CHAPTER NINE

"SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION"

A. SUMMARY:

9. A. 1 Introduction:

Water transport is a branch of the surface communication. Inland water transport means navigational activities on canal, river, lake and on other navigable water. The scope of this research study has covered the inland water transport in Assam, which means transportation through the river system in the state.

In the early days of civilization, people of different countries used boats, rafts and sailing ships on rivers (also on seas) for transporting cargoes and passengers. With the development of rail and road transport, water transport in India had faced severe competition. In some developed countries on the other hand water transport also developed simultaneously, along with rail and road transport.

The geo-political conditions of Assam have been a serious obstacle to the development of overland (e.g., road and rail) transport. The existing river system in the state on the other hand offers a convenient way to develop surface transport.
The main objective of this research project is to study the evolution, present position, prospects and problems of water transport and to suggest measures for its development with particular reference to Assam.

This research project is based mainly on secondary data. Data on various aspects of water transport in Assam are not easily available. No intensive study on water transport has been made in Assam till present. Information from different sources and organizations were collected for the study.

9.2 Geographical Background:

Assam state is located at the North-East corner of the Indian Republic. It is connected with the rest of India by a narrow strip, lying at the foothills of the Himalayas. The state is covered almost in all sides by hills. It is shaded with numerous rivers and dotted with various beels, hollows and swamps. High humidity, heavy rainfall, recurrent floods and uneven topography are the general characteristics of the state of Assam.

There has been a tremendous growth of population in Assam in the last 80 years. It reached a figure of 1,99,02826 (projected) in 1981, with a density of population of 258 per
square kilometre. According to the 1971 census, 27.25 percent of population are classified as workers in Assam. The occupational pattern reveals that primary sector accounts for 76 percent of workers as per 1971 census.

The state is rich in natural resources. The principal mineral resources are coal, oil, limestone and natural gas. Assam is blessed with vast forest resources, comprising valuable trees and animals. The state can be proud of her water resources too, but these are lying idle.

Agriculture is the backbone of the economy of Assam. Contributing a great portion to the total State Domestic Product (S.D.P.) Assam occupies a prestigious place in the world map, for the cultivation of tea. Another important non-food grain agricultural production is jute. The state is yet to achieve self sufficiency in food grain production. Although there is great scope for industrialisation, Assam has only a few tea, oil, coal, paper, plywood, cement and fertilizer industry.

9.A.3 Early History:

In the pre historic days men carried their belongings themselves. With the passage of time they used domesticated animals for transport. In the Puranas and in many other
religious books references about the uses of boats by the early inhabitants of Assam have been made. The history of water transport in Assam is known from the reign of the Ahom Kings. Country boats were used for traffic and passenger services. There was a network of trade route within the country, connecting its important places by waterways. There were some customs houses to regulate the trade by waterways. Water transport was most extensively used for war purposes. Ahom rulers maintained a very strong navy. Boat making was an important activity in certain areas near the river side.

9.A.4 Water transport during the British rule:

Till the beginning of the regular steam navigation in 1846 under the East India Company, the transport and communication in Assam was performed by country boats. But the journey by country boats was very tedious and it was almost impossible in the rains. In 1841 the first steam boat was plied on the Brahmaputra under the auspices of the Assam Tea Company. Regular steam services between Assam and Calcutta was started in the year 1846, by the East India Company, during the administration of Colonel Jenkins. The Indian General Steam Navigation Company Limited, which was formed in 1844 ran its vessels on the Brahmaputra in 1860.
Another company, River Steam Navigation Company (1862), pld their vessels in Assam in 1866. Both the company, i.e. the I.G.S.N. Company & R.S.N. Company started their joint operation from 1890, and came to be called as Joint Steamer Companies.

After the introduction of the steam navigation in Assam the ferry and commercial services were maintained to some extent with steamers. At the same time country boats were also in operation. Installation of the steam boat helped the development of the tea and oil industries and economic development on other spares. Before the beginning of the direct rail link in 1902 the steamer companies had their hayday. Assam (Dhubri) was connected with Calcutta in 1902 by rail and the same was extended upto Gauhati by the year 1911-12. Because of the development of the railways, the inland water transport companies faced severe competition. But they continued to play an important role till the partition of the country.

