

Social Base of Grassroots Politics in ASSAM



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Jogendra Kr. Das

THE BOOK

India has been experiencing chequered results of democratic decentralization process initiated more than a decade ago. The new dispensation of devolution of power and funds in a relatively more transparent manner following the 73rd CA Act, 1992 has brought about a change in the rural leadership pattern as well as in the process of village empowerment. The new politico-administrative era has led to the emergence of local leadership in the country with a new vigor. Assam is not an exception to that new revolution of grassroots governance, where the experiment of Panchayati Raj system had been a gross failure in the past. But the new dispensation has added a new lease of life to the PRIs in Assam and added a newer dimension in representation. At the academic level, PRIs, generally do not attract much scholars and academics in the state to a desired extent. Here, in the present book "Social Base of Grassroots Politics in Assam", an attempt has been made to fill up this vacuum of our knowledge regarding the sociological appraisal of grassroots politics in the Indian state of Assam. The author has grouped some very pertinent issues through an inquiry of social background features of the representatives of Panchayats of a specific universe based in Assam for a broader understanding and generalization of grassroots governance. The quality of representativeness of any political organ in a democracy is the very basis and essence of democratic governance and it is also important to look as to how our plural society finds representations in the political apparatuses, be it in the top or in the bottom. Here lies the significance of studying the grassroots governance, which is now, becomes a part of the constitution itself. The book deals with intensively the PRIs of Assam with a special reference to the district of Kamrup from a sociological perspective. It is probably the first attempt of this kind, which is interdisciplinary in its approach, and it obviously addresses to a large audience even beyond the social science disciplines. Our administrators, policy-makers, planners, political activists, students, scholars and general readers interested in the study of grassroots governance and democratic decentralization as such will find Dr. Jogendra Kr. Das's book useful and stimulating.



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**SOCIAL BASE OF GRASSROOTS POLITICS
IN ASSAM**

JOGENDRA KR. DAS



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CONTENTS

| | Page No. |
|---|--------------|
| <i>Preface</i> | XI |
| <i>List of Tables</i> | XV |
| <i>List of Abbreviations</i> | XIX |
| CHAPTER-1 | |
| INTRODUCTION : | 1-18 |
| Origin of the Research Problem | 1 |
| Interdisciplinary Relevance | 9 |
| Review of Research and Development of the Subject | 9 |
| Significance of the Study | 12 |
| Objectives of the Study | 13 |
| Methodology and Field Work | 13 |
| Scheme of Chapters | 16 |
| Limitations | 17 |
| CHAPTER-2 | |
| A BRIEF PROFILE OF KAMRUP DISTRICT | |
| LOCATION | 19-30 |
| A BRIEF HISTORY OF PANCHAYATI RAJ | |
| OF KAMRUP | 26 |
| CHAPTER-3 | |
| SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE PANCHAYAT | |
| REPRESENTATIVES | 31-70 |
| Location of Upbringing | 32 |
| Age Structure | 34 |
| Family Status | 35 |
| Castes of the Panchayat Representatives | 39 |

| | |
|--|----|
| Communities of the Panchayat Representatives | 41 |
| Religious Background of the Panchayat Representatives | 43 |
| Educational Background of the Panchayat Representatives | 45 |
| Political Background of the Panchayat Representatives | 50 |
| Economic Bases of the Panchayat Representatives.. | 56 |
| Hobbies of the Representatives | 68 |

CHAPTER-4

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BASES OF WOMEN

REPRESENTATIVES AND THEIR ROLE 71-94

| | |
|--|----|
| Age | 74 |
| Caste Representation | 75 |
| Religion | 76 |
| Educational Background | 77 |
| Occupation | 79 |
| Annual Income | 80 |
| Political Experience and Training | 81 |
| Factors for Joining Panchayats | 84 |
| Women in the Decision Making Process | 84 |
| Attending the Panchayat Meetings | 86 |
| Women Leaders for Women Folks | 86 |
| Meeting the Rural People and Self-Assessment About their Leadership Quality | 88 |

