. The concepts of eco-museum and eco-tourism are two good examples of this. Growing consciousness for the environment has changed people’s attitude towards life. This has also changed the people’s consumption pattern in terms of food, dress and other such.

The environmental movement has considerable common ground with the feminist movement as argued by Ecofeminists. According to them, there is a distinct connection between the oppression and subordination of women in families and society and the degradation of nature. The central idea of this movement is that male ownership of land has led to a dominant culture which is manifested in “food export”, “over grazing”, “the tragedy of commons”, “exploitation of people”, and “an abusive land ethics” in which animals and land are valued only as economic resources. Some others claim that the degradation of nature contributes to the degradation of women. It is argued that gender is a relevant factor in determining access and control of natural resources which is related to class, race, culture, ethnicity. The discursive formation surrounding environmentalism has a relationship with labour movements, peasant revolutions, and ethnic movements for land rights etc.

Environmentalism, particularly since the late 1980s, has become something of a legitimizing discourse of opposition. In societies where institutions of political opposition have not been permitted to develop, the environment movement created alternative sites for the expression of contesting positions...Environment serves as a legitimized arena of resistance, or as part of accepted discourses on alternative paths to development. Yet the

obverse of this is that environmentalism is also subject to forces of cooptation. The window of environmentalism thereby opens onto and reflects many of the subtleties of positioning and cross-cutting interests associated with new social, economic and political forces (Hirsch and Warren 2002, 2).

The environment has itself come to be seen as a social construction. Environmental discourses are quite obviously influenced by cultural factors and other institutions of society. “The environment, of course, is neither pure nor obsolete. Rather, it both exceeds the cultural and invokes a performative, heterogeneous discourse that shapes our entire lives. More than a location, the environment is what it does materially and symbolically” (Pezzullo 2011, 1). Environment has its connection with broader cultural, political as well as ethical concerns. It remains a critical issue of great concern. Environment has become the master narrative which invites several actors to be part of it.

But the perception about environment is not the same in every society. There are different discursive frameworks in different societies. Each society or country has its own perception as well as world view about the conception of nature or environment.

Policy style- or the interactions of the policy cultures- is perhaps the most obvious or visible way in which national cultures can be seen to influence environmental politics. Under the formal surface of policy-making, however, there are a range of somewhat more elusive factors which have to do with national “mentalities,” or ways of life. They are often difficult to identify in any rigorous fashion, but there can be little doubt that people in different countries are affected by different “mindsets” or discursive frameworks (Jamison 2001, 105).

What Jamison observed from his research is significant in the field of environmental politics. To study environmental politics through the lens of discursive framework can be a useful way of identifying the place of nature in shaping a country’s national identity. For instance, “Gandhi’s practice has served as a frame of reference for all Indian environmentalists and, in its international influence, indicates how particular national discursive frameworks need not degenerate into “nationalisms” (Jamison 2001, 111).

1.2 A Discursive Approach

Discourse analysis is one of the significant theoretical approaches in doing Cultural Studies. “In recent years, discourse analysis has emerged as an increasingly influential method for analyzing the production, reception and strategic deployment of environmental texts, images and ideas. Although closely identified with social constructionism, nonetheless, discourse analysis has been practiced with good results by subscribers to other ‘schools’ of environmental theory and research, most notably, critical theorists, political ecologists and international policy analysts” (Hannigan 2006, 36).

Discourse can be defined as an assemblage of ideas, concepts and categories. It is used in a range of meanings. It is “varying from the analysis of linguistic regularities to the normative quality of discussion” (Hajer and Versteeg 2005, 175). “A discourse consists of culturally or socially produced groups of ideas containing texts (which contain signs and codes) and representations (which describe power in relation to others). As a way of thinking, a discourse often represents a structure of knowledge and power (Sardar and Loon 2010, 14). “From Foucault, Cultural Studies has derived the idea of discourse as a regulated way of speaking that defines and produces objects of knowledge, thereby governing the way topics are talked about and practices conducted” (Barker & Galasinski 2001,12). Discourse gives meaning to social as well as political phenomena. They are produced and reproduced through a kind of identifiable set of practices. “Discourse constructs, defines and produces the objects of knowledge in an intelligible way while excluding other forms of reasoning as unintelligible” (Barker 2006, 101). Discourse involves the production and spread of knowledge through language. It is embedded in language. It constructs meaning and relationships. At the same time it helps to define legitimate knowledge. Each discourse is based on certain assumptions, judgments and arguments. These provide the basic terms for analyses, debates and discussions.

Discourses provide ways of talking about a particular topic with repeated motifs or clusters of ideas, practices and forms of knowledge across a range of sites of activity. This phenomenon we may call a discursive formation. A discursive formation is a pattern of discursive events that brings into being a

common object across a number of sites. They are regulated maps of meaning or ways of speaking through which objects and practices acquire meaning (Barker 2006, 102).

Power is the most important phenomenon in a discursive formation. Discourses are more often regarded as sign of power. Power controls and determines the social as well as cultural condition. It also determines who can speak along with determining the time and place.

Discourses are always embedded in material political realities. The policies and practices of all agents are influenced by these political realities. Foucault was concerned about the production of subjectivity through various discursive formations. “For Foucault, subjectivity is a discursive production. That is, discourse (as regulated ways of speaking/ practice) enables speaking persons to come into existence... A subject position is that perspective or set of regulated discursive meanings from which discourse makes sense” (Barker 2000, 129). A subject, according to Foucault, is the ‘product of power’ as ‘power’ is distributed through different power relations. This is the reason why Foucault’s works were mostly concerned with the historical investigation of power.

The structures, through which subjects are fashioned, as both minds and bodies, are termed by Foucault *discourse*. A discourse could be described as a set of recurring statements that define a particular cultural object (e.g. madness, criminality, sexuality) and provide the concepts and terms through which such an object can be studied and discussed. Discourses produce distinctions between what can and what cannot be said about an object and establish who has the right to say whatever can be said” (Cavallaro 2001, 90).

Thus, according to Foucault, power and knowledge are interrelated concepts. Foucault altered the theoretical understanding of power. He negates the paradigmatic notion about power that power resides in the hands of the institutions, particularly the state. Rather he states that power is embedded in all social relationships. Power is not just exercised by the ruling class but it is the fundamental feature of everyday social interactions.

Discourse analysis can therefore help to take a critical stance towards certain “established” facts. It can be defined as the study of language which is used in particular discursive formations. In social science, discourse analysis can be placed within the social constructionist approach. “This tradition has anti-essentialist ontology; it assumes the existence of multiple, socially constructed realities instead of a single reality, governed by immutable natural law. Characteristically, the approach takes a critical stance towards ‘truth’ and puts emphasis on the communications through which knowledge is exchanged” (Hajer and Versteeg 2006, 176). Reality is a social construction. Therefore the analysis of meaning is significant to explore “unseen” truths. Thus the main intention of discourse analysis is to unveil how language shapes one’s perception about the world and reality.

Hajer and Versteeg observe that discourse analysis has three particular strengths: the capacity to reveal the role of language in politics, to reveal the embeddedness of language in practice and to illuminate mechanisms and answer ‘how questions’ (2006, 176). The realities of the discourse are framed through the power of language. In the Foucauldian perspective, language shapes how one views the world; it is language which constructs reality. “Language has the capacity to make politics, to create signs and symbols that shift power balances, to render events harmless or, on the contrary, to create political conflict” (Hajer and Versteeg 2006, 179). Another significant factor in the process of articulation of discourse is the presence of a diverse group of actors. “The study of discourse also allows one to see how a diversity of actors actively try to influence the definition of the problem” (Hajer and Versteeg 2006, 176). Quite obviously therefore, discourse analysis is very useful in interpreting environmental issues. Application of discourse analysis in analyzing environmental issues will help to know about how diverse groups of actors actively involve in shaping and moulding our views concerning these issues. Discourse analysis has thus paved the way to answer the “how” questions. It shows how politics is conducted and allows us to look at the active participation of different actors.

