

Chapter II

*Kaziranga and it's People : the first hand experience of a Student of Social Work
(A Block Placement Report on Kaziranga Study Area)*

This preliminary study was undertaken to have a generic overall understanding of the lives of the people living in Kaziranga National Park area without going into details of socio economic parameters, indicators based on a scientific framework. **Ms. Bhaswati Kalita** currently a research scholar at Institute of Bangalore and a postgraduate in social work carried out the study while she was pursuing her PG course at the Institute of Social Works under Delhi University. Based on her first hand experiences as regards the variables controlling the various issues of the society under study, a presentation is made to understand the basics of the problem. Her observations and deductions are shared in this chapter to emphasize the basis of our approach towards the problems facing the community over the years. **This report is intended to give an insight into the issues, the challenges capturing the imaginations of a student of social science.**

Introduction:

BLOCK PLACEMENT!! As a student of Department of Social Work, field work was and is still my favourite subject. In my previous year, I was placed in community through agency. There were many issues to tackle, many concepts to understand in the community which I felt that two days in a week were not enough. So I was excited about Block Placement where I would get plenty of time to engage in the field to my heart's content. After pondering for about a month on where to do my block, I finally selected the agency **Grasshopper**. The reasons for selecting this agency were given below:-

Firstly, it worked on the issue of Environment and rural livelihood sustainability which are the issues I always wanted to work.

Secondly, I wanted to know my state better. I have never worked in Assam and the prospect of working at Kaziranga National Park was like a dream come true as I had heard about its beauty, but did not get the chance to visit the area.

Thirdly, one of my senior had recommended this agency.

Fourthly, agency was located at Guwahati, my home town. As I got the opportunity to visit home after six month so my parents expect me to be with them.

This report of my Block Placement is divided into certain categories such as –

Agency profile- this section deals with a brief history about the inception of the NGO Grasshopper, initial activities it is engaged in, its mission, vision and objectives.

About Planning and Development Department, Government of Assam and its functions. This is the department of the government funding the project study.

Community Profile- Kaziranga and its fringe villages. This section deals with the issues that I observed in the community and also the role of the NGO in dealing with those issues. This section describes both the importance of Kaziranga as a world heritage site in addition to the issues and problems of the people living in and around the National Park.

Objectives of Block Placement:

- Issues faced and identified by me in the community.
- Skills developed during the training period
- Use of Social Work values and principles
- Conclusion and recommendation

Agency Profile:

The organisation that I selected for the block placement is Grasshopper. It is a non-profit non-governmental organization based in Guwahati, Assam and its area of operation is within India. It works for Biodiversity Conservation. Here, I present the reasons for inception of Grasshopper and its work areas.

The continuous loss of forest cover and exploitation of rich flora and fauna around north east India prompted a few young minds to initiate the inception of Grasshopper in the year 1995. The founder member of this NGO is Mr. Manijyoti Baruah, Senior Research Officer, Planning and Development Department, Government of Assam. Grasshopper was initially involved in conservation awareness amongst school and college students through nature tourism in different parts of North East India. From late 1999 onwards however, Grasshopper has been involved in biodiversity research and conservation in protected areas of the region. The society is run by young professionals dedicated and committed to the cause of nature conservation. The founder member also believes that as a Government officer in the policy level they do not get to know the realities of people as they have no connection with the ground. Therefore through this NGO he and his colleagues can directly meet people, know their problems and also understand how government policies are implemented or not implemented and most importantly they can spread awareness about various schemes of the Assam government which the common masses are not aware of. They can also contradict the lewd statements often made against the government because many a times the centre passes schemes and allots money for different cause but still the benefits does not reach the people.

The **objectives** of Grasshopper in sync with its motive to contribute towards conservation of bio-diversity in the North-Eastern region can be summarised as follows:

Activities pertaining to the conservation of biodiversity are taken up with launching of programs for the cause of wildlife and nature. Link is established with international/national/regional organizations/trusts whether government or non-government working for conservation of biodiversity.

Participation of local people is an important strategy in biodiversity conservation as well as launching of programs to upgrade their poor socioeconomic condition to minimize the pressure on nature.

Educational and informative excursions are conducted to places of historical, cultural as well as of industrial importance to acquaint the young people with national heritage and development activities. Excursions to wildlife sanctuaries/ national parks in the country would also be conducted in near future.

Provides opportunities to people especially the young ones to take active part in tours to places of tourists' attraction. Adventures like boating, trekking, hiking, overnight camping etc are held from time to time. The authorities of schools/colleges are consulted and associated while such programs are organized.

Regular holding of seminars, exhibitions, competitions, group discussions at local, regional and national levels for effective dissemination of information related to environment and tourism sector.

Publicity campaigns through radio, television, newspapers, pamphlets/ brochures to make people aware of foundation's activities. To print/publish study materials etc. and to give coaching & impart training, to enter into an agreement with university or other bodies in India and abroad, to fulfil its aims and objectives.

Public opinion built against all sorts of social evil, drug abuse, alcoholism, prostitution, beggary and to take all possible steps to eradicate the same for peace and prosperity of mankind, and to promote awareness of cultural heritage and also to remove differences to uphold secularism, unity and integrity among masses.

Provides all possible help to disabled and isolated persons, assisting during natural calamities such as flood, earthquake, epidemic etc.

Creates public awareness through propaganda, seminar, lecture etc for the cause of protection of nature and its resources.

Brings out write-ups in news media regularly to facilitate prospective youngsters.

Subscribe, to become a member of any cooperative with any government as well as non-government organization or association whose objectives are altogether or in part similar to those of this foundation and to procure and communicate with any such organization, or association which may be helpful to fulfil the aims and objectives of this foundation.

Enters into agreement with any government/authority, municipal, local or otherwise which may seem conducive to the foundation's objectives or any of them, and to obtain from such government or authority all rights, concessions and privileges which the foundation may think fit and desirable to obtain, and to carry out exercise and also to comply with such agreement, rights and privileges.

Objectives of GRASSHOPPER:

To transform the existing subsistence economy into a self sustaining economy capable of furthering growth based on traditional eco friendly activities and occupations. Working towards strengthening the livelihood of people through skill development and self help groups.