CHAPTER-5

ROLE PERCEPTION AND POPULAR LINKAGES. 95-122

| | |
|--|----|
| Important tasks to be accomplished by the Representatives | 97 |
| Important Works done | 98 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Major Problems of South Kamrup | 99 |
| Whether the Problems could be solved | 100 |
| Self-Assessment About their own Achievements | 101 |
| On People's Cooperation and Participation in the Rural Developmental Process | 102 |
| Panchayat Meetings | 104 |
| Perception about the Role of the State Government on Panchayats | 105 |
| Utilization of Allocated Funds | 110 |
| Major Problems in the Panchayat Working as perceived by the Representatives. | 111 |

CHAPTER-6

ROLE OF THE PANCHAYATS IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT. 123-142

| | |
|---|-----|
| Schemes taken Under SGRY during 2006-2007, in the Panchayats covered under Development Blocks of South Kamrup. | 126 |
| Suggestions of the Respondents to Resolve the Problem of Flood and Erosion | 138 |
| Future Visions of the Panchayat Representatives..... | 140 |

CHAPTER-7

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS. 143-160

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| Appendix | 161 |
| Notes | 211 |
| Bibliography and References | 215 |
| Glossary. | 225 |
| Index | 229 |

INTRODUCTION

ORIGIN OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

The process of democratic decentralization in the form of local government has become a revolution throughout the world in general and India in particular by way of sharing and distribution of political powers to the grassroots level. In the third world countries including India local government is considered as a functional and effective grassroots administration and rural development strategy through which national development can only be achieved. In India, grassroots politics both in rural and urban level, has been constitutionalised and instead of it being a financial scheme of grassroots reconstruction, it becomes a system of governance where the rural folk could be involved in the entire village developmental programmes ensuring their full and active participation in the decision making process. At present in our country, we have a uniform three-tire system of Panchayati- Raj and it has been made obligatory for all the states to constitute Village Panchayats at the village level, Panchayat Sammittees or in some cases Anchalik Panchayats at the intermediate level (Block level in Assam) and District Panchayats or District Councils at the apex level following the Constitution 73rd Amendment Act in 1992. Thus in order to extend Indian democracy to the grassroots level, the government of India has fully constitutionalised the local government system in order to ensure

political participation of the rural people to the maximum and speedy socio-economic development. The recent amendment has envisaged a broad objective to make the village poor milieu as active agents of social change and development instead of their former position as just recipients from the 'giver', i.e., the government institutions. In fact, the recent amendment makes sincere efforts to entrust upon the grassroots political institutions the responsibility to shape and reconstruct our village communities by envisaging necessary statutory powers and well-defined area of jurisdictions.

The concept of democratic decentralization has found its indigenous name in our country as Panchayati Raj. By the term 'democratic' we mean the close involvement of ordinary people in the governance of the country and from this count it necessarily has to be first available at the grassroots level. Panchayats in rural India have been functioning for centuries. The appointment of the Balwantray Mehta Committee in 1957 reflected in some degree the concern of the ruling authorities to seek structural alternatives with a view to mobilizing popular participation in the developmental programmes. The committee had recommended for setting up of a three-tier structure of the PRI's, such as district, sub-district (intermediate) and village (Zila Parishad, Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayat respectively) level for ensuring popular participation in the rural area's progress. But these bodies began to languish within a decade of their celebrated commencement (Malik 2005:775). Accordingly, state legislations were enacted in different states and PRIs were established. Again the Janata government appointed the Ashok Mehta Committee to review the existing PRIs. Interestingly, the Ashok Mehta Committee observed that the PRIs were exclusively dominated and controlled by the socio-economically advanced sections of the society, facilitating thereby the emergence of oligarchic forces, which grossly fail to benefit the weaker sections. Thus, Ashok Mehta committee made certain recommendations including enacting a central law, etc. But due to lack of political support to the recommendations, the report could not make much headway. However, some states like West Bengal and Karnataka seized the opportunity and patterned their local governments

in the light of the committee's recommendations. Therefore, there was a quest for restructuring the local governments particularly to make them more vibrant and effective grassroots institutions for strengthening democracy and agency which may coordinate public administrative apparatuses in bringing social transformation (Malik 2005:776). The policy makers in the country felt the needs to introduce democratic decentralization by establishing democratically elected governments at local levels with the objectives to entrust them with powers and responsibilities so as to make them the institution of local government in true sense (ibid). This issue was examined by G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985) and L.M. Singhri Committee (1986) etc. The resulting idea was introduced as a bill (64th Constitutional Amendment Bill) in the Lok Sabha in 1989 to achieve the above stated conflicting objectives. Though this bill could not be enacted, the idea was translated into the 73rd CA Act, 1992.