9.5 Partition and After:

After the partition of the country in 1947 the direct rail link between Assam and Calcutta was disrupted. Towards the end of 1949 the Pakistan Railways stopped all
the transit through their railways to and from Assam. At that time the R.S.N. & I.G.S.N. Company had their virtual monopoly of traffic between Assam and Calcutta. Even after the construction of the Assam rail link in 1950, the importance of waterways had not diminished, as the rail link invariably breached during rainy season every year for several days.

After partition the transport along the waterways, via East Pakistan had been jeopardised. In December, 1949, the Pakistani Authority had held-up several barges carrying jute from Assam on their way to Calcutta. The steamers from Assam have to crossed several check-posts in East Pakistan, on their waterways, causing considerable loss of time.

The great earthquake of 1950 was a serious setback to the water transport in Assam. 1950's earthquake caused considerable changes in the courses of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, resulting in deterioration of the navigable channels. River beds were raised at many places and the depth of the rivers almost throughout the entire length reduced. As a result several steamer services, particularly in Upper Assam had to be closed by the Joint Steamer Companies at that time.
In 1965, with the outbreak of Indo-Pakistan war the Pakistani authorities closed the water route between Assam and Calcutta, through East Pakistan. As a result the J.S.C. suffered a set-back. Some of the vessels of the J.S.C. were detained in East Pakistan. At that time the water transport practically came to a standstill. Consequently, the business of the R.S.N. Company was closed, and in 1967 the C.I.W.T.C. Limited was formed. Since 1965, the water transport remained effective only in the territory of Assam till 1972.

After the emergence of the sovereign Bangladesh in 1972, a protocol on inland water transit and trade was signed between India and Bangladesh, on 1st November 1972, for the opening of waterways between Assam and Calcutta, via Bangladesh. On November 20th, 1972 the then Chief Minister of Assam Sri Sarat Chandra Sinha inaugurated the river services between Assam and Calcutta, via Bangladesh at the Pandu port (Gauhati).

9.A.6 Water transport after independence:

After independence the Joint Steamer Companies were rendering their services in traditional manner as before. In the closing years the traffic of the companies
were diminished. On the 18th February, 1956 the Govt. of India appointed the Gokhale Committee to make recommendations on the development of water transport. Accordingly, the Govt. of Assam set-up, the Inland Water Transport Directorate, on 1st April, 1959. It is the only State Government organization in the state, dealing with the water transport. In May, 1967, the R.S.N. Company closed its business. In the same year, a new organization, Central Inland Water Transport Corporation Limited, (Central Govt. undertaking) was incorporated. The C.I.W.T.C. Limited took-over all the assets of the R.S.N. Company. At present I.W.T. Directorate and C.I.W.T.C. Limited, are the two inland water transport organizations operating in Assam. Both the organization have no long distant passenger services at present.

At the initial stage the I.W.T. Directorate worked as an agent of the Central Govt., in the construction of the Pandu port. Later on the Directorate had started the ferry and traffic services. In 1968, the I.W.T. Directorate started its ferry services for crossing the river Brahmaputra. Its ferry services went on increasing and in 1985, it also started its ferry services in the Barak river. The income and expenditure of the ferry services for various years show that the income exceeds the expenditure. At present the main activity of the I.W.T. Directorate is to maintain the ferry
services. The developmental work of the Directorate consists of improvement of ferry services, opening of new ferry services, maintenance of river channels, installation of modern ships and conduct of hydrographic survey etc. It has one crew training centre and one workshop. For night navigation the I.W.T. Directorate installed lighting in 1983 on the Brahmaputra.

In Assam, certain ferry services have been operating under the authorities of the Mahkuma Parishads, F.W.D. and Panchayats. In spite of the increasing mechanical transport, the country boats are still used extensively and they serve the purpose of trade and commerce, particularly in negotiating short distance. In India, except the National Waterways, the water transport is under the exclusive responsibility of the State Government.

