CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

IX.1 This chapter has been designed for drawing the broad inferences of the study and extracting policy implications. However, to facilitate the process, first the principal findings of the study have been recapitulated. Hence, the chapter consists of three sections – this introduction is followed by re-capitulation of principal findings in section II. In section III, the main conclusions and policy implications of the findings and inferences of the study are discussed.

IX.2 Re-capitulation of Principal Findings of the Study

IX.2.1 Rural Development and Rural Infrastructure Attainments at the State and District Level as extracted from Analysis of Secondary Data

- In terms of a few indicators of development and otherwise such as poverty, infant mortality rate and literacy rate observed in this study, rural areas are found to lag behind the urban areas of the state.

- Among the rural areas, inter-district variations have been found regarding development attainments in terms of the overall rural development index based on rural under 6 age sex ratio, rural literacy and rural income and there is also a geographical pattern in this disparity. Generally, the upper Assam districts, endowed with tea plantation and minerals, indicate to have higher rural development standards than most of the lower Assam districts. While N C Hills has been found to attain very high level of rural development,
the position of Karbi Anglong, the other hill district, has been found very
discouraging in this regard. The development standard in the Barak Valley
districts corresponds more or less to the average level of the state.

- Variations have also been found across districts in case of availability of rural
infrastructure in terms of overall infrastructure index based on availability of
rural roads and rural electricity supply. In this regard also the upper Assam
districts are better placed in terms of rural infrastructure compared to most of
the districts in lower Assam. The rural areas of the hill districts and the Barak
valley districts of the state are found to have infrastructure comparable to the
state average.

- Although disparities exist in both development and infrastructure levels in the
rural areas across districts, such disparities in development and
infrastructure do not strictly overlap.

- While higher rural development creates more rural infrastructures, no such
pattern has been found to exist in the other way round. Thus, districts lagging
behind in rural development are found to have poor state of rural
infrastructure.

- Both the current rural development process and the improvement in current
rural infrastructure are positively depended on their past provisions.
• There exist strong evidences of occurrence of $\beta$-convergence in both rural development process and rural infrastructure provision across districts of Assam.

**IX.2.2 Inter-connections between Development, Infrastructure and Grass-roots Institutions as extracted from Village Sample Survey Data**

• As per the guidelines of the 73rd amendment of the constitution of India, provisions have been made in Assam to empower the *panchayati raj* institutions at the grass-roots. Attempts have also been made to empower grass-roots level development institutions in the sixth schedule areas of the state where the 73rd amendment is not applicable.

  ➢ In the non-sixth schedule plain districts, *gaon panchayats* have been envisaged as the village level development institutions. Similarly, the village development councils have been instituted in the sixth schedule areas as the development institutions at the grass-roots.

  ➢ However, structural differences exist between such institutions in the sixth schedule and non-sixth schedule areas. The institutions in the sixth schedule areas are less democratic and not well-structured compared to their counterparts in the non-sixth schedule areas.

• Despite the provisions of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, the process of grass-roots empowerment through the *panchayati raj* institutions remains incomplete in the state of Assam and more so in the sixth schedule areas of
the state. In the plains, functions to the panchayats are not fully devolved compared to other states like Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura and, therefore, activities of the gaon panchayats in the state are confined in performing specific works under MGNREGA, Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) and IAY schemes.

- Gaon panchayats/VDCs in Assam generally do not hold gaon sabha in the manner prescribed in the 73rd amendment of the constitution of India. Even the sabhas held are not found much participatory.

- Almost a uniform pattern has been observed in the achievement of development indicators by the sample villages across components. Almost all the components of development under study have been found better in the villages where overall rural development has been relatively higher.

- There seems to have a tendency towards lack of convergence in the process of development among the sample villages. This is in contradiction with what has been found from the analysis of secondary data. This conflict may arise because of two reasons. The secondary data is available as district-level aggregates. The analysis using secondary data has been carried on covering all districts. In contrast, the primary data are household level and village level statistics collected from plain villages in three districts. While the coverage of the secondary data analysis is wide, the coverage of the primary data analysis is more in-depth. Moreover, the components of rural development
are not uniform in both types of data. Hence the results are not strictly comparable.