Thus it appears that PRIs of India function marginally and largely fail to fulfill popular expectations, however, with a few exceptions to Kerala, Maharashtra, West Bengal and Gujrat where PRIs function relatively better than other states of the country. Today, as is observed, especially in the states like Assam grassroots politics have been largely bureaucratized and narrow party politics eat into the vital objectives of democratic decentralization for which Panchayats have rejuvenated.

Possibly because of some inherent loopholes in the administration and functioning of the PRI's, coupled with its very marginal role in grassroots enlistment, the government of India was hurry to give it a new dimension. Hence, the first half of 1989 witnessed a flurry of activities at the level of Central government aimed at remedying this dismal situation. Thus the 73rd constitution Amendment Bill was passed which has brought about a new innovation in the grassroots politics in the country. It was hailed as a historic step in the empowerment of the people not only with a view to ensuring their more effective participation in the electoral process at the grassroots level, but also for entrusting them with a greater role in decision-making and developmental functions in matters of their immediate concern. For the first time PRIs have been admitted as the third stratum of our

democracy and federal polity. The new law focused the attention of the nation on the political structures and process of rural India, their significance for the rural society and their participation in the operation of these structures.

Following this act almost all the states of the country have enacted own PRI legislation in broad conformity with this governing central act. Now, it would be very pertinent to make intensive investigation into the social bases of political representation in these structures, the emerging pattern of rural leadership, their roles in the task of rural reconstruction, which are now having constitutional backing.

With this end in our mind, we propose to conduct a sociological study of an intensive nature, in an empirical setting based on the Indian state of Assam. We must admit that the country is experiencing chequered results of democratic decentralization process initiated a decade ago. The new politico-administrative era has led to the emergence of local leadership in the country. Though a number of curious issues have ranked in our mind, we shall only group a few very pertinent issues, through an inquiry of social background features of the representatives of Panchayats in our selected universe. We believe that the quality of representativeness of any political organ in a democracy is the very basis and essence of democratic governance and it is also important to see how our plural society finds representation in the political apparatuses, be it in the top or in the bottom. Here, lies the significance of studying the grassroots governance, which is now becomes a statutory institution.

To keep conformity with the national pattern, the government of Assam in March 1994 passed Assam Panchayati Raj Bill 1994. This act has extended to the whole of the rural areas of Assam except the Autonomous Districts under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. However, the Act has excluded any area under the Municipality or a Town Committee or a Cantonment or a Municipal Board or a Municipal Corporation. The Assam Panchayati Raj Act of 1994 has introduced a three-tier local self-government institutions in Assam such as Gaon Panchayat at the village level, Anchalik Panchayat at the block level, and Zilla Parishad at the District level covering a

population of 6000-8000 (Government of Assam 2002). The present law has replaced the earlier Mahkuma Parishad by Zilla Parishad. The term of office has been extended from 4 years to 5 years. Provisions have been made to reserve 30 per cent seats of gaon Panchayats to the women and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population. Though the state government can take over the administration of Panchayats, provision has been made to held elections within six months from the date of taking over the administration. According to the provision of the constitution the State government shall constitute a Finance Commission for the allocation of fund to the Panchayats. The PRIs have been given adequate powers and a wide range of jurisdictions to ensuring speedy economic development and social justice at the grassroots level, sufficient powers have also been decentralized with 29 subjects at the 11th Schedule of the constitution and it is expected that with the help of this provision, the Panchayats will be able to mobilize sufficient resources for initiating decentralized economic planning for rural development. Thus the Act has made the Panchayats more powerful economically with new avenues to mobilize resources as well as politically with a wide range of subjects for jurisdiction.

