This chapter sets the background to the present study. It depicts the demographic profile of the state of Assam, located in the north-eastern region of India, and describes its ethnic, religious and cultural make-up. It provides a brief historical narrative of Assam, and introduces the socio-economic setting of the villages selected for the study. Apart from this, it also discusses the three-tier structure of governance in India with special reference to Assam.

The present political Assam consists of three distinct geographical parts divided into twenty seven (27) districts. Twenty two of them are in the Brahmaputra Valley, 2 in the hilly south-central region, and the rest 3 in the Barak valley. Present Assam is only a shadow of the colonial province of Assam, which included the neighbouring states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. These states were gradually made into separate political units starting with the creation of the Nagaland state in 1963. According to 2011 census, the total population of Assam is 31,205,576. The sex ratio is 958 females per 1000 male. Literacy rate is 72.19 percent while the density of population per square kilometer is 398. Assamese is the state language of Assam. Other important languages spoken in the state include Bengali, Bodo, Karbi, Mising, Sadri, Nepali, Hindi, etc. Of the total population of Assam state, around 85.90 percent live in the villages1.

**Pre Colonial Period**

The social and political landscape of Assam, known as Kamrupa in ancient times, was dominated by the various groups of the Mongoloid stock since ancient times up to the advent of British colonialism in the early 19th century. Some of these groups gradually experienced a relatively higher level of social development and a process of state formation

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1 Census report, Government of India, 2011
in early first millennium itself. Migration of Aryan settlers with superior agricultural technology and revenue administration also facilitated this process of state formation and social development in the region. The Burman dynasty, who reigned over parts of the north Bengal and the central and the lower Assam (known as Kamrupa then) from the 5th to the 8th century A.D. are perceived to be Hinduised Mongoloid tribals. Other Mongoloid royal dynasties following the Burmans also embraced Hinduism. Following the royal dynasties, many autochthons also came under the fold of Hinduism.

The Ahoms came to Assam through upper Burma in 1228 AD, established their rule in the eastern Assam and subsequently went on to dominate the Brahmaputra valley for almost six centuries. Though initially the natives resisted the Ahoms, finally they succeeded in establishing its authority and supremacy. Their contact with the natives strengthened to the extent that they even entered into marital relations with them, embracing local customs, practices and language. Gradually the process of adopting Hinduism or Hinduisation gained momentum from the sixteenth century, especially with the expansion of the Ahom kingdom from toward more Hinduised central and western Assam.

The Ahom state was based on very systematic political and economic organizations. The political system was elaborately organised from the king at the helm, the ministers, the governors posted at various parts of the kingdom, civil and military officials, to the ordinary soldiers and producers known as paiks. The paiks were then organized under a production system based on compulsory corvee labour service which brought every male individual of the state between the age group of 15 and 50 under its control. Each individual was called a paik and a cluster of four paiks was called a got. The members of a got worked in rotation, each rendering state services for three months a year. Their works included land reclamation from forests and marshes, leveling of highlands for cultivation, construction of dams to resist flood, construction of roads, temples, buildings etc. In case of need, paiks were required to play their role as soldiers too. Thus, the paiks were always at the service of the State. In brief, “(I)t was a state-organised system of compulsory labour exploitation” (Sharma 1996, 34). It was this system of labour exploitation which in course of time gave rise to intense conflict and civil war in the Ahom state since the late 18th
century paving the way for the incursions by the Burmese and eventually the annexation of Assam by the British.

The Colonial Period

Colonization of Assam took place much later in comparison to the rest of India. Assam came under the rule of the British by the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. Gradually, they captured or brought under their control other areas neighbouring Assam like Khasi Hills, the Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills, the Naga Hills, the Lushai Hills, and areas inhabited by tribes like the Daflas, the Abors, the Akas, the Mishmis, etc in the present Arunachal Pradesh. With colonization, there came several changes. The system of administration in Assam was completely altered. Monarchy was replaced by the modern English system of bureaucracy and a new monetized land revenue system was put into practice. New land holding systems, land revenue, imposition of taxes on agricultural produce, trade rules, etc. are some of the significant changes brought about by the British.

One of the most significant fallout that left far-reaching impact on the society, polity and economy of Assam was in the domain of demography of the state arising out of the colonial policies of encouraging migration into the state. Assam has been a habitat for migrants since ancient times. But the wave of immigration gathered serious momentum since the time of colonial rule. It further accelerated during the post-colonial period. Prior to the colonial regime, Assam was scarcely populated; it was full of uninhabited land. This picture however drastically altered when the colonial rulers encouraged migrants to cater to their needs and work for their interest. Colonial rulers found the land favourable for tea cultivation and this discovery marked the beginning of socio economic transformation of Assam. The possibility of large-scale tea production enthralled the minds of the British and lured them to invest on tea plantations. Forests began to be destroyed and tea gardens were set up. Thus, there emerged the need for labourers. To cater to that, the colonialists transported people from outside the state to work in the plantations, as they could not convince the local people to work in the tea gardens. This demand for labour in tea plantations was the first major reason to turn to immigrants (Barua 1999, 46).
Along with tea, the discovery of oil fields, coal etc. led to economic transformation of Assam. Oil fields, coalmines, construction of roads, buildings, and railways also attracted immigrant labourers. Apart from labourers, immigrants who were educated and had knowledge of English came in to occupy administrative jobs. Thus, thousands of people from outside stepped in to the region in search of jobs and livelihood. One of the oldest immigrant groups is the tea labour community comprising of members from Santhal, Mundas, Oraons, Kharias, Gonds and other tribal and non-tribal groups from Chotanagpur region of central and eastern India. Their movement into the region was not voluntary. Rather they were forcefully and repressively imported by the colonial rulers as indentured labour. But gradually they started settling in Assam after the contract period was over as they were left with hardly any means of returning to their land. Hailing from a poor socio economic background, their life in plantations was also not easy as they had to work almost like slaves in a strict, regimented system with little autonomy of their own. Even after having internal differentiation amongst them, they are usually recognised in Assam as belonging to one single community named as either ‘Adivasi community’, ‘Chah Janajati’. Further, even if they were in friendly terms with the larger Assamese population and shared a common identity, in the recent decades they too like many others have been claiming a separate identity. They are also aspiring for the scheduled tribe status to avail various government facilities and schemes.

The Hindu Bengalis from the East Bengal were one of the early immigrant groups encouraged by the colonial regime to come to the region. They came here to work as clerks, supervisors etc. in government offices, courts, and later in the tea plantations. Another predominant section of the Assam’s population today comprises of the Marwaris, a commercial trading community from Rajasthan. Even before the advent of British, the Marwaris had their business enterprises in Western Assam and being blessed with no competitors, trade and commerce in the state gradually became their monopoly (Sharma 2012).

The Nepalis from Nepal immigrated into the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and with the approval from the colonial administration settled in some of
the excluded areas of Assam. They were predominantly engaged in the milk business and buffalo herding. Monimala Devi claims that the real immigration of Nepalis into north-east India began in early 19th century to employ Gurkhas in army. She writes that Nepali migration continued in the post-colonial period as well. They came to Assam to settle down in the riverine tracts and subsequently on the outskirts of towns along the hill slopes to sell milk and milk-products in the urban areas. In this manner, Nepalis came to constitute a sizeable population in Assam (Devi 2007).