- Village level development institutions are found to positively influence not only the development status of the villages but also their improvement in the process of development over time. Most specifically, the process of village development is found to be favourably associated with activities performed by the *gaon panchayats*.

- In contrast to what has been found in the pattern of development, the pattern of infrastructure development is not uniform across villages. While some of the villages have experienced higher development in some components of infrastructure, some villages have attained higher development levels in some other components.

- In general, a tendency towards convergence in the level of village infrastructure seems to appear. However, the tendency does not extend to the relatively remote villages. This may have to do with the fact that the flagship programmes of infrastructure development are yet to effectively penetrate in the backward and remote areas of the state.

- Village level development institutions are also found to have positive impacts on the status of village infrastructure and on its improvement as well.
• Expectedly a positive relationship has been found between development and infrastructure across the sample villages. However, infrastructure facilities across the villages have been found to improve their level of development but no such pattern has been found in the other way round.

• In the sample hill district, tendency towards lack of convergence has been observed not only in the process of development of the villages but also in their level of infrastructure facilities. The lack of convergence in infrastructure progress among the sample hill villages, which is in conflict with the finding in the plain villages, may be partly attributed to the lack of success of the flagship programmes to penetrate into the remote areas of the hill district on one hand and the structural deficiencies of the village level development institutions on the other.

**IX.3 Broad Inferences and Policy Implications**

The broad inferences of the study may be summed up in the following points:

1. In rural areas of Assam, it is improvement in infrastructure that leads the development process instead of infrastructure coming out in response to demand for it arising from developmental push. The endogenous development push appears to be rather feeble but the exogenous pull of infrastructure development seems to be the driver of the development process.

2. The institutions for grass-roots empowerment play a critical role in the dynamics of rural development both directly and indirectly. Wherever these
institutions are more effective, they contribute directly to development attainments by ensuring better implementation of state-sponsored rural development initiatives. Indirectly, *al bait* not less significantly, effective grass-roots level institutions promotes infrastructure which, in turn, transmits momentum to the development process.

Given these broad inferences from the study, the following recommendations should be in order:

- There exists a strong case for strengthening of institutions of grass-roots empowerment in the state of Assam. For expediting development attainments in rural areas of Assam, there is an urgent need to expand and intensify the scope of activities of the institutions. Even in areas where PRIs have been instituted such institutions for developmental participation have not been deepened to the extent as in the states like Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura. Therefore, ample scopes exist to strengthen the PRIs in the state which may be expected to assist the process of infrastructure improvement and economic development in the rural areas.

- In the same context, a case for vitalizing the *gaon sabhas*, the basic forum for popular participation in self-governance, need to be emphasized. In the absence of effective *gaon sabhas* with wide popular participation, the empowerment process can stop percolating down to the grass-roots which, in turn, can block the development process from being truly inclusive.
The need for strengthening the institutional framework for grass-roots empowerment is even more necessary in the sixth schedule areas particularly in the hill district of the state. In the absence of constitutional obligations for devolving power of the district/autonomous council to the village level bodies the institutional development in these areas have not been shaping up in the democratic and inclusive way. This weakness can seriously hinder the percolation of benefits of development schemes to the people at the grass-roots.

The initiative to merge the District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs) with the *zilla parishads*, the apex body of grass-roots institutions, will be a welcome step which should be carried on expeditiously. The DRDAs are the bureaucratic set-up for implementation of rural development programmes existing even prior to the institutions of PRIs. In the absence of accountability to the elected grass-roots level institutions, leakages of development fund flow through DRDAs used to be common and substantive. Bringing the DRDAs under the control of the *zilla parishad* can one hand stem such leakage and on the other hand capacitate the *zilla parishad* with an established bureaucratic set-up for better functioning. It may be recalled from earlier discussion that one of the constraints restraining PRIs from more effective functioning is the absence of a trained and professional techno-bureaucrat back up. Thus the merging of DRDAs with *zilla parishads* can be expected to overcome this deficiency of PRIs to quite an extent.