Chapter 6

Findings and Conclusions

In the present research work an attempt has been made to understand the pattern of leadership that prevails in the Panchayati Raj Institutions in Assam with special reference to Hailakandi District which is situated at the southernmost part of Assam. For the purpose of an intensive empirical investigation sample of sufficiently representative nature has been drawn from the leadership at PRIs and the electorates of the district. The study is a modest attempt to understand the socio-economic base of the panchayat leaders, their standard of living and the level of material consumption as well as their capacity and the level of awareness regarding PRIs. But as understanding of these remains incomplete without having an idea of the electorates who choose the leaders, the socio-economic profile of the rural electorates, their voting behaviour as well as their perception towards their leaders at the PRIs were also studied. Besides, the election trend in the last three panchayat elections of the district is also discussed to understand the changing aspect in panchayat elections. The entire finding of the study has been presented on the basis of its objectives and the research questions. Chapter-wise presentation of the summary of the content and findings is made.
The introductory chapter (Chapter 1) presents a detailed outline of the research plan which includes the statement of the problem that signifies the importance and relevance of the study. A theoretical framework of the study has been given to understand the key concepts like ‘panchayat’ and ‘leadership’ and the meaning that has been attached to them for the purpose of the present study. It also contains an analytical review of relevant literature, objectives of the study, basic research questions and methodology of the study explaining the size of the sample, procedure of its selection and the techniques of data collection, chapter plan and the profile of the sample area.

As the study is conducted in Hailakandi district of Assam an attempt has been made to lay down a brief profile of the district. The district is situated in the southernmost corner of Assam surrounded by river Barak in the North, Cachar in the East, Mizoram in the South and East and Karimganj in the West. The district Headquarter is at Hailakandi town which is located 341 k.m. away from the state capital Guwahati. As per census of India 2011, the district has a total population of 659260 comprising 338766 (51.39 per cent) males and 320494 (48.61 per cent) females. The literacy rate of the district is 75.26 per cent which is comparatively little higher to the state average of 73.18 per cent. However, the literacy rate in the district in terms of rural and urban population and male and female is not uniform. While the rural literacy rate is 57.05 per cent, the urban literacy rate is 94.67 per cent. Similarly, male literacy rate is 81.61 per cent and female literacy rate is 50.46 per cent in the district.

Geographically the district has an area of 1327 square k.m. which constitutes only 1.69 per cent of the total state territory. Out of its total territory of 1327 square km, 1316.47 square k.m. (99.95 per cent) is rural territory, while only 10.53 square k.m. (0.05 per cent) is under urban settlement. The district has a heterogeneous ethno-linguistic composition. Other than Bengalee, it is the home of a large number of different communities like Meitei, Bishnupriya, Kuki, Reang, Chakma, indigenous Muslims and immigrant population. Majority of the population of the district speaks
Bengali, which is the official language of the district. Besides, Hindi (Bhujpuri) and Manipuri are also two important languages of the district spoken by a large minority. The population of the district is almost entirely divided into two major religions viz. Hinduism and Islam. Besides, people of other religious faith viz. Christianity, Jainism and Buddhism have also been living in the district for a long time.

Hailakandi district comprises two notified towns viz. Hailakandi (district headquarter) and Lala. There is also one industrial town ship viz. Panchgram. Both Hailakandi and Lala have elected Municipal Boards with 16 and 10 wards respectively. The district consists of four revenue circles viz. Algapur, Hailakandi, Lala and Katlicherra and five development blocks viz. Algapur, Hailakandi, Lala, Katlicherra and South Hailakandi. To ensure that the fruits of development percolate down to the lowest level, the district has been further sub-divided into 62 Gaon Panchayats consisting of a total of 331 villages (including 27 forest villages).