Environmental discourses have become a matter of great concern in recent years. There are multiple perspectives to address an environmental issue.

“Environmental issues do not present themselves in well-defined boxes labeled radiation, national parks, pandas, coral reefs, rainforest, heavy metal pollution, and the like....Thus environmental problems tend to be interconnected and multidimensional; they are, in a word, complex. Complexity refers to the number and variety of elements and interactions in the environment of a decision system” (Dryzek 2005, 8). The multiple perceptions towards human engagement with the environment have developed different discourses. The environmental crisis of the contemporary period is in itself the root of various discursive formations. Environmental discourses can be said to be a composition of various linguistic devices. It articulates our perceptions about various environmental issues as well as the relationship between humans and the natural environment.

It is observed that just as there are a multiplicity of environmental problems there are also a multiplicity of environmental discourses to “understand” and “manage” the environment. Environmental problems can never be understood through a single environmental discourse. There are complementary as well as competing discourses for discussing environmental problems. Different scholars have discussed environmental discourses from different perspectives. “Hajer (1995), Dryzek (2000) and Irwin (2001) have focused on discourses within the political arena; Herndl and Brown (1996) have highlighted the use of environmental discourses within nature writing; Van Koppen (2000) has demonstrated and discussed environmental discourses’ effects in environmental sociology; and Hanningan (2006) have examined the implications of environmental discourses in society at large” (Gustafsson 2013,41-42). Therefore, discourse analysis has impacted the study of environmental politics.

Appreciation of nature as a contested terrain is one of the important contributions of discourse analysis to environmental politics. Nature is a culturally constructed and reinvented concept. Everyone from a scientist to a layman has defined nature from their own perspectives. Discourse analysis can be a powerful tool to analyze the policy making processes with regard to the environment. It also helps to know about the shifting dominance of a particular discourse.

Discourse analysis has defined environmental discourse as cultural politics. Dryzek defines discourse as “a shared way of apprehending the world, embedded in language” (Dryzek 2005, 9). He goes on to say that “it enables those who subscribe to it to interpret bits of information and put them together into coherent stories or accounts. Discourses construct meanings and relationships, helping to define common sense and legitimate knowledge” (Dryzek 2005, 9). Dryzek mentions the presence of powerful actors in the development of particular discourses. According to him discourses are always influenced by political power. However it can be regarded as exercise of power by a section of powerful actors. Here interests of the powerful are advanced and others are suppressed. Dryzek remarks,

Discourse is important, and conditions the way we define, interpret, and address environmental affairs. This should not be taken to mean that there is only discourse when it comes to environmental problems. Postmodernists believe that there is no escape from specific viewpoints, such that ‘nature’ and ‘wilderness’ are mainly social constructions, understood culturally as the product of societies that have, among other things, removed indigenous peoples from their landscapes. Thus nature should not be treated as merely a subcategory of culture, as an extreme postmodern position would require (Dryzek 2005,12).

Dryzek goes on to say,

Just because something is socially interpreted does not mean it is unreal. Pollution does cause illness, species do become extinct, ecosystems cannot absorb stress indefinitely, tropical forests are disappearing. But people can make very different things of these phenomena and---- especially – their interconnections, providing grist for political dispute. The existence of these competing understandings is why we have environmental politics (or any kind of politics) to begin with (Dryzek 2005, 12).

Dryzek identifies four broad categories of environmental discourses: (1) Environmental problem-solving (2) Survivalism (3) Sustainability and (4) Green radicalism (Dryzek 2005). According to him each category of the above discourse identifies, constructs and privileges some of the basic entities like

governments, markets, humans, resources, technologies, and ecosystems. Relationships between these entities are described as competitive, cooperative, hierarchical or equal. The existence of motivated agents or actors is a significant point in the analysis of Dryzek; he calls these motivated agents “ecological subjects”, a group that includes “enlightened elites, rational consumers, ignorant and short-sighted populations, virtuous ordinary citizens...” (Dryzek 2005, 18). Dryzek’s analysis is based on the functions of the discourses. He has discussed about the use of metaphors as rhetorical devices in these discourses. “Metaphors are rhetorical devices, deployed to convince listeners or readers by putting a situation in a particular light” (Dryzek 2005, 19). According to him these metaphors have the power to determine the position of the readers or listeners whether they accept or reject a particular philosophy. “These metaphors, which describe the environment in such hyperbolic or romantic ways, undoubtedly contribute to people’s attitudes and behaviours towards the environment...” (Massey 2009, 8).

The application of Foucault’s concept of governmentality is a significant step of discourse analysis towards environmental politics. Foucault has used this concept to identify and qualify the emergence of the modern nation state and the deployment of power. The concept of governmentality helps to understand the role of various agencies or institutions in exercising power. “‘Governmentality’ is the broadest term, and occurs in the context of Foucault’s historical interpretation of the literature on ‘reason of state’ in Europe from around the sixteenth century. Foucault identifies and qualifies the emergence of modern deployment of power in the context of three axes: institutional centralization around governmental agencies, the emergence of new instrumental knowledge, and capillary diffusion of power effects across the entire social body” (Darier 1999, 21). Foucauldian understanding of discourse analysis helps to locate the discursive power struggle which is hidden behind environmental politics. It helps to make sense of environmental politics as a process that attempts to answer a problem of the real world.

The present work uses discourse analysis as a tool to understand environmental issues. Besides this, I have undertaken textual analysis of various non-fiction

texts, government documents, news reports. Hence I am looking at the history of the context as it is essential to know the socio-political situation where environmental discourses develop. “A crucial part of this history consists of the kind of politics surrounding, shaping, and shaped by the discourse. In some cases the politics might be that of a social movement or political party; in other cases, governmental commissions and intergovernmental negotiations; in others, administrative control; in others, elite bargaining; in others, rationalistic policy design. Sometimes there will be little in the way of politics at all, as, for example, in the case of ‘lifestyle’ greens. Sometimes the politics may be local, sometimes national, sometimes transnational, sometimes global” (Dryzek 2005, 20).

This work is about environmental politics which describes and analyses select environmental issues of Assam. It analyses the constitution or shaping of environmental subject position. The study concentrates on the construction of environmental subject position as a result of intersection of environmental discourses and various narrative discourses. The concept of ‘environmentality’ has been used here to analyze the environmental politics of Assam. The term environmentality is the union of two words: environment and the Foucauldian concept of Governmentality. It is used as an approach to analyze environmental politics which is the result of the emergent interrelationship between power, knowledge, institutions and subjectivities.

Though the discursive approach is useful to analyze power relations, it cannot always suffice to offer a bigger picture of society. It does not pay enough attention to the material condition of society. For instance, it does not pay attention to the inequalities between different social groups. It does not take cognizance of the role of social structures. “..[D]iscourse analysis remains largely condemned to ‘the markings of textuality’, a play of semantics, a decontextualized set of hermeneutic interpretations that can all too easily be dismissed. More than this, by fixing on textual effects (and on discourse as effect at the cost of an awareness of discourse as also the instrument of power), discourse analysis aids and abets in the contemporary effacement and denial of its material effects and appears to risk a dangerous reductionism in thinking power” (Hook 2001, 38). Thus, while the usefulness of the discursive approach to

undertake a textual analysis of texts is indubitable, it needs to be supplemented by reflections on the lived experiences of people. Thus, the present work is informed by the writings of thinkers like Hook (2001) who have pointed to the importance of not losing sight of the “extra-discursive” in an exclusive concern with the discursive.