Further, immigration accelerated with the introduction of commercial agriculture and profit driven motive pursued by the colonial rulers. They encouraged immigrants from erstwhile East Bengal mostly from Muslim peasant community. Members from this community are regarded as expert in farming. The British administration settled the Muslim immigrants in the wastelands in order to earn more revenue. They were also encouraged to engage in commercial jute cultivation. Since the first decade of the 20th century, western and central Assam witnessed massive waves of immigration of these East Bengali peasants bringing about a dramatic transformation to the social, demographic and the political landscape of the state. However, immigration of different communities did not confine only to the colonial period. After independence, Assam witnessed migration of groups mainly from Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. They come from marginal socio-economic background and are engaged as construction workers, thella or rickshaw pullers, barbers, cobblers, and other petty jobs (Sharma 2012, 301). They too gradually settled in Assam and their numerical strength grew with time to the extent that they have become a powerful constituency of the state.

Post-Colonial Assam

It is already mentioned above that colonial Assam came to be divided into five states beginning with the creation of the Nagaland state in 1963. Subsequently, Meghalaya was given statehood in 1971; Mizoram was made a union territory in 1972, Arunachal Pradesh which was earlier known as North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) was made a union territory in 1972 and subsequently a separate state in 1987.
The disintegration of the colonial state may be attributed to several crucial factors. I would not like to go into a discussion of the individual factors since it is not germane to this discussion. However, issues of insurgency against the Indian state among the Nagas and the Mizos, the language policy of the government of Assam in making Assamese the official language in the multi-ethnic state; political and economic aspirations of the emerging middle class among the tribal groups, etc. played an important role in the division of Assam. Further, the means, methods and policies adopted by the central government to address the challenges in the region also played a major role in the disintegration of Assam.

The provision of tribal autonomous districts, although evidently a progressive policy, under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution also fanned tribal aspirations. That this process of division of Assam did not stop with the carving out the four states of Assam is a testimony to that. More and more tribal (and even non-tribal) groups in the state are raising demand for autonomy and separate state creating a serious challenge to the governance and social landscape of the state.

The above discussion gives us an idea of the multiethnic society in Assam. This multi-ethnic character greatly influences the political and economic process of the state. Without an understanding of this, it is not possible to grapple with the functioning of the local governance in Assam and how it is influenced by the ethnic or communitarian sentiments.

**Panchayati Raj Institutions and Local Self Government in Assam**

To understand the dynamics of present local governance, it is important to understand how PRIs evolved in India and then took shape in Assam. This section deals with the historical evolution of the PRIs in India and Assam.

India has a three-tier local governance system known as Panchayati Raj system. The institutions under the latter are known as the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). The history of the PRI system dates back to the pre-independence India. Especially, Mahatma Gandhi propagated the idea of Swaraj. He emphasized that every village in India has to become a self-sufficient republic.
After independence, however, the political leadership in India hailing mostly from urban or privileged and feudal background from rural areas was not interested in implementing Gandhi’s dream of village Swaraj. Therefore, most of the policies designed for the decentralisation or devolution of governance could not work. In the central government, industrial capitalists held important positions while in state or federal politics landowners had a strong hold. The nexus between the new urban political leader and landlords in the rural areas shifted the focus from community development to agrarian promotion. In 1950s, most promising community development programmes were failed because it was hijacked by the corrupt landowning class (Varshney 2006, Sarmah 2006).

The concept of village council or Gaon Sabha is not new in India; it existed in the traditional village society as well. The PRIs have got the constitutional status after the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments. The idea of participatory development and democracy is the main essence of the local self-governance. As an institution of self-government, panchayat basically puts emphasis on maximization of local autonomy and minimization of control by higher authorities thereby providing the scope of greater involvement of the common people in the governance of their own areas.

It is believed that the vast possibility of the grass root democracy can be realised by the means of the panchayati raj institutions. But such a possibility has been questioned by the critics saying that the institution of caste and other factors will come in the way of the modern political institutions. As Mathew (1994) writes, “the long history of panchayat as an institution of local self-government in India is associated with many controversies regarding its working and efficiency”. In this context, it will be interesting to look at the impact of such traditional institutions on the modern political institutions and vice versa. Lele has given a comprehensive account of how bestowing decision-making powers to the Gram Sabhas manifests itself in the form of conflict with the traditional power structure of the caste, class and patriarchy. This crisis of legitimacy ultimately results in the non-functioning of panchayat, if they do function, they are poorly attended. Another demerit is that Gram Sabha are not bestowed with the decision making power. He posited that with
social hierarchy and the inequalities that exist in the civil society, it is not possible to pass the decision making power to the marginalized communities (Lele 2001, 4702-4704).

Although the 73rd amendment to the constitution was expected to bring a new era in the history of decentralized government there is a need to critically look into its working and evaluate the functioning of the PRIs. The duality of centralization and decentralisation with a trend towards decentralisation is the basic ethos of the Indian governance in the present time. It necessitates the need to look into the question of power that the people actually enjoy at the local level through such institutions and their perceptions about it. The complex social structure of the Indian society has a vast impact on the working of panchayats in many ways ranging from the selection of the beneficiaries to the voting patterns in the elections to these institutions.

In resonance with the 73rd amendment to the constitution, the Assam assembly passed the ‘Assam Panchayat Bill’ on 9 April 1994. Though PRIs are given more power under this new act, its operation still suffers from deficiencies in the lay men’s perception. There have been contradictory observations and perceptions about the changes and the nature of the governance system. People perceive PRIs as institutions run by their own people, yet at the same time, it deprives its own people from the fruits of development. Participatory approach to grass root democracy has to be seen on the basis of the working of the Panchayats along with its sociological implications especially with respect to the dynamics of political participation among the marginalized groups.

Development of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India

In the following sections I argue that there is a correlation between the constitutional reforms done in the year 1993 delegating power to the local level body through 73rd amendments and neoliberal agenda of the state. The traditional system of village government in India provides the basis for the PRIs in India although the local self-government of India today owes very little to local self-government that existed in ancient and medieval India. The change in the local self-government institution over the period with the demand of the socio political situation ended such a possibility (Rao 1980).
Besides working as important force in the economic life of the village, traditional village panchayats performed many important functions being the centre of village administration and community life. The community spirit of the medieval ages helped to manage local affairs independently along with keeping the village community functionally united. The existence of the village sabhas and samitis (assemblies or councils) in ancient system of village are mentioned in the Vedas. The panchayat in the ancient times was an assembly of five persons to look after the affairs of the village with the police and the judicial powers (Aslam 2007, 9). They were elevated to the sacred position of authority by the custom and religion (ibid). The traditional village panchayat was, therefore, performing a number of functions so that they became the pivot of administration and the centre of community life besides working as an important economic force. But several changes were brought about in the structure and composition of the panchayat raj system in order to cope with the demands of the time and with the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional amendment in 1992, Panchayati raj institutions became functional institutions of local self government throughout India. The discussion on the structure and composition of the panchayati raj institutions gives us a clue to the nature of governance at the village level that has been going on at the village level through such institutions.

Mahatma Gandhi (1962) had visualised the idea of Gram Swaraj (village self-governance). He found that the mass poverty and destitution in India can be fought through the idea of gram swaraj. He argued for giving credence to the self-government. The political freedom of a village will lead to the economic and social freedom. His idea of gram swaraj is that it should be a complete republic.

Various committees were setup to evaluate and improve the working of the PRIs. For detail discussions please refer to the - annexure I.