To develop and give further impetus to the existing tourism potential by harnessing the untapped sources of local human and natural traits.

To showcase the rich cultural legacy of the local tribes viz. The Mishing, Karbis and tea garden communities keeping in view the tourism prospects and potential.

Mission of GRASSHOPPER

The mission of Grasshopper is to create an environment friendly self- sustained community around the places of ecological importance through promotion of eco friendly activities.

Grasshopper works with local communities to help them manage their natural resources and trains them to become more effective stewards of their environment. Grasshopper's approach combines creative thinking with solid business strategies to bolster economies and living standards while protecting ecosystems and wildlife populations.

In the initial phase the NGO dealt with the following issues which at present stage have expanded to work on a number of issues.

Issues in Initial Phase

The NGO at its inception stage concentrated on the issue of poaching in both the National Park i.e. Kaziranga and Manas National Park. It was identified that poachers use web of networks engaging poor villagers of the fringe villages since they are well aware of the routes of animals as they stay in the vicinity of the National Parks. Poaching of say rhinos for its precious horn is a lucrative business and it has a very high rate in the international market. Some of the poor villagers not being aware of the ecological importance of the National Park and are lured into the prospect of earning easy money by engaging themselves in the evil business of helping the poachers. The NGO realized that economic backwardness is very tightly connected to problems like poaching, deforestation etc.

Other problems which the non profit organization identified in its initial phase were as follows:

There was degradation of wild water buffalo due to mixing with domestic buffalo. More than 90% of villagers depend on fire wood because of which there is pressure upon the forests bordering the villages. Besides, every village household rears cattle for livelihood which are left open for grazing inside the park which puts tremendous pressure on the grassland.

Due to difficult topography particularly guarding large number of wildlife during flood season is a real challenge for forest department. Therefore, community participation is pivotal in the conservation efforts of forest department.



Scene of a veterinary camp and the GRASSHOPPER team

Planning & Development Department, Government of Assam:

My block placement training took place in the Department of Planning & Development, Government of Assam, Assam Secretariat, Dispur. It is the core /nodal Department in matters of development planning in the state. This department guides all the line departments in the state in formulation/preparation of five year plans as well as annual plans and also monitor the activities pertaining to the projects/schemes thus taken up for implementation. Agriculture and rural development are the areas that are accorded priority in the plans.

The primary functions of this department are as follows:

- Preparation of Five Year Plan and Annual Plans.
- Co- ordination of Plan activities of different Developmental departments.
- Plan fund under various development departments provided for implementation of development schemes.
- Manpower Planning.
- Determination of priorities in respect of Five Year Plan Schemes and allocation of resources.
- Assisting Development Departments in removal of bottlenecks in implementation of Plan Schemes.
- Approval of development schemes given as proposed by the department during annual plan period.
- Reporting of physical achievement as well as financial achievement to Planning & Development Department.
- Central assistance for implementation of plan schemes.
- Matters relating to the establishment of the directorates of Economics Statistics.

In addition to its normal functions (i.e. allocation of funds to state govt departments and agencies to execute the schemes), P & D was also entrusted with the responsibility of implementing selected innovative schemes on its own during 2012-13. One such initiative was to engage Grasshopper in implementing the welfare schemes of the Government mostly done by State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD) as facilitator in the areas for promotion of conservation needs. Grasshopper works are mostly confined to the the fringe villages of Kaziranga and Manas National Park and such other areas requiring conservation activities. In the process of facilitating the rural development acivitites the NGO also took up a reaearch study titled 'Kaziranga landscaping through community participation –(although the scope of study was for the Dhansirimukh area of the KNP initially) with the objectives of having an insight into the issues and other factors affecing this world heritage site from a differen perspective unlike the other NGOs working for natue conservation.

Funding:

The funding of the project study '*Kaziranga Landscaping through Community Participation in economic activities*' is by the Planning and Development Department, Government of Assam.

Detailed Profile of the Community and/or issues that and/or issues that the placement agency engages with-

The primary working area of the agency Grasshopper is in two national parks of India. They are Kaziranga National Park and Manas National Park. Manas Wildlife Sanctuary is UNESCO Natural World heritage site, a Project Tiger Reserve, an Elephant Reserve and a biosphere Reserve in Assam. Located in the Himalayan foothills, the park is known for its rare and endangered endemic wildlife such as the Assam Roofed Turtle, Hispid Hare, Golden Langur, Tiger, Pygmy Hog and also famous for its Wild water buffalo. Covering an area of 39,100 hectares, it spans the Manas River and is bounded to the north by the forest of Bhutan. The site's scenic beauty includes a range of forested hills, alluvial grasslands and tropical

evergreen forest. Manas has exceptional importance within the Indian sub continent's protected areas as one of the most significant remaining natural areas in the region, where sizeable populations of a large of threatened species continue to survive. Though the NGO works both at Manas and Kaziranga National Park but as a trainee I was supposed to work at Kaziranga since my supervisor's work area was Kaziranga and its fringe villages.

Kaziranga and its fringe villages:

Kaziranga is known to the people of Assam and the entire world for its famous one horned rhino. Little did I know as a child and also a young adult about Kaziranga until I worked in Grasshopper for 45 days as block placement. The least I knew was about the presence of rich flora and fauna and read often in the newspaper about the killing of our national heritage- the one horned rhino and the annual flood. I had little idea about the population living in this area. Therefore the following profile that I have prepared is based entirely on my field visit and my stay in that beautiful part of Assam which I became aware for the first time. Also I have depended on some of the literature which gave me a better insight about the issues faced by the national park and its fringe villages.

Kaziranga National Park (KNP) covered an area an area of 430 sq km which is now extended to almost 858.98 sq. km. It is vast stretch of land situated in over two districts of Assam namely Golaghat and Nagaon; the other district which is adjoining to Kaziranga is Karbi Anglong, the home for the karbi tribes of Assam. Since Kaziranga is a national park so it is equally important to describe its demography and also its flora and fauna. Kaziranga is the biggest abode for the one horned rhino.



