Chapter 1

Introduction

In the happiness of his subjects lies the king’s happiness; in their welfare his welfare. He shall not consider as good only that which pleases him but treat as beneficial to him whatever pleases his subjects (Kautilya 1992, 149).

In the history of human civilization, the concept of governance, which originated with Plato, has always been complex, ambiguous, and contentious; drawn much attention; and undergone change. Although conventionally the issue of governance is in the domain of political science, contemporary sociologists and social anthropologists are also keenly interested in exploring the sociological dynamics of governance. Contemporary discourse on ‘good governance’ is critically analysed in some recent works corresponding with neoliberalism. If one looks at the everyday life of the majority of people, the changing nature of the state is felt. Under the impact of neoliberal policies, the state tends to withdraw from various welfare measures, which affects the everyday life of poor people at various levels. Political parties play a significant role in the lives of people, where intermediaries or brokers (dalal) also have an important role to play in facilitating access of people to different welfare schemes and entitlements.

The overarching nature of the state and its programmes and policies, or the system of governance, is considerably mediated and conditioned by a host of local specificities. Often, people use the system of informal governance in the day-to-day functioning of the state. While the state employs structures of formal governance as a legitimate means of reaching out to the people, informal governance structures facilitate people’s negotiation with the state for access to different, limited resources. In a multi-ethnic society, a community’s political and ethnic affiliations play a significant role in its access to the state machinery and its various welfare schemes. Communities operate at the local level in their own distinctive ways.
Discipline

The object of knowledge, in the way it is constructed and approached, is dependent on one’s training in a particular discipline. It trains us to think in a disciplinary language. Therefore, it is important to know the language of the discipline. It will be problematic to talk about a discipline and its boundary in a period when there is a call to break the disciplinary border, but understanding one’s own discipline—where one is located—helps one transcend disciplinary boundaries without much uncertainty. Unlike disciplines like political science and public administration—which focus mainly on the formal institutions and functions of the modern state and in knowing who gets what and where—sociology and social anthropology are concerned with not only the formal institutions of the modern state but also with the various forms of engagement of the common people with the state in everyday life. Anthropology tries to find how certain phenomena works and through what mechanisms, and sociology, especially in India, tries to understand through fieldwork why certain social processes occur.

Ideas and Interest

The issues of governance have been dealt with mainly by scholars of political science, international relations, public administration, system analysts, and so on. The sociological study of governance has not yet—like other sub-disciplines of sociology—fully developed as a sub-discipline in India and elsewhere. Sociologists and social anthropologists, who have always been fascinated by phenomena in their immediate surroundings, have only recently started analysing the sociology of governance, and consider this sub-discipline a part of both political sociology and economic sociology.

Classical sociology developed in response to the modernist intervention in society in the 19th century, which believed that society can be changed with necessary interventions. Since then, sociologists have been engaged in understanding and explaining the nature of state and society relationship from various perspectives. Classical sociologists developed sociology in response to the modernist intervention in the 19th century, though its origin can be traced to an earlier period. Sociology itself as a discipline emerged out of the process of modernization. The crucial idea embedded in modernism was that society can be changed with interventions. After the initial development of sociology, many sociologists tried to understand modern society using their own perspectives. The more recent social theorists have also been engaged in trying to
understand the issue. Foucault analysed European society and tried to show how the modernist agenda penetrated people’s lives, and how various technologies and tactics of modern government constitute a strategy, which he defines as governmentality—and that it prepares citizens to be ruled in the manner that the state desires (Foucault 1991).

Keeping the above issues in mind, it can be assumed that sociology, as a disciplinary practice, is appropriate to understand governance in modern society. Modern governance, an outcome of modernism, gained prominence in the 1960s after the World Bank started emphasizing good governance. Following this, scholars of social science, in general, and political science and sociology, in particular, started studying the issues of governance both theoretically and empirically. All this work led to various understandings and interpretations of governance. In this study, I will dwell upon the idea of governance in contemporary society and try to evolve some sociological understanding of the social processes that shapes the nature and forms of governance.

As a discipline, sociology by now has made a significant intellectual journey. However, and interestingly, it is difficult even now to define ‘sociology’ precisely, its meaning, or its objective, although many sociologists have defined it according to their theoretical and methodological position, and have contributed significantly to its growth and development. While sociology is generally defined as the systematic study of different social processes occurring in society, the difficulty of defining ‘society’ precisely makes it difficult for sociologists to define sociology convincingly.