It is important to note here that the PRIs in Assam suffered severely from non-functioning and in reality, it was a no-man's business till this new dispensation for which the process of rural development in the state was extremely lethargic. Since 1972, Panchayat elections were not held in the state and this sector had been a neglected child in the hands of the Congress (I) and the AGP government between 1972-1992. However, after a long gap of 18 years, the Congress (I) holds Panchayat elections on February 1992. Though generally, individual qualities and personalities have been the chief criterion of election of a person to local bodies, the 1992 elections showed rather a different picture. All the national and regional political parties had their supported candidates. Thus in reality, Panchayats in Assam was bureaucratized and party political wrangling was also started during this period. Finally, however, following the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, democracy has been brought to villages in Assam along with other states of the country. Following the new dispensation, again Panchayat elections

were held in March 2001 and the elections were fought completely on party basis. Thus the Panchayats, for the first time, following the 73rd amendment, were constituted in Assam and successfully completed its stipulated five years term. The government of Assam of course held the next Panchayat elections by the end of 2007 amidst wanton violence, which was in fact unprecedented. The recent elections were also fought on party basis and the supporters along with the stalwarts involved in fratricidal violence in a large scale destroying all the democratic norms and the essence of grassroots politics. The Congress (I) has swept away the recent Panchayat (2007-2008) elections capturing majority of the PRIs of the state amidst strong opposition from certain quarters and allegation being levelled against it in the wake of its failure to restore law and order situation and stop ethnic violence. Thus, we find that Political Parties have exclusively cropped up in the domain of grassroots politics in Assam and it becomes almost a part of the parliamentary democracy both at the state and national level. But still then Panchayats in the state have not been functioning properly and up to the popular expectations. People along with the representatives are yet to be sensitized on democratic decentralization of political power and economic resources.

Despite this fact, we must admit, democratic decentralization of power and resources through the grassroots governance have become constitutionalised by the recent act and as a result , popular involvement in local government activities and rural developmental efforts have gradually been on the increase which certainly needs closer scrutiny on the nature of representations and role performance of the local bodies following the new dispensation. Hence, we have taken up this problem for intensive investigation and a sincere attempt has been made to understand PRIs of Assam sociologically. Thus, it would be our sincere endeavour to closely look into the functioning of the PRIs and the Social background of the representatives in our specific stipulated empirical setting. While taking up such a very pertinent problem for investigation, we have realized that infant rural leadership has not attracted scholars to the desired extent especially in Assam. Therefore, it is necessary to look into it intensively as to how PRIs represent the grassroots milieu, how the rural society is

reflected into the PRIs, how the rural vulnerable sections including SCs, STs, women, Muslims and others find representation in it and how the PRIs fulfill rural popular expectations. The sociological approach to grassroots governance is quite new in Assam's context. No such attempt has so far been made earlier to deal with the grassroots politics of the state. We assume, our present effort will help us to comprehend as to how and to what extent our rural society has been reflected in the recent constitutionally recognised grassroots village bodies as well as the quality of emerging leadership at the grassroots level.

While taking up such a new approach, it is necessary to make a conceptual clarification of 'social bases' and 'grassroots politics' and their relevance and interlinks.

Here we assume that the Panchayats like the other upper level representative bodies, do not operate in a vacuum and the representatives too, are not isolated from the society as such. They are rather deeply embedded in the society that creates them. Thus, a Panchayat is fundamentally, a product of the society and is a part of the political superstructure particularly following the 73rd amendment. Our assumption here is that man is not only a political being, but as well a social being, that besides his political actions, he has had a non-political area of activity and the former is not unconnected with the latter, but is, in fact, incomprehensible unless the latter's influence on it, is fully taken into account. Hence, a Panchayat representative is essentially a product of his social milieu. His role in the Panchayat is not simply determined by the established political and institutional frame. He has with him his family background, his occupation and income, his party affiliation, his education, his religion, caste, class status, age, language and his overall economic status in the society where he lives and which have an impact on his role in the Panchayat. It is against the background of these different strands of the social structure that one may fully comprehend about the roles of the Panchayats. We also assume that political activities may be understood through one's manifest behaviour. Moreover, a concrete activity is expressed in observable behaviour. Therefore, naturally, these activities are

