

## ACTIONS OF ASSAM GOVERNMENT FOR MAINTAINING ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: A CRITICAL STUDY (2020-2024)

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper is about to the study of policies of Assam government for the maintenance of environmental sustainability from 2020-2024. Balancing development with environmental sustainability is a significant challenge for a state in nowadays. Challenges towards the environment represents the challenges to our natural resources which focuses upon balance regarding the relationship between the human being, animals and our surrounding natural environment. The Assam state is now facing certain major challenges regarding its natural environment. To overcome those challenges, the awareness of citizens and the accountability of the concerned state government to implement properly of the major policies are very necessary. The major objective of this paper is to examine the policies of Assam government for environmental conservation within the last 5 years. These will include the budgetary provisions and the laws of the state government in response to the emerging environmental issues. Moreover, this paper will also investigate the success and failure of the concerned state government for the department of Environmental and Forest. The state government has created this particular department to take a special care for our surrounding environment and to improve the environment along with conserving the priceless biodiversity of the state. In this paper, analytical method will be adopted to examine the budgetary provisions and the actions of state government for the department of Environment and Forest.*

**Keywords:** *budget, challenge, conservation, environment, sustainability*

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## INTRODUCTION

Environment is the most precious natural resource and we all know that we cannot live without a sound and healthy environment. But now, our natural environment is not in an original position. Environmental issues are rising day by day not only at the regional or national level, but also at the global level. If any appropriate step will not be taken by the government, then our natural environment will lose its sustainability in the near future. Now, the maintenance of the sustainability of environment becomes very necessary. Government of every country have a financial accountability for the conservation of country's natural resources and to maintain its sustainability. Like other northeastern states, the potentiality, possibility and prosperity of Assam can be denied. The resources of Assam have the full potentiality for economic growth for the entire country. By keeping the aim of development, a number of infrastructure projects are implemented in the state by the concerned government. But there should be the scope in the context of the planning, policy making and implementation ideologies of national and sub-national governances for the environmental protection which will keep the balance between the developmental projects and the green cover. It helps in optimizing the financial allocations to developmental activities with environmental concerns. With the intent to foster a sustainable society, the global governance started transitioning from the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals in post 2015. In this context, government budget is very helpful which can establish a balance between the developmental activities and the protection of the state's natural environment. Most of the public policies are based on government budget which indicates the development prospects of a country. The term 'Budget' is derived from the French word 'baguette' which means 'little bag', or a container of documents and accounts. The term 'Budget' is used in monetary context which is a formal plan of action. The financial allocation of government in the form of budget should be such that it can secure the country's natural resources in a most appropriate way. The major objectives of this research paper are to find out Assam government's budgetary allocation for the maintenance of environmental sustainability and to examine the impact of policies of Assam budget for the protection of environment. In this research study, secondary data are helpful. In this context, book, journal, newspaper and internet are used.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Balancing development with environmental sustainability is a significant challenge for Assam. Like other states of North East India, Assam is faced with many environmental issues like deforestation, climate change, global warming, man- animal conflict, decreasing the forest area, cutting a lot of trees etc. Moreover, weak enforcement of environmental laws and policies of the respective state government exacerbates these environmental issues. In Assam, there seems to be a significant lack of a balanced approach towards natural assets and development. Several water-bodies of the state suffer from poor maintenance and heavy pollution due to inadequate solid waste management. The state's renowned National Park- Kaziranga National Park has witnessed a shrinking grassland area due to the construction of hotels, resorts and infrastructure for tourism. This has caused a loss of biodiversity while commercializing the land. Furthermore, the conversion of wetlands for urban development and infrastructure projects have harmed aquatic ecosystems and affected migratory bird movements. Construction projects have also fragmented elephant habitats and disrupted their movements which lead to human- elephant conflicts. Guwahati's rapid expansion has led to encroachment into the hills, causing several environmental hazards such as flash floods. The consequences of development projects undertaken without considering natural resources have always been devastating. Therefore, to mitigate these impacts, it is essential to strike a balance between development and conservation. All these environmental problems have raised the voice for a well-balanced budget which can handle these issues wisely. A balanced budget will also ensure sustainability of environment in future.