Theodor Adorno, one of the influential thinkers of the Frankfurt School, tries to interrogate the concept and idea of society in terms of individuals and various forces that connect individuals to one another. Adorno suggests that sociology must provide an insight into society and explore its essential nature. Sociology should offer a critical insight into the society to discern the real meaning of it. Adorno quotes Wittgenstein’s well-known formulation “the world is all that is the case” and emphasizes that sociology’s objective can be drawn from Wittgenstein’s idea. Adorno also proposes the idea of dialectical characteristics of society. He contends that though the concepts of integration and differentiation are essential to society, it sustains itself through contradictions and changes (Adorno 2000: 15). Following Adorno’s argument, it can be further argued that the whole idea of modern rule and technology applied in governance mechanism is fallacious, and that it is bound to fail. Therefore, we need to accept the
idea of failure in governance, and that contradiction and failure are inherent in governance. This idea of failure is discussed in Chapters 2 and 4.

Sociology aims to define ‘society’, understand its structure and social processes within it, and also to understand governance in its various forms—the different ways in which human beings govern themselves to cope with and exist in the larger process and structure of governance. Apart from being governed by the state, people also govern themselves in everyday life, without necessarily involving the state whether in the realm of culture, politics, economy or any other social process.

Among contemporary sociologists, Pierre Bourdieu has extensively written on the relationship between politics and sociology. Writing on Pierre Bourdieu, sociologist David Swartz argues that for Bourdieu all sociology is sociology of politics (Swartz 2010, 143). Drawing from it, I propose that all sociology can be seen as sociology of governance. In direct or indirect ways, people are governed by somebody else and, in a more micro way, people govern themselves.

If one searches for the word ‘governance’ online, one can see many entries on either good governance or corporate governance. Governance is widely recognized as governance of corporations, and has different dimensions when it comes to issues related to the state. Various disciplines in the social sciences have used this concept according to their own purpose. Recently, scholars have urged for developing a multidisciplinary approach that has no methodological constraint, as it should help us understand various issues and problems of governance.

As the title of the thesis suggests, the issue of governance will be discussed frequently in this work. But I am not going to offer or propose a sociological theory to understand governance, as it is an eclectic concept and used very differently by various social scientists. Rather, my intention is to evolve a kind of understanding of governance from a sociological point of view.

Social structure is a very important concept in sociology. Sociologists and anthropologists have conceptualized the idea of social structure from various theoretical and methodological viewpoints. This study does not claim any universality in application of its findings or formulations. Each research field is unique in its feature, but could resemble others in function and pattern. Therefore, in this case, learning from
new experience will help us understand other phenomena. The framework of the sociology of governance will deal with production of governance objects by state and with people’s perception, reception, negation and negotiation in everyday life. Other theoretical concepts will be discussed briefly, in passing, or not at all.

This thesis discusses the sociology of governance in the Sonitpur District of Assam. Social structure and therefore, governance differs from society to society. I argue that the concept of embeddedness is important in the process of governance. Governance could be seen as an outcome of modernity. One of the major forces and claims of modernity is freedom. Similarly, the liberal and neoliberal ideology emphasize upon freedom.

Similarly, Das and Poole in their book *The Margin of the State* (2004) suggest that sociology and anthropology should explore social processes at the margins of society. Therefore, the sociology of governance should study and analyse the margins of society in the structure of governance. Societal processes are dynamic, not static; therefore, it will be erroneous to define ‘state’ simplistically by assigning to it some concrete feature of tax collection centre, police, judiciary, army, administrator, and so on. In this case, sociology should strive to explain certain phenomena that influence society but are not directly visible. Das and Poole (ibid) powerfully demonstrate the argument of the functioning of the state at the margins of society, where different peoples and communities perceive the state’s presence differently. Until recently, mainly political scientists dealt with the subject matter of governance, and that too in terms of institutional framework analysis. On the other hand, political sociologists and political anthropologists did not consider the state holistically in studying local communities. However, in contemporary academic practices, there has been a shift in the approach—social scientists have been applying the ethnographic method in looking at the power relations between the state and the people and the sociality involved in it. The state governs people’s lives, which depend on the kind of relationship between the state and society, which is negotiated in various ways in everyday life. Interestingly, this relationship changes according to its environment. It is also important to look at the global politics in creating different concepts, categories and rhetoric. Words like governance, participatory development, cultural capital and social capital have dominated the contemporary governance discourse in the global level.
In sociology, the idea of hierarchy has a prominent place, as few societies have systems without a hierarchy. Hierarchy is a widespread feature of human society, reflected in many aspects and in varying degrees. The governance process may entail a system of super-ordination in terms of keeping everybody equal, but people will always try to manipulate the system to gain advantage over others, as will people at the margins to access scarce resources and services.