**Community Development Blocks**

The introduction of the community development blocks on 2 October 1952 marked a very important step in the direction of the process of decentralization during the post-independence period. This date was deliberately chosen to make the programme coincide
with the birth anniversary of Gandhi. In the initial stage, this programme encompassed 55 backward areas of the country each having almost 300 villages (Saikia 2005). In 1953, the Central government reduced the area of the community development block to a population of 66,000. In order to implement community development programme (CDP), a new structure was created below the state level called community development blocks.

The CDP was intended to ensure the direct participation of the people in the rural development programmes. To ensure such participation, advisory bodies with citizen membership were set up at various levels. The block level advisory committee consists of representative of village committee (wherever these in existence), the member of the state legislature and parliament, representatives of the co-operative societies, progressive farmers etc. Although this programme could generate enthusiasm at the initial stage, but within few years, instead of being a people movement, it became a government programme and thus CDP lost its initial momentum and the participation and involvement of people gradually declined.

In spite of many drawbacks of the CDP, it was the first comprehensive programme aimed at rural development in the post-independence India. The success of the programmes lies in the establishment of a well-organised administrative set up at the national, state, district and block level that would ensure peoples participation in the development programme with a greater aim of making them self-reliant.

**Panchayati Raj Institutions in Assam: A Historical Background**

Local self-government institutions in Assam are not new. But these institutions are not the institution of the local self-government in the modern sense of the term because they were functioning without elective and territorial character. The evidence of such institution in Assam is seen in the Report of Moffat Mills on Assam (1854) which suggested the reconstitution of the village councils and the appointment of influential class of men as ‘gaonburas’ (village headman) for the management of the local affairs (quoted in Rao 1980, 6).
There were some local organisations like ‘Mels’ and ‘Khels’ that were working before the advent of British into Assam and which provided the base for local self-governing institutions in rural areas. ‘Sarumel’, ‘Majumel’, ‘Dekamel’ and ‘Gabharumel’ were acting as powerful local government institution during the Ahom rules (Gait 2005). These Mels were of three types: Mels comprising of the village elders for the settlement of the minor disputes, Mels consisting of the king’s officers (Barmel) to whom the king made consultants on necessity. Mels created by the king for his relatives which had two types—male and female Mels.

The Khel system became more active and strong after the establishment of the Namghars and the Satras by the great neo-vaishnavite social reformers of medieval Assam, Sankardev and Madhavdev. Namghar and Satras worked not only as the organisation working for the propagation of the neo-vaishnavaite religion but they also worked for unifying the people of an area on a community basis. Thus, they ensured the formation of groups that can undertake various community works apart from some other local judicial works like giving judgment on some local conflicts. There was a distinctive organization of such Khels consisting of ‘Medhi’, ‘Barek’, ‘Hatula’, ‘Pasoni’ and ‘Melki’ etc. If some people were found guilty on the judgment of such Mels, then they were given punishments. Thus, it can regard as one of the primitive institution of Assam possessing the character of panchayat (Saikia 2005).

But it needs to be clarified that Namghar and Satras were totally different from the present day PRIs because community set up of these organisations are different from the democratic elected composition of the panchayat. The working of the Namghar can be equated to that of a Gram Sabha, which is comprised of all adult members of the village and worked as decision-making bodies for the village panchayat. But the presence of the Gram Sabha in Assam in the true sense of the term is questioned. This will be discussed in a later section. History of decentralization of power in Assam during the British rule can be traced back to the practice of the panchayati raj that was introduced in Assam in 1870 through the Bengal Chowkidari Panchayati Raj Act (Konwar 2006).
The colonial Government of India took up reforms from time to time to empower the local bodies. The resolution of 1881 and Ripon’s reform in 1882 had an impact on the local governance system. A resolution was also passed by the Government of Assam on 17 November 1882 to delimit the administrative areas of the local boards to subdivisions. Assam Local self-Government Act of 1915 was formulated to give legal basis to the local boards based on the guidance of the Royal Decentralisation Commission. Local Self Government Act, 1926 was passed to give more decision making power to people. In the post independent era Assam Rural Panchayat Act, 1948 was passed for the realisation of village panchayat. More detailed discussion is provided in Annexure II.

**Field Description**

The Tezpur Lok Sabha constituency is located on the north bank of the Brahmaputra River. Tezpur town is the headquarters of the district known as Sonitpur and is considered to be the cultural capital of Assam. It has also a large military base. Its total population according to 2011 census is about 1,924,110. Out of which males are 983,904 and females are 940,206 respectively. Density of population in Sonitpur district is 370 people per square kilometer. Out of the total population in Sonitpur district 9.04 percent lives in urban regions whereas 90.96 percent of population lives in rural areas of the district. Basically, it is a district where 90 percent of the population lives in rural areas.

The demographic structure of the Napam panchayat where the field work or the present study was conducted is heterogeneous with communities like the ex-tea garden community, the tea garden tribes known as *Adivasis* in Assam, the Bengali-speaking (Mymensingha) Hindus and Muslims, Nepalis, Boros, Kacharis, Biharis and Assamese caste Hindus. Most of the people are involved in agricultural activities, while poor sections depend on wage labour in construction sites besides agricultural activities. While the villages under study were located in Napam panchayat, one village is also called Napam, which is located adjacent to Tezpur University; one is village Amolapam, which is located in the other side of the University. Bhitor Parowa and Noorbari tea estates are located near the Tezpur Town.
Napam

It is a village where a number of ethnic and religious groups are living including Nepali, tea tribes, Assamese, Bengali, Bihari, Bengali Muslim and others. The Nepalis are counted under Hinduism whereas some of the tea tribes are Christians. The village has a Namghar and a Church. They also have a lord Shiva temple in the locality. Most of the people residing in the village are agriculturalists. Cultivation is their main occupation. The main crops that they cultivate include rice, jute, sesame, mustard and vegetables like cabbage, cauliflower, okra, potato, etc. Apart from agriculture some of the people are engaged in carpentry. Some villagers, both men and women, are engaged in Tezpur University either as salesperson, security guards or for some menial jobs. There are also people residing in the village whose lands were washed away by the river Jiaboroli flowing nearby.

In Napam there are three Anganawari centres (pre-school), three primary schools- i. Napam M.V. School, Madhavdev Sishu Niketan, Azad Memorial School. Madhavdev and Azad memorial schools are private schools.

Amolapam

Out of the 14 villages in Napam panchayat, educated people are found in more numbers in this village. This village is also adjacent to the Tezpur University. People in this village are engaged in agriculture, in petty casual employment in Tezpur town and inside the university. Nepalis from this village are engaged in milk trading. People of this village are relatively better off as compared to other villages.

Bhitar Parowa

Bhitar Parowa village is mainly inhabited by people who migrated from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Most of them are involved in agricultural activity, petty trade, and transport business. Few of them are also involved in the semi-skilled jobs like motor mechanic and so on. Most of the farmers in this area are involved in sugarcane farming. Since sugarcane is a cash crop the farmers have a steady income instead of unpredictable paddy agricultural income. Some people have acquired machine to extract sugarcane juice and they also prepare jaggery.
Noorbari Tea Estate

Most of the people in the village are daily wage earners. The women folk of this village are tea leaf pluckers. Some are permanent and some are temporary workers. The permanent workers get an amount of Rs. 500 per week and the temporary ones get Rs. 400 per week. Most of the people are from the tea garden community who are known as tea tribe in Assam. People dwell in kutcha houses, made up of thatch roof and bamboo and hay walls. The type of family found is nuclear family. People living in this area lead a difficult life. They also suffer from social and geographical exclusion as there is less communication with others. The issue of tea garden community and their everyday life is discussed in a following section.