KNP Map source: Assam Science, Technology & Environment Council (ASTEC), Government of Assam

Brief History:

The park became a reserve forest in 1908, a game sanctuary in 1916, and it was closed officially for shooting in 1926. Kaziranga was thrown open to visitors in 1938. It was only after independence that Kaziranga became a wildlife sanctuary in 1950. In 1974 it was designated a National Park, the first one in Assam. UNESCO declared Kaziranga a World heritage site in 1985. Recently it has been declared a Tiger Reserve in the year 2006 and it has the highest density of tigers in the world. Apart from one horned rhinoceros (2048 in 2009), Kaziranga is providing habitat to other wildlife viz. Royal Bengal Tiger, Asiatic Water Buffalo, Asian Elephant, Sambar, Barking Deer, Swamp Deer, Hoolock Gibbon, Capped Langur, approx. 480 bird species etc.

It has a vast stretch of tall elephant grass, marshland and dense tropical moist broadleaf forest. The fertility of the soil is enhanced by four crisscrossing rivers- the mighty Brahmaputra at its west boundary, Dipholu, Mora Dipholu and Mora Dhansiri and has numerous small water bodies. (The word mora in Assamese means dead, therefore the river having mora in front of its name means the river is not in its active form and is dried to a large extent). It is not uncommon that in the rainy season KNP and its fringe villages experience annual flood. With adequate protection efforts that date back to almost a century, the grasslands and the mega fauna have been able to sustain in such a manner that one of the largest assemblages of these can be seen today in the wild. Prominent among them are the charismatic “BIG FIVE” –

- The great Indian one horned rhino
- The Asiatic Wild Buffalo
- The Asiatic Elephant
- The Swamp deer and
- The Royal Bengal Tiger

KNP also contains a significant population of mammalian species (35 in number) out of which 15 are threatened mammals according to the IUCN Red List. It has 60 species of reptiles; the most common is the King cobra, 24 species of amphibians, 42 species of fishes, 440 species of plants and 491 species of butterflies. The area also falls at the junction of the Australasia and Indo- Asian flyway thus providing an important migrating, breeding and nesting for over 550 species of Avifauna and is also a birding paradise. But this sector of bird watching is still a new concept and is being planned to develop by Grasshopper.

Wildlife Population Status (Species estimated in the Park)	
1. Greater One Horned Rhinoceros	- 2290
2. Royal Bengal Tiger	- 106
3. Asian Elephant	- 1165
4. Asiatic Wild Buffalo	- 1937
5. Eastern Swamp Deer	- 1168

(Tourist guide board inside the National Park)

There are three main types of vegetation: alluvial inundated grasslands, tropical wet evergreen forest and tropical semi evergreen forest. Grasslands predominate the west with tall elephant grasses on the higher ground and short grasses on the lower ground surrounding the beels (water bodies).

Vehicles are advised to slow down their speed as the national highway passes through the National Park intercepting animal corridors at various locations along the highway. There are also viewpoint/ towers at certain locations for passersby or the tourists to watch the natural beauty with animals roaming freely in the park vicinity.

The fringe villages of Kaziranga:

Although Grasshopper was extending its activities in more than forty villages of Kaziranga area, however as field visit I had to restrict myself only to central zone of the Kaziranga National Park viz.the Kohora and Madhya Kaziranga which includes villages such as Kohora 1, Kohora 2, Halodhibari, Sildubi, Bosa gaon, Doomjan, lukhurakhonia and some adjoining parts.

While meeting groups of women self help groups, meeting resource persons and taking up socio economic surveys in the villages I came across a number of issues and tried to understand the population, their livelihood options, dependency upon the National park etc. The experiences and issues we encountered in the process are attempted to be summarized in the following few lines:

Heterogeneous Population:

The population in the fringe villages is heterogeneous in nature. There are Bengali and Assamese speaking population both Hindus and Muslims, tea tribes originating from Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh who follow Christianity and were brought by the British, Bodo and Missing tribe etc. However all the tribes could speak Assamese fluently. Adjacent to Kaziranga is the hills of Karbi Anglong district who in contrast could not even understand Assamese and speak their own dialect. If one crosses the main road and goes to the nearest Karbi village he/she would feel that they have come to a new place altogether.

Livelihood:

Agriculture in Assam exhibits most of the characteristics of underdeveloped/backward agriculture, namely, a high dependence on agriculture for livelihood, widespread practice of traditional farming techniques and correspondingly low usage of modern farm inputs, low levels and low growth in productivity and incomes in the sector, widespread prevalence of subsistence cultivation, poor / inadequate agricultural infrastructure, and so on. The whole of Kaziranga can be termed as rural. People live in villages and most of them depend upon agriculture as the main source of livelihood. The main crops grown are paddy, rapeseed etc. But this option of livelihood is greatly affected during the flood time when crops stored in the granaries are all washed by flood or when animals from the reserve forest feed on them in ripening stage. In the last few years a certain strata of population has shifted from the traditional mode of livelihood to other activities such as:

- Animal husbandry (rearing of animals such as poultry, ducks, pigs and goats)
- Working in resorts and guests house
- Working in tea gardens

- Bamboo and cane works
- Self Help Groups (SHGs) taking up livelihood options as may suit the group and
- Petty business

Flood:

Nature and strategic location of the mighty Brahmaputra and Dhansiri River takes heavy toll on poor villagers. In the survey conducted in the villages of Kohora, Sildubi, every respondent admitted that flood is the annual problem in the region. During this time, villages get submerged and they take shelter in the government schools built on a higher ground. Flood also cause havoc to the wild life. Though higher grounds are built every year for the rescue and shelter of wild animals yet many animals die during flood. This includes both domestic and wild animals. It has direct repercussion in the education of the students who could not attend classes as schools become shelter houses for the whole community. Flood brings with it whole lot of health issues such as dysentery, pneumonia, malaria, cough, cold etc. Scarcity of food and spread of water borne diseases add more weightage to their plight.

Occupation: Agriculture

Agriculture has been the main source of livelihood of the people living in the fringe villages. Most of the people surveyed during the study admit that they have both *basti* and *kheti* land. Even if some families own small pieces of land they would cultivate crops for their own consumption and depend on it for the next cropping season. After the flood the land becomes more fertile and becomes suitable for mustard seed farming. Even though this option seems to act as relief to those poor farmers, but this option again does not favour them for long. The location of those fringe villages makes the crops vulnerable as these mustard seed farms fall in to the easy prey of wild elephants. The wild elephants not only destroy the crops but also sometimes ravage their homes. So choosing an option for livelihood does not always so much easy for those poor villagers. If they try their hand on one option that would be either destroyed by the flood or sometimes by the wildlife and adds more plight to their sufferings.