II

In Chapter 2 a brief discussion has been made on the growth and development of panchayats in India with special reference to Assam. For the convenience of a systematic study of the developments of the village panchayats this chapter has been divided into three sections: Section I deals with the panchayat institutions of ancient and medieval period. Section II deals with the evolution of panchayats during the British period and Section III focuses on the post-independent developments in panchayat institutions. In Section I, it is discussed that the panchayat in India is not a new innovation; it has its roots in Indian history and civilization. It has been a very familiar institution of Indian social system even from the Vedic period. It underwent a continuous process of development with the evolution of Indian social and administrative system. Though the system of panchayat has been a part of Indian life and civilization, yet there was no scope for democratic leadership in panchayats. The persons of great wealth and noble birth
were mostly the leaders of such village organizations and they mostly performed the functions of revenue collection and the maintenance of law and order in their respective villages. *Section II* reveals the beginning of a new era in which several legislations were made during the British period to establish and strengthen the village organization. In the process although autonomy was granted, to certain extent, to the local bodies yet it could not involve popular participation in the system of elections. The leaders were either elected by a few competent voters or nominated by the government officials. The main functions of the then local bodies were to collect revenue, administration of justice and maintenance of law and order in their respective villages. *Section III* presents the post-independent developments in the fields of panchayats in India and Assam. It was found that the independence of the country in 1947 ushered in a new era in the history of local government in India. The inclusion of Panchayat in Chapter IV of the Constitution of India gave a new push to the growth of this institution. Almost all the state governments enacted the Panchayat Acts afresh incorporating in them the democratic spirit of the new age. As a result, the village bodies began to be set up all over the country. Every state government created new departments to organize and look-after the Panchayats. Out of a continuous effort in this regard a number of legislations were enacted both at the centre as well as in the states to establish a democratic-political set up at the rural level. This effort has reached its zenith after the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, 1992 and made the panchayat a constitutional body with representation from all corners of the society.

III

*Chapter 3* makes an empirical analysis of the socio-economic profile of the electorates and their voting behaviour in panchayat elections. For the convenience of presentation, this chapter has been divided into three co-related sections. *Section I* deals with the socio-economic profile of the electorates. *Section II* deals with the voting behaviour of the electorates, as to how they make their choice in favour of a particular candidate and the hindrances they face in the way of exercising their franchise and *Section III* studies the opinion of the voters about panchayat leaders.
Chapter 6

The main Objective of this chapter is to investigate the voting behaviour and the opinion of the voters about the panchayat leaders. The study was carried out on the basis of the following research questions:

- What are the factors that influence people’s participation in panchayat election?
- Do people face any obstacle in the way of participation?
- Do people share good opinion about panchayat leaders?

Before going into the actual research questions an attempt has been made to study the socio-economic conditions and political linkage of the respondents so as to understand its impact on their voting behaviour. Analysis of data reveals that the entire rural electorate is divided into two major religious groups, viz. Hinduism and Islam at the rate of 52.20 per cent and 47.80 per cent respectively. So far as the caste composition of the electorates is concerned, a majority of 54.80 per cent was found to belong to the general category, while the remaining 45.20 per cent belonged to SC, ST and OBC at the rate of 13.00 per cent, 0.70 per cent and 31.50 per cent respectively. It is important to note in this context that out of 148 (54.80 per cent) respondents of general category a majority of 129 were Muslims, while only 19 were found to be Hindus. This may be because there is no notable caste division in Muslim community as like Hindus. So far as the economic condition of the electorate is concerned, it was found that the rural people are no more centered to a particular occupation. People belonging to different occupations viz. agriculturists, wage earners, businessmen and housewives were found to have been sharing rural economy in almost an equal proportion. Regarding the income of the electorates, it was found that an overwhelming majority of them were either having no income or income up to Rs. 5000/- per month and the electorates having no income were mostly women. Regarding socio-political attachment of the electorates, it was found that most of them were neither associated with any community organization nor affiliated to any political party and had not done any work either for any candidate or for a party in the last panchayat election, 2008.
In response to the first research question “What are the factors that influence people’s participation in panchayat election?”, it was found that there are several factors which influence people’s participation and voting behaviour in panchayat elections. A majority of 55.60 per cent of respondents were found to have given priority to religious identity while voting for a candidate. Apart from this, priority has also been given to other factors like political affiliation, personal familiarity, caste and family status according to their relevance in the given scenario. It is important to note that the maximum bias on the part of the rural voters towards religious identity of the candidates is perhaps due to the almost even polarization of the district into two religious groups viz. Hinduism and Islam. Having interaction with the respondents it was found that a majority of them had taken note of the religious identity of the candidate while making choice of the candidate. However, it is also observed that in case of making choice among the candidates of same religion, other factors like caste, family background, political affiliation and so on come to the fore according to their relevance and priority in local context. Again, in case of the constituencies reserved for SC or ST, the question of religion and caste disappears and other factors like political affiliation, personal familiarity and family status gain importance. It is also worth mentioning that the educational attainment received very low priority from the rural voters. This may be because that the rural voters themselves are mostly too poorly educated to understand the importance of education in politics. Besides, personal visit of the candidate to the electorates and age of the candidate were also not found to exert any significant influence on the voters.