Map of Napaam area where the fieldwork has been conducted (Source: Google Maps)
The above-mentioned villages are mostly dependent on mono crops. Very few cultivators go for double crops. River Jia Bhoroli flows nearby these villages. There is no forest located around these villages. Therefore, the question of collecting forest product is out of question. From the month of March until August, these areas receive heavy amount of rain. That is why, most of the time villagers face the problem of flood.

Governance process leads to people’s interaction with various state level institutions. Hence in order to understand this process multiple approaches were employed during fieldwork. This survey was conducted in the Napam panchayat of Sonitpur District in Assam. Sample size was drawn from the voter list. Random samplings were drawn in proportion to the population size of a group in the voter list.

This area is known as a backward region in terms of governance indicators such as health, education, amenities, hygiene etc. Napam panchayat has a population of 18989 under it. The people from the panchayat claim that this is one of the biggest panchayats in Assam in terms of population size. The objective of this survey was to understand the various nuances of the governance and people’s perception about them. The main objectives were to know the status, affordability and accessibility to the services like education, health and various social welfare schemes.

For the convenience of analysis of data, age group was divided into four categories. First one is clubbed between 21 years of age to 30 years of age. Second category covers the age from 31 to 45. Third one is between 46 to 60 and the last category formed by clubbing all persons having more than 60 years of age.

This clustering of age will give us better understanding of the nature of the composition of the households. From the analysis, it is evident that maximum numbers of people who head their households belong to the age group of 31 to 45 years. This is an indication that most of these households belong to nuclear families coming out of the joint household system. In this kind of situation, the competition for survival become more acute as each nuclear family has to depend on its own earning unlike in a joint family.
People do various kinds of job to sustain themselves and their families. Sometimes it is difficult for them to get a job or earn due to lack of enough working opportunities. One advantageous position for people in this area is the presence of Tezpur University. Here many people are engaged in construction work as wage labour. Women folk work as domestic help in many of the households. Some of the men folk work as gardeners in residential quarters and hostel; some of them are also engaged in hostel as cooks. Apart from getting opportunity to work in the university area, they often go to Tezpur town to work as daily wage labour. Few of them also work in stationery or grocery shops as helpers. A majority of landless men and women works in the agricultural land.

However, local landowners often complain that they are not able to generate any earning from agriculture. They do not get people to work in their land. They attribute this to two main factors. One is Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) which gives temporary employment to many people. The landowners claim that since it is a government project, there is much laxity. With less amount of work they can earn a full day’s wage. Hence people do not want to come and work in the agricultural field where they have to produce certain amount of work in presence of the landowner. It is also seen that in the study area, many people even if they have substantial amount of land, they do not prefer to cultivate it. They have started leasing it out to other professional farmers who cultivate cash crops or vegetables with high amount investment and use of chemicals.

Another factor they attribute to the lack of labour force to work in the agricultural field is the presence of a brick kiln. A lot of manual labour is needed to work in the kiln. Mostly the owners of this industry pay good amount of money in advance to the labourer. So they prefer to work in this sector though it demands lot of hard work. Labour force cannot leave work half way as they have to enter into an agreement before starting this work. The brick kiln industry is an exploitative system which contractually employs whole family to work in kiln including children. In Napam panchayat area recently many new brick kilns have come up. The other categories of service in the area include teaching and other employment in government and non-government sectors.
There are people who are engaged in small business, owning petty shops in front of the university area. Main business centre in this locality are Napam centre and Panchmyle centre. A market area in this locality is called as the centre. Market area here needs a special mention. In Tezpur town, most of the shops close by 7.30 pm but these centres are mostly open until 11 pm. This shows the embeddedness in the market area wherein Tezpur town market is symbol of anonymity. In these two market centres people discuss various things starting from religion to governance, politics, and economic activities. The cultural symbol of this region is *tamul* i.e. betel nut. People are seen taking *tamul*, drinking tea and having various locally produced snacks. Unlike the market in Tezpur town, women are visible in this area until late evening.

Though Tezpur University is located in the Napam panchayat, it has not contributed much towards the growth in the educational status of people in this region. There are various factors responsible for this. Out of the surveyed households maximum proportion belong to primary level education and then people with no education. Very few come under the category of graduate and above. People with higher secondary level of education formed just 18% of the surveyed population. During the survey and interview, it was found that though people are interested in education they cannot afford it. The present generation has started sending the children to school because of the mid day meal (MDM) scheme of the government and free elementary education system. Most of them feel that though their children get free food in the schools, the quality of education is not good in government run schools. They feel that private schools are better than government schools though it is more expensive than the government schools. This issue is discussed in more detail in chapter 6.

Napam panchayat is inhibited mostly by people adhering to Hinduism and Islam. They are Bengali speaking Muslims and Hindus. The Nepalis, tea tribes, Assamese, Biharis and others follow Hinduism which has maximum followers in the Napam area. The population in India belongs to different categories on the basis of their socio-economic status making them eligible to different kinds of social, economic and political benefits under the affirmative action of the Government of India. These categories are Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC) and Other Backward Classes (OBC). Those who are considered
socially advanced are known as ‘General’ category, who are not eligible to avail any benefit under the affirmative action policy of the government.

The study was interested to examine how these categories of people in the Napam area have accessed welfare schemes in relations to each other. 54 percent of the sampled population informed that they belong to general category. 33 percent are OBCs whereas SCs and STs are 12 percent each. But most of the people put their category under general as they do not know their category exactly. Another reason for this is that they have never used the social category for acquiring any kind of services or schemes.

**Table 3.1- Income category wise distribution (based on monthly income per-capita)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income category</th>
<th>No of HH</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to 900, Poor</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>46.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>901 to 1300, Vulnerable</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1301 to 2000, Non-Poor</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 2001, Affluent</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>188</td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Average household size of the sample households is 5.49 and average monthly income is 7769.73.

#Monthly per capita income categories are obtained roughly corresponding to the monthly per capita consumption expenditure categories defined by NSSO 66th round of survey for rural Assam with an estimated average Engel’s ratio of 70 percent.

The division of income group for the purpose of analysis is divided into four income categories. Those who earn an income of up to 900 rupees per month are categorised as poor. Those who earn between 901 to 1300 rupees per month are categorised as vulnerable. This category is not clubbed under poor although they are separated from poor by a thin margin. Any time due to vagaries of earning they can slip down to the poor category. They can also shift to an upward category by earning more. Those who earn between 1301 to 2000 rupees per month are categorised as non-poor and those who earn more than 2001 rupees per month are categorised as affluent.
To have a better understanding of the local level governance, it is important to discuss how
the government has initiated various pro-poor welfare schemes in the area and how various
government departments coordinate with each other in implementing these measures. In the
following section, I will discuss the functioning of the local government.

**Politics of Local Governance in Assam**

The Assam government passed the Assam Panchayat Act 1994 as per as 73\textsuperscript{rd} Amendment
Act of the Constitution. Accordingly, the system was implemented all over Assam in the
rural areas except the autonomous districts which were governed under the Sixth Schedule
of Indian constitution.