9.A.7 Prospects and problems:

Relating to the geo-physical conditions water transport possesses some distinct advantages in Assam. Water transport satisfies most of the requirements of a good transport system. Assam is endowed with a large number of navigable rivers. These waterways can be extensively used for ferry and commercial services.
Considering the topography and climatic conditions of Assam the comparative cost of water transport is far lesser than that of the road and rail transport. Increasing co-operation amongst rail, road and water transport will accelerate trade and commerce and economic development of the North-East Region. Development of water transport can relieve the congestion in road and rail transport. Water transport can serve as an anti-inflationary measure. The conservancy measures of the river channels can reduce the intensity of flood in the state.

The water transport in Assam confronted several set-backs. The basic problem that threatened the navigability in Assam is the neglect of maintenance and conservancy of waterways. Deforestation in the last three decades has caused the elevation of the river beds and as a result caused reduction of depth of water for navigation. The waterways in Assam suffer from seasonal fluctuations of water. One crucial problem faced by water transport in Assam is that the waterways between Assam and Calcutta, required to pass through an alien country, Bangladesh.

Lack of training facilities for navigation, ship repairing facilities and absence of modern ships are other major problems. The infrastructural facilities required for
for navigation is very poor. The problem of night navigation, ship building, warehousing facilities and absence of industrial site on the river side has also affected the development of water transport.

Another drawback of water transport is that it cannot provide door to door services and that the speed of services is slow. Nevertheless, heavy goods, which are not perishable are to be transported by water transport as it provides the easiest and cheapest mode of transport.

9.A.8 Appraisal and Suggestions:

Since time immemorial inland water transport continued its gradual growth till 1965, in Assam. But its activities diminished to a very large extent from 1965 to 1972. Fortunately, after the emergence of Bangladesh in 1972, its navigability through the Brahmaputra river from Assam to Calcutta via Bangladesh started to revive gradually.

As water transport has very limited inherent shortcomings, the existing limitations of inland water transport in Assam may be removed with some efforts. Certain measures for the development of water transport are suggested, with particular reference to Assam.
The most important measures necessary are to intensify the conservancy, conduct regular survey, construct dry port, improve the workshop, provide better training facilities and develop the necessary infrastructural facilities. It is suggested that the water transport should obtain modern speedy ships and modern lighting facilities for night navigation, to enhance its competitive capacity with rail and road transport. Inland water transport should be regarded as a complementary to rail and road transport and co-operation with rail and road services should be increased. Declaration of inland water transport as a small-scale industry will accelerate its pace of development. To ensure the waterways between Assam and the rest of India the proposed link canal between the Ganges and the Brahmaputra through Indian territory is essential. For the implementation of the different measures, for the upliftment of water transport a comprehensive plan covering a period of 15 to 25 years will be necessary.

B. CONCLUSION:

The transport system of a country should be shaped according to the topography, physical facilities and availability of goods for movement. The comparative cost of construction and maintenance of all the surface transport is
determined by the topography and climatic conditions. Assam is traversed by several navigable rivers. Recurrent flood is another problem faced by the state. All these factors favour water transport, over rail and road transport. In the process of development, the underdeveloped countries (or region) should consider the cost factor as resources are the main hindrance of economic development.

From the foregoing discussion it is clear that since time immemorial water transport has been occupying an important place in the transport history of Assam. Though some set-backs began to appear from 1947, water transport continued its importance till the time of Indo-Pakistan hostilities in 1965. After the emergence of Bangladesh in 1972 water transport in Assam started to revive.

It is observed in the context of the geo-political and socio-economic conditions that water transport in Assam possesses some distinct advantages. For long distant movement of bulky commodities water transport is economical and suitable. For the over all economic development of the North-East Region the utilization of these waterways is inevitable. Economic features of Assam like, recurrent flood, agricultural productivity, availability of forest and mineral resources etc., justly a cheaper and dependable mode of transport through waterways.
Due to certain difficulties, traffic by water transport has gradually shifted to rail and road transport. This is because of the neglect of this branch of transport. For the development of the inland water transport traffic, it is essential that the infrastructural facilities relating to the water transport must be provided, as early as possible. Both the Central and the State Government should devote its efforts for the utilization and development of waterways in Assam. The water transport, in Assam contributed tremendously in the economic development throughout the last fifty years of the nineteenth century and the first fifty years of the twentieth century, almost a hundred years. Even these it has great scope for expansion and development. Water transport should not be considered as a rival to the rail and road transport. It should be treated as complementary to rail and road transport.