As regards the second question “Do people face any obstacle in the way of participation?” it was found that except a few, almost all the rural voters (84.10 per cent) comprising both males (41.10 per cent) and females (43.00 per cent) have faced some or other challenges in exercising their franchise in panchayat elections. The major problem that is faced by rural voters and as pointed out by 61.10 per cent of the respondents is the lack of adequate security in elections. Unlike Assembly or Parliamentary elections, panchayat election concerns the interests of
even the small groups of the village and as such it is more sensitive and violent in nature and that requires extra care in conducting polls. But unfortunately, no extra security measure is provided keeping in view the sensitivity of panchayat elections. The polling booths are often left open without deploying a single police personnel. Under such circumstances, violence and disorder become inevitable in the polling booths and that hinders participation of the common people. Lack of proper security not only disrupts the spontaneous participation of the people, it has other implications as well. Due to this security lapse, powerful candidates or their representatives take advantage and often compel people to vote in their presence. This infringes the privacy of the voter and his right to make free choice. 18.50 per cent of the respondents identified it as the most serious challenge before exercising franchise. Besides, there is also the problem of identification of ballots. People often feel confused about the presence of four ballots at a time in panchayat elections. 46.30 per cent of the respondents have identified it as a hindrance towards making an appropriate choice. The presence of four ballots for the post of G.P. Member, G.P. President, A.P. Member and Z.P. Member with almost similar symbols confuses the rural masses as rural people generally caste their vote on the basis of symbol without taking note of the name of the candidate. Study also reveals that lack of cooperation on the part of the local administration and blind power race among too many contestants for a single post also deter people from exercising their franchise freely. Besides, the influence of political parties also plays a negative role as it encourages rigging and other malpractices in elections. The formation of a progressive leadership demands a healthy atmosphere in which people can make their choice of leaders freely and fearlessly. It is needless to say thus that the right to franchise exercised under constrains also constrains the formation of leadership.

Regarding the third question “Do people share good opinion about panchayat leaders?” the study reveals that most (77.00 per cent) of the rural voters do not share good opinion about the leaders in PRIs. They consider them to be corrupt and indifferent to the well-being of the common men. They criticized the role of panchayat leaders on the ground of their inability of decision-making. People were
of the opinion that the panchayat leaders were dictated by the political leaders at the top in the process of decision-making. 40.30 per cent of the electorates feel that the panchayat leaders are not concerned with rural development, rather they are engaged in their personal wellbeing. Regarding the factors that encourage people to join politics, as many as 51.90 per cent and 40.70 per cent of rural people have identified personal ambition and craving for power as important motivating factors that instigate people to join local politics. It is interesting to note in this context that only 7.40 per cent of the respondents considered social commitment as an important factor to join politics at the local level.

IV

Chapter 4 provides an empirical analysis of the socio-economic and political factors that determine the emergence of leadership at the panchayat level. For the convenience of a systematic presentation, this chapter has been divided into three sections. Section I deals with the socio-economic and political determinants of leadership at the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Section II deals with the emergence of women in panchayat leadership and Section III deals with the level of awareness of the panchayat leaders. The study was carried out on the basis of the following research questions-

- Is there any role of caste, religion, sex, income and family status in determining the pattern of leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions?
- Is the increasing emergence of women in panchayat leadership active and spontaneous or a mere outcome of reservation?
- Are panchayat leaders aware of the objectives of Panchayati Raj and their responsibilities towards it?

In an endeavour to find answer to the first research question “Is there any role of caste, religion, sex, income and family status in determining the pattern of leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions?”, it is found that the introduction of the Seventy-third (Constitution) Amendment Act, 1992 has brought changes in the
degree of influence of various socio-economic factors in the pattern of leadership at
the PRIs. The relevance of caste, sex, income and family status in determining the
pattern of leadership in PRIs was found to be on decline. People belonging to
different socio-economic background were found to have been participating and
wining positions in it. However, gender stereotyping still continues to have its
influence in determining leadership pattern in PRIs. Against men, women were
found to have representation in panchayat leadership at the proportion of 67:33.
This shows that the participation of women in panchayat leadership is confined just
at its statutory limit as no one was found to be elected from beyond the seats
reserved for women.