From the discussion in the preceding section, it is shown how the panchayat systems
developed in India and Assam. The following section discusses the complexity and
interrelation of functioning of the PRIs in Assam and role of various structures which were
created and their implications in the local governance. It also discusses whether the PRIs
served the purpose for which they were created or they create unwanted and undesirable
conditions for the rural population in the grassroots level.

**Provisions under Assam Panchayat Act 1994**

Assam enacted the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 on the basis of the guidelines given by the
73\textsuperscript{rd} constitution amendment act, 1992 (Part IX of the Constitution). The State government
of Assam constituted panchayats at the district, block and village levels and entrusted them
with duties and responsibilities with a view to enabling them to function as institutions of
self-government (The Assam Gazette, 2007). The Act gave legal power and responsibilities
that would enable the state to transfer funds, functions and functionaries to the PRIs of
Assam. It identified 29 subjects\textsuperscript{2} for such transfer in Assam to achieve maximum possible
decentralization of the governing situations. The list covers almost all basic and
developmental dimensions. In this regard, activity mapping was done in respect of 29

\textsuperscript{2} List of 29 subjects are provided in annexure III
departments and government notification was issued to this effect on 26 July 2002 (Government of Assam 2007).

In the next stage, the District Planning Committees (DPC) had been constituted in all 20 non-Sixth Schedule districts. It was believed that the DPC will play very important role in the decentralised planning for the each district but it proved to be a failure. In accordance with the procedures prescribed under Section 3 of the Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 by October 1, 2006 the state government of Assam undertakes to put in place DPCs. In view of the planning commission’s circular of 28 July 2006 advising that the eleventh five year plan and all annual plans in the eleventh plan period commencing April 2007 was be based on district development plans prepared in conformity with the provisions of article 243 Z(D) of the Constitution. It was also noted that the Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF) releases are contingent upon the submission of district plans for the districts concerned. There was further plan with respect to the subjects devolved to the panchayats for taking steps to merge all parallel bodies including District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs) with Zila Parishads so that the panchayats acquire an appropriate instrumentality for planning (PNRD 2006).

If the issue of PRI is examined carefully, one can find the link between decentralisation of power and the agenda of neoliberalism. The agenda of good governance is put forward by the World Bank (WB) to facilitate privatisations and market driven growth in third world countries. Similarly the decentralised governance process and market economy go hand in hand. There is clear correlation which can be analysed. The local government bodies are suggested and directed to work with NGOs where the role of the state in delivering welfare provisions to the citizens are minimized. NGOs are expected to make new provisions for better service delivery in the grass root level. Criticizing this view of WB, a scholar writes “instead of greater accountability of the State, decentralisation in the neo- liberal perspective implies withdrawal of the state from its autonomous role in the social sector to create space for the market and NGOS, which are neither accountable to nor constituted by representative of the people” (Sarmah 2006, 3).
Gram Sabhas in Assam

It is well accepted that the Gram Sabha is the essence of the working of the panchayats in India. Although, various types of traditional Mels existed in Assam, they cannot be equated with the Gram Sabha. The Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 and the rules made under the Act have made it mandatory on the part of the gram panchayat for convening periodic meetings of the Gram Sabha on a quarterly basis which was later increased to six times in a year. It was essential for democratic working of the panchayats as the Gram Sabha, which is constituted of all the adult members of the village entrusted with all the decision making powers including the selection of the beneficiaries in the panchayats (PNRD 2005).

Gram Sabha is constituted of the electoral roll of the village and the main decision making body of the panchayats. Assam does not have Gram Sabhas in actual practice although there was clear indication of some community having their own decision making system. The government of Assam claims that it plans to take steps to constitute diverse sub-committees of the Gram Sabha dealing with subjects listed in the eleventh schedule of the Constitution including matters such as education, health, midday meals, women and child welfare, agriculture, animal husbandry and PWD works at the gram panchayat level. The Gram Sabhas were provided with the powers to make legislation and rules regarding the selection of the beneficiaries; approval of plans, programmes and schemes; authorization of utilization certificates and to conduct social audit to strengthen it (PNRD 2005). But in practice, nothing substantially is functioning in the ground level.

This study shows that there is no Gram Sabha constituted and more than 90% people in the study area are not aware about the power and function of the Gram Sabha.

The accounting and audit system of the panchayat which should work according to the guidelines, is hardly in existence. I have discussed in chapter 4 how the language of governance is not known to the villagers and they need a person or middlemen who generally work on their behalf. People expressed that even if they know they have right to get welfare provisions provided by government, generally they do not get it. For that, they need to have a connection; patron or need to pay money to get their works done. In this
case, it is very difficult for the people to get into the mechanism of social audit. After the RTI Act, social audit became a popular tool for accountability of the authority. Social audit has been successful in many part of India as the basic ethos of the community participation in the audit process makes it more practical at the panchayat level. But where this study has been conducted there was not a single social audit done on behalf of the community or public within the last five years. Even if the state government of Assam tried to strengthen social audit, it does not seem to work at the ground level.

**Gaon Sabha or Panchayat Sabha**

Assam Panchayat Act 1994 made the provision of Gaon Sabha. The Gaon Sabha has to be conducted in the ward, rather than in the gram panchayat. Each panchayat generally has 10 administrative wards, so technically Gaon Sabha should be conducted in each ward. Gaon Sabhas are responsible for the developmental planning of the village, selection of beneficiary for welfare schemes and even Gaon Sabhas are responsible for the community collective labour devoted to for a community development programme or common good.

During the Congress government rule in Assam, the government started a different version of Gaon Sabha. They called it *Rajor Podulit Rajor Sarkar* that means redressal of people’s grievances at people’s doorstep. It has to be conducted quarterly. It should be based on a specific theme. The Deputy Commissioner (DC) is responsible to conduct it in the respective districts. It is mostly dominated by bureaucrats and panchayat secretary (Sarmah 2006, 185-187). This system of organising meeting ruined the true spirit and essence of Gaon Sabha. It is perceived by the people at the GP level that its meeting has to be organised only when they get notification from DC. This practice defeats the ethos of Gaon Sabha.

In Assam, one department calls one meeting and it is agenda specific. They discuss a particular programme in that meeting which is called by the respective government department or agency. For example, if DRDA calls a meeting, then they might discuss the issue of SGSY scheme or related issues with it. They will not entertain other issues that a village confronts. It is convened by government and they give a date. But Gaon Sabha is
not agenda based or issue based. Gaon Sabha is meant for the participation of villagers irrespective of their social position. But this was not so in Assam. People, however, came to believe that the procedure which the Assam government follows to organise a Gaon Sabha in practice is not the ideal Gaon Sabha.

It is mentioned that Napam panchayat is having 10 wards. But the Gaon Sabha is organised in the panchayat office. I have attended a few Gaon Sabhas, which were organised in the panchayat itself. It looks like as if it is routine affair or rituals. The notice for Gaon Sabha will be sent to all the villages under Napam panchayat stating the date of the meeting and the issues to be discussed there. The president of GP will welcome the people. The Secretary will put forward the agenda of the meeting then people will be requested to speak in the meeting. It is called *Vishesh Gaon Sabha* (special Gaon Sabha).