1.2.1 Collection of Empirical Data

This work was set in the broad framework of Cultural Studies. Multiple methodologies were used for conducting research in this particular topic. It combined discourse analysis and analysis of empirical data. Hence the work is based on both field research and textual analysis. Empirical data were collected from the field. Field research was conducted in the different places of three districts of Assam namely, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji located in the northern part of the river Brahmaputra. All these three districts have fertile lands for vegetation. At the same time, natural calamity like flood regularly occurs in different places of these three districts. Research data were collected in the following way:

- i) Regular field visit was conducted since the initial stage of my research. I have collected various narratives from the field for the development of my study. Observation and interviews were used for the purpose.
- ii) Textual materials were collected from News papers, Periodic Journals, School Text books, television and other electronic media.
- iii) During the course of study I spoke to several social actors which helped me to look at the topic from different perspectives.

1.3 Situating Assam

Assam is situated in the North-Eastern Part of India. It is rich in natural “resources”. The natural world of Assam has played a decisive role in constructing the sense of an Assamese identity. The hills and plains, rivers and forests stand as symbols to depict the national identity of Assam. The early Assamese literatures contain descriptions about the rich natural world of Assam. The understanding of nature in these literatures reflects a romantic view. Through

his many writings the neo-Vaisnavite saint Sankardeva beautifully depicts the scenic beauty of the natural environment of Assam. Folk literatures of different genres contain wonderful descriptions of the natural setting of Assam. In due course of time different historical events have changed the view of the people towards nature. Hence Assam occupies a significant place in the place of environmental history of India.

Assam has experienced rapid environmental as well as socio-economic changes in recent years. Development has become the site where economic as well as environmental contradictions tend to be most forcefully worked out. Another significant point to note is that the state has been facing various kinds of socio-political struggles. The media has very often painted Assam as a “problem-ridden” state. Traditionally, the ecology of production and livelihood shows Assam’s dependence on agriculture. The practice of rice cultivation has been a major characteristic of Assam’s agriculture. The pattern of production and resource use has met the demand of time and keeps on changing with the historical situation.

1.3.1 A Brief Account of the Environmental History of Assam

Without a historical account of the environment of Assam it is not an easy task to contextualize the research problem. Assam is called the place of “red river and blue hills” which suggests the geographical characteristics of the place itself. It is a fact corroborated by historical evidence that traditionally the society of Assam was rural and agrarian. Here in this chapter I begin my brief historical sojourn by taking the invasion of the British to this land as the starting point. The advent of the British irreversibly altered the process of environmental imagination and a new regime of discursive formation regarding natural environment got an impetus.

1.3.2 Pre-Colonial Period

The natural environment served as means of subsistence of life for the people of this land during the pre-colonial period. The classical literatures of the ancient times and the religious texts such as the *Mahabharata*, *Puranas*, *Tantras* and

others have described the pre-historic situation of the region. Inscriptions in various copper plates provide us some information about the history of Assam. These texts contain description about the early ages. Since the arrival of the Ahoms to this land during the 13th century the pattern of resource use underwent changes. The Ahoms established their kingdom in Gargaon (presently in Sivsagar) and later on expanded their territory in the valley. The Ahoms ruled Assam for 600 years. "...[The] Ahom state in spite of its rather rigid structure, which ultimately contributed to its downfall, showed remarkable vision and skill in organizing the agriculture and cottage industries, a vast and impressive system of public works for water-control and defense, a polity that united heterogeneous tribes and warring ethnic groups by force, guile or friendship, and a militia that resisted foreign invasions until royal despotism and arrogance provoked the people into tumultuous rebellion that weakened it decisively" (Gohain 2010, 37).

It is asserted that during the pre-Ahom period people of this land used to practise shifting cultivation. "The Morans and Barahis- the people the Ahoms first came across and absorbed- as well as large sections of other Bodo people, including the Dimasas, were all shifting cultivators" (Guha 1983, 25). The introduction of wet rice cultivation by the Ahom rulers had cleared the path of settled agriculture. It changed the relationship between the people and the land. It is asserted that the Ahoms passed on the technology of wet rice cultivation to the other native dwellers of this valley.

"Pre-Ahom Upper Assam was an undulating alluvial plain, full of jungles and marshes under the given conditions of a heavy rainfall. Land reclamation was therefore the first task. The Ahoms, with their superior iron implements and animal (buffalo) power, were equal to this task. Slope and water-control are the two most important crucial factors for wet rice culture....They uprooted the forests and reduced the undulating surface to a dead level so that the rain water, or water led from the bounded hill streams, could remain standing on it, when required. Over the centuries, they built and maintained a network of embankments for overall water control" (Guha 1983, 25). There is ambiguity among the scholars about the system of production during the pre-Ahom period. The fact is that the evidence of rules and regulations, taxation, and nature of

institutions during this period are not very clear. Inscriptions are the only source of information about this period.

During the pre- imperial Ahom period the forest resources were the basis of inter-state commercial transactions. There was good trade relationship between the neighboring states. History provides ample evidence about this complex trade system which was dependent on forest produced articles. If we look at the Ahom-Mughal wars from the perspective of political economy we can say that the Mughal rulers were lured by the temptation to secure access to the forest resources of Assam. Thus, the natural resource of Assam was one of the important reasons for successive attacks by the Mughals. “In the pre-colonial time, beyond the Ahom frontier, taxes on a variety of forest produce, which included cotton and birds, contributed to the revenue. The state exchequer also relied heavily on the exploitation of the forest resources, including the elephant. The most commonly used item was timber for constructing boats. The Ahom military system was crucially interested in securing its waterways and hence required sustained investments for naval warfare. Similarly, elephants were usually procured in large numbers not only to strengthen the military system but also for everyday uses of the royal palaces” (Saikia 2011, 12).

Apart from this several studies about that period reveal that during the pre-colonial Ahom period many of the forested areas were converted into agrarian zones. The new system of production (settled agriculture) encouraged the Ahom rulers to clear more forest land. It is to be remembered that the culture of the wet rice cultivation played an important role in the process of state formation by the Ahoms. Hence the aim to expand the crop fields by clearing forest land was driven by the motive of producing surplus yield for the subsistence of the population. Ahom rulers had control over the forests. In spite of this, they encouraged the interested peasants to clear the forest land for harvesting.

Besides these, there were some feudal lords and tribal chiefs who held the rights over particular forest-areas. During the Ahom period people were required to pay taxes for some forest products. “... [T]he Ahom rulers did levy taxes on a large variety of forest products like aloes, wood, lac, ivory, etc. The government also

appointed officers like the *Habiyal Barua* and the *Kathkatiya Barua* to look after forest products and forest timbers respectively” (Handique 2004,24). It is clear from this that the Ahom rulers put emphasis on the management of forest resources and that they used to make use of various forest products. The Ahom kingdom used a vast array of forest resources for their daily needs and for making of different equipments of warfare, particularly boats. It is worth noting that there was no idea of creating protected or reserved forests at that period.

1.3.3 Colonial Period

The advent of the British in the year 1826 as a result of the Yandaboo treaty marked a change in the history of the natural environment of Assam. During the colonial period discourses about natural environment acquired a new meaning. Gadgil and Guha pointed out that

The ecological history of British India is of special interest in view of the intimate connection that recent research has established between western imperialism and environmental degradation. World ecology has been profoundly altered by western capitalism, in whose dynamic expansion other ecosystems were disrupted, first through trade and later by colonialism. Not only did such interventions virtually reshape the social, ecological and demographic characteristics of the habitats they intruded upon, they also ensured that the ensuing changes would primarily benefit Europe” (Gadgil & Guha 2013, 102).

