CHAPTER - VII
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS
Chapter VII

Summary and conclusions

7.1 Summary and Conclusion:

Development can be understood as the gradual growth of formation of any entity or a process in which a person or thing matures, changes or advances to another stage to realize its inherent potentials. The planning process failed to bring about desired results in the peripheral areas of the Northeastern region. The planning mostly failed partly on account of the lack of understanding of the people and their problems; such a failure being undoubtedly compounded by the multiplicity of small ethnicities in the region. The hilly topography meant that developmental opportunities offered to the region remained confined to the urban areas only.

Along these lines, after the long agitation by the Bodos, a new arrangement termed the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was created on 10th February 2003 to boost the developmental process in the Bodo areas of Assam. After six years of its existence, opportunities of development remained confined in the Kokrajhar and its surrounding areas. Rural areas of Kokrajhar have languished in backwardness.

Although in Assam particularly in areas dominated by ethnic communities like the Bodos, displacement due to development programmes has not occurred very significantly, yet the impact of few projects like the Dhansiri irrigation project, Bongaigaon Refinery Petrochemical Ltd (BRPL), Salekati Hydro electric project etc. can not be under estimated. The
Dhansiri irrigation project in the Udalguri district of the newly created BTC alone displaced more than 1000 tribal families, loosing about 1184 bighas of land in 1984 have not been compensated till date. Therefore the affected families have become impoverished due to the acquisition of land for the project.

However it is true that the impact of development-induced displacement is much less compared to conflict induced displacement in the study area in terms of intensity, numbers displaced as well as continuity. In the case of the former people are informed well in advance whereas in the latter case, people have to run for their lives with virtually no warning.

The state of Assam in general and the district Kokrajahr in particular populated by different communities have been experiencing ethnic conflict since last few decades. The conflict, which erupted between the Bodos and Adivashis during the 90s, displaced more than 3 lakh populations from their original habitats, forcing them to stay in temporary relief camps in dehumanized conditions. Due to technical considerations the displaced people in Kokrajhar being Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), were deprived of the relatively better assistance and protection that refugees receive.

The displaced people were housed in the temporary relief camp after the conflict that erupted in 1996 but went back to their villages in 1997 with meager amount of relief grant received from the government. Many families
went back without any assistance and relief grant. The conflict erupted again in 1998, as the criteria for rehabilitation were not followed.

Another significant issue of the area is the movement for separate state by the Bodos. When this group of people realized that they had been deprived in many respects such as political, economic, social etc. they started articulating their grievances in the form of a political movement, demanding greater autonomy which led to a conflict between the state and the non-state agencies. During the course of the movement, many lost their precious lives and thousand got displaced from their original habitats.

The year 1996 remained a distressing one; not only between the Bodos and Adivasi but also among the Bodos themselves as the fratricidal clashes occurred between the Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT) cadres and the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) cadres. The fratricidal clash between the BLT and the NDFB came to a brief lull after the declaration of ceasefire by the NDFB with Government of India in 2005. The conflict between the two organizations stopped for sometime but of late it has started again, in which many innocent people also lost their lives.

Kokrajhar district is populated by various communities such as Bodos, Rabhas, Assamiyas, Santals, Rajbongshis, Muslims, Bengalis, Biharis etc. out of these, the Bodos, a plain tribes with some 3,65,000 speakers are the major community. Of Tibeto-Burman stock, the Bodos are generally believed to be the original inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley.
Their population is found not only in Assam but also scattered in other states of North East India and West Bengal including Nepal.

About 90% of the Bodos live below the poverty line till today, while small groups of educated middle class have cornered the crumbs of Assam's miniscule cake. 98% of the Bodos live in remote villages, that are inaccessible from main towns: the pathetic condition of the communication network, reflecting the neglect of the areas for decades. Problems of land alienation, poverty, indebtedness, economic exploitation and cultural and political neglect became increasingly acute among the tribals.

The Santals (or Santhal, Saontar or Satar) are another significant population group in the district. The Santals of Assam were brought to work in the tea gardens and construction of railway lines as labourers.

From the economic point of view, the economic activities of the Santals in the western part of Assam may be divided into two categories – a group which works in the tea gardens and the other group who are agriculturists. The number of service holders in the public and private sector is extremely limited as they lag far behind in the field of education.

The history of Santals in the western part of Assam is a history of 125 years or so and unfortunately they are amongst the most backward of communities in the state.

The major causes of the conflict in the study area are mainly because of ethnic clashes. The Bodos and Santals lived together as friendly
neighbours for more than a century but the recent conflict between the two communities spewed feelings of animosity and dislike. Prior to the occurrence of the conflict, they existed relations between the two communities and some of the villages in the western part of Kokrajhar district had a mixed Santal-Bodo population. Many Bodo families were conversant with the Santali language. And some were using Santali language even among their own family members. Thus close ties knit these two communities that were living together harmoniously for more than a century.