**The Porous State and the Society**

Mitchell (1991) suggests that the edges of the state are uncertain, but the societal elements have penetrated the state from all sides, and thus differentiating between the boundary of state and society is very difficult. Similarly, the state has also penetrated into various social spaces (Das and Poole 2004).

It is important to understand the deceptive character of the state. Nandy (1989) interprets the Constitution of India and argues that modernization will prevail, more Indian-ness will emerge, and the diversity of India will diminish so that people of the country will be governable. Bardhan (1984) argues that the state is controlled by rich farmers, industrial capitalists and bureaucrats. Some say the state is an idea while others argue it is a system. But Philip Abrams (1988) suggests that the relation between state system and state ideas should be more carefully examined. For Mitchell (1991), the state is important because of its political structure as a mythic or ideological construct. For him, the state should not be read as a structure but as a structural effect. Practices make the structure exist. Kaviraj and Chatterjee argue that the Indian bourgeoisie could not dominate the masses because it could not control the community through culture. Chatterjee argues that the postcolonial nation-state, embedded as it is within the universal narrative of capital, refuses to recognize any form of community except the nation itself. Culturally distinctive expressions of community identity are therefore antithetical to the modern Indian state, which generally seeks to subjugate them (Chatterjee 1986; Kaviraj 1984).

That the boundary between the state and the society is porous and permeable could be inferred from ethnographic experiences. However, and largely, people practise certain
rituals in everyday life where they feel that state \( (Sarkar)^1 \) is different from them. Symbols and signs separate ‘state’ from ‘society’, and it is often difficult to define what a state is and what it is not. There are debates in the social sciences, particularly in sociology and social anthropology, over how to study the state. The book *The Margin of the State* (2004), mentioned above, specifically looks at different practices of state and society interaction that sociologists and anthropologists take for granted and ignore. Various essays in this book show how state practices are produced and reproduced in most social spheres—from family to check gates and borderlines.

It is also an important task of sociology and anthropology to understand people’s perception, practices, and stratagems in negotiating with the state. I will discuss how people view and understand the state’s agenda. The state has mechanisms to keep the people in order and legitimize its presence through various social welfare schemes, but they receive and respond to these schemes in their own ways. We will also try to understand the mechanisms through which people settle scores and bargains. At the time of elections, for example, even vulnerable poor people can get to prove their importance by their voting power. Similarly, local intermediaries who are mostly affiliated to different political parties also try to mediate with the agencies of the state for various socioeconomic benefits for local communities.

Further, different communities perceive and use the agenda of the state differently. They have various meanings for the same thing. One of the main causes of the failure of governance is miscommunication between the state and the people. Often, members of political parties mediate between these two, and try to interpret various aspects of governance to the people. It can be argued that, often, people do not understand the language of governance, and that is when they find the role of intermediaries useful and crucial. At these times, intermediaries work as Hermes\(^2\).

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1 Sarkar is a rough translation of government or state.

2 Hermes is a god in Greek mythology. He is considered an intermediary between gods and humans who interprets the message of gods to the people and vice versa.
**Research Problem**

The study seeks to understand how people respond to various forms of governance, and how these forms mutate as they interact with the target populations. It is well recognized that while the state frames all the rules and policies of governance, many factors influence grassroots implementation of these rules and policies. Inter-linkages among the state, the society, the community and the market unfold its own permutations and combinations on the ground. This study attempts to understand how this happens, and how this shapes and facilitates interaction between the state and society.