### BASIC LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT

#### Efforts at the international level:

Stockholm Conference of 1972 was the official programmes in response to the growth of the global environmental movement. It was the first conference of environment at the global level in the context of political, social and economic problems of the global environment whose main purpose is to take corrective measures. After this conference, in 1992 Rio De Janeiro has conducted a conference for environmental protection which was also known as Earth Summit. This conference gave birth to the Kyoto Protocol which has handled the issues between global environmental management and the national needs of economic development of individual countries. The outcomes of Rio Conference are- The Framework Convention on Climate

Change, The Convention on Biological Diversity, Agenda 21 and The Forest Principle. Another important convention of UN relating to reduce greenhouse gas emission was United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This convention was adopted in 1992. This convention was convened by Rio de Janeiro in Brazil in 1992. This convention focuses upon the rising of greenhouse gases. Rising the temperature of the planet is caused by increasing the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Therefore, the major purpose UNFCCC was to reduce the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Montreal Protocol was signed in 1987. The main aim of this protocol is the regulation of the depletion of ozone layer. It is the main focus area of this protocol to protect the ozone layer from the harmful ultraviolet radiation of the sun from reaching the earth. Another protocol relating to environment was Kyoto Protocol which was established in 1997. The core areas of this protocol were to limit the greenhouse gas emissions by the industrialised states. The major commitment of Kyoto Protocol was to make the duty of the nation states to commit themselves to the reduction of the emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases of the nation states. This protocol has divided the states into two categories- Annex 1 and Annex 2 where Annex 1 means developed countries and Annex 2 means developing countries. The major commitment of this protocol was to maintain a balance between the developed and developing countries regarding the emission of greenhouse gases. This agreement provides necessary measures regarding the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions between the developed and developing countries.

Among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, goal no. 13, 14, 15 deals with environment related areas. Goal no. 13 deals with the actions and adopt capacity measures to combat climate change and other natural disasters in all countries. Goal no. 14 emphasis upon the conservation of ocean, sea and marine resources for sustainable development and the appropriate measures to maintain sustainable development and ecosystem of these areas. Goal no. 15 deals with the sustainable management of forests, terrestrial ecosystems, combat desertification, protection of biodiversity and prevention of land degradation.

Goal 7 of Millennium Development Goals (MDG), 2000 of United Nations General Assembly concentrates on sustainability of environment. This goal stresses upon to the application of the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and to prevent the loss of natural resources. Other included topics of this goal are- reduction of biodiversity loss, easily accessibility of safe drinking water and to ensure basic sanitation.

**Efforts by the Indian Government:**

Conservation of natural resources and environmental protection emerged as a national priority in India after the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi participated in the Stockholm Conference on Human Environment, 1972. Legislation, policies and programmes particularly since 1980 evolved to gear the state to the task of environment. To ensure and protection of the health of citizens and to give an effort to improve the environment and also to safeguard the forests and wildlife of the country, the Department of Environment was established in 1980 to help to ensure a clean and healthy environment for the country. It was upgraded to become the Ministry of Environment and Forests in 1985. It is the primary agency in the administrative structure of the government for the planning, promotion, coordination and overseeing the implementation of environmental and forestry programmes. The ministry is also the nodal agency in the country for the United Nations Environment Programme. The ministry works toward conservation and survey of flora, fauna, forests and wildlife, prevention and control of pollution, afforestation and regeneration of degraded areas and protection of environment in the framework of legislations.

India is the first country in the world to have made provisions for the protection and conservation of environment in its constitution. On 5<sup>th</sup> June, 1972, the concept of 'environment' was first discussed as an item of international agenda in the U.N. Conference of human environment in Stockholm and thereafter 5<sup>th</sup> June is celebrated all over the world as World Environment Day. Soon after the Stockholm Conference, our country took substantive legislative steps for environmental protection. Among them, the most prominent are- Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, The Water Prevention and Control of Pollution Act, 1974, The Forest Conservation Act, 1980, Air Prevention and Control of Pollution Act, 1981 and The Environment Protection Act, 1986.

Moreover, India has taken a lead in giving a constitutional status to environmental protection. Part IV of the Indian Constitution states that the state shall endeavour to protect and improve the environment by safeguarding the forests and wild life of the country. Article 51 A of the Fundamental Duties prescribes "it shall be the duty of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wild life and to have compassion for living creatures". Article 48 A of Indian Constitution also states that this is the duty of the state to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wildlife of the country. 'Forest' is included as a subject in the concurrent list of the constitution which is included in article 246 of Indian constitution. In the concurrent list, both the central as well as the

state governments can take up initiatives and both have the authority to form rules and regulations.