quantifiable and subject to empirical investigation. Besides, we have also used the terms like ‘Panchayat leaders’, ‘Representatives’ ‘Grassroots leaders’, ‘Respondents’ to mean the same thing, the elected Panchayat incumbents. We have also frequently used the term ‘Leader and Leadership’ in the study. To our definition the term ‘Leader’ is almost equivalent to the concept ‘Elite’ distinguished from the non-leaders or the people. The leaders have specific qualities to exert command over society, get obedience from the followers, have charismatic image, rational-legal recognition and could lead the society in a legitimate manner. A leader is a person, whose guidance and direction are accepted by the people in the community. Leader signifies a blend of personal traits uncommon to others. A leader is basically a human being and is related to other human beings through different sets of relationships (Truman, et al., 1972: 184). Though a Panchayat leader does not acquire all the necessary qualities of a political elite based at the state and national level, yet, as we assume, Panchayat representatives certainly acquire the qualities of the semi-elite in so far as their political status is concerned. Besides they have also a middle class standing in the society in so far as their economic status is concerned. The modern grassroots representatives are not mere laymen or village folks, rather as experiences reveal, they are more than what we traditionally thought to be. The panchayat members today are qualified, experienced having organisational and leadership qualities and assuming elite status with distinct political visions.

The proposed research is an attempt to understand the PRIs operating in Assam with special reference to the Panchayats under two big Revenue Circles such as Palasbari and Chhaygaon of Kamrup District, which cover up three Legislative Assembly Constituencies such as West Guwahati, Palasbari, and Chhaygaon. Again within these two revenue circles, there are four big Development Blocks such as Rampur, Chayani Barduar, Rani and Chhaygaon. Though there was no proposal initially, to cover-up Panchayats under Rani Block, considering the feasibility, viability and for a broader dimension of our proposed research, later we have also cover-up 6 more Panchayats under Rani Block such as Dharapur, Garal, Kahikuchi, Rani, Dakshin

Bholagaon and Majirigaon situated in the vicinity of greater Guwahati. The four development Blocks comprise 34 Gaon Panchayats which consisting of 396 representatives (65 more than was proposed) including the presidents. Though we could have studied more Panchayats of these two Revenue Circles for broader understanding, it is practically not possible to cover-up this vast universe in the present proposed minor research project. However, the Panchayats under these three Development Blocks are assumed to be adequately representative, since Muslims, Tribals, SCs, STs and Caste Hindu Asamiyas equally inhabit these areas. Here, it is necessary to mention that the composition of the present Panchayats following the new dispensation was qualitatively different from the earlier ones on many counts. Therefore, it would be interesting to understand how these PRIs represent the grassroots society after they have got constitutional status and become the system of rural governance of India.

(B) INTERDISCIPLINARY RELEVANCE :

As is evident in the statement of the problem, the approach of the proposed work is largely Sociological and has an interdisciplinary orientation within a well-defined logical framework. It unravels the Sociological foundation of grassroots politics having an intensive nature with an effort to pass independent critical judgments. The study has tried to fill the gap of our understanding of an important subject directly relevant to Sociology, Social Anthropology and Political Science. Hence, it would be an important contribution to the discovery of first hand (original) knowledge.

(C) REVIEW OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE SUBJECT :

So far as is revealed, scholars pay less attention to the study of grassroots politics or the PRIs. Though we have few literatures that have been brought to light mainly of descriptive and general nature, we have only a very microscopic literatures brought about on sociological approach. Full-length intensive studies are also very scanty. Infant rural leadership in the Panchayats has not attracted scholars for review. However, a lot of studies have been conducted throughout

the world and in our country as well. Though in India considerable number of studies were brought about before the 73rd amendment, a very few works have been done following the 73rd amendment act. Less attention has been given to investigate the infant institutions having completely a new structural and functional framework and dispensation. Specifically scholars usually have adopted institutional legal and historical-documentary approach in observing the role of the Panchayats but give a little or no attention to intensive empirical investigation in sociological perspective.

There is an avalanche of literatures in the broad area of local government at the international level, since local government and democratic decentralization is a worldwide phenomenon. Notable British, West European, North American and African scholars have provided us valuable works with findings of experiments and observations. The wealth of materials, which these studies provided, has made possible useful comparative studies between the developed and developing countries of the world. Some works have given us valuable insights into the structure, functions, administration and role of the grassroots governments in the transformation of societies of various parts of the world. (Mackenzie 1974; Moulin 1965; Ostrom 1988; Panter-Brick 1954). In India various descriptive works have been done which provide meaningful insights into the domain of local governments and approaches in understanding Panchayati Raj administration and their role (Matskihberg 1976; Kothari 1970; Narayan 1957; Reddy 2004). Some other works, though largely of traditional nature, may invite our attention, which give meaningful insights into the structure and functions of Panchayati Raj institutions in India (Thinker 1954; Patil 1994; Chaturvedi 1981; Maheswari 1963; Rao 1960; Buch 2000; World Bank 2000; Rao 1967; Reddy 1977; Bhose 2003). In a recent article, an attempt has been made to analyse the importance and implications of the new approach, participatory Governance in achieving sustainable development and social justice at the grassroots through the newly created PRIs. The author has tried to establish possible linkages between community organizations and rural institutions, which might produce the needed synergies energy for achieving social equality and sustainable