In this meeting, which is conducted in the panchayat office, people do not speak much. Only the community leader, political intermediaries and occasionally school teachers speak in the decision making process. One of the important personalities in this area for the common people is Mr. Sheikh Sahabuddin who is a teacher by profession. His wife is a member of the ZP from the Napam panchayat. Many people regard him as a benevolent person who helps the needy while some of them opine him as a intermediary or broker, one who takes money or votes in return for rendering his services. His help is sought by people mostly to deal with the court cases or to get documents related to land. People perceive that he knows the language of governance because of which he is powerful and commands some form of respect from the local people. I will discuss this issue in the section on clientelism in the next chapter.

But it is interesting to observe that, though it is a Gaon Sabha and according to the Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 each revenue village or ward should conduct Gaon Sabha but the case in Napam panchayat is different. They do not organise Gaon Sabha in the village but in panchayat office itself. Question arises whether it should be called as Gaon Sabha or Panchayat Sabha. This study finds that it is practiced not only in Napam panchayat, it is a regular practice all over Assam. The practice of *Rajor Padulit Rajor Sarkar* was replaced by the meetings in panchayat. This kind of practice ruined the true essence of
decentralisation and participatory decision making process. It perpetuated the practice of elite leadership or hijacking of the decision making process by the few.

**District Planning Committee (DPC)**

Article 243 Z(D) of the part IXA of the Indian Constitution provided the scope for the establishment of the District Planning Committee (DPC) in every district to ensure bottom up planning for preparation of the plan for the district as a whole which is to be put forward to the State Planning Department. The composition of DPC including its chairperson was left at the discretion of the state legislature. Besides, there was provision for ensuring proportional representation of elected members from both panchayats and municipal bodies in the DPC as it is given the task of preparing the draft plan for the whole district. Thus, the formation of DPC was aimed for providing a decentralisation in the planning process.

When government decided to transfer 29 subjects to the panchayat, it realised the necessity to merge all parallel bodies including District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs) with ZPs by January 1, 2007. It was believed that panchayat will acquire an appropriate instrumentality for planning and development. ZP president and vice presidents are nominated from among members of ZP. One representative from each GP comes as a representative of Anchalik Panchayat. There by from 15 GP, 15 AP members are elected. Among the 15 AP members, one president is elected for the AP (PNRD 2005). DPC is a complex phenomenon where elected representatives meet bureaucratic executive. Most of the times, it creates confusion and becomes nonproductive.

A Chief Executive Officer is the bureaucratic head of ZP where he looks after the developmental activity in the district level whereas BDO is the developmental head and executive of the block level APs. In GPs, the secretary is the executive head who is a government appointee while the GP President is elected by people (more on this in Chapter 5). All these systems of hierarchy and bureaucratisation are replica of the state’s federal structure.

The Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) was implemented by government of India in the year 1980 throughout India. The objective of IRDP was to enable rural poor
families towards upward mobility by providing productive assets. Later IRDP scheme merged with another scheme called Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY). DRDA was created to look after the developmental programme in the district level, in Assam. A project director looks after DRDA. In his absence, DC may take over as the chairperson. The governing body of DRDA consists of MP, MLAs, GP, APS and ZP members. Officials from government departments, bank employees, farmers and civil society representatives are members of the governing body. The governing body in the DRDA prepares agenda and the implementation works to be done at the district level.

IRDP was planned and designed by the Government of India with its own objectives. But at the district level, DRDA along with ZP takes care of the developmental programmes. Development programmes like MGNREGA is looked after by the DC. Technically, CEO is constitutionally sanctioned and empowered post but in practice, this post has no power. DC should be concerned with revenue and law and order issues but looks after development programmes as well. In Assam, schemes such as MGNREGA, SGSY, IAY, etc are handled by DRDA while BRGF works in the Sixth Schedule areas.

The tenth Five Year Plan emphasised on the collaborative role of PRIs, civil society, voluntary sectors in the local level governance. It was visualised that NGOs and CSOs will be recognised partner in the developmental activity with PRIs. They will also participate in implementation of various social welfare programmes. National Advisory Council (NAC) and Planning Commission of India have designed guidelines for the incorporation of NGOs and CSOs. As per the centralised plan, all state government implemented different flagship programmes like MGNREGA, Bharat Nirman, SSA, NRHM, Water and Sanitation Mission (Swajaldhara) and Mid-Day Meal in the area of health, education, sanitation, etc.

National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) was constituted to serve the rural health sector. To fulfill this goal, the state health mission and district health missions were constituted. Chairman of ZPs looks after the working of the public health institutions and leads the programme. Then, at the village level, Village Health Committee (VHC) is formed and president of GP looks after the VHC, which is supposed to prepare the health plan. ASHA personnel are selected by GP.
Sarbasikshya Mission or Sarva Sikshya Abhiyan (SSA) was designed to enhance the enrollment at school especially in the primary level. In the village level, the president GP usually acts as the chair person of the Village Education Committee (VEC). Ward member of the village is also a member of the VEC. Headmaster of the school is the member secretary of the committee. Members from NGOs and local citizen are also part of this committee.

Swajaldhara is a scheme on clean water facility for providing clean drinking water to the villagers. The Chairperson of ZP is the chairperson of District Water and Sanitation Mission, CEO of the ZP is the Chairperson of District Water and Sanitation Committee. President of GP is the president of village Water and Sanitation Committee (VWSC). Again, apart from GP members, NGOs and CSOs representative are also part of this committee.

How the agenda of neoliberal policy facilitates the process of privatization can be seen from the analyses of a few programmes. VECs are constituted to look after the quality and status of school education in rural areas. When 29 subjects were transferred to PRIs, education was also one of the subjects. It is clear that PRIs will supervise and manage the local schools, which are run by government. Then question arises what is the role and need of VEC where constitutionally approved body like PRIs exist. The 11th Schedule of the Constitution brought about democratic decentralisation and according to it, primary education has to be managed by GP which is an elected body. VEC is constituted taking members from various sectors such as local citizen, GP members and NGO members. Justification for VEC is given that, it is decentralizing governance and making people participating in the process of governance.

If one carefully looks at the policy and procedure of SSA, NRHM, and such other programmes, all of them came into existence after 1991. In the name of transferring power to people various committees are formed like VHS, VEC etc. During 1991, government of India changed its economic policy and liberalized the economy with minimal control. This period saw a change in the nature of the state. The state started withdrawing from various
social welfare provisions and this period saw the cut in budget allocations to welfare measures.

The bodies like VHC, VEC, and VDC, were justified by the policy makers on the ground of better form of governance and improved delivery of public goods. However, in reality it does not happen. The neoliberal state is using these projects for its own end. In the name of good governance, projects are being implemented with partnership of NGOs and private bodies which can be seen as one of the techniques of gradual privatization of the welfare activities of the state.