Cows are one of the most popular domesticated animals in every part of rural Assam; the case is similar in Kaziranga too. As people own small pieces of land, they cannot use tractor to till their land, thus cattle is the only means to till fields. Every household owns either of these; cows, back yard poultry, pigs, ducks or goats. No extra effort has to be made to rear these animals.

They are left open in the premises of the reserve forest where they graze freely. However this exerts tremendous pressure on the grassland of the reserve forest.

Prevalence of Child & Early Marriage among the Poor:

Girls are often married before the official age recommended by the law i.e. 18 years. The reasons for this are many. This practice is mostly in the case of the poor sections such as farmers, tea garden labourers who fight with poverty. Another reason is the fear of eloping and actual elopement of young boys and girls when they are in high schools or in the early years of puberty. In the first case, parents of young girls are constantly in the grip of fear that their daughter too might be emotionally blackmailed by some boy and then the couple might elope so parents marry off their daughters at an early age of 15 or 16. In the second case young lovers do elope in reality. They might often be classmates or neighbours whom the society does not allow for marriage (because of young age). The second case is very common in rural Assam. There are many instances of such marriage taking place at a young age through elopement but later these relations are accepted by their parents and the married couple get the approval of society in the process. However, these practices are not encouraged though in recent times. Marriage at a tender is particularly affects the health of the girl to a great extent.

School Dropout:

Dropout rate is considerably high at Kaziranga particularly with girls, but the situation isn't too good in the case of boys either. Poverty forces parents to strike off the names of their wards from the school list (though schools are mostly government run schools where expenses are much lesser than private schools) as they are not able to borne the minimum expenses of books or uniform. Dropout students then help their parents in petty earning. These children who then remain out of work due to lack of education qualification suffer from frustration and in many cases these youth are known to join either militant groups (as in the case of Karbi youths from Karbi Anglong district, near to Kaziranga) or groups with vested interests whose primary agenda is to oppose any move of government and call for *bandhs* and protests. Similarly, child marriage is also directly linked to the economic status and dropout rate of students. It is found that girls and boys elopes from homes when they are still student and ties the knot of marriage at adolescents. This is one of the reasons of dropout of students.

Man-Animal Conflict:

One of the striking features of Kaziranga national Park is that the whole area comes under core area. Wild animals pass through corridors (identified passages) and as such they are neighbours to villagers since villages are deep within the reserve forest. This is the reason animals like wild boar, elephants, rhinos often come as visitors to the paddy fields and backyards of people's houses and in this process there takes conflict between human and animals. Male members form groups and take turns in guarding paddy fields at the time of crop ripening and also the backyard kitchen gardens. They use different methods to scare wild animals such as fire, beating on tin roofs, lighting powerful batteries etc which act as short term method to prevent animals and also long term methods such as use of power fence to guard fields etc.

Seasonal Unemployment:

The people of Kaziranga are dependent on two main sources of livelihood. Firstly, agriculture with allied activities, and the second biggest source is tourism sector. The national park is open for the tourist from the month of November to April every year. This is

the peak season for the inflow of tourist and also the inflow of income and accordingly the rise in income. There are more than 25 big and small hotels or guest houses in the vicinity of Kaziranga mostly built along the highway and in some cases in the interior and remote areas amidst nature. The reason behind this is to provide the tourist an experience of the nature's beauty in the lap of nature, a chance of seeing the beautiful rural Assam, staying in bungalows experiencing the sounds of wild animals and forest insects, the sound of chirping of birds early in the morning etc. There are some luxury resorts developed in exotic locations in recent years offering top class facilities with careful blending of the traditional flavours and modern amenities to attract the well to do tourists both Indian and foreigners for an experience of a lifetime during their visits to KNP. Each and every hotel ranging from economy class government guest houses (*Aranyak* or *Bonani* and the like) to very costly hotels and resorts such as *Borgos*, *Iora*, *Landmark*, *Wildgrass* or *United 21* get 100 % occupancy during the peak time of the season (mid Novembr to February end). Along with this, the road side *dhabas* also earn a handsomely as people prefer to relinquish cheap yet traditional Assamese dish. Besides the hotel industry, the other business that flourish are the jeep services and elephant rides and all these generate a lot of employment in the tourist season. The traditional popular Assamese lady's wear known as *Mekhela chador* (*cotton Assamese traditional and Mishing designs*) are woven by the local women at their home and at the weaving centres are bright and colourful and attract a large number of tourursts who want to own atleast one pair for them as souvenir. Thus the weaving industry too gets a boom during this season as hotels too promote all kinds of ethnic food and wear.

But... this picture of a thriving economic activities and natural beauty hub completely alters as the tourists season comes to an end with the advent of summer. The place suddenly becomes deserted and gloomy and people's pockets tend to get empty as they are out of work. The hotels are open but only to give shelter to either journey breakers, researchers or those who happen to visit the area for business or leisure purpose. They are very few in numbers. As a result inhabitants of the area who rely heavily on tourism related activities are affected badly. Those who offer home stays at a cheap rate during season and the owners of affordable guest houses/restaurants are the worst sufferers as they now have to search for alternative means to make a living. Most of the poor semi skilled and unskilled workers who make a living out of the tourism business become unemployed with the onset of rainy season. Those who do not have their own cultivable land or any stable business worth the name have to engage themselves as hired labour to make both ends meet. Those who possess uneconomic and scant cultivable land may not even think of resorting to agriculture farming as the onset of monsoon in most years causes floods and inundate low lying areas. Ironically the villages in the fringes of KNP are low lying and rainy season is the toughest time for every poor family living in the flood prone areas.

Objectives of Block Placement at GRASSHOPPER:

Initially I planned to work at Grasshopper for 30 days which is the minimum working days for block placement. But this notion changed as days passed by. I started enjoying my training. So I decided to work till the last day before I return to Delhi again. Therefore I completed 45 days and still had the desire to continue further.