So far as the age-wise distribution of the panchayat leadership is concerned, it was
found that an overwhelming majority of 64.00 per cent was within 40 years of age,
while the presence of elderly people (aged 51 and above) was found to be 14.00 per
cent only. This shows a trend of shifting of rural power from the elderly people to
the younger generations. Such a change might have been the outcome of the
growing administrative complexities of the PRI which requires more socio-political
orientation and positive outlook on the part of the leaders. As the youths are more
enthusiastic and comparatively free from conservative outlook they can mobilize
the rural voter in favour of them. The presence of high income landlords in the
panchayat leadership was also found to be on decline as most of the leaders were
found to have landholding up to 6 bighas and monthly income up to Rs. 5000. As
regards educational attainment of the leaders it was found that the leadership at the
panchayat level is still confined to people who have low educational attainment.
57.33 per cent of the leaders were found to be educated up to primary level and
only 6.00 per cent of leaders were found to be graduates. In this context, it may be
said that rural politics is still dominated by people with low educational attainment
because qualified people do not take interest in rural politics as it is highly chaotic
and self-derogatory in nature. Besides, educated people often migrate out of their
rural habitat in search of better career. This enables the emergence of people with
low educational attainment in panchayat leadership. In terms of occupational
pattern of the rural leaders it was found that panchayat leadership is no more
centered to a particular occupational group, rather people belonging to different occupational groups are now coming to the seats of power in local bodies. Regarding the nature and size of the family of the leaders it was found that most of the panchayat leaders hailed from the joint families having 6 to 10 members. This finding not only reveals that the panchayat leaders are mostly from joint families but also negates the contemporary notion about the uprising of nuclear families at the rural set up. Besides, one of the important reasons for which the family background of local leaders is not changed overtime is that joint family fulfills the manpower requirement of political activities like managing election, campaigning, maintaining social network and so on.

Regarding the standard of living and the level of material consumption of the panchayat leaders, it was found that an overwhelming majority of them were leading a standard life with modern facilities. They were having electricity, proper sanitation facility and were subscribing news papers. However, most of them were found with no internet connection at their house and were using fire wood as fuel for cooking. The standard of living of the leaders was found to be higher according to the ascending hierarchy of the PRIs. The Zilla Parishad leaders were found to be in a relatively better position than their Anchalik Panchayat counterparts, so also Anchalik Panchayat leaders than their Gaon Panchayat counterparts.

So far as the socio-political linkage of the leaders was concerned, a majority of 64.67 per cent was found to have no involvement with community organization. However, almost 50.00 per cent of the leaders were found affiliated to political parties and mostly to the Congress. It is interesting to note in this context that although almost 50.00 percent of the panchayat leaders had been found affiliated to political parties, a majority of 60.00 per cent of the leaders did not give a favourable opinion about the involvement of political parties in panchayat elections. They were of the opinion that the involvement of political parties in the PRIs deteriorates the local political atmosphere and turns the rural political set up into a battle ground. Data also reveal that inspite of being members of some or other political party around 83.00 per cent of panchayat leaders won elections as independent
candidates. An overwhelming majority of 92.67 per cent of the leaders won elections for the first time at the PRIs. One of the reasons for which the repetition of the candidate is marginal in PRIs is that rotation of reserved seats often restricts the candidates to join the electoral fray for the next time. This seriously impedes the prospect of winning candidates also.

In search of the response to the second research question “Is the increasing emergence of women in panchayat leadership active and spontaneous or a mere outcome of reservation?” the study reveals that the share of women (32.70 per cent) in panchayat leadership is stuck just within the margin of 33.00 per cent. Not a single woman was found elected from an unreserved seat. In other words, it can be said that women were found to have been elected from those seats from which men could not contest election. Besides, not a single woman leader was found to be elected out of her personal enthusiasm; rather an overwhelming majority of 97.92 per cent was found to have been elected due to reservation of seats for them. As regards the role of women in rural bodies, they were not found to have been independent in making their decisions. Instead, their decisions were often influenced by a male counterpart like husband, brother, son or a colleague. Interestingly, it was found that most of the women leaders had decided to contest elections just before the filing up of the nomination papers as the seats in certain constituencies were declared reserved all on a sudden just before the date of filling up of nomination papers. Thus, it may be said that till date women’s participation in local politics is not spontaneous, rather determined by the wishes of the patriarchy. However, it does not undermine the importance of reservation for women as it may encourage in course of time the spontaneous participation of women at the grass-root of our democracy.