### **ASSAM GOVERNMENT'S EFFORT FOR THE CONSERVATION OF ENVIRONMENT**

Major institutions, laws, regulations and acts of Assam government relating to environment are-

- a. Pollution Control Board, Assam (PCBA)-** Pollution Control Board was established in Assam on 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 1975 under the provision of section 4 of the Water (Prevention & Control of Pollution) Act 1974 as an autonomous statutory organization with a view to protecting and controlling the pollution of water and air in the State of Assam. The major functions of PCBA are- to advice the state government on any matter concerning environmental pollution, sitting industries etc., including continuous monitoring of pollution status of the industrial and other sources. This board can collect and disseminate data and information on pollution and environmental problems and preparation of reports thereon, PCBA has comprehensive programme on Water and Air Pollution Control and Execution thereon in line with Pollution Control Laws, Guidelines, and Regulations of the country, PCBA also collaborates with the Programmes of the Central Pollution Control Board, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, state government, NGOs and other organizations relating to pollution control and environment and organize Mass Education Programmes. PCBA has implemented various National flagship programmes for the elimination of Single Use Plastic (SUP) and to prevent plastic pollution.
- b. Environment Protection Act, 1986-** Like the central government, Assam government have also made this act applicable in Assam. For enforcing the provisions of this act in Assam, the Assam Pollution Control Board is responsible. According to this act, Assam government will take appropriate measures to protect and improve the environment including control of pollution and regulating hazardous substances within the state.
- c. The Manufacture, Use, Import, Export and Storage of Hazardous Micro-organism Genetically Engineered Organisms or Cells Rules, 1989-** To ban and to restrict the import, export, transport, manufacture, process, use or sell of any hazardous microorganisms or genetically engineered organisms or cells without prior approval from the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee, the act was formulated and implemented accordingly.
- d. The Chemical Accidents (Emergency Planning, Preparedness and Response) Rules, 1996-** This law was implemented under the Environment Protection Act, 1986. This law has

outlined guidelines for managing and responding to chemical accidents at industrial facilities, including the formation of crisis group at the central, state and district levels to coordinate emergency response plans.

- e. **Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution, Assam) Rules, 1977-** To control the pollutants which can pollute water and to collect levy cess on water which are consumed by persons carrying on certain industries and by local authorities, this act was passed.
- f. **Assam Forest Policy, 2004-** To main a sustainable forest cover, Assam Forest Policy was enacted in 2004. To maintain stability of the environment through preservation, restoration of ecological balance and conserving natural heritage of the state, this act has provided certain major provisions.
- g. **Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) (Assam) (Amendment) Rules, 2022-** This law aims at the control of water pollution within the state. Within this law, the state government will concern itself with local water pollution concerns. This law includes certain new terms like “idol”, “synthetic paint”, “remnants” etc.
- h. **Agroforestry Policy, 2024-** The Assam Cabinet approved the state’s Agroforestry Policy 2024 as a landmark move aimed at boosting environmental sustainability and enhancing rural prosperity.<sup>2</sup>

### **ROLE OF ASSAM BUDGET FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION**

Budget is an annual financial statement which is prepared at the national or at the state level. Like the union ministry of Indian government, Assam government also have a separate department of environment namely Department of Environment and Forest. Government budget of Assam annually provides financial allocation for this department like other departments of Assam government. But this financial investment of Assam government and its policies are not sufficient due to which Assam is facing lots of challenges in regard to the protection of its natural environment.

In the 2020- 21 Assam budget, the major focussed areas were to strive to shore up the revenue collection while ensuring protection to the natural flora and fauna. The concerned ministry intended to undertake certain initiatives to further streamline the revenue collection from the Department.

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<sup>2</sup> E-Governance Portal, *Elets Online*, <http://egov.eletsonline.com> (last visited Nov. 16, 2025).

In the Assam budget 2021-22, the main focussed area was- to provide a Frontline Staff in protected areas with an allowance of Rs. 2000 per month and to raise the number of third battalion of Assam Forest Protection for protection of forests located in inter- state border areas. Moreover, a decision was taken in this budget session to prepare three- year master plan for greening Greater Guwahati. In this budget, a total of Rs. 730.12 crore was allocated for the Department of Environment and Forest.