development at the grassroots (Palanithurai 2003). It has been empirically demonstrated through an excellent action research that by proper positioning of the Panchayat institutions in the orbit of governance, constant capacity building of the Panchayat leaders and mobilizing the people for community activities, many of the social development issues can be addressed easily and by doing so, the status and position of our rural poor, children, women and marginalized sections could be improved and enhanced (Palanithurai 2007). Regarding the empowerment of women through the PRIs it has been empirically observed that periodical training, constant orientations, and sensitization make the women leaders perform the assign role in a better way (Smitha 2006).

In the specific context of Assam, we find some very important contributions towards the growth, development, administration, functions and role of the rural self-government in the state (Rao and Hazarica 1983; Jana Sanjog 1993; Saikia 1977; Barooah 1980).

Though, there are some methodological and theoretical limitations of these studies under review, they undoubtedly provided significant insights into the structure, functioning, recruitment, circulation and behaviour of the rural non-elite or semi-elite representatives. So far our review is concerned, we have one sociological work on Assam Panchayats, which is more thematically relevant to our present effort (Nath 1991). The author has made a partial attempt to study the socio-economic background of the rural governments along with other aspects, with special reference to the PRIs in Karimganj District of Assam. However, this study was also conducted prior to the new dispensation of the PRIs following the 73rd amendment. The present author has brought about an article on the role of the rural women leaders in the PRIs in Assam where he found that though the 73rd amendment act has given an ample opportunity for the rural women to experience the share of political power and thereby participate in the decision making process at the grassroots politics, most of the women representatives are not active in the decision making process, they are not gender sensitive and very casual in attending the meetings and are yet to understand the essence of democratic rights of women .(Das 1997).

From the review of published literatures as well as from the information we have obtained up till now, no attempt has been made to study the PRIs of Assam from a sociological perspective and particularly no attempt has been made to deal with this phenomenon following the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act. We propose to fill this vacuum in our knowledge and take up a study of social background of Panchayats of Assam in a stipulated area. Here, we shall be making an effort to overcome the theoretico-methodological limitations and gaps as revealed in earlier studies. We shall also keep in mind the strength and limitations of the earlier studies conducted at different fields and do our best to make our study meaningful and relevant.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY :

Our study would be a humble attempt to understand the social background, governance, and the role of the grassroots politics of some sizeable segments of Assam. The significance of this study has three important dimensions:

- (i) It would be essentially an empirical research based on intensive fieldwork and in fact, a full-length study.
- (ii) It has tried to fill the gap of our understanding of society-panchayat dichotomy, which is directly relevant to Political Sociology, Political Science and Social Anthropology. Besides, our study will also help in understanding the representativeness of the third tier of our federal democratic polity. It may be helpful to Sociologists, Social Anthropologists and academicians to conduct further studies in other empirical settings. On the other hand, it is hoped that our attempt will also help to understand the Panchayat politics of Assam, which is crucial in understanding the PRIs of other states of India.
- (iii) The present study may also be helpful to the planners, policy makers, administrators, parliamentarians and legislators to take appropriate steps to improve the functioning of the PRIs by removing the hurdles and shortcomings that may be found out in our present research and may inspire to initiate further legislation for the strengthening the grassroots governance.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY :

The main objectives of the proposed work are to analyse as follows on the basis of the relevant variables. Both independent and dependent variables would be taken into consideration and be tested in the study.