Interestingly, discourses of nature conservation existed and continued simultaneously with exploitation of natural resources. In the process the natural environment took on new and often, complex meanings. Nature, in this period, was primarily viewed from the perspectives of science and commerce. Scientific management and conservation practices were used as tool to preserve forest as well as the natural environment. On the other hand the commodification of natural objects and treating them as resource cleared the path of commerce to enter the discourse. During this colonial period the natural environment of Assam had gone through a structural change. Here I use the term ‘structural’ to refer to the whole process of management and organizational structure of the natural

environment. "... [O]n several accounts there were perceptible changes in the way the people understood and related with the forests since the nineteenth century. These changes can be broadly understood in terms of management of the jungles, conversion of the forest resources into saleable commodity, and also understanding about the forest" (Saikia 2011, 2). Henceforth the discussion around natural environment became a part of the political debate of the time. The top-down process of environment management and conservation opened up the ground for environmental politics.

1.3.3.1 Creation of Protected Areas

The rich 'jungles' of Assam attracted the attention of the colonial officials. Policies were formulated to tame the 'jungle' and convert it into an ordered forest. "... [F]orests had traversed a long journey from wilderness to an ordered jungle, from petty trade in forest products to brisk business in the international market, and from hunting areas to national parks"(Saikia 2011,2). The colonial intervention in the rich flora and fauna of Assam led to the creation of different protected areas like reserved forests, national parks, wildlife sanctuaries in later years. The writings of colonial administrators were full of romantic descriptions about the natural beauty of Assam. As soon as they discovered huge amount of natural resources of the place, Assam entered the larger politico-economic stratum of the world. The colonial administrators were then involved in mapping the jungles of Assam from the perspective of their economic viability and commercial importance. Henceforth a new landscape emerged when they established a market for these commodities in Calcutta. "By the middle of the nineteenth century the East India Company was in total control of the political territory of Assam.....By the fourth decade of the nineteenth century the forests tracts and its resources had firmly entered into the market economy" (Saikia 2011, 31-35). It was the commercial lure of timber that led to the creation of protected areas. The company administrators surveyed and studied the nature of jungles of Assam and tried to give it a shape that facilitated administration. "In so far as the main aim of the new department was the production of large commercial timber and the generation of revenue, it worked willingly or

unwillingly to enforce a separation between agriculture and forests” (Gadgil & Guha 2013, 123).

This kind of thought engineered the programme of forestry in India during the colonial era and Assam was no exception to it. “The rudimentary forestry was given a new lease of life after the establishment of the Imperial Forest Department in 1864. The department was entrusted with the responsibility of identifying the sources of supply of strong and durable timbers to be used as railway sleepers” (Saikia 2011, 51). Initially the forest department of Assam was under the provincial administration of Bengal. For the smooth functioning of the administration, the company appointed an Assistant Conservator of Forest in the year 1868 who was assigned the duty of examining and surveying the forest resources of Assam.

In the year 1874 Assam came under the separate chief commissionership. Henceforth the department of forest became an independent wing. Many forested areas were mapped. Different laws and regulations were enacted which facilitated the systematic exploitation of resources. It needs to be remembered that the colonial administration had started the process of deforestation in India. “By the close of the nineteenth century there was a full proof mechanism to extract timber from the forest and to take it to the appropriate markets...In the twentieth century, even after Independence, the commercial prospect of the forests never diminished. In fact the history of forest conservation remains an untold success story of commerce” (Saikia 2011, 146).

Creation of reserved forests and protected and open forests with an aim to collect revenue as well as to manage the forest affairs were the result of that exercise. By implementing different laws the imperial forestry programme opened up a new chapter of conservation of Assam’s forests. During the course of time the attitude of the colonial administrators towards the natural world of Assam underwent many changes. The journey from a wild jungle to a managed forest implies this. “In the early part of the nineteenth century, the company officials were merely looking for the commercial viability of the forest in Assam. But later in the century, the colonial state had to address a mixed bag of responsibilities,

including the problem of conservation, the expansion of the plantation and agricultural frontier, and the demand for more revenue. These complex worries continued to determine the exigencies of the forest administration of Assam” (Saikia 2011, 28).

1.3.3.2 Plantation of tea

The favorable climate condition and vast array of land in Assam encouraged the colonial masters to develop a tea industry. Tea was discovered in upper Assam in the year 1823 and very soon it became one of the most profitable industries for the imperial rulers. “The idea of introducing British enterprise, capital and skill in agriculture caught the imagination of the Board of Revenue and the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal. Meanwhile, the growing prospects of tea culture in Assam – the formation of the tea Committee in early 1834, the starting of the Government Experimental Tea Gardens in 1836 and the first successful manufacture of Assam Tea in December 1837 – made Jenkins’s scheme of colonization all the more acceptable. In 1840, two-thirds of the Government Experimental Gardens were transferred to the Assam Company, rent-free for the initial years. To make the wastelands available for special cultivation on attractive terms, a set of rules were framed. These were known as the Wasteland Rules of 6 March 1838” (Guha 1977, 13). Plantation of tea encouraged the planters to acquire a vast array of forest land. “The tea-planters, with effective support from the colonial administration, came to occupy a vast landmass. In the land thus owned, existing jungles or forest covers were cleared off and replaced with tea seedlings and other trees, which were meant to work as shadow trees for the tea saplings. This not only changed the landscape permanently but also transformed forever the pattern of relationship of man and nature, also leading to extensive landscape fragmentation” (Saikia 2011, 11). Tea plantation thus played a distinctive role in creating a new environmental history of Assam. “Imperial capital and enterprise transformed Assam into a plantation economy characterized as much by rapid demographic change as by the visible emergence of ordered tea gardens and ricefields in place of forested, riverine, and common lands” (Sharma 2012, 8). Rapid expansion of tea plantation increased the population density through migration of labour from other provinces of the Indian state. This process of

migration had far reaching consequences in respect of resource sharing with the natives. Many of the forest lands of Brahmaputra valley were converted into tea gardens.

British sought to establish full control and monopoly over this industry by forming the Assam Tea Company in 1840. Special rules, like the Waste Land Grant Rules of 1838, old Assam Rules of 1854, Fee Simple Rules of 1862, Revised Fee Simple Rules of 1874, and New Lease Rules of 1876, enabled the British Planters to own large tracts of the most fertile land of Assam at highly concessional rates. Under the Waste Land Grant Rules of 1838, for instance, one-fourth of the total land acquired for a tea garden could be enjoyed tax free for life by the owner and even the rest of the land could be tax-free for periods varying from 5 to 20 years depending on the productivity of the soil. Thus the British planters became the owners of almost seven lakh acres of tax-free land in Assam, while the local Assamese peasants paid two to three rupees per acre as land revenue to the British masters (Misra 1980, 1358).

The gradual expansion of tea industry further accelerated the process of deforestation. The tea planters, by the grace of the colonial administration, started to grab more and more land by clearing forests and merging agricultural land. Another notable point is that the tea plantations purchased timber from the forest department. The forests of Assam supplied wood for the purpose of making tea-boxes which were at first imported from outside. Many saw mills came up for the purpose of producing storage boxes for exporting tea. Gradually, the forests of Assam became the most enduring provider of raw materials to run those mills. "Tea cultivation rapidly expanded into a million- pound industry bringing large colonial revenues. The name Assam became synonymous with tea, an everyday staple for households worldwide. A range of interlocutors, from British bio-prospectors to American missionaries to Assamese gentry, extolled the Edenic transformation underway, of a jungle into a garden. They conjured up a future ordered landscape of export-producing tea plantation, a stark contrast to the partially cultivated and imperfectly commercialized state of nature that they saw in the present" (Sharma 2012, 3).

1.3.3.3 Establishment of Railways

Establishment of railways for transportation of the resources was another important event that altered the natural landscape of Assam. “Railways first entered Assam in 1881 when the Assam Railway and trading company began construction of a 65-km long metre gauge line from Dibrugarh to Makum collieries in Margherita for the sole purpose of transporting tea and oil”(www.nfr.indianrailways.gov.in). The expansion of the railway network implied greater use of forest resources for use as fuel and sleepers. “Negotiation between the railway companies and the Forest Department gradually improved the commercial prospects. The first large-scale trade order came from the East Bengal Railway, which required more than 300,000 of sleepers for their extension line between Dhubri and Guwahati. In 1902, the department entered into an agreement with the company to supply 50,000 of sleepers from the sal-bearing tracts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Khasi hills, and Garo hills” (Saikia 2011, 178).The establishment of railways in this region was the result of colonial greed for natural resources of this region. Thus the railways remain the historic symbol to delineate the attitude of colonial masters.