In the 2022- 23 budget, certain initiatives were planned to take by the Finance Minister of Assam. These were- to undertake a three-year master plan for greening Greater Guwahati, to free the hills and forest areas of Guwahati from illegal encroachments, mitigation of the man- animal conflict etc. To mitigate the man- animal conflict, one of the notable measures was the activation of Anti Depredation Squads and a system for coordination with other stakeholder departments like Railways, Power etc has been put in place.

In the Assam budget 2023-24, the main resolution was the addition of a new concept namely “Green Budget”. The concept of green budget was formally announced in this financial year. With the introduction of Green Budget, the policies and activities of almost all the administrative departments will be checked about their impacts upon environment. the government’s main motive is to build a state that is safe, sustainable and resilient for years to come. By observing the rise of certain environmental issues in Assam and to address the increasing growth of urbanization, industrial growth, negative environmental externalities and pollution, “Green Budget” was initiated towards mainstreaming environmental concerns of the state. In this financial year, another was taken to monitor the encroachment activities through the use of satellite imagery and drone photography. Moreover, planed was made to set up a modern zoological rescue and rehabilitation facility in Kaziranga National Park.

Though these resolutions are taken by the Assam government through their budget within these specific terms, but these are not enough to tackle our environmental issues. According to the recently released report of ‘India State of Forest Report 2023 (ISFR 2023)’, Assam recorded a forest cover loss of 83.92 sq. km between 2021 and 2023. Between 2021 and 2023, the forest cover inside ‘recorded forest area’ was decreased by 86.66 sq. km in the state. The eight Northeastern states recorded a total forest cover loss of 327.30 sq. km during the period. In this

period, the 'recorded forest area' in Assam has degraded to 1,699 sq. km area.<sup>3</sup> Another most pressing conservation crisis in the state is the human- elephant conflict which has shown no signs of abatement over the years. According to official data, the five-year period from 2019-20 to 2023-24 has witnessed the death of 383 people in the state against an elephant fatality of 92. The break-up of the elephant deaths includes electrocution, train-hit, poisoning and poaching with the corresponding figures being 55, 24, 10 and 3. While Assam happens to be among the few remaining strongholds of the Asian elephant, the prevailing scenario bodes ill for the long- term conservation prospects of the pachyderm. Essentially a man- made crisis, the conflict is largely attributable to unabated loss of forest cover and elephant habitat and migratory routes connecting different forests. This has habituated the elephants into making raids on cropland and human habitations in search of food and space, resulting in an inevitable conflict. Elephants are long ranging animals that require large space as well as contiguity among different forest belts to facilitate their unhindered movement. Unfortunately, mushrooming settlements and indiscriminate commercial and industrial activities have been allowed to erode prime elephant habitats and corridors, compelling the animals to come into conflict with humans who stand in their path. In the latest such instance, the Assam Government itself has shockingly cleared the decks for the construction of high- end hotels on a well- known elephant territory near Kaziranga National Park<sup>4</sup>. As per the latest report of 2024, there is a marginal increase of the state's elephant population in the past seven years, with a total count of 5,828 elephants. The latest survey covered 43 forest divisions, five elephant reserves, nine elephant ranges and 26 protected areas including national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. While the state's elephant population, which was 5,524 in 1993 had kept declining to 5,312 in 1997 and 5,246 in 2002- the trend has since maintained an upward trend with 5,281 in 2008, 5,620 in 2011, 5,719 in 2017 and 5,828 in 2024. The stable elephant population is undoubtedly, welcome news for conservation but at the same time, shrinking space for the pachyderms has put disturbing questions for their long- term well- being. A most significant finding of the elephant estimation exercise concerns their large presence outside national parks and sanctuaries with 82 percent of the total population residing within the five Elephant Reserves, underlying their critical role in conservation. This is not surprisingly given that long ranging animals like elephants need a lot of space to meet their

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<sup>3</sup> State Forest Cover Down, *The Assam Tribune*, vol. 86, no. 347, Dec. 2024, at 1.