- (I) To present a brief profile of the Kamrup District location with reference to South Kamrup.
- (II) To analyse the social background characteristics including political, economic and educational background features.
- (III) To observe whether Panchayats help to loosen the hold of bureaucracy in the process of concurring and implementing the programmes of development.
- (IV) To study the role of the Panchayats in rural upliftment
- (V) To look into the Socio-Economic bases of Emerging Women Leadership and their Role Perception.
- (VI) To examine the role perception and village linkages of the Panchayat Representatives.
- (VII) To study the Assessments, Prescriptions and Diagnostics methods of the representatives

METHODOLOGY AND FIELD WORK :

As is mentioned in the research proposal, the present study attempts to delineate the society-politics dichotomy and the consequent interactions between the society and the grassroots politics of Assam with a special reference to Kamrup district (South bank of the Brahmaputra). A very sincere attempt has been made in the present research to examine both the two variables in terms of the operations of the Panchayati Raj Institutions under review in our selected empirical setting. Basically, throughout the work we have tried to understand the politics of the grassroots bodies in terms of the social background characteristics of the actors.

During a yearlong thrust in the fieldwork, we had the occasion to gather many practical experiences in the field, of actual working of

the grassroots democracy of our country with the reference of our stipulated universe. We have two different directions in the collection of necessary data for our purpose, one is to collect primary data from the Panchayat representatives and the other is to collect relevant documents from the Circle Offices, Block Development Offices and other government departments. The process of collecting both primary and secondary data has been successfully completed.

Initially it was our intention to start the research project from March 2005, but due to some unavoidable circumstances and official compulsions we could have started it officially from the first week of January 2006. The preliminary works such as establishing contacts with the Panchayat offices, knowing the locations and residences of the representatives and the preparations of interview schedule have been completed by the last week of February 2006. The field work for the collection of primary data, such as visiting the Panchayat offices and the residences of the representatives, fixing the date of interview, meeting the respondents, explaining to them the purpose of our present research, sharing our mutual views for the purpose, taking the interview by fairly a long interview schedule, tape-recording of some reactions of the respondents to some open-ended questions, collection of information by regular telephonic calls, have been continuously done up to December 2006. Naturally, we have to face many problems and difficulties in the interview process since the rural representatives are all the time busy in many-fold personal and social preoccupations. The members are generally not regularly attending the Panchayat offices and they are, in fact, not so easy in response and interactions. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to meet them in fixed date and time. We could have met them for the interview after several consecutive efforts being made. A considerable number of the representatives, in the first instance, were reluctant to disclose necessary information, however, after repeated efforts; a large number of Panchayat representatives extended their full cooperation in taking up the interview.

The interview schedule for the collection of primary data from the Panchayat representatives (which are the main unit-respondents

of our investigation) comprises 43 questions consisting of both fixed-alternative and open-ended questions, which were formulated on the basis of our objective requirements. We have collected primary data from altogether 258 Panchayat representatives, including 33 Presidents, (of which 13 are female Presidents), 14 Vice-Presidents, 8 Anchalik Panchayat members and 110 women representatives, from 33 Gaon Panchayats under Rampur, Chayani Barduar, Chhaygaon and Rani Development Blocks of Kamrup District (see Appendix-B). Though somewhat difficult, it was in fact very interesting for us to visiting the Panchayat offices, meeting the members with talk and tea, sometimes individually in their residences, sometimes organizing them collectively in common meeting places with prior notice, occasionally even in the market places, in the streets and in the Block Offices with our interview schedule for the collection of primary data. However, as is mentioned earlier, we faced tremendous difficulties to meeting the respondents of very interior distant places, where we had to use bicycle, scooter and of course sometimes walking in bare footed. We had to spend several continuous days even to meet two or three respondents at one instance, that too, in vain. Most of the respondents however, could be met by traveling with our own car. There are 396 Panchayat representatives in our selected universe and we could have collected data from 258 respondents.

We have visited the following places for the collection of primary and secondary data from the respondents and govt. Departments:

Guwahati, Rangia, Assam Legislative Assembly Library, GU Library, District Library (Guwahati), D.K.College Library, Rajapara, Goreswar, Jagiroad, Rani, Chhaygaon, Bongaon, Gumi, Bamunigaon, Ratanpur, Kulshi, Kukurmara, Tezpur, Rampur, Nahira, Garaimari, Chimina, Futuri, Hudumpur, Palasbari, Parley, Agsia, Kahikuchi, Azara, Majirigaon, Garal, Bhatapara, Dharapur, Boko, Barihat, Jharobari, Loharghat, Bahranti, Parakuchi, Amranga, Sarpara, Kochpara, Champaknagar, Maliata, Birogaon, Bongara, Haropara, Pantan, Ratanpur, Saattaluuk, Saatpokheli, Dakhin Pantan, Amtola, Jiakur, Uparhali, Dahali-Dakhala, Dakhin Bholagaon, Sonapur, Bamundi, Sualkuchi, Hazo, Assam Seretariat, Khanapara Administrative Library,



Khetri, Rangamati, Hudumpur, Chhaygaon Block Office, Palasbari Circle Office, Rampur Block Office, Rani Block, Chhaygaon Block Office, Office of the Directorate of Rural Development, Guwahati and many other places several times.