One of the root causes of the Santal-Bodo conflict is the conflict over forest resources. The Bodos enjoyed superiority, as they are categorized as schedule tribe population. Whenever there was a tender for logs, only Bodos were allowed to tender. Since the Santals are not listed in the S.T. category till date, they are deprived such lucrative avenues leading to friction. An immediate cause of the Santal-Bodo conflict of 1996 was the recovery of three dead bodies belonging to Bodos in a Santal dominated areas that sparked off widespread retaliatory assaults on Santals. As to who killed these 3 Bodo girls, remained unknown. Since the dead bodies were recovered in a Santal dominated areas, it was taken into granted that the Santals killed them.
7.2. Findings:

(1) The conflict which erupted in western part of Assam between the Bodos and the Santals led to the displacement of more than 3 lakh population from their original habitats forcing people to live in the temporary relief camps.

(2) There were two rounds of conflict between the two communities. About 34% of the district population got displaced due to the conflict that erupted in 1996 and 1998.

(3) The figures of displaced people would have been higher if the people who got displaced for a week or a month were taken into consideration. The data, which was provided by the government, relates to the inmates those who were housed in the relief camps.

(4) In the beginning, the victims of the Santal-Bodo conflict were sheltered in 78 relief camps of the district but slowly the government closed down some of the camps by providing relief grants to the affected families and forcing them to return to their villages. Thus, the number of relief camps was reduced to 26 by the end of 2006. These 26 state sponsored relief camps housed 10,666 families comprised of 57,386 persons in the entire district.

(5) The Santal–Bodo conflict, which erupted again in 1998, was due to a hasty policy adopted by the government.

(6) The process initiated by the government raised some thorny issues such as firstly what was the actual number of IDPs in the camps,
relatives house and other buildings. Many IDPs could not register, which was very important because only registered IDPs were eligible for assistance in the camps and for resettlement packages. Some of the IDPs are not interested to be resettled because they had been traumatized by violent incidents and harboured security related fears in returning to their areas of origin. Others were reluctant to return to their villages since there was a lack on infrastructure and other basic services. Some of the IDPs were resettled in unsafe areas.

(7) For effectively ending the problem of the IDPs, the areas for resettlement should be declared safe. There should be complete absence of hostilities and safe access of humanitarian workers in the resettled areas. Only then can there be possibilities of a realistic end to this acute problem. If the displaced people are forced to return without the application of the above criteria then there exists the possibility of reoccurrence of conflict as it happened in 1998.

(8) The camp inmates were supplied with limited ration for 10 days in a month, which included rice, dal and salt. The IDPs complained that the ration provided by the government was extremely limited and because of these they were forced to move out of the camps in search of livelihood options.

(9) Among the displaced people there were even people from the forest areas, who were identified as encroachers on forestland. There were
about 1057 displaced families in Sapkata relief camp and about 378 families in Kachugaon relief camp under Gossaigaon sub-division who were declared as encroachers on forestland. They continue to remain in suspended animation and are yet to be rehabilitated.

(10) Some 113 Bodo families in the Bajugaon relief camp have not been able to go back to their original villages, as their villages are located in sensitive areas. These people were displaced many times and currently living in the Bajugaon areas under Gossaigaon sub-division. They are original patta holders and their lands are being illegally occupied by the Santals. The sub-divisional administration has done precious little towards their rehabilitation and it is now more than 10 years since they were displaced.

(11) The violence, which erupted in the western part of Assam, affected the IDPs as well as the local population adversely. Basically the people who got displaced had lived in large open spaces before displacement but they were confined to small-enclosed spaces in the temporary relief camps that were very congested and quite unhygienic. Their movements were also highly restricted due to security reasons. Bereft of their usual livelihood options, the inmates were totally dependent on the administration to meet their basic needs.
(12) Before being shifted to their original villages, the affected people of the remote areas were housed in the temporary structures or transit camps near the original villages of the displaced people. This was done so to allow the affected people to cope up psychologically with the locality. Another logic behind keeping the displaced people close to their original village was to allow the inmates to carry out limited cultivation in their fields and build houses in the original homestead areas.

(13) After the conflict beyond loss of lives and property, diverse impacts were felt on their livelihoods, education of children, agriculture. Impacts were felt not only by the local communities but also by the business communities.

(14) Only two international NGOs namely the MSF and LWSI were rendering service to the affected people in the study area; however their efforts were not sufficient to handle such a huge number of displaced people.

(15) Since many had seen the killing of their kith and kin with their own eyes, many inmates of the relief camps suffered deep psychological scars and were emotionally very adversely affected.