**Theoretical Framework and Research Approach**

Generally, international agencies and global players produce and reproduce concepts of governance. It is interesting to analyse how the nation-state co-opts or operationalizes these concepts. Governance entails policy planning and evaluation. Generally, it is done in a centralised manner, where local considerations are hardly incorporated. Despite bitter experiences, severe lessons of failed programmes and implementations and unplanned consequences, why does the state follow governance patterns designed by so-called experts? What is the politics? Who benefits from these games of governance? This thesis attempts to understand these complex questions through experiences in local governance.

As James Scott (1998) casts doubt over state planned programmes in his work *Seeing Like A State*, this thesis seeks to understand these programmes as the citizens see it, i.e. people’s perceptions and ideas of the state, government and governance. This thesis draws on ethnographic studies of various elections, which are considered a pathway to better democracy, and analyses these in terms of performance and magic. Using the concept of neoliberal governmental politics developed by various scholars like David Harvey (2005) and Wendy Brown (2005, 2006), this study explores the politics of good governance in relation to the agenda of neoliberalism. This thesis analyses the interest of the World Bank and other multilateral organizations in the politics of developing countries and governance at the macro-level and tries to link this interest to everyday, local politics, thereby situating the Indian state in people’s life. The core argument of this thesis is that the state may lay down governance rules and policies, but these assume various forms and characters at the grassroots, as mentioned above, and do not
translate exactly. The idea of ‘embeddedness’ is used to explain the dynamics at the local level.

**Objectives**

The study aims to study people’s experience and engagement with governance in everyday life; understand the processes associated with governance in the local context; comprehend the idea of the state, the government, and governance as perceived by grassroots communities; analyse how the local social structures influence governance at the local level; and understand the relationship between the state and community during the time of elections.

**Methodology**

The theoretical perspective of this study is located in the debates and works of the scholars like Pierre Bourdieu, David Swartz, Gary Wickham, Newman, Kooiman, R J Pierre, Partha Chatterjee, James Scott and David Harvey on state, government, community, NGOs, CSOs and their inter-relationship.

The work is a field-based empirical study. The field study has combined ethnographic approach with the survey method to study the state–society relationship and how it impacts everyday life. The study has also used interview method for the purpose of primary data collection. For the collection of secondary data, the study depends on relevant books, newspaper reports, official documents, etc.

**Period and Field Area of Research**

This study was conducted in the Sonitpur District of Assam, which has three sub-divisions. Tezpur is one among them, and is divided into several developmental blocks, each of which is divided into many panchayats. Under Tezpur sub-division, there is Balipara development block, under which is Napam Panchayat, which is divided into 10 administrative wards. Fieldwork has been conducted in the villages of Napam, Bhitor Parowa, Noorbari tea garden and Amolapam under Napam Panchayat.

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3 Here the use of embeddedness is borrowed from Karl Polanyi and Mark Granovetter. It is explained in Chapters 2 and 4. It shows how individual actions are constrained by various social considerations.
There are a number of factors for choosing the field sites. One is the diversity in ethnic composition and community. Another is accessibility to the field where the researcher is located. Every field worker, whether an insider to the society under study or outsider, is faced with the challenge of maintaining objectivity in the accounts of the field with which she/he establishes close relations. Srinivas talks about a situation where a researcher finishes the field study and starts writing the analysis, which forces him to emerge from the field and transform oneself into an impersonal analyst from being a participant observer. He starts “the process of writing about his experience for an impersonal and professional audience, which gradually produces for him a measure of distance from the field he has left behind” (Srinivas 2009, 165).

The fieldwork for the present study was conducted in different phases from 2009 to 2013. The reason for this long period of field study is that it sought to collect ethnographic data from various elections and study the state-society relationship, as it were, in the months prior to the different elections when this relationship between state, community and political parties becomes different than usual. While the common people become more important for political parties, including those in the government, the former also becomes more assertive in bargaining for their demands and rights. Activities conducted during the pre-election period thus offer significant insight into the engagement between society and the state. Since elections are held only periodically, the study had to wait for a comparative, comprehensive view of the state-society relationship as manifested during election times.

For the purpose of this study, data was collected across a number of communities based in the rural areas under the Napam Panchayat of Sonitpur District of Assam, which constitutes one of the most diverse demographic landscapes within the state. To grapple with the nuances of governance and politics in a multi-ethnic setting, the thesis examines the sociological dynamics involved in the processes of various elections, the most dominant and dramatic site of democratic participation and performance in India. Besides, the thesis also studies the day-to-day engagement of rural communities with state agencies, and the way it informs their relationship.