After the collection of data from our respondents, we started the work of data processing in a long processing sheet. By the end of January 2007, the data processing works have been almost finished and tabulation works were started. The process of converting the data into tabular form was completed by the end of August 2007 and the collection of secondary data was finished by the end of September 2007. The process of preparing the final report (composition of the thesis) was completed by the third week of February 2008. The data have been systematically processed, classified, quantified, checked and crosschecked at the time of converting them into tables for our analysis. The thesis comprises of 55 tables. It should be noted that the data have been entirely processed on the basis of party affiliation of the Panchayat representatives, since the elections to panchayat institutions including Gaon Panchayats and Anchalik Panchayats were fought on the basis of political parties.

SCHEME OF CHAPTERS :

The study is consisted of seven chapters including the introductory one. The introductory chapter consists of origin of the research problem; interdisciplinary relevance, review of research and development of the subject, significance of the study, objectives on the basis of independent and dependent variables, methodology and field work, scheme of chapters and limitations of the present study. Chapter second presents a brief profile of Kamrup district location with a reference to South Kamrup area. Chapter three deals with the social background of the Panchayat representatives which covers profiles of place of birth, sex, age, family, number of children, castes, communities, class positions, religious background, children's education, educational status of the representatives, Reading habit, mother tongues, party affiliation, attending of Panchayat meetings, factors joining the Panchayats, political imprisonment, previous representative experience,

monthly remuneration, main occupation, industrial and business establishments, annual income, landholding pattern, land used, ownership of modern amenities, taxes paid by the representatives, class positions and hobbies practiced by the respondents..

Chapter four deals with the position and role of women in Panchayats which covers aspects like women leadership, women in decision making, meeting the village women, tasks being accomplished, works for the interest of the rural women, women attending meetings, factors joining Panchayats, experience of political imprisonment, previous representative experiences, occupation, annual income, educational status, religion, community, marital status, age and caste composition. Chapter five contains the role perception, assessment about their role performance and popular linkage which contains various relevant aspects like views about the 73rd amendment, important works done, major problems of South Kamrup, Panchayat's role in solving burning problems, views on party interference on the Panchayats, people's cooperation with Panchayats in rural upliftment, perception about own achievement, important tasks to be accomplished, Panchayat meetings, satisfaction as representatives, meeting the rural people, perception about leadership, on grants/scheme's fund utilization, on role of the state government, comments on personal problems, suggesting the measures to be adopted for the improvement of working of Panchayats. Chapter six contains the role of Panchayats of South Kamrup in rural development and deals with the future visions of the representatives. Finally, chapter seven summarizes the study and draws conclusions.

LIMITATIONS :

The present research relies mostly upon primary data collected from the Panchayat representatives through an interview schedule. The secondary materials available on the subject also supplemented it. But still to paint a real picture of grassroots politics is very difficult, as perfection has no end and the authenticity of source materials is also often questioned. We have accepted the data supplied to us by the respondents and analysed them in the thesis. We admit that the data

may not be fully accurate and authentic as well. But we have no way other than to accept it. Moreover, it is not possible to prove the authenticity of these data. Besides, the results of this study may not be similar to that of its earlier and latter Panchayats. However, in spite of limitations, we have tried our best to present an objective account of the social background of a specific coverage of Panchayati Raj Institutions of the district of Kamrup of the Indian state of Assam. Notwithstanding the limitations we have stated, it is hoped that our study will throw lights on the social foundation of grassroots politics in Assam, we also assume that the samples we have drawn are representative and generalization being made is logical at least in the context of Assam's grassroots governance. Thus, inspite of limitations, we believe our study would throw sufficient lights on the pattern of emerging leadership at the grassroots level particularly aftermath of the new dispensation, i.e., the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act.