A Panchayat institution is basically a territorial and functional self-governing unit. Its territorial jurisdiction should be of such an area, which can ensure maximum possible service to the local people. Its area should be so designed that the local people can secure necessary services for themselves. In view of which there are certain basic principles like homogeneity of people, geographical adequacy, economic viability, availability of efficient leadership, maximum possible services to the local people, which determine the size of Panchayats. Furthermore, another consideration arises whether one particular type of Panchayat at a certain level will hold good to ensure the supply of necessary services to the people.

In the old villages of India the Panchayat or such other organisation was localised in the village itself as the community needs were very few and could be served adequately by the village itself. This has developed the concept of one village one Panchayat.

In Assam, the Assam Local Self Government Act 1915 as amended from time to time thereafter provided for establishment of village authorities for the villages.
According to this Act the Local Government could declare any local area to be a village for establishing a village authority. As such, there were variations in the administrative areas of village authorities from place to place. The then Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup District Mr. Bentiek (1920) took initiative to organise a village authority for each revenue village.

The Assam Rural Panchayat Act 1948 did not provide specifically what should be the administrative area of each of the two tier Panchayats namely Rural Panchayat and Primary Panchayat. This was left to the discretion of the Government to declare any area to be a Rural Panchayat. Every Rural Panchayat might contain any number of primary Panchayats as the Deputy Commissioner or Subdivisional Officer thought fit. The Government however, declared that there should be a Rural Panchayat for each mauza. Where a mauza was quite big, it was divided into two Rural Panchayats.

As regards formation of Primary Panchayats within each Rural Panchayat area the number was limited up to five under an amendment of the Act in 1952. This was again revised by another amendment of the Act in 1955 which provided for fifteen Primary Panchayats within a Rural Panchayat.
The Act also provided that after a district or sub-division was fully covered by Rural Panchayats, the Government would form Union Panchayat for each sub-division with such powers and functions as might be assigned by the Government. The Act contemplated that the Union Panchayats would be established to replace the age-old local boards. According to this Act, the Rural Panchayat was the only Panchayat body with executive powers and functions and the primary Panchayats were to function as agents to the Rural Panchayat. The average population of a primary Panchayat was 2000. The Rural Panchayat had a population of 20,000 to 40,000 according to the population of the mauza. The mauzawise Rural Panchayat was a convenient unit so far as its economic viability and traditional unity of the people were concerned. Though the aauzas in Assam, were originally demarcated as revenue units for the purpose of revenue records and collections, the very existence of such units for several decades could develop in the minds of the people a sense of belonging to the mauza almost like the village feelings. That is why the Rural Panchayats were more or less efficient in performance of their functions with active cooperation of the local people. The main drawback in this Panchayat system was that the primary panchayat was bound to become quite ineffective organisations for some obvious reasons. Firstly
it had no fund and budget of its own. With very limited funds and resources a Rural Panchayat could hardly spare any fund exclusively for undertaking development works by the primary Panchayats.

Secondly, the primary panchayat Presidents had no say in the Rural Panchayat. It was the Rural Panchayat member elected from a Primary Panchayat area, who controlled all the activities and expenditures of the Rural Panchayat concerning the Primary Panchayat. He could ignore the wishes of the Primary Panchayat Executive Committee. Thus all activities of the Rural panchayat for a Primary Panchayat were controlled by One man. So it was not the administrative area of the Primary Panchayat but want of necessary powers made it in-effective.

The idea of forming union Panchayat for each subdivision did not materialise mainly due to strong resistance from the local Board leaders who were quite powerful in Assam politics.