<sup>4</sup> Escalating Conflict, *The Assam Tribune*, vol. 86, no. 351, Dec. 2024, at 6

requirements for food and space. In Assam, protected areas constitute a minuscule portion of the state's total forest area and it is high time the government took a decisive step towards upgrading some more reserve forests, especially those falling in elephant reserves, into sanctuaries and national parks. Such a step in fact is the surest way to ensure the long- term protection of some wildlife habitats and meet the goals of long- term conservation. Another imperative is to reclaim lost elephant corridors as well as habitats to the extent possible, which can go a long way in easing the human- elephant conflict. According to the official data, the five-year period from 2019-20 to 2023-24 has witnessed the death of 383 people in state against an elephant fatality of 92. The break- up of the elephant deaths includes electrocution, train-hit, poisoning and poaching with the corresponding figures being 55, 24, 10 and 3. While Assam happens to be among the few remaining strongholds of the Asian elephant, the prevailing scenario bodes ill for the long-term conservation prospects of the pachyderms. Essentially, a man- made crisis, the man- elephant conflict is largely attributable is the unabated loss of forest cover and elephant with little intervention forthcoming from the government authorities to ensure adequate protection of elephant habitat and migratory routes connecting different forests<sup>5</sup>.

Various environmental issues are happening inside Kaziranga National Park which causes threatening to the biodiversity and wild life of the national park. This UNESCO world heritage site is considered as an embodiment of biodiversity and ecosystem services and also inscribed for being the world's major stronghold of the Indian one- horned rhino, currently with a species strength of two- thirds of the global rhino population. Severely affected by fluvial processes and bank erosion, coupled with negative anthropogenic interventions, Kaziranga National Park has suffered from deaths of numerous wildlife species, destruction of ecosystems and discontinuity in ecological successions. As such, the conservation process of this national park hovers around strictly protecting its biodiversity and negating human interventions. It is no secret that poaching of rhino horns has been notoriously active in and around the park and efforts to contain it has faced dead- ends. The strict conservation process has now and then devoid fringe communities of their livelihood as well as their traditional lands, subsequently resulting in clashes among park authorities and local people. The lone Ramsar Site of Assam Deepor Beel is also facing numerous environmental issues. It is now polluted by the wastage of urban areas. It has become a dumping site. This site has also faced a huge biodiversity loss. The Asian Water Bird Census

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<sup>5</sup> Elephant Census, *The Assam Tribune*, vol. 87, no. 4, Jan. 2025, at 6.

recorded 12,245 birds of 105 species at Deepor Beel. The census was organized by the Guwahati Wildlife Division using the visual encounter survey methodology. The number of birds was relatively less in the latest count (January, 2025). However, a single year count cannot give a clear picture of the number of birds dwindling in the Ramsar Site. However, those who participated in the census admitted that haphazard disposal of waste and picnic litter is impacting the wetland severely. In January 2023, over 26,000 birds of 97 species were recorded in a count at the wetland organized by the Guwahati Wildlife Division<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, it is reflected from these above-mentioned issues that in every year, Assam government have allocated money through budget for the department of environment and forest and they take measures for environmental protection. But these policies are implemented wisely due to which environmental problems are not settled in a fair manner.

### FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

1. From this study, it was found that though the Assam budget has taken various policies to deal with environmental issues, but these are not satisfactory, which are cleared from the official report of Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.
2. We are only the part of this vast ecosystem. But we are not the whole part of this ecosystem. Like us, animals and other living beings also have the right to live in a healthy environment. Right to get a healthy environment is our third generation of human right.
3. Government should maintain a balance between the developmental activities and the protection of environment. The construction activities of the government should not destroy the original habitat of the wild animals.
4. There should be a balance between the allocation and implementation of budgetary policies of the respective state government. The respective state government should supervise the functions and policies of the concerned ministry of the state government to tackle the environmental issues.

For the betterment of human's existence and for the preservation of nature, the cooperation of common citizens and the respective environment is very necessary. The human being of the whole world will have to join hands by sacrificing selfish motive and narrow thinking and towards a more liberal and environment- friendly development. Moreover, the pollution of urban environment should be more focussed because urbanization and population explosion has

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<sup>6</sup> Over 12,000 Birds Recorded at Deepor Beel, *The Assam Tribune*, vol. 87, no. 11, Jan. 2025, at 1–2.

stressed heavily upon the environment of the urban areas. The anthropogenic activities of the human being in the urban areas are more responsible for the destruction of the environment. Therefore, the major requirement is to check the applicability of the present laws and policies and make changes of certain provisions of the present laws to make these suitable to govern the present scenario of environmental protection and ecological conservation. Another major initiative should include is the strict monitoring of the governmental activities from the grassroots level to up level. Afforestation around the countryside and in urban areas is the best way to conserve and maintain ecological balance. Accountability at the ground level to the governmental level can make a gradual improvement to our overall green cover.