1.3.3.4 Exploration of Mineral Resources

Exploration of minerals was one of the important developments in the economic history of Assam during the British Period. The East India Company undertook exploration of mineral resources in the region. They appointed scholars having vast knowledge regarding the region to chalk out the list of resources. They were interested in exploring coal, lime, oil and other mineral resources in this region. Coal was discovered and commercially produced in the nineteenth century in Eastern Assam which immediately became a sought after fuel for the railways and tea industry.

The discovery of petroleum in this region began a new era which attracted a lot of international attention. The petroleum industry, like the tea plantations, played a significant role in the British imperial economy. Petroleum was discovered in the nineteenth century. Subsequently, it began to attract global capital. At the

juncture of policy formulation of the post-independence period, the discovery of petroleum played a crucial role.

The colonial intervention in the process of resource use changed the socio-economic discourse of Assam. The system of resource use by the colonial masters initiated clashes between people and the state regarding the access to resources. This process was integrally related to the matter of land right of the commons. Large scale deforestation was a distinctive phenomenon of the colonial period and this was true in the context of the whole of India. In fact, the British initiated this problem in all their colonies. Hence Gadgil and Guha (2013, 102) term it as an ‘ecological watershed’ initiated by the colonial masters. The land settlement policy initiated by the British in Assam offered the Assamese peasantry long term titles to land. But the Assamese peasants were not interested in it. “Why did Assamese peasants resist long-term titles to land, despite what to us would seem to be its obvious advantages? This puzzle provides an important clue to understanding the impact of the colonial land settlement project on Assam and of the larger meaning of colonial rule in terms of the shifts in the global geography of resource use” (Baruah 2001, 110). The land settlement policy of the British was a historic deed in connection to the post-colonial situation of Assam. Baruah remarks that it was “the most important administrative enterprise of the colonial administration in Assam” (Baruah 2001, 110). He goes on to say that, “... [T]he project of protecting existing land rights was shaped by a whole host of ideas that the British brought with them. Among them were their ideas about ‘civilization’: a dense population and industry, for instance, were seen as markers of civilization and, settled agriculture belonged to a higher plane than shifting agriculture or hunting and gathering. These ideas shaped the land settlement project in practice, and were key to determining the winners and losers of the project” (Baruah 2001, 110).

The colonial programme for settling the issue of land led to a socio-political debate in the post-independence period. “The new rules of property provided the legal foundation for the new projects- those that the early colonials thought will bring ‘civilization’ to Assam and in post-colonial times came to be seen as projects that would bring about development, modernization and progress”

(Baruah 2001, 114). Baruah again states that “The goal of the British land settlement policy was ostensibly to recognize all traditional rights to land and create long term hereditary and transferable rights in land. But even if one assumes that the colonial authorities had managed to recognize the property rights of all peasant families to their *ga mati*, this would still have radically restricted the peasants’ traditional access to other lands” (Baruah 2001, 114). However, the issue of land question in Assam later became a debated topic. The right to access land was regarded as an inalienable right of the people at one point of time. This was altered by the colonial engagement in matters relating to land rights. This alteration had a far reaching consequence in the formation of environmental discourses of later periods.

1.3.4 The Post-Independence Period

The environmental history of Assam underwent a lot of change during the post-colonial period. Several new issues came up as a consequence of colonial intervention in the natural environment. “Colonial forestry marked an ecological, economic and political watershed in Indian forest history. The intensification of conflict over forest produce was a major consequence of changes in the patterns of resource use it initiated” (Gadgil and Guha 2013, 129). The colonial era initiated the kind of environmentality which has become one of the important causes of conflict of our time.

“While there was a spectre of change in the colonial era in the way natural resources were seen and understood these changes had left behind a legacy of social conflicts that were paramount to the political landscape of the late twentieth century Assam” (Saikia 2011, 13). Acquisition of land by the British for the purpose of extracting natural resources and planting tea directly impacted agrarian life. Besides this, various ethnic clashes of the post-independence period have their roots in the colonial times. “The land distribution movement, which started during the early 1940s, continued to grip the region and gained new fervor after 1947. Since then, the issues of escalating conflicts over land and resources have dominated the socio-political narratives of the region” (Sharma et al. 2012, 68).

Apart from this the natural calamities like flood and earthquake impacted the socio-economic life of Assam. Floods were a regular phenomenon of Assam. It is to be remembered that Assam has continued with the traditions of economic activities which were started by the colonial masters. Assam is very rich in oil and tea production but it still remains an “underdeveloped” state in comparison to other states of India. “Despite being the country’s largest producer of tea, oil, plywood and forest products, Assam is one of the poorest and industrially most backward states of India” (Misra 1980, 1357).

During the colonial times, or earlier, Assam was the favoured destination for various migrating communities. This created a lot of pressure in the agrarian life of Assam. In the post- independence period migration from East- Pakistan (now Bangladesh) has become the most talked about socio-political issue of Assam in contemporary times. The demographic expansion of the post-independence period has created a lot of pressure in the process of resource sharing among the indigenous dwellers of the land. A series of ethnic clashes and demand for greater autonomy and territoriality (space) have become serious issues.

Perhaps the rich natural deposits and large cultivable lands was an attraction for people to come and settle in this place. In various writings (particularly the travel accounts) of the colonial masters, Assam was described as a land of dense forests with a vast array of uninhabited land, full of wild beasts. “This portrait of early nineteenth- century Assam- a land with vast expanses of uninhabited land- provides a useful vantage point against which to consider Assam’s economic and demographic transformation in the subsequent decades. As a result of the British conquest, Assam became a land frontier attracting large scale immigration” (Baruah 1999, 44). The production of tea and the exploration of the large treasure of minerals initiated the rapid rate of immigration to this land. “For reasons rooted in the history of this region, the Brahmaputra valley had an abundance of cultivable wasteland when the British occupied the territory in 1826. Land-hungry peasants, mostly Muslims, from over-populated East Bengal flocked to Assam under the patronage of the colonial administration as well as local *zamindars* and *mouzadars*” (Chaudhuri 2002, 3). Amalendu Guha stated that,

The period from 1826 to 1873 was a period of transition for Assamese's pre-capitalist economy into its colonial phase. British capital penetrated the economy and started building an infrastructure to sustain the exotic capitalistic set-up....The economy was monetized. The closed society was exposed to immigration of labour, new skills, new vices and new ideas. Marwari trader- cum-moneylenders monopolized the internal trade as agents of the British trading houses of Calcutta, who in turn worked for their metropolitan counterparts in London. Bengali clerks, doctors and lawyers, with the advantage of their early initiation to English education and the British- Indian administrative system, monopolised Government jobs and profession”(Guha 1977, 25).

These historical events of migration during colonial period have become a never-ending process in the later periods. “Assam remained a land frontier attracting large-scale immigration through much of the twentieth century” (Baruah 1999, 49). Baruah goes on to say, “Immigration to Assam thus began as a consequence of the colonial conquest. Once Assam became a part of British India, it came to be perceived as a part of the (pre-partition) pan- Indian economic space. Colonial policymakers saw Assam as a land frontier that needed more settlers and actively pursued policies to encourage immigration” (Baruah 1999, 64).