The Assam Panchayat Act 1959 introduced three tier Panchayat system with Gaon Sabha and its executive body Goan Panchayat at the village level, Anchalik Panchayat at the Block level, and Mahkuma Parishad at the Sub-Divisional level. This Act repealed the Assam Local Self Government Act 1915 and the Assam Rural Panchayat Act 1948. Consequent upon which all the earstwhile local
bodies i.e. local Boards, Rural Panchayats and Primary Panchayats were abolished. According to this Act the State Government could declare any area as a Gaon Sabha, but in cases where population exceeded five thousand, more than one Gaon Sabha could be established. This Act also provided that in case the Gaon Sabha area covered more than one village the opinion of the villages concerned should be consulted. But in determining a Gaon Sabha areas, though more than one village were tagged, no such opinion was formally taken perhaps due to administrative difficulties. As a matter of fact, the Deputy Commissioner or Subdivisional Officer determined the territorial jurisdiction of the Gaon Sabhas. In practice the population of a Gaon Sabha varied from 2500 to 4000. The average population of a Gaon Sabha was 3230. It appears to be considerably high in comparison to all other States of India. The average population coverage of village Panchayats in the different States are Assam-3230, Andhra-1942, Bihar-3921, Gujrat-1290, Maryana-1371, Janmu and Kashmir-3126, Kerala-15618, Madhya-Pradesh-1996, Maharashtra-1276, Mysore 2456, Orissa-6723, Punjab-1095, Rajasthan-2290, Tamil Nadu-1994, Uttar Pradesh-998, West Bengal-1312 and Himachal Pradesh-1536. It appears that whilst the average population of village Panchayat in Assam is 3230, the extreme range was between 889 in the U.P. and 15618 in Kerala. The population coverage of Gaon Sabha in Assam obviously mean grouping of villages.
The population of the villages in the Kamrup district like all other districts in Assam shows that many Gaon Sabhas had to be declared taking group of villages in each.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Number of villages in Kamrup district.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>200 and less</td>
<td>597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 200 and 499</td>
<td>957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 500 and 999</td>
<td>930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 1000 and 1999</td>
<td>404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 2000 and 4999</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 5000 and 9999</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 2971 villages.

Thus out of 2971 villages only 78 villages could satisfy the requirement laid down by the Act to be a Gaon Sabha in each village and 5 villages with more than one Gaon Sabha in each. In the case of all other villages more than one village had to be grouped together to declare a Gaon Sabha. It also appears that the idea of having a Panchayat for each village was not possible. Therefore, there was no other alternative but to group villages, in forming many Gaon Sabhas.
It appears that the grouping of villages was not workable in view of lack of cooperation of the people and poor performance of such Gaon Sabhas. To be more specific I am citing an example of a Gaon Sabha in the Kamrup District. This Gaon Sabha under the name "Titka Garin" was formed with 8 villages. It has a population of 3951 from different communities viz- Caste Hindu 2943, Muslim 252, Scheduled Caste 37 and Scheduled Tribes 619.

As the village Titkagoria was the prominent amongst all the villages in the group, the name of the Gaon Sabha was declared by that name. A section of villagers from other villages had expressed their dissatisfaction, but they could not convince the authority to alter the name. Nor they could suggest for a commonly acceptable name. This problem was felt everywhere and a section of the villagers were found to be aggrieved on this issue.

Secondly, it appears that the majority of the members and the President were elected from the majority community for all the three consecutive terms from 1961, 1964 and 1968. One member from the scheduled Tribes Community was coopted under the provision of the Act. It was only in the 1968 election one Muslim member was elected from the Muslim village under a changed provision of single member election constituency which was provided for local representation. As the Gaon Sabha was predominantly
controlled by the leaders of a particular community, necessary cooperation from the other communities was considerably less. Also the facts that the people of different villages were not cooperating is evident from the attendance at the Gaon Sabha General meeting. All these meetings were held without the required quorum. As a result the performance of this Gaon Sabha was far from satisfactory mainly for want of active cooperation of the villagers from different villages in the group.

On the other hand the performance of a single village Gaon Sabha like Bajo was comparatively better and perhaps due to the traditional unity and homogeneity of the villagers they were found to have participated in development works undertaken by the Gaon Panchayat.

A study team on Gaon Sabha headed by Shri R.R. Divakar as Chairman was appointed by the Government of India in June 1962 which suggested a population between 1000 and 1500 for a Gaon Sabha so as to ensure active participation of the community. The committee on Panchayati Raj election appointed by the Government of India with Sri K. Sampathnam as Chairman in February 1964 observed "It may be useful as in Madras (Tamil Nadu) State to treat a Panchayat with population over 5000 and an annual income of over Rs. 10,000 as a town or major Panchayat with powers and functions some where between those of an ordinary Panchayat and a Municipality". The Committee opined that the constitution of small hamlets with a population of a few hundred into statutory village
Panchayat in fact incapacitate them for making any effective progress. From different reports of the study teams it can not be ascertained what should be the appropriate area and population of a Gaon Panchayat. The necessity of economic viability and efficiency of a Gaon Panchayat favours a larger area whereas the necessity of community organisation and actions favours a smaller area. The weakness observed in the working of the Gaon Panchayats under the Assam Panchayat Act 1959 lead us to advocate for a Gaon Panchayat of larger areas if adequate funds and resources can not be provided for Gaon Panchayats of smaller areas. If however, adequate funds and other resources to the Gaon Panchayats of smaller areas had been arranged such bodies would have definitely proved to be successful. But in consideration of the limited funds and resources, the Gaon Panchayat with a larger area would be preferable. In the State level Panchayat Sammilan held at Mangalda in 1969 it was suggested that the Gaon Panchayat area should have a minimum population of 7000. But an official committee headed by Sri D.Das, I.A.S. the then Commissioner for Agricultural production and Rural Development, observed that "The population within the Gaon Panchayat in Assam is neither too large to make a Gaon Panchayat unwieldy, nor too small to make it weak and uneconomic. A population coverage of this order can enable the adult population in a rural area to participate directly in the functioning
of democratic institutions at the lowest level". Theoretically, however sound this argument may be it was not workable in actual practice. If the question of direct participation in a democratic institution is taken into consideration, our observations on the Gaon Sabha meetings clearly indicate that such objective could never be achieved by such Gaon Sabhas.