Many different communities inhabit this region. Samples of these communities have been drawn from the voters’ list. To begin with, a cluster of different communities was
prepared from the list. Then, according to the population size of each community, a representative sample of each of them was drawn based on random sampling.

The field study on the election part was done in Tezpur and Behali, two Legislative Assembly Constituencies (LAC) under the Tezpur Parliamentary Constituency. Some field study was also conducted in the Dhekiajuli LAC under the Tezpur Parliamentary Constituency. The issues pertaining to governance were mostly studied in the Napam Gaon Panchayat, which comes under the Balipara Development Block of Sonitpur District.

The study on elections aims to prepare ethnographic details of the voting practices of people in a limited area. To achieve this goal, three select polling booth areas (Behali, Panchmile and Thelamara-Naharbari) of the Tezpur Parliamentary Constituency in the Sonitpur District of Assam were covered. These three polling stations were chosen to represent three different ethnic, cultural and geographically distinct areas, and utmost care was taken to select them so that these areas could be representative of the universe. Behali is dominated by tea garden workers (popularly called tea tribe in Assam), Panchmile area is inhabited predominantly by Muslims of immigrant origin and Nepalis, and the Thelamara-Naharbari area has the Bodo tribal groups as the majority community. These polling stations were selected based on purposive sampling and utmost care was taken to have representation of three different communities, which are numerically preponderant in these areas. It was expected to provide an opportunity for making comparative analysis based on social and political behaviour. This procedure allowed this study to gather opinions from different sections of the electorate. This study tried to find out the nature of voting decisions and gather views and opinions in the context of broader social and economic issues, because this study was designed to analyse social background of voters, their social and political values and perceptions. It also intended to evaluate the levels of groups and candidates and ascertain opinions on questions of public policy besides studying the nature of participation in political activities.

Data were collected primarily through interview schedules. This process was also supplemented by detailed observations of various activities in the polling booth area on the day of election. I participated in the election rallies and followed the campaign trails of various political parties and examined the response of the voters of various
communities. This provided the opportunity to meet and interview some of the voters and political campaigners, leaders and contesting candidates. The polling booth-based profiles of the voting activities have been prepared with the help of intensive fieldwork. This study thus tried to explore the relationships between workers of a political party and between the leaders and workers of the party and so the connection between the workers and voters. I attended public meetings and public rallies that were addressed by the candidates themselves and some other meetings organized at the village level. It was also observed that how workers campaigned and canvassed door to door and how voters were mobilized on voting day. The flyers, pamphlets, cassettes, CDs and banners of different candidates and parties were collected and analysed.

Riles (2006) takes ethnographic methodology to a new dimension. She suggests ethnography excites, provokes, and intrigues. In the academy in particular, in disciplines from law, sociology, and economics to literary criticism, scholars are turning to ethnographic work as a way out of over determined paradigms, as a theoretically sophisticated antidote to the excesses of theory. A number of contributors to the volume *Documents: Artifacts of Modern Knowledge* (2006) argue that documentation and documents are among the prime elements in modern bureaucratic governance. Documents are an inevitable part of the modern governance system. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse documents to have a meaningful understanding of the social transactions involved in governance. Riles writes: “Documents provide a useful point of entry into contemporary problems of ethnographic method for a number of reasons. Documents are paradigmatic artifacts of modern knowledge practices. Documents thus provide a ready-made ground for experimentation with how to apprehend modernity ethnographically” (2006, 2). The issue of D voters⁴ and access to the state’s welfare mechanisms depend largely on necessary documents. This is discussed in some detail in Chapter 4.

I approached different party offices, spoke with party members, candidates in general and the common people in particular and reporters of different Assamese and English dailies especially of local correspondent of Dhekiajuli as well. The respondents were randomly taken from different areas of the universe. I visited some other selected areas of Tezpur town, Thelamara, Kawaimari, Naharbari, etc. Intensive fieldwork was

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⁴ Doubtful or dubious category of voters in the electoral list. For details, please refer to Chapter 4.
conducted for one month before the polling. A cross-section of people at different levels, which included party workers at the grassroots and administration, authority, different civil society like Mahila Samity\textsuperscript{5}, Dokani Sangha,\textsuperscript{6} were interviewed. The candidates in the fray were interviewed along with the voters to have an understanding of the general environment of the elections. The voters were observed minutely as to how they came to the polling booth, who accompanied them, how long they waited outside before and after voting, with whom different voters talked and how the different party workers tried to mobilize them at the last moment of voting.