This trend of migration brought the concept of indigeneity to focus. During the colonial period, which is termed by Amalendu Guha as *Planter Raj*, the natives were treated as the *other*. “The right of way through the tea plantations became a major issue in Assam's anti- colonial politics in the twentieth century. In many parts of Assam a villager had to walk many miles around tea plantations. The use of roads that went through plantations was restricted. For instance, “natives” could not go through a tea plantation on bicycle or on horseback, or with umbrella open, in the presence of a white man” (Baruah 1999, 49). However, the process of ‘othering’ also worked at another level: the indigenous communities looked at the migrants as the ‘others’ who threatened to “usurp” their lands.

The indigenous communities thus felt threatened and victimized on two fronts. Firstly, there was a strong sense of marginalization fostered by certain policies of the British government. The decision to make Bengali the medium of instruction

for the educational institutes of Assam in 1836 (subsequently revoked in 1873, thanks to the strong protest of some of the champions of Assamese nationalism in the nineteenth century) strengthened this sense of marginalization of the Assamese in their own lands. The British encouraged a free play of the politics of identity, pitting one community against the other. Further, the Ahom oligarchy was completely sidelined by the British, a fact that was not taken kindly by the locals.

Secondly, the rapid and large-scale immigration of communities from other parts of the country to the state continued unabated in spite of the voice of protest that was raised by some of the leaders of Assam during and immediately after colonial rule. This made the Assamese feel that their views and concerns were increasingly sidelined in the postcolonial state.

In any case, this rhetoric of neglect continued to prevail even after the post-independence period. But the theorization of that rhetoric was informed by various historical and socio-political realities of the 19th and 20th centuries.

In addition to the events pointed above, there were several historical situations which reinforced this sense of marginalization among the natives. In 1874 Assam was formed as a chief commissionership province. “The inconvenience of governing the Assam districts as a division of the unwieldy Bengal Presidency had long recognized. Quite different local conditions and the unique position there of its European planters warranted the creation of a new province to ensure administrative efficiency. Accordingly Assam proper, together with Cachar, Goalpara, Garo Hills and the other hills districts, was formed into a Chief Commissioner’s province on 6 February 1874” (Guha 1977, 27). But the population density of the new province was thin. Hence the potentiality of revenue was not much. Therefore, with a view to make the province financially stable the colonial administration included Sylhet, the populous Bengali speaking district in it. This district constituted a large part of Bengal. That is why a significant protest against this act was constituted. Subsequently, several other territories were incorporated in Assam. The boundaries of Assam were always changing. In pursuit of economic gains, the colonial masters were always

concerned with the functional aspect of that classification. They were not concerned of the cultural or historical ramifications of their strategies.

In 1905 the colonial administration combined Assam with Eastern Bengal, the present day Bangladesh. They went on to dismiss the very name “Assam” to mean the newly constructed province. But the pressure from the tea industry (as the name Assam was synonymous with the tea of this region) prevented the act from being brought into force. In the following paragraph I look at the role of the political machinery involved in the history of Sylhet during the “execution” of partition.

The intention in placing these cases here is to show how the rhetoric of neglect originated in the historical context of the colonial period and continued to have far reaching consequences in the post independence period. The partition of India greatly impacted the socio-economic life of Assam in the subsequent years. “Partition came to assume an altogether different significance in Assam during the post- independence decades. It has been endowed with ‘surplus-value’ to earning rich dividends. It is necessary to look into the problem of immigration in Assam since the British days and assess the endeavours of the Assamese politicians to resolve the problem pre- and post- independence” (Chaudhury 2002, 3). When the problem was realized in the pre- independence period it was placed before Jawaharlal Nehru when he came to India in 1937 for an election campaign. Asamiya Sanrakshini Sabha submitted a memorandum to save Assam. They emphasized that:

“...as a means of saving the Assamese race from extinction, a considerable section of the Assamese intelligentsia has even expressed their minds in favour of *the secession of Assam from India*. This is how the present situation appears to the average Assamese, and they look to you, the National Congress, to help the Assamese to get out of these dangers” (Quoted in Guha, 1977, 257).

There was another memorandum submitted by Asamiya Deka Dal. It suggested (i) Transfer of Sylhet to Bengal, (ii) total ban on Bengali immigration to the Brahmaputra Valley for a period of twenty years, (iii) strict naturalization laws

for resident Bengali immigrants, (iv) outlawing all anti- Assamese organizations in the Brahmaputra Valley, (v) a ten- year moratorium on agricultural indebtedness and (vi) the exclusion of the planters' bloc from the legislature (taken from Guha 1977, 257).

But what was the view of Nehru? “Aware of his limitations in understanding the local problems, Nehru was confused. The desire of the Assamese to preserve their own culture and language, and not to be overwhelmed by non- Assamese people, appeared to him perfectly legitimate. He agreed on the desirability of separating Sylhet from Assam. But, at the same time, he argued that sparsely-populated and land- rich Assam could no longer continue to remain so with an overcrowded province flanking it. Immigration was, therefore, bound to take place as an economic necessity. No amount of sentiment, not even laws, would stop it” (Guha 1977, 258). After a lot of hue and cry Sylhet was separated from Assam. Assam lost one of the wealthy districts of that period. But it was a long cherished dream of the Assamese people and this loss was projected as gain by the press. Gopinath Bordoloi expressed before the Cabinet Mission about the preparedness of Assam to hand over Sylhet to Eastern Bengal.

The fulfillment of the quest for making a culturally and linguistically homogeneous territory in 1947 became a never ending problem over the years. The partition of 1947 brought into focus the term *foreigner* who always stood as a threat for Assamese nationalism. “Figures on immigrants in Assam, however, have become a matter of intense political contestation, especially since the Assam movement of 1979-85. While the Assam movement itself focused on *illegal* immigration, both supporters and opponents of the campaign relied on census data on population growth rates to make their case” (Baruah 1999, 49).

Immigrants are regarded as threats for the survival of Assam. In this connection the role of the Indian state has also been frequently questioned by the intellectuals. Hiren Gohain stated, “This is not the Big Nation Chauvinism that influences the rulers in New Delhi. They do not seem concerned to encourage and develop the productive forces in the north- east, and appear interested in this region only as a hinterland for the manufactures in metropolitan areas. The lop-

sided development must be corrected if Assam is not to turn into a threat to India” (Gohain 1980, 590). Jawaharlal Nehru’s speech at the time of the Chinese Aggression in 1962 “My heart goes out to the people of Assam” (Saikia 2004, 166) famously used as historic statement to denote the rhetoric of neglect by the Indian State even in the contemporary period.

1.3.4.1 Meaning of Wildlife

The wildlife occupies a significant place in the long standing history of Assam. A significant portion of the oral traditions of the land reveals the importance of the wild in the lives of the communities living here. The rich body of folk literature tells the story of the human-animal relationship. The general understanding of wildlife that we come across in the folktales is a romanticized one. On the other hand, the wildlife was also the source of fear. The peasant community felt the need to protect themselves from the wild animals like elephants, rhinoceros, tigers, monkeys etc. The expansion of the agrarian frontier worsened the situation as their paddy and cattle were at stake. Antiquarian evidences indicate that menace caused by wild animals had attracted the attention of the imperial rulers. Henceforth the discourses of fear generated the metaphors of some “fearful” wild animals as “disobedient” subjects. “The control of errant animals and of the disobedient subjects was integral to the establishment of the British power in the countryside. Indian as well as Europeans hunters were engaged to kill carnivores. The collection of trophies had already begun in earnest, anticipating the obsession of the late nineteenth century” (Saikia 2011, 256). The hunting practice was also popular among the common population. They made regular visit to the jungle and used to kill the animals for various purposes. There are numerous folktales of different communities of this region describing this activity. Besides this the wild buffalo was the other species which was hunted for the purpose of domestication.

The significant point is that till the twentieth century the extermination of certain species of wild animals continued unabated. It can be claimed without any fear of being contradicted that the expansion of the agrarian frontier for which large tracts of forested areas were cleared had an immediate impact on the wildlife.