On the very first day, my supervisor Mr. Manijyoti Baruah explained me about the ongoing project at Grasshopper Assam. The project is named "Kaziranga Landscaping through

community participation". This project works mainly on providing sustainable livelihood options keeping in balance with the nature. The participation from the community is foremost. I was assigned to carry out a study on the socio economic conditions of the people living in the fringe villages of KNP. This was the major task assigned to me and it continued throughout the training period. I had certain objectives in my mind regarding my block placement which I would like to discuss below:

- Knowledge of Rural Assam
- Knowledge of environment
- Field Study
- Research
- Working with different groups
- Meeting experts and resource persons
- Use of theoretical inputs of social work in the field

Knowledge of Rural Assam- to have a better and in depth knowledge about the issues and problems of rural Assam, the way of living, food pattern, problems faced by them etc in the context of Kaziranga National Park.

Knowledge of environment- to work with issues pertinent to environment, in this situation it is the conservation of biodiversity which is through the empowerment of people so that they avoid the encroaching of forest areas and misuse the natural resources, out of which much of it might be endangered species requiring acute attention.

Field Study- a detailed understanding of the area of involvement with gaining knowledge on the prevalent practices and the indigenous resources.

Research- conducting a study of the ethnic groups present in the fringe villages of KNP with focus on the use of natural resources based on their ethnic diversities. With specific use of research methodology the study would be made scientific and reliable

Working with different groups- the organization has been working to provide livelihood opportunities to more than 500 self help groups; one objective is thus to get an experience of working with groups and the beneficiaries.

Meeting experts and resource persons- Since the project is funded by the Government of Assam; the implementation of the project and the progress of study is monitored and supervised under the guidance of officials of the Planning & Development department. So one of the objectives is to discuss issues with the resource persons and experts and gets insight on matters of policy making, matters of creating livelihood options, enhancing the tourism potential etc.

Use of theoretical inputs of social work in the field- having prior introduction to sociological and social work fundamentals an effort will be given to use of knowledge on human worth and dignity in their social lives and the related environmental aspects.

Task/Responsibilities assigned to the trainees: The assignments which I undertook during my block placement were as follows:

Understanding Kaziranga and its fringe villages:

Until I joined Grasshopper, I had just heard and imagined Kaziranga as an abode of the one horned rhino (as it is famous for) and full of natural beauty but at the same time a place encroached by the immigrant Bangladeshi people who illegally built houses in the free spaces within the national park (as always been reported in the Assamese regional newspapers). However, my knowledge about KNP enriched as I started working with members of Grasshopper and also when I visited KNP as field visit and met local people.

Kaziranga National Park at present covers an extensive area of almost 858.98 sq. Km and it falls under Golaghat District of Assam. The entire Kaziranga can be termed as rural area and the nearest town is Bokaghat which is 15-20 km from different villages of Kaziranga. The entire Kaziranga is core area and it falls under National Park therefore the people staying within Kaziranga particularly those residing in the interior of KNP always has the fear of being evicted by the forest department as it is considered illegal by the Wildlife Protection Act. Recently Kaziranga has been declared as Tiger reserve considering the number of tigers in the National Park which exceeds more than 100.

Majority of people of Kaziranga are dependent on the tourism sector as their livelihood. As such their business or income flourish during the season of tourist i.e. from November to April (earlier it was till March) and the rest of the time they have to sit idle. This is the case with most of the resorts too. There are a good many number of 3 or 4 star rated resorts which gives tourist a memorable experience of living in a comfortable home environment surrounded by nature's beauty however these resorts too remain vacant during the off season i.e., from May to October. Besides tourism, the other livelihood options are agriculture, weaving, working in tea gardens, bamboo and cane works etc. But it seems these options of livelihood are also in some way or the other linked to tourism (except for tea gardens). For instance, weaving of traditional Assamese dress known as *Mekhela Chador* gets a ready market during the festive and marriage season which also coincides with the tourist season. Therefore weaving takes place in the winter season and during the off season, training is given to new women or girls interested in weaving. The traditional machine through which *mekhela chador* or *gamocha* is made is known as *tat xal* is not available at every home since most of the families in number of villages of Kaziranga falls under poor category. As such women folk interested in weaving has to go to private weaving houses (ladies of well off families have such provision of *tat xal* at their homes where they give training to other ladies) or government offices such as SIRD (State Institute of Rural development).

People remain out of work not only when KNP is closed for tourists but also for another major reason i.e. the annual floods. The mighty river Brahmaputra flows adjacent to the national park and during monsoon season the river overflows and the whole of Kaziranga gets inundated with river water. This is a very crucial time for both the villagers and the animals of the park as they have to look for shelter on higher lands. Villagers take shelter in government schools and camps are being constructed in the schools and community kitchen takes place. The worst sufferers are domestic animals like poultry. Ducks on the other hand swim when flood approaches and so families who rear ducks as backyard poultry suffer loss. Accompanied by flood are number of diseases such as malaria, viral fever, dysentery, and pneumonia and skin disease. Flood also destroys the food in granaries. As the mainstay of

people is agriculture so destruction of granaries is a big blow to the farmers who would have otherwise depended on the home grown rice for whole of the year. This kind of poverty affects education of children too. In case of heavy flood, schools remain close for almost three months as villagers construct their camps in the government schools. The infrastructures of these schools are weak. (I can say this from my visit to a few schools at Kaziranga where meetings took place for self help groups). Window panes broken and non availability of fans.