In the meanwhile the Assam Provincial Congress Committee suggested the reorganisation of the Panchayat structure in the state, and strengthening of the Mahkuma Parishad with adequate financial powers, resources and executive functions in respect of all development programme in the subdivision. At the lowest level they suggested for establishment of Panchayats at the mauza level keeping an organic link with the Mahkuma Parishad.

The Government of Assam accepted the recommendations and the Assam Panchayati Raj Bill 1971 was introduced in the Assam Legislative Assembly which referred the Bill for Public opinion. The Bill was lapsed at this stage. Then the new Government headed by Shri Samat Chandra Singha Chief Minister, immediately after assuming charge, very enthusiastically took up preparation of the Assam Panchayati Raj Bill 1978. The Minister in charge Panchayat etc. Shri Sayed Ahmed Ali under the progressive policy of the
Government designed the Bill with certain revolutionary changes in the Panchayat administration. This Bill envisaged decentralisation of some powers and functions of different development departments of the Government to the Mahkuma Parishads. It provided for two tier Panchayati Raj set up at the Mahkuma level and village level by direct election. The Bill provided for the establishment of Gaon Panchayat with a population of 15000 to 20,000 in each. This Bill, after it was modified by a select committee was passed by the Assembly in the same year and assent of the President of India was received in the month of May 1973. This Act was brought into force with effect from 7th May, 1973.

In fixing up 20,000 as the population of a Gaon Panchayat the value of direct participation of the people in their democratic Institution has been completely ignored. Here the need for efficiency and economic viability of a Panchayat unit has been considered to be much more important than Community Action. A Gaon Panchayat with an average population of 15000 persons will never encourage people to be organised for Community action. Therefore the idea of peoples participation is losing its ground at the very grass root.

In the Kamrup district there were 561 Gaon Panchayats under the Assam Panchayat Act 1959. The number of Gaon Panchayats has now been reduced to 120 under the
Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1972. There being the population 25,64369 in 3218 villages in the district the average coverage of population and villages in a Gaon Panchayat are 19,878 persons and 25 villages respectively. To be more specific I am citing the positioned of Khata Gaon Panchayat under Nalbari Mahkuma Parishad as an extreme example. This Gaon Panchayat consists of 41 villages with the population of 23444 persons. In this Gaon Panchayat all the essential elements like territorial integrity, homogeneity, community feelings and actions do not at all exist. As a result direct participation of the people as such Panchayats does not exist.

In conclusion it may be suggested that every revenue village which has the traditional unity and solidarity should be statutorily recognised as a basic unit. All adult person of a village should form themselves into a Gaon Sabha or Village Assembly.

The Gaon Sabha should elect its executive Committee or Gaon Panchayat to carry out its functions.

One may, however, argue that such Gaon Sabhas will be weak and ineffective organisation like that of the primary Panchayat (Under the Assam Rural Panchayat Act 1948) and the Gaon Sabha (under the Assam Panchayat Act, 1959). It is of course true that such Gaon Sabha will be economically weak if it is expected to thrive on its own income and the
Government grant is limited to the proportion of its population. But it will never remain weak if a self help and self supporting spirit can be generated and sustained in a proper atmosphere and under effective leadership.

If the people can be motivated to shoulder their own responsibilities in a conducive atmosphere, the question if limited financial position of the Gaon Panchayat will never be a problem.

If however, the Panchayat is accepted mainly as an agent of the higher local body and the Government, its function will be limited to the extent of funds and responsibilities assigned and it will certainly be weak if the entire fund required by it is not forthcoming from the Government or the higher body. On the other way if a Gaon Panchayat is accepted as the only self Governing Institution in a village and endowed with full powers and authority for all administrative and developmental activities in the village and given control over the available local resources it will prosper as a self sustained unit of self Government and become least dependent on outside aids.