Besides, hunting and shooting were the favorite pass time of a class of people. Hunting for leisure was a source of thrill for the officials of the East India Company when they came across the dense forests of this province. It was the favourite sport of the British officials during the nineteenth century. In addition, wild animals were used as commodities for running international trade. The native people were also involved in this business. The elephant was the chief means of trade with the neighboring countries. Elephant catching was a common practice in this part of the country. There were cultural practices involved in the case of elephant catching. It was very popular amongst some classes of the Assamese populace. The elephant was regarded as the provider of substantial revenue. The technologies of power and governmentality had created the space for production of environmental identities during the colonial period. The wildlife was regarded as a distinct subject which could be, and, should be, dominated by human beings. The wildlife got a new meaning when it was felt that it had started to deplete.

“While the forests and natural landscape of Assam bewildered nineteenth century observers equally challenging was the subject of wildlife. The latter was not only a favourite pastime subject but the very survival of the forestry programme began to be contested by the wild animals....Since the early nineteenth century there was a significant change in the history of wildlife in Assam in matters of understanding and its relation to the native society” (Saikia 2011, 253). The wildlife was a neglected phenomenon in the colonial programme of forest conservancy. Their interest in wildlife protection was developed much latter. Along with the forest officials there were some colonial masters who took interest in the protection of wildlife. Kaziranga was declared as a game reserve in the early years of the twentieth century. It was the best place for hunting rhinos, elephants and other small and big species. “Like other game reserves in British India and elsewhere, the KNP [Kaziranaga National Park] was born amidst general cry for lost species such as lions, bisons and rhinos and also the imperial rulers’ claim for privileging hunting practices” (Saikia 2011, 12).

Thus the establishment of game reserve in the early years of twentieth century was the earliest attempt to protect the wildlife. Then onwards a considerable

number of wildlife parks, sanctuaries were established even in the post-independence period. The game reserves and the wildlife sanctuaries were the results of colonial understanding of preserving flora and fauna. The initiative of the government in preserving wildlife was apparently encouraging. “In the 1970s and 1980s there was increasing participation of the local wildlife lovers. In the 1990s and then onward, the wildlife issue got more prominence in the vernacular press. The third generation of the wildlife lovers has come from a different background. Many of them have professional expertise in the science of wildlife preservation” (Saikia 2011, 254).

By the end of twentieth century the wildlife entered into the larger arena of administration. During the post independence period the attitude of the administrators towards wildlife changed. The management and protection of the wildlife have become a matter of concern of the administrators. In 1950 the game reserves got the new name ‘Wildlife Sanctuary’. The wildlife is an umbrella term which encompasses all the living creatures, big or small. Accordingly, for the protection of wildlife a state body, namely, the State Wildlife Board was formed in the year 1953 after establishment of the Indian Board of Wildlife. In the year 1954 the Assam government introduced a bill for the protection of rhino in Assam as Assam Rhinoceros Preservation Act of 1954. This bill was meant to protect the rhino.

There are several wild life acts in the environmental history of Assam which define the importance of wildlife in the social life of Assam. In 1968 a bill was introduced in the Assam Legislative Assembly with an aim to preserve the rhino in Kaziranga. It attracted the attention of the international community. The Assam National Park Act was introduced in 1968 and it came into effect in 1969. In 1972 the Indian government passed the Wildlife Protection Act with an aim to protect wildlife by declaring several species rare. There are some other bills or acts namely the Project Tiger, Rhino Vision 2020 which redefined the wild life of Assam. These acts and bills constructed the subjectivity of some animals as rare.

1.3.4.2 Environmental Issues in Contemporary Times

It is very difficult to decide on the “major” environmental issues in Assam in contemporary times. In fact, any selection of a set of environmental issues as “major” is itself a political choice that is informed by political beliefs and ideologies (for instance, the researcher’s in this case). While there is no quantifiable means to zero down on a few environmental issues as more important than others, any selection is bound to be subjective. What will be treated as a “major” environmental issue will depend on the socio-political context.

The mass media has been quite vocal in highlighting environmental issues. A host of environmental problems have become socio-political problems of contemporary Assam as they have even impacted electoral politics. During the Lok Sabha elections of 2014 the problem of flood, erosion and the increasing incidence of rhino poaching got a lot of importance. The annual floods of Assam cause large scale devastation. Every year, thousands of people suffer because of the turbulent floods every year. The intensity of land erosion is very high. A number of social and political organizations of Assam have urged the Central Government of India to declare flood and erosion as “national” problems.

These two environmental problems have posed a serious threat to the lives of people and to the natural world. Very often, floods have induced displacement. Floods have also led to large scale deforestation as displaced communities have very often been forced to settle down in new places, clearing forest lands. The increasing rate of conflict between humans and animals over their respective habitats has become another issue of great concern in recent years. It is to be noted that the issue of land rights has turned into a powerful social movement in Assam in recent years. All said and done, every environmental issue has its own dynamics and thus needs to be properly contextualized.

There are instances in Assam’s history when some environmental issues have been pushed to the backburner. The famous Assam movement of 1979-85 can be an important example of this. An analysis of the causes of the movement shows that initially resource sharing was one of the core issues of the movement. But in

the course of development of the movement the issue of “illegal” immigrant sidelined the other issues. In more recent years, different ethnic clashes that have taken place in the region can be traced back to conflict over access to resources. We can take the example of Bodo Movement. The demand for a separate land on the north bank of Brahmaputra is the root cause of the Bodo movement. It was started at the period contemporary to Assam Movement. They have been pleading for a separate homeland which will be ethnically homogenous where they would not have to share the resources with other groups. This demand or plea rests on the belief that the indigeneity and identity of ethnic groups of Assam is on the verge of extinction. A series of ethnic clashes have taken place in the last few years in Assam. This separatist tendency is not only a characteristic of the Bodo movement alone. The Karbi ethnic movement has greater political autonomy as its goal. The main point of argument for inclusion of these examples here is that these social movements are never taken as environmental movements. Environmental issues are always sidelined by the issues of indigeneity, identity and ethnicity.

This issue actually became the starting point for my research on the politics of environment in the context of Assam. While it is a fact that there are a host of environmental problems that afflict Assam, only some of these problems get talked about at a given point of time. Thus, the environment is framed differently depending on the socio-political context. Moreover, the environment is not seen or treated as independent of other issues – it has in fact become a tool to drive home particular issues. In other words, because of the space for environmentalism and the world wide concern for the environment, different socio-political actors have tended to ‘talk through’ the environment. In such a scheme of things, the environment occupies a place that is secondary to ethnicity and indigeneity. Thus, in the discourses of environment, talking about environmental issues becomes a ploy, a method with which to talk about other issues. The environment is thus a symbol for something else; the symbolic use of the environment to address socio-political issues has become a marked feature of the environmental discourse in Assam. These discourses lead to the formation of environmental subjectivity.

1.4 Objectives

1. To decode environmental discourse by setting it up against the social and political context of Assam
2. To analyze how the discourses about environment have shaped ecological subjectivity in the context of Assam
3. To set this discourse up against the lived experiences of people, particularly women
4. To understand the process by which the environmental issues have become a means to meet other ends such as those of indigeneity

1.5 Review of literatures

In this study the following texts have been primarily used for the purpose of making the arguments. This section reviews the selected literatures which inform the analysis described in the subsequent chapters. It integrates the related theories and the previous studies on environmental politics. However, the present work requires a method of understanding how environmental discourse constructs ecological subjectivity. Broadly the method must incorporate a way of understanding how environmental discourse is related to the social, political and economic reality of the context. To achieve the objectives, an interdisciplinary approach has been adopted. The study undertakes the broad frame of the discipline of Cultural Studies as a primary methodology of research.