Study of livelihood options:

Grasshopper Assam believes that problems like poaching, deforestation, drop out of students and child marriage has a strong link with the economic condition of people. Poaching of rhinos by militants and poachers cannot take place without the slightest support from local people and forest authorities as these are the two core groups who know each and every corner of the national park. Poaching of rhino horns is a lucrative business as it brings huge income from international market. Deforestation is also linked to the social and economic status of people. Local people heavily depend on firewood brought from nearby forest and tea plantations as they cannot afford gas cylinders. Therefore this has a direct effect on the ecological balance. Dropout rate is considerably high at Kaziranga particularly with girls, but the situation isn't too good in the case of boys either. Poverty forces parents to strike off the names of their wards from the school list (though schools are mostly government run schools where expenses are much lesser than private schools) as they are not able to borne the minimum expenses of books or uniform. Dropout students then help their parents in petty earning. These children who then remain out of work due to lack of education qualification suffer from frustration and in many cases these youths are known to join either militant groups (as in the case of Karbi youths from Karbi Anglong district, near to Kaziranga) or students union whose primary agenda is to oppose any move of government and call for *bandhs* and protest. Similarly, child marriage is also directly linked to the economic status and dropout rate of students. It is found that girls and boys elopes from homes when they are still student and ties the knot of marriage at adolescents. This is one of the reasons of dropout of students. This in turn affects the social, economic and health status of the couple. Most parents who fear that their wards too might elope, gets their daughter married soon before the prescribed age of law.

For all these reason it is necessary that the socio economic condition of these people of the fringe villages must be improved so that poverty related problems like child marriage, poaching etc lessens. Therefore, I studied about a number of livelihood options particularly for the women as they are mostly dependent upon the income of their husbands. Some of them were:

- Backyard poultry/Duck rearing
- Cattle rearing
- Pig rearing
- Goat rearing
- Weaving
- Vermi compost
- Cane and bamboo craft (for men)

Setting up of rural library:

Research conducted by grasshopper showed dropout rate of students high among girls, the case is not better for boys either. The reasons for this dropout rate are many:

- Poverty
- Eloping from home on pretext of marriage.
- Lack of facilities in schools(no fans, no proper desk and bench, no library)

In order to encourage students and community people towards education, Grasshopper decided to set up a series of rural libraries to be distributed across 40 villages. In this process I was assigned the task of preparing letters to publishing houses, libraries, authors and run community drive for books. I also acted as the spokesperson and conveyed people the noble idea of setting up rural libraries and successfully accumulated more than 1000 old and new books for the proposed library.

Field trips to hotels/resorts at Kaziranga:

During field trip to Kaziranga, we visited a number of well known resorts of Kaziranga and prepared a questionnaire as to assess how these big resorts are benefitting the local people and employment opportunities provided by the management of these resorts. It was found out that the local people are engaged as housekeeping staff or cook or waiter, driver, or as security guards.

However with competition amongst the resorts, the authorities of these resorts prefer educated, well behaved, knowledge of English etc. All these criteria have made selection process tough and at present it does not matter whether one is a local or not, preference is given to the best candidate.

Attempt was also made to understand as to the necessity and compelled circumstances leading them to shift from their traditional mode of occupation i.e. agriculture to these new livelihood options.

Assessing the growth and progress of earlier projects of livelihood sustainability initiated by Grasshopper:

As poverty is one of the primary reasons of economic backwardness in the fringe villages, Grasshopper Assam had implemented the programme “Chief Ministers Jeevan Jyoti Aachoni” through which self help groups was formed and they were provided poultry, pigs, ducks and goats. It was also aimed at Women Empowerment. My task was to assess the whether the scheme was successfully implemented, are the SHG groups benefitting from the distribution animals for rearing etc. Therefore we met groups of women who were part of SHG group and checked their passbooks and enquired how do they accumulate money in their account and got to know interesting facts such as “*hundi khel*” “collective work” etc to collect money on weekly and monthly basis.



Meeting with SHG groups at Madhya Kaziranga's Bosa Gaon (left)

Sensitization programme with SHGs of Central Kaziranga at Kohora (right)



Documentation work:

It includes preparing questionnaire for the study “Socio- economic conditions of the people living in the fringe villages of Kaziranga”, research work on the above topic, letters to publishing houses in Guwahati, writing articles on livelihood options such Pig rearing and Goat rearing, Pygmy Hog conservation program and its success, article on Human Elephant conflict in context of Kaziranga’s fringe villages, questionnaire on bird watching as a new arena to improve tourism of Kaziranga etc. Documentation was one of the primary work that I engaged at Grasshopper besides working in the field.



Filling up of interview schedules during survey for the study on “Socio-Economic conditions for the fringe villages of Kaziranga



Visit to academic and research institutes:

Visit was made to academic institutes to study on matters relating to self help groups, livelihood options, organic farming through vermin composting, pig farming, goat farming, types of agriculture in Assam etc. The institutes visited were-

- **NEDFI-** North–East Development and Finance Institute
- **SIRD-** State Institute of Rural Development
- **OKD-** Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development
- Assam Veterinary College, Khanapara
- Directorate of Agriculture, Assam

Besides academic institutes I made field visits to a couple of weaving training centres at SIRD, Kaziranga and Greenwood resort to understand the prospects of this handloom industry and the profit incurred by the weavers. It is only when I talked to number of weavers that I got to know that the original muga silk that used be the only material used in muga mekhela chadar(the costliest among all other mekhela chador; it is the most important one used in Bihu dance) has been replaced by artificial coloured thread brought from Karnataka as the production of muga is decreasing day by day.

Working upon newer ways to improve tourism sector at Kaziranga:

In this process we had extensive discussion with experts on field of tourism, bird watching, local tour guides etc and took ideas as how to improve tourism in Kaziranga. Proposed ideas that came out of discussion are as follows:

By opening a spice garden at Middle Kaziranga in the model of spice gardens of Kerala. Introduction of bicycle for tourist who can ride and see the beautiful surrounding and the nearby villages riding the bicycle.

Training centres to be established for jeep and tourist guides where information would be disseminated on scientific names of animals and birds (foreign tourist doesn't understand local names of birds), English speaking courses for guides etc. Bird watching could be enhanced by setting up bird watching towers at places where migratory birds flock the most. Idea was also proposed for construction of rope ways across Kaziranga.



(The proposed location for spice garden)

Human Elephant Conflict:

Man has been in conflict with wild beast since ages. One of the prominent conflicts which persist till date is the Human elephant conflict. Due to increasing rate of deforestation particularly the habitats of elephants, these gigantic animals comes out to the open spaces in search of foodstuff and in the process trespasses the cultivated fields of nearby people and also ruins granaries. An agrarian person whose primary sustenance is agriculture visualizes the entry of these beasts as destruction of their hard labour done on the fields. Therefore people come out in collection and use various means such as crackers, bells, fire, sticks etc to scare the animals. However when an elephant or a herd of elephants turns out to be regular visitors to the village's conflict takes place between them and humans. The results are either death of the beast itself or death of people whom the angry elephant attacks. The loss is both human lives as well loss of wild life.