Is there any constitutional provision under which the three elected members such as the MP, the MLA and PRIs members can come together? District planning Committee is the answer provided by government of India. According to article 243 ZD, the role of the DPC is to consolidate and converge the district level developmental planning. The motive behind this convergence of the schemes is to avoid repetition and duplicity of programmes and projects. Most importantly to create functional assets at the grass root level. But in practice does it happen? The area under study has more than 10 primary schools and 4 high schools. But in 90% of places, the toilets are not functioning. For example, a good toilet would require a RCC building, toilet base and water supply. School building will be built from SSA grant whereas the sanitary toilet base has to be supplied by sanitation campaign. This is looked after by DRDA. Water supplies to the toilets are taken care of by the Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) of the Assam government. Therefore, without convergence of all these three sectors there is no possibility of a good functional toilet. (Refer to photograph in the annexure IV)

Many studies have shown that the lack of toilet leads to a huge dropout of female students in the rural areas of India. In the schools under the Napam panchayat, hardly any functional toilet facility is created for the students. Even female teachers face problem in using a toilet. Male members of the schools can go to outside whereas it creates a difficult situation for the female teachers and students.
Another reason for non-convergence of departments or creation of functional assets is the constitution of DPC itself. DPC is constituted by elected members like MP, MLAs and PRI members. PRI members do not have a strong say in many matters in DPC because they are low in the hierarchy. But MP and MLAs are generally motivated by political interests. Therefore, there are difficulties in arriving at a consensus on implementations in the areas where the pork barrel politics come to play their own role. Secondly, they want to give the contract to their own people where consensus generally is not built. Hardly any convergence of consensus between MP, MLA and PRI members occurs in the ground level. Therefore, it is always very difficult to create functional assets in practice.

**People’s Perception of state and governance**

What is *sarkar* and who is the *sarkar*? Is the government important for them? When these questions were asked to people in the study area, interesting answers were given. According to some of them, *sarkar* means political parties, for some it represents the public, and others viewed that the *sarkar* is nothing but full of corruption who plays with the emotions of the poor people. Few of them interestingly opined that they do not need any government. Moreover, the panchayat is not able to provide the facilities properly though they promise to provide them. Most of them said that they do not need government because the government has done nothing for them. They only used to give false hope, they make fool of the innocent people. Thus, now they do not want to wait for any kind of governmental schemes or help.

They mentioned that government possesses both good and bad qualities. Though there is corruption in the governance, somehow the government manages to run the country. Some people also opined that government is an important organ of the country because it implements laws and maintains rules and regulation to form a civilized society. These poor people, however, feel that government gives importance to those people who are powerful and rich.
In the views of some people, *sarkar* is a governing body, which is formed through their votes in the elections. Government is seen as an instrument that is having power to control others and give security to the people. Some of the people opined that government is necessary to look after the country while some others viewed that they do not need government because they can survive without it. One elderly woman with an aggressive tone replied “*amiee sarkar*” (We are the government). They also said that government is an organ that can control the price instability.

Significant percentage of people feel and articulate that for them government is a different form of corruption. Government is busy in unnecessary things, which are not useful for citizens, but ignores many necessary and important things. Few of them said that government has the power to rule over the general masses. But the powerful and people having vested interests misuse the power for their own benefit. Many respondents accuse *dalals* for mis-governance of their society. Some people opined that the rules and laws are not so strong for which the tendency of corruption is increasing continuously.

One principal remark made by many respondents in the study area effectively was that of corruption. It is widely discussed and argued by urban middle class populace which is concerned about the issue of corruption. India recently witnessed the ‘India Against Corruption’ movement led by Anna Hazare. This anti-corruption movement has caught people’s imagination. Capitalizing on this campaign, Arvind Kejriwal with his supporters formed a party called *Aam Aadmi* Party, which formed the government in Delhi for forty nine days. Electronic media and print media equally carried the live coverage and news stories of the anti-corruption movement. These events had an all-India impact due to the continuous electronic media coverage. Even the rural masses who were hardly concerned about the big corruption at national level came to understand some of these issues. They were concerned about the immediate livelihood issues and challenges they face in everyday life. Under the influence of anti-corruption discourse many people even in rural areas started believing that corruption is the root cause of all sorts of evil in governance. Many of the respondents stated that they need a powerful and corruption free government to bring changes and development to the country. One of the respondents said that only during the
election several political parties come to different villages and request people to vote for their party. They give hope for their development by providing various facilities. But after the elections, they become invisible.

Mintu Chetry of Amolapam village, who is about 35 years of old, belongs to the Nepali community. He said that for him government is meaningless. He feels that to become successful in life, we must not depend on government. The political parties use the people for their own self-interest as most of the people in his locality and even in many rural parts of India are illiterate. He says though Indian National Congress party is not doing its duties sincerely, still many people supported it by casting their valuable votes. However, to bring in any change in government, people must be aware about the true worth of the political parties, their positive and negative intents.

Sarita Devi, a young lady from Napam, hails from the Nepali community, maintains that the government possesses both good and bad qualities. She says that the government provides full financial support to the people for development purpose. But in the process of monetary distribution, some groups with vested interest, generally known by the term ‘Syndicate’\(^3\), take away the resources made for the poor people causing them serious sufferings. She emphasised the need of good leaders who can take the country on the path of progress and development. She opines that Congress party represents the government. According to her, earlier sarkar was good and the present Congress Sarkar is bad. It is mainly responsible for corruption and price hike. Many people feel that sarkar should work for the poor people, as rich people can do things by their own.

Shewak Upadhya a middle-aged man, from Amolapam village who is a fruit seller, equates sarkar with the political parties. Though the Congress has been ruling since the last 15 years, they have not been able to fulfill the main target of development. So he feels that AGP sarkar will be a better sarkar than the Congress. He directly opined that the Congress

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\(^3\) In Assam, people generally refer to Syndicate as an organized group of individuals formed to do some illegal activities. It denotes to the racketeers who are responsible for hoarding, collecting illegal tax and price hike of essential commodities.
is a corrupt party that is why the country is not developing. He said that the officials, bureaucrats and the politicians are embroiled in severe corruption. It adversely affects the common people, especially the ones who live below the poverty line. He also mentioned that corruption is the main reason why the gap between the poor and the rich are increasing day by day.

People of Napam have a tendency to equate government with political parties, such as Congress, AGP, BJP etc. For them, the government is a ‘necessary evil’. Society takes care of their everyday need while government creates more trouble for them. Most women folk feel that government is not doing anything for their upliftment. According to them, the political parties constitute an important part of government. They are quite concerned about the present political situation. Mainly, they have pointed out that the government does not give any importance to the development of backward areas.

While defining sarkar, Phool Devi a middle aged woman from Bhitor Parowa said that public is the government. This is because they have the power to select and elect the ministers, so that they can work for citizens. But after getting the power the ministers think themselves to be the government and utilize the power wrongly. Another respondent said that government is the office where people with high status work and control everything. That is not for common people. Some of the respondents said that they did not understand all these (politics, government etc.) things, because they are illiterate. They also said that there is no need to know it further, because they spent half of their life without knowing all these. Another old lady from tea garden community identified ministers with government. Many respondents feel that government is something which is beyond their reach. That is why in villages people do not consider PRIs as sarkar or government. For them, sarkar is an entity which holds a high position and very powerful and it is out of the reach of the common people.

Subrota Mandal who is in her late thirties, from a Bengali Hindu community from Napam village said that government provides facilities to people. It is necessary for a country especially for one like India where poor people live in large numbers. Mohammad Abdul Salam from Amolapam, a middle aged Bengali Muslim opined that government is
everything. It is the most important thing in any country. He asks back, whether there is
country which runs without a government? Without government a country will become
instable. So, for him, government is important to control our society. He emphasised that
Congress is the government everywhere. They are in power both in Delhi and in Assam. In
his view, the political parties manage the governance of any country. Another person
interestingly opines that the BJP is the sarkar of India, because it handles problem better
than Congress.

From the views gathered from various respondents it appears that many understand that a
government or sarkar is formed by their votes. Government is formed by the support of
common people. According to them, government is an important part of the country
because they implement laws and regulations. But there are also some people who view
government as a necessary evil. It is mainly the poorer section of people who are deprived
of the welfare schemes said government is an unnecessary thing. One can survive without
government. Dependence on government, according to them, is like wasting one’s life
without any meaning and achievement. So, for these people government is not important.
There are also some people who said government is both good and bad.