Andrew Jamison's *The Making of Green Knowledge- Environmental Politics and Cultural Transformation (2001)* has provided a thought provoking analysis about the environmental politics and the discursive formation of environmental knowledge.

John S. Dryzek's *The Politics of the Earth-Environmental Discourses (2005)* provides a theoretical understanding of environmental politics where Dryzek analyses different environmental discourses.

Key Milton in *Environmentalism and Cultural Theory (1996)* provides a useful analysis about the role of culture in environmentalism. It shows how an

understanding of culture can provide the way to interpret and perceive the environmental issues.

Alison Anderson's *Media, Culture and the Environment* (1997) provides a significant analysis about the social construction of the environment and new dimension of media studies.

Ramachandra Guha's *Environmentalism: A Global History* (2000) provides a brief survey of the ideas and movement which have shaped environmentalism around the world.

Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000 (2011) of Arupjyoti Saikia presents a comprehensive history of the forests of Assam. It gives a description of the process of transformation of *jungles* to forests during the British period. The book discusses the process of reconstruction of the forest resources of Assam.

Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development (1988, 89) of Vandana Shiva provides the ecofeminist perspective. She examines the position of women in the third world in relation to nature. Her arguments are set against the impact of development (which, for her, can be meaningfully called 'maledevelopment'), especially on the lives of women.

Arun Agarwal's *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects* (2005) provides an analysis of the development of environmental subjectivity. The book is about the research done in the villages of Kumaon in Northern India. His study provides an analysis of transformation of environmental behaviour of the villages of Kumaon.

Sumi Krishna's *Environmental Politics: People's Lives and Development Choices* (1996) is a thought provoking book about Indian Environmental politics. This provides an analysis of the course of environmentalism in India, looking at the issue from the perspective of gender. It provides a distinctive perspective to know about the different strands of environmentalism in India.

The Politics of Environment in South- East Asia: Resources and Resistance (1998, 2002) edited by Philip Hirsch and Carol Warren is an important book in

the field of environmental politics in South East Asia. The South East Asian region has become a fertile area to study environmental politics because of growing intensity of conflict between economic growth, social security and environmental protection in the region. This book is concerned with the importance of environmental issues and their relationship to broader processes of social, political and economic changes in South East Asia. It deals with the studies of environmental struggles over large dams, forestry, mining, pollution and tourism.

Civil Society, Democratization and the Search for Human Security: The Politics of the Environment, Gender and Identity in Northeast India by Duncan McDuire-Ra (2009) studies the environmental politics in the northeast region of India, Meghalaya. The author uses the primary examples of environmental insecurity and gender based insecurity.

Derek Hook's article 'Discourse, Knowledge, Materiality, History: Foucault and Discourse Analysis' (2001) provides a critical assessment of the Foucauldian method of discourse analysis.

Bina Agarwal's *A field of one's own: Gender and Land right* (1992) provides a significant study on gender and property right in South Asia. It's a comprehensive analysis of different historical, economic and ethnographic data collected from her field research.

Bina Agarwal's article 'The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India' (1992, 2007) offers a critical approach towards ecofeminism. Her article presents a critical understanding of the position of a woman in relation to environment in the context of India

Besides the above several other articles and journal papers have been referred in the thesis to develop a critical outlook. But not much works have been done in the field of environmental politics in the context of Assam. The important point is that the previous literatures do not look at the environment and the issues around environment from this perspective. There is a serious gap in the understanding of environmental politics in Assam. Hence the underlying concerns and theoretical

implications of the present work have its larger importance in the context of studying environmental politics in Assam. This work is an attempt to address the issues of environmental politics in Assam.

1.6 Parameters and Justification of the Study

It is not an easy task to discuss each and every issue of environment of a state like Assam. A limited timeframe and the vastness of the subject forced me to be selective in discussing the topics. The dynamic historical situation and at the same time the contemporary socio- political realities of Assam have a direct impact on determining the importance of certain environmental issues. Hence I have selected three main issues as the thrust area of my analysis – rhino poaching, big dam and the women- environment relationship in the context of Assam, with particular reference to the impact of floods. The first two issues are more immediately connected to the state of Assam. The rampant poaching of rhinos in recent years in Assam has posed several questions. The question of biodiversity loss, survival of big mammals, resource loss in terms of revenue, state property, security of conservation sites (especially Kaziranga as it has been regarded as a natural heritage site by UNESCO) and above all the threat of losing the one-horned rhino, probably one of the most powerful symbols of Assamese nationalism have become a part of popular discourse. The increased rate of poaching of the rhino for its horn is at bottom an environmental issue in the context of Assam.

The issue of big dam in recent years has become a site of a battleground of different environmental discourses. Different civil society organizations have demonstrated protests against the damming of the rivers of North- Eastern part of India. This place is the homeland for different ethnic groups. Intellectuals of the region have termed it as a big threat for the survival of indigenous lives and ecosystems. On the other hand, the representatives of the state have termed the protests as signs of opposition to development. The discourses on big dams in Assam revolve around these two conflicting positions. Hence, I have taken up the issue of big dam as a topic for discussion to know how environmental discourses are constructed.

The issue of rhino-poaching and that of big dams are issues of “national” interest in the context of Assam. In both the cases, the concerned actors have successfully posited these issues that are integrally connected to questions relating to the identity and nationalism of the indigenous ethnic communities of Assam. The rise of these issues have emerged as powerfully evocative symbols that can only be explained by looking at the ways in which these have come to be understood in the present socio-political milieu of Assam.

Having said this, the environment is not only about the way in which people think about it. It is not merely an abstract idea. To a large extent the discourse about the environment in the context of Assam has emerged as a rhetorical ploy, a strategy to highlight issues other than the environment itself. This environmental discourse has particularly gained favour and acceptance amongst the middle class of Assam. There is therefore an urgent need to look at the environment from the perspective of those whose lives are directly dependent on the mercies of nature. With this in mind, the third issue I want to take up is the issue of the woman-environment relationship in Assam. It is particularly important in this context to look at women’s experiences and perspectives on the environment since it is undeniable that in the ethnic agricultural communities of Assam they bear the brunt of nature’s exigencies. The hard material realities of human life are something different from the kind of representation through various discourses. Thus, I rely of certain case histories collected from the field to drive home the point. It covers the reports from the flood-prone areas of Matmora of Dhakuakhana in Lakhimpur District of Assam, a place which has become infamous for regular floods and erosion. The report from the field gives us some ideas about the lived experiences of people in the flood-affected region of Matmora. Apart from the issue of floods of women, I have incorporated certain other cases from the district of Sonitpur through which I have tried to show the relationship between women-environment in Assam.

1.7 Overview of the Chapters

The chapters are designed in the following way.

The second chapter tries to give an account of the major theoretical approaches and different concepts used for the purpose of analysis throughout the dissertation.

The third chapter discusses the politics of environment. It discusses how environmental subjectivity is formed and shaped by different texts and discourses. Different media texts along with school text books have been discussed in this chapter.

The fourth chapter is on development and environment. The introduction of neo-liberal economy in the developing nations has created conflicts among the stakeholders. In the contemporary period of intensive and pervasive global capitalist expansion, several development projects have been launched in the region. The construction of big dams is an ambitious project taken up by the government with a purpose to generate hydro power. It has generated a lot of debate in the civil society. This chapter will analyze the discourses of the stakeholders, academics and intellectuals.

The fifth chapter titled 'Gender and Environment: Issues of Convergence' looks at the ways in which the two marginal discourses of gender and environment address common concerns in Assam. It also looks at the ways in which the dynamics of woman-environment relationship in Assam is different from that of the rest of the country.

The sixth chapter will form the conclusion of the work.

Thus this chapter is an introduction of the present work. In the following chapter there will be a brief overview of the theoretical as well as methodological approaches on which the study is based. It includes a brief and general description of Cultural Studies along with an illustration of the concepts used in the dissertation.