Regarding the third research question “Are panchayat leaders aware of the objectives of Panchayati Raj and their responsibilities towards it?” it was found that most of the leaders were not even aware of the basic issues of rural concern. Except a few panchayat leaders most of them were found ignorant about the functions of the PRI and their role in it. They were also found to have very little
concern and idea about the solution of the local problems. Such response is indicative of the fact that in our society politics is still looked at as a profession of self-aggrandizement and not a means to serve people.

Chapter 5 is a comparative study of the last three panchayat elections held in Assam in 1992 (under the Assam Panchayat Raj Act 1986), 2002 and 2008 (under the Assam Panchayat Act 1994). The study is conducted in Hailakandi district with the objective to understand the growing trend of participation in Panchayat election and is formulated on the basis of the research question – “Has the Act of 1992 encouraged participation in panchayat election?” Analysis of data reveals a remarkable difference in terms of participation in the three panchayat elections under study. In the panchayat election of 1992, the participation of voters was much lower compared to other two elections of 2002 and 2008. The percentage of participation of voters in 1992 election was 47.00 per cent, while it was 59.00 per cent in 2002 and 73.00 per cent in 2008. This gradual growth in the percentage of voters’ turnout is of course an outcome of the growing importance and relevance of panchayat bodies at the local level. In 1992 election the average voter’s turnout was only 47.00 per cent because at that time the panchayat was neither well organized nor well functional. It was not a participatory body in the true sense of the term, rather it had to implement the decisions which had been taken at the state capital. It was because of this people did not have much headache about panchayat elections and obviously the percentage of participation of the electorates was low. With the enactment of the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 and consequent Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 decentralization of power took place at a large scale. Panchayats became widely representative bodies with extensive powers and functions of rural importance. This led to the increase in the involvement of mass people in rural electoral politics and an average of 59.00 per cent of voters’ turnout in the panchayat election of 2002 was observed. It further rose up to 73.00 per cent in 2008 election.
As regards the number of contestants also, an upward trend was observed. In 1992 election, a total of 1737 (1404 males and 333 females) candidates contested, in 2002, 3955 (2704 male and 1251 female) candidates contested and in 2008, 7119 (4882 male and 2237 female) candidates fought this electoral battle. This shows a sharp rise in the number of candidates contesting elections at PRIs and this is considered to be an outcome of the importance that the PRIs have gained after the introduction of the 73rd Amendment Act. After the introduction of the Act, the leadership at the PRIs has become a position of high importance and profit as it is supposed to play a very important role in rural development. This may be the reason for which a large number of people are now passionate to reach the corridor of power at the local level.

As regards the number of leaders elected to the PRIs uncontested, it was found that there was a total of 183 leaders (101 males and 82 females) who had been elected uncontested in the panchayat election of 1992. This number comes down to only 28 (11 male and 17 female) in the election of 2002 and to 7 (3 male and 4 female) in the election of 2008. This makes it clear that the panchayat leadership in present context is no more a position that can be left without importance. It has to be fought and won. No candidate can be left to win uncontested unless under extraordinary circumstances like absence of any other candidate of same caste/community as it happens sometimes in case of reserved constituencies. Thus, it may aptly be concluded that the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 (Received the assent of the President on April 20, 1993 and published in the Gazette of India, extra, Part II, Section I, dated 20 April, 1993) has not only redefined the importance of panchayats in our democracy but also influenced people’s participation by creating space for their greater involvement in rural politics.

Like any other study, the present study also has its limitations. The present study due to its time-limit and prescribed academic framework could not delve deep into certain things which may be investigated further. The role of leaders in the process of rural development and their way of decision-making are the subjects which are required to be studied further. A comparative study of leadership pattern may also
be made to develop deeper insight about rural leadership. Thus there remains scope of further research in this regard.

To conclude it may be said that the panchayat in India has passed through various stages of development to attain certain level of constitutional maturity. Several legislations were enacted from time to time to imbibe the panchayat with more vital functions of rural development. The 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 has ensured popular participation in panchayat bodies by giving space to the weaker sections and women in it. As a result, people belonging to all the strata of the society are participating and holding the seats of power in PRIs. Reservation of seats has made women’s entry to local politics easier. In a rural milieu marked by stark inequalities between men and women, it is a significant development. However, everything is not changed. There still continues to be the influence of traditional factors like caste and religion in influencing voter’s choice in panchayat elections, although their hold is on decline. An effective leadership at the rural level may help to remove the influence of such factors and realize the goals of Panchayati Raj in a more meaningful way.