Keeping this in mind, I was assigned the task of reading extensively on this topic and meeting local people at Kaziranga and also elephant and forest experts such as Dr. Kushal K. Sharma in preparing a module as how to deal with of human elephant conflict.

Training on GIS and RS (Geographic information System and Remote Sensing)

I was given training on how to use GPS system and how to analyze data. In recent years, the severe global climate change has altered the habitats of plenty of creatures. Therefore, some specific creatures are reduced dramatically every year, which causes great impacts on the ecology balance.

One major Goal of Grasshopper as an Organization is to achieve the aim of creating a network of natural resources and ecological data, this is a part of the Kaziranga Landscaping

Project. Also, the internet technologies enable developers to build up a web platform for front-end query, display, and back-end management.

In the Conservation of Biodiversity, Geographic Information System has a major role to play, this includes the following 5 functions:

- Photo Assessment
- Survey data assessment
- Species directory modification
- Species data modification
- User Management

In Biodiversity Conservation, Geographic Information System and Remote Sensing greatly facilitates Endemic and Endangered Species Research in order to understand the time and spatial distribution of species. Also, the advantages of the system, like the intelligent query functions, species distribution map service, easy-to-use interface, reduce users' time for waiting, etc can increase users' willingness to use and attract more people to devote to preserving biodiversity. Also it can be used effectively to attract and guide tourists.

On a learning curve:

A visit to the pygmy hog captive breeding centre to learn about conservation efforts:

Pygmy Hog also known as “chota suar” (suar meaning pig) in Hindi or “nal gahori” (nol is the name of the grass under which the pig stays; and gahori meaning pig) or “Takuri Borah” in Assamese is the rarest wild suid in the world. It is an endangered species of small wild pig. Its scientific name is *Porcula Salvania*. It was previously spread across India, Nepal and Bhutan in the foothill plains of south of Himalaya. The present population is confined to Assam only.

As part of training process, we visited Pygmy Hog Conservation Programme at Basistha, Guwahati to know the reasons for it being categorised as endangered and what are the ways to protect it. The issue is complex as the meat of pygmy hog is considered tasty by people and hence even if they are farmed, their number again falls down when they are left in the reserve forest as there is no adequate security. At present with the raising level of consciousness through initiatives of the Government, measures to provide security through radio collar is being thought of and have been initiated in a few reserve forest such as Nameri Reserve forest, Dibru Soikhuwa and Manas National Park.



Visit to a Pygmy Hog Conservation centre. Animals in grey colour are the pygmy hogs



Skills Developed during the Placement:

In the entire 45 days of training the agency vested me the responsibility of a program coordinator of Grasshopper. This position accompanied the duty of meeting and taking appointments of people for discussion on issues related to the project “Kaziranga landscaping through community participation”, data collection on socio economic conditions of the fringe villages of Kaziranga, PRAs, reading up literature on various topics such as organic farming, human elephant conflict, visiting field sites and important offices and organizations such as SIRD, NIRD, OKDISSD, NEDFi, Pygmy hog Conservation Program at Basistha etc. in the process my team had to take various assignments and activities like setting up of village libraries for children etc.

As a result I was able to acquire a number of skills which I think was because of the responsibility entrusted and trust reposed in me by supervisor and colleagues. Here I describe a few of the skills that I think I was able to develop and hone in the process.

Communication skills:

Communication skills are skills needed for effective conveyance of information and they include sending clear and concise messages and hearing and correctly understanding messages that are being sent to us. These skills are essential in verbal, para-verbal and nonverbal communication.

The trainee could develop her communication skills through the work in the rural areas, as well in the premises of the office with the staff and facilitator.

Interpersonal skills:

These are skills that are used by a person to properly interact with others. It refers to character traits possessed by an individual rather than skills that can be taught in a classroom. Interpersonal skills include everything from communication and listening skills to attitude and deportment. Good interpersonal skills are a prerequisite for many positions in an organization.

Concurrent field work in addition to classroom teachings has already imbibed in me a lot of interpersonal skills like listening, positive attitude towards everything and public speaking. In addition to these I was strongly motivated by my supervisor (at Grasshopper) by his critical questioning of things and his enthusiasm towards every kind of work. I too have now started questioning things and not accepting situations as if they are presented to me on a plate ready to eat.

I now realize one of the main reasons of extending my block training at Grasshopper. It is the lively and jovial atmosphere at the agency; everybody worked beyond the scheduled time without any complaint; it is because of their love and dedication towards their work. I developed the art of not taking tension at the silliest of things. Cooperation and working in team is also another skill that I learn which I lacked till my block placement training.

Team building:

The activities of organising people for meetings and gatherings along with the facilitator helped me to understand the tactics of team building.

Leadership Skills:

Leadership has been described as “a process of social influence in which one person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task”.

This is one skill which was dormant in me as I never realized that I possessed it but often I was appreciated by my colleagues that I possess good leadership skill. However I realized late and so block placement training pointed out to me that I too possess this very skill which I am going to strengthen in future.

Leadership qualities includes-



Among these qualities I was praised for honesty, sincerity, passion for working in new field, and some bit of confidence. As my professional ethic demanded and also my personal belief, I tried not to be absent from work and in case I got late, I made sure I informed my supervisor the reason for being late.

I showed honesty in sharing every bit of detail of field with my supervisor as he guided me. For setting up rural library I had to form a small group and I took the responsibility of being the spokesperson in approaching publishing houses and big book stores requesting them to donate books both old and new for the noble cause. I spoke as though I were a member of Grasshopper (in reality I was just an intern) showing confidence in what I spoke and standing firm for the cause. I was greatly congratulated by my team and my supervisor for showing such confidence, passion and shouldering the responsibility for which we were able to collect more than 1000 books; this was considered a very good start by everyone.