\textbf{Chapterization}

The thesis has seven chapters, including the introduction and the conclusion. Chapter 1, that is, the introduction, discusses the theoretical framework and methodology of the study. This chapter briefly introduces the field set-up, where the fieldwork for the study has been conducted. It also explains the relationship between the state and society. Besides, based on relevant works, the chapter highlights the challenges in studying the state, which has various forms and manifestations.

Chapter 2 gives an account of the concepts, approaches and frameworks used in the study of governance. Locating governance within the larger social structure, the chapter discusses the idea of embeddedness in governance and the relation between governance and governmentality. It further discusses the paradigm shifts in the discourses of governance with the advent of neoliberalism. The chapter also discusses various models of governance. It recounts how formal structures of governance are generally adopted by the state machinery, but how informal structures are also important in the vernacular society. The chapter explores the possibility of studying governance through the lens of sociology. Finally, the chapter gives an account of the discourses on good governance and civil society and its impact on contemporary governance.

Chapter 3 presents an account of the demographic profile of the state of Assam and its ethnic, religious and cultural landscapes. It also provides a brief overview of the political systems of the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial Assam. In that backdrop,

\textsuperscript{5} Literally, womens’ association.

\textsuperscript{6} Shopkeepers’ association
the chapter recounts the historical background of the Panchayati Raj Institutions and local self-government in Assam.

This chapter then introduces the villages selected for intensive field study and explains the rationale for the selection. It explains how the social and cultural diversities in Assam need to be considered to understand the implications of the process of governance at various levels. The chapter then describes and examines the three-tier structure of local governance in India with special reference to the specificities in Assam. People’s perception of state and governance is also discussed. It also addresses the gender aspect of governance. Finally, the chapter examines the changes that the community life of villages is undergoing with the advent of Panchayat system.

Chapter 4 presents various data collected with respect to the issues under study, and analyses these data to gain insight into various government welfare programmes. The chapter examines the people’s perception of development and governance in detail. While doing so, the study takes into account various indicators of social development like health, education, drinking water and sanitation and people’s perception about them. People’s suggestions for improvement of various services are also enlisted. The chapter also discusses the people’s interaction with various government agencies engaged in rural development.

The chapter then delves into the process of informal governance and the element of trust in the everyday life of the people. In this context, it explores the role of political brokers and clientelism in local politics. The politics around the issues of ‘D’ (doubtful) voters and citizenship is also discussed These analyses enable us to compare and contrast the perspectives of beneficiaries of the welfare schemes with respect to ethnicity, caste, class, gender, age, education and so on.

Chapter 5 is based on the ethnographic study of three elections in Sonitpur District. Apart from analysing the voting patterns and voting behaviour, it explains electoral participation as a form of enacting citizenship. Further, it examines the political significance of electoral voting for various communities. It then analyses the question as to why people vote.

The chapter then discusses the campaigning and canvassing done by the political party workers and party leaders before the elections in order to understand the dynamics of
the election process. The study also highlights the activities that play out around the polling booth on the day of polling. It thus tries to capture the manner in which elections take the form of a ritualistic celebration.

Chapter 6 discusses the concept of neoliberal governmentality as developed by various thinkers such as David Harvey, Raymond Plant and Wendy Brown. It analyses the changing nature of the state in the context of neoliberalism, which implies the withdrawal of the state from various public welfare measures and explicates its manifestation and implications at the local level in the context Assam. The discourse on good governance has been mentioned with the political agenda of various international financial organizations.

Chapter 7 is the concluding chapter, which first presents a brief summary of the main arguments of each chapter of the thesis. It emphasizes the need to understand the dynamics of governance in multi-ethnic democracy like India from the micro level without ignoring macro perspectives. The conclusion outlines the implications of contemporary governance for the backward rural societies in India with special reference to the state of Assam.