(16) It was not only that violence broke out in Kokrajhar district of Assam but it also occurred very recently in the Udalguri and Darrang district of Assam. The October 2008 conflict, which erupted between
the immigrant Muslims and the indigenous people of Udalguri and Darrang districts, led to the killing of 24 indigenous people by the immigrant Muslims. A lesser number of immigrant Muslims lost their lives, as learnt from press reports.

(17) Although the number of displaces were more among the Muslims, the loss of lives were greater with the indigenous people as most of the villages targeted by the immigrant Muslims were rich villages.

(18) The government limits its responsibility by erecting relief camps, providing rations for a limited period, distribution of relief grants to the affected families, which were not at all sufficient for complete rehabilitation. The ration provided by the Assam government to the camp inmates @ 6 kgs of rice to an adult and 4kgs. of rice to a minor in a month was not sufficient, since rice forms the bulk of their diet (and also since very little in addition to rice is available to the IDP in the camp to consume). Hence, many are forced to leave the camp in search of work for their sustenance.

(19) There is no clear-cut policy with the Government of India like many other countries for the IDPs, that is why there is discrimination in the distribution of relief grants to the displaced people. A Kashmiri Pandit would be given higher assistance of Rs. 750/- per month whereas a Bru in North East India would be given only Rs. 80/- per month.
(20) The administration was seen adopting some coercive measures such as stoppage of ration on many occasions, thereby forcing the displacees to return to their villages without any assistance from the government.

(21) The relief grants provided by the government at Rs. 10,000/- per family was not sufficient for starting a new life in the original village.

(22) The 113 Bodo families of Srirampur, Shyamaguri and Majadabri village could not be rehabilitated apparently due to the insincerity of the administration.

7.3. Recommendations:

1. As the district has been witnessing ethnic conflict since the past few decades, there is a possibility of reoccurrence of conflict. To overcome this, the administration should set up police pickets and outpost in the sensitive areas especially in the border areas of between the communities. The affected people who could not go back to their villages after receive of rehabilitation grant should be provided with police pickets.

2. Before initiating the rehabilitation process, the government should clearly specify the resettlement strategy for effectively ending displacement. The following criteria could be followed for resettlement of the IDPs (i) firstly there should be complete absence of hostilities in the areas to be resettled. (ii) second, unhindered safe
access of humanitarian workers in the resettled areas should be facilitated and (iii) only when these conditionalities have been satisfied should the area be declared safe for resettlement. If the above criteria are followed then perhaps the possibility of reoccurrence of conflict could be minimized.

3. The rehabilitation measures adopted by the government should include compensation for properties lost/damaged, government houses as provided to the Below Poverty Line (BPL) families and ration for at least a few months after rehabilitation, so that the families are in a position to start their cultivation.

4. The Government of India (GOI) should adopt a mechanism of formal structure to deal with the IDPs, so that equal opportunities and protection could be provided as in the case of refugees who enjoy equal opportunities world over. Therefore, the GOI must develop specific standards for providing humanitarian assistance based on principles of equality and non-discrimination.

5. There should be special focus on the affected women and children. The humanitarian assistance for the IDPs must include assistance for baby food, special care and protection for pregnant women.

6. The state government should make special arrangements for land to rehabilitate the displaced encroachers on forestland to avoid further reoccurrence of conflict. The government should take immediate
steps in this regard as some the displaced encroachers were found to be once again re-occupying the forestland in the guise of returning back home.

7. The district Kokrajhar is politically very sensitive. The administration including the police personnel should not be biased in dealing with the prevailing situation. To provide safety and security to the life and property of the people, the administration should work independently and should not come under any pressure from any quarter. However this is easier said than done.

8. There are various militant organizations in the district such as NDFB, COBRA etc. who are currently on ceasefire with the Government of India (GOI) and Government of Assam respectively. To bring permanent peace in the area, the government should expedite the peace process with the organizations and solve the problems once for all. This initiative will go a long way towards conflict resolution and confidence building.

9. A civil forum should be formed involving the ethnic communities of the area. This civil forum should remind the militant groups that it is their responsibility to avoid deciding for the people and learn to listen to what their people truly want. In the greater interest of the people and the district, ethnic organizations and militant outfits should give up fratricidal conflicts and work towards peace,
reconciliation and progress. Perhaps a leaf can be taken from the Naga Hoho success.

The civil forum should educate the masses at the grass root level and make them aware that it is better for the communities and the organizations involved in the conflict and fratricidal killings to accept the past, however painful it be and learn to forgive and forget. There should be reconciliation over the narratives of conflict and hatred. To remove misunderstandings, seminars, workshops, public meetings, sports, cultural activities etc. should be organized to provide opportunities for positive and constructive interactions among the people belonging to different ethnic communities of the area.