Project Management:

A project is a temporary group activity designed to produce a unique product, service or result. Therefore project management is the application of knowledge, skills and techniques to execute projects effectively and efficiently. As I have already mentioned, I was entrusted with the task of carrying out a study on “Socio – economic conditions of people living in the fringe villages of Kaziranga” which required a systematic study of firstly, understanding the demography, getting an insight into the issues of people, carrying out survey through interview schedule, focus group discussion etc

Project Management knowledge draws on ten areas:

Integration	Scope	Time
Cost	Quality	Procurement
Human Resources	Communications	Risk Management
	Stakeholder Management	

Networking:

One of the basic and important skills is that of networking which I acquired through my block placement. As Grasshopper worked directly with the Planning and development department, I studied the Chief Minister’s special schemes, NABARD, SIRD and discussed them with my supervisor. We also looked for skill development programmes for the youths of Kaziranga and tried to locate local resource persons who can train women and girls on weaving the Assamese traditional wear. We visited State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD) to study on schemes and training programmes meant for the rural people living in the villages which would then be mentioned.



(left) a local weaver expert who also train local women in weaving skills and (right) visit to an weaving centre.



Social Work Values and Principles used in Field and Training:

Every profession in this world is guided by its own set of values and principles which make them unique and great. Social work as a profession as I believe carries with it the baggage of novelty, doing good and also thinking good for others. In this sense the values and principles of social work give it a distinct mark from other profession.

As a social work student it is my personal belief to develop in me the values of the profession which I believe will help me achieve great miles in the helping profession. I can assure of imbibing in me the following values which I used during block placement:

Value 1: Respect for Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons

As I got to work with so many groups not belonging to my community but still called an Assamese by the virtue of sharing the space and geographical boundary, I constantly checked my biases in dealing with people in the rural Assam. But I was happy to find that I was at ease in following this value and I did not have to make effort in creating respect but it came to me naturally. I was able to give the same dignity and worth to every person I met during my block field training.

Value 2: Pursuit of Social Justice

Social workers believe in the obligation of people, individually and collectively, to provide resources, services and opportunities for the overall benefit of humanity and to afford them protection from harm.

While assessing the success and growth of the livelihood programmes with the SHG groups, I found that many groups have grievances against the NGO for not adequately distributing cheques and poultry. While many groups got what they desired for there were still many who were not happy with the services of the Government scheme i.e “Chief Minister’s JeevanJyoti Swa-Niyojan Yojana (Self Employment Scheme). In that case I noted down the griveinces of those groups and later discussed them with my colleagues and supervisor. I brought up this issue of inequality into light which helped in formulating new plans for those groups.

Value 3: Service to Humanity

When acting in a professional capacity, social workers place professional service before personal goals or advantage, and use their power and authority in disciplined and responsible ways that serve society.

Humanity knows no concept of boundary, caste, creed etc and as a social work student I firmly belief and practices this value by accepting and showing equal respect to everyone.

Value 4: Integrity of Professional Practice

Social workers maintain a high level of professional conduct by acting honestly and responsibly, and promoting the values of the profession. Social workers strive for impartiality in their professional practice, and refrain from imposing their personal values, views and preferences on clients.

While acting as the project coordinator at Grasshopper I carried a professional attitude in the field by behaving responsively. I had to mind my words for it was the matter of prestige for both my department and the agency I worked in. Honesty is what I adhered to in whatever condition it may be which is also a sign of professionalism.

Value 5: Confidentiality in Professional Practice

Social workers respect the importance of the trust and confidence placed in the professional relationship by clients and members of the public. They respect the client’s right to confidentiality of information shared in a professional context.

While I went for exposure visits to meet resource persons I encountered many such details about government operation and corruption linked to individuals at policy level. In that case I kept the identity of the resource person safe by not disclosing it to the department in which I had the training since it was a government department.

Principles adhered to:

The experience and exposure during the block placement helped her to imbibe the very core principles of social work which can justify the attitude that she had developed for the social work practice. They are:

- Principle of individualization
- Principle of purposeful expression of feeling
- Principle of controlled emotional involvement
- Principle of non-judgemental attitude
- Principle of acceptance

- Principle of client's self-determination
- Principle of confidentiality
- Principle of resource utilization
- Principle of agency practice and settings
- Principle of democratic group self-determination

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Kaziranga is known to people world wide as one of the world heritage site, and famously for the biggest abode of the one horned rhino. It is also the one of the biggest earner of the revenue for Assam. Considering this picture even a lay person can claim that Kaziranga is economically viable and developed. This picture is not entirely false as most of the household are linked directly or indirectly with the national park or the tourism sector as mahouts of elephant's, security guards, forest officers, jeep driver's helpers in resort helps as a tourist guides etc.

However there is another picture too. More than half of the population living in fringe villages of Kaziranga falls under the below poverty line and are holders of B.P.L card besides the study conducted on the socio economic condition of the people living in fringe villages of Kaziranga reveals that more than 50% of the population still use fire woods as a means of fuel, stays in kuchcha houses and higher education level was found to be very low. Moreover, annual flood in addition to crop destruction by wild animals such as elephants, wild boar and Rhino adds to the misery of the people.

The National park is also facing threats from problems such as poaching. Though the number of rhinos has increased and Kaziranga has a very good density of rhinos, still the rate of rhino killing is highly alarming.

Human elephant conflict is another issue. Rogue elephants often kill people and also destroy fields massively. The forest department has now surrounded the territory of the National Park with electric wires and it has decreased the instances of attacks by animals.

The fact that the mighty Brahmaputra is at the west boundary of the Park is also posing a serious threat to the area covered under the National Forest. Heavy flood in the monsoon season washes away tons of land which gets completely lost in the heart of the mighty river.

As a social work trainee at Grasshopper, which works under the Planning and Development department, I attempted to bring all such issues through writings which are going to get published in the annual report of the department. Through reading of literature and assessing the growth of SHG groups, the trainee also had discussion on how to improve the implementation of Government schemes properly and presented before them ideas on improving tourism sector at Kaziranga.

From the work experience and learning at Grasshopper, I can highly recommend the agency for future block placements. The assistance received from the agency and my supervisor in particular was highly satisfactory. In the entire 45 days of my block placement, I entirely felt that I am a permanent member of the NGO. It was due to the love and support and guidance from my team members.