The administrative area of the Anchalik Panchayat was coterminous with the area of the Development Block. The Balvantrai Mehta Committee suggested the establishment of a vigorous Democratic Institution to take charge of all aspects
of development works in the rural area with its jurisdiction of the Block area. According to this Committee the jurisdiction of the proposed local body should be neither so large as to defeat the very purpose for which it is created nor so small as to militate against efficiency and economy. Obviously the Village panchayat is too small in area, population and financial resources to carry out all these functions. Obviously too the next higher body will have to furnish function with and through the Panchayats as far as possible for the very reasons for which such a body will be created. The various alternatives, which we have considered are that this institution should be identical in extent with the N.E.S. Block, the Tehsil or Taluka, the subdivision or the District. The Block offers an area large enough for functions which the village Panchayat can not perform and yet small enough to attract the interest and service of the residents."

The Block areas demarcated following the general norms of average 60,000 population, 100 square miles in area and approximately 100 villages in each Block, subject to such variation as considered necessary under the local conditions such as the density of population, geographical limitation etc. The position of the 25 numbers of the Development Blocks in the Kamrup district in respect of their area and population are shown as below: --
This table shows that there has been much variation in area of different Blocks, though every Block comprises of 3 or 4 Mauzas. It appears that the suitability of the geographical area was not considered in determining the Block areas. The backward areas where the density of population was generally low, a large area was covered by a development Block.

This had affected the quicker development of the Backward areas. For example the Boko Bongaon, Tamulpur and Jalalah Blocks of the Kamrup District have areas more than 300 sq. miles in each though these are the most backward areas in the district. From the working of these Blocks during the C.D. Stage it appeared that quite a considerable number of villages were not benefitted by the C.D. Programmes.
Similar problem also arose in the working of the Anchlik Panchayats. It is therefore, suggested that the area of a Development Block should not exceed 200 sq.miles.

As regards the administrative area of the Mahkuma Parishad, the Civil Subdivision was accepted to be the unit in Assam. The area of a Local Board was also to civil subdivision. Later on the area of Mahkuma Parishad was also the same. Most of the districts in Assam are too large to be accepted as the administrative area of a local body. The Mehta Committee however, suggested the Zilla (district) as the area of a Zella Parishad. Now let us consider what should be the administrative area of the Mahkuma Parishad, a district, or a subdivision? The district certainly not suitable for obvious reasons. First, it would not be possible to coordinate the activities of all the Panchayati Raj bodies. The areas of the districts where Panchayatiraj institution have been established are shown as below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of district</th>
<th>Areas in Sq.miles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Goalpara</td>
<td>3969.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Kamrup</td>
<td>3769.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Darrang</td>
<td>3358.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Nowgong</td>
<td>2192.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sibsagar</td>
<td>2363.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Dibrugarh</td>
<td>1787.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Lakhimpur</td>
<td>769.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Cachar</td>
<td>2669.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the Kamrup district there were as many as 561 Gaon Panchayats and 25 Anchalik Panchayats under the Assam Panchayat Act 1959. Though these Block level Anchalik Panchayats were abolished and the number of the Gaon Panchayats reduced to 129 under the Assam Panchayati Raj Act 1972, we do not think that a district level local body covering the area of 3769.6 sq.miles will be able to supervise the working of all these Gaon Panchayats effectively. Some people are however of the opinion that the district should be the administrative area of the highest level local body. They argue that in such case this body will function from the district head quarter station and the district heads of the Government Departments would conveniently cooperate and assist the working of the local body. Further the Deputy Commissioner would be able to coordinate the activities of the several Government Departments; he would be able to assist this local body when any administrative difficulty arises. Though this argument is apparently sound from the administrative point of view, we are not convinced of this argument as the Deputy Commissioner and other district officers can assist the local body at the Subdivisional head-quarter also.

The areas of the three Civil Subdivisions in the Kamrup district are Gauhati 1591.9 sq.miles, Nalbari 948 Sq.Miles and Barpeta 1249.7 Sq.miles. Thus the Mahkuma Parishads which are now functioning in the respective subdivisions appear to have been able to supervise the activities of the Gaon Panchayats.
without any difficulty. This would not have been possible if the district had been the area of a Mohkuma Parishad.
Therefore, Civil Sub-division in Assam is much more suitable and convenient than that of the district as the administrative area of Mohkuma Parishad.