**Governance and Bureaucracy**

Government officials generally show a typical attitude of indifference. Very few officials
are interested in the real implementation of policy, programmes and development of
effective governance system at the grassroots level. In last five years, government is trying
to implement the e-governance system. It is believed that e-governance system is an
efficient form of governance. Most of the government officials including the District
Information Officer feel that the e-governance system is helping in reducing the red tapism
and corruption in governance. He, for example, pointed out that issuing passport today is
much easier in comparison to the earlier days. Similarly, in court cases, judges get cases on
the basis of computerized shuffling system. In earlier days, there was a possibility that an
individual judge could choose his cases based on some personal interest. But now computer
programming will decide which judge will get which case.
Napam is part of the Balipara development block. BDO of the Balipara development block said that MGNREGA is a very good poverty alleviation programme, but it is not working properly. He said the workers generally do not work as per the wage they get. Without generalizing the situation, he said that many MGNREGA workers, man and woman, sit idle at the work site. If officials tell them to work, they would threaten that this money is for them, nobody can take away the money from them. They even threaten to go for a dharna (protest). He feels that people do only half the work but get the full wage. They do not do quality work. He narrates that too much of political intervention is also a problem in India. He was reading an Assamese newspaper, he found a news item where Michelle Obama, the USA First Lady urged students to go to China and study the kind of development it has initiated. Then he opined that in a country like India where many people are still illiterate, democracy will not work. He said, “Look at China, even if it is an authoritarian country, it is developing much faster and is going to be a super power very soon.” He also told that India is having some wonderful social welfare programmes, but the implementation and execution of these programme are miserable. There are various reasons for it. The interventions of politicians are the biggest hurdle to it, where all kinds of programmes, even with very good intentions, end up in disaster.

**Gender and Governance**

The role of gender in governance was witnessed in the house of the ZP member from Napam area. The husband Sheikh Sahabuddin, whose name we have mentioned above, is a teacher by profession and his wife is a member of the ZP from Napam. When we visited the house was filled with people, especially males, from different backgrounds who had come to discuss problems of the community or the village, welfare schemes and its benefits, personal issues, etc. It was expected that the woman who represents the people in ZP will give information and answers to queries. But to our surprise, it was her husband and his associates who interacted among themselves and the wife, the ZP member, was conspicuous by her absence in the interactions.

His wife did not even come to greet or see the people who gathered at her house. Thus, there was no scope of interacting with her. This situation seems to suggest two aspects i.e.
male dominance and woman’s power (power to women is granted at rarest case). Male dominance was evident as the husband along with other male associates took decisions like when to conduct discussions, meetings with the local people and higher authority, resolve issues and so on. This patriarchal dominance is also major feature of the society. The decisions taken by the husband without the consent of his wife who is the member of ZP curbs the effective participation of the wife. It also indicates that woman’s participation in decision-making is marginal at grassroots societies.

However, a kind of woman’s power was reflected in the scene because I had no direct interaction with the wife. Neither did the villagers and people assembled there. It is assumed that it may be only on rarest occasion that the lady interacted with people and the people have to have prior talks with her husband to request the lady to come to the public.

Besides, the house was transformed into an office temporarily where people exchanged views about new and old policies and development of their area. People belonging to different religions assembled in the house and formulated developmental plans which were later made public to the members of their block or the villagers. All the men folk were of participatory spirit and dealt with issues with sheer attention. There was no single woman present in the meeting. Social relation seemed to be cordial among them and their actions spoke about their dedication. Their collective action helped to solve a shared problem. There was veneration for each other’s opinion and interest and this helped to come at a collective consensus. They were aware of the prevailing scenario of their village and actively participated in discussion to provide benefits to their people. Their interaction helped to establish relation of understanding among them and apply the same in their meetings. Finally, the woman who was a member of the ZP sent tea through her aide to the people assembled in her house.

It is widely debated that though women have been granted reservations in the elected representative bodies in India, they are controlled by their male counterparts. Many people in the Napam area feel that it might empower the women in future. But presently most of the women who hold office are manipulated by the male members of their family. It is seen that women those who have been elected through women reservation quotas, hardly
participate actively in the activities of the PRIs. They are used as a symbol or rubber stamp by their husbands, brothers and fathers. Even some women respondents opined that though government has provision for us to enter into politics, it belongs to the domain of male. We are only good in earning livelihood, managing children and household activities.

When people were asked question on women’s reservation in legislative bodies, interesting answers were given. Some such responses are mentioned here. Prahlad Singh is a middle aged man from Bihari community in Bhitar Parowa area. He states that women should not take part in political activities. For him, it is an unnecessary activity for a woman to take part in political affairs as they are born to do household work and not to rule the country. They are more emotional and sentimental compared to men. So, he thinks women cannot do justice to politics.

A woman from tea tribe community named Susita Tapno from Noorbari tea estate articulates that the reservation policy in legislative bodies for the women help to improve their status as well as their conditions in the society. She supports women in participating in politics because she feels that women are more capable to understand the problems of women as compared to men. For example, a woman will be able to understand the emotion of a rape victim more intensely than that of a man. She states that women need reservation to assert their voice and also added that equality is the right of every citizen. So, people must support women in the domain of politics.

Mohammad Jalaluddin, an old man from Bengali Muslim community from Amolapam stated that reservation in legislative bodies would only help those women who belong to the elite groups of the society; therefore, by gaining political powers they would marginalize the poor and deprive the backward sections of women. He also mentioned that women are more sentimental than men. He also said that women are physically weak for participating in political activities. Even if there is the reservation policy, it is only going to serve the rich and powerful who will rule through their wives. The biggest problem today is that politics is getting alienated from the common people. It is controlled by the elites and rich. So, no reservation system can solve this problem. He thinks reservation in politics will not
be useful. He opined that women do not have the capacity to change the scenario of the present governance system.

Rubina Begum, a young woman from Muslim community in Noorbari area stated that women are playing a significant role in various spheres in our country. Reservation does not mean women are weak, neither it a charity. In fact, it is the first step, the government can logically take to make women come forward and unleash their creative power. Once women use their power, the society and the present generation will be empowered. So, we must support women reservation in the domain of politics.

A woman from Nepali community in her mid-thirties named Tilasori Devi of Napam says that women reservation has changed the views of people on the capability of women. It has changed the status of the women as well; this has helped them to think differently. It has motivated other women to raise their voice and participate in the political activities. In India, women have the equal right to vote and in this process they have to get equal opportunities to get elected. Nowadays, women are educated and they must get the chance to come forward and participate in all the social, economic and political spheres.

Some people supporting women said that women are more able to understand the problem of women than men. Some others viewed that women who belong to the elite groups are gaining upper hand, therefore, by gaining political power they deprive the backward and poor ones. But some women strongly opined that this is the beginning. Men have started realizing the power of women and very soon women will be accepted in politics. They will contribute better than the men as they understand and handle social problems in better ways.

Napam Panchayat Office

In the Napam panchayat office around 1:30 pm, there was nobody in the office except the chowkidar and there was a man outside the office making some noise and abusing the chowkidar. When he was asked about what happened, the man replied with anger that he
has been coming to the office for many days to get a ‘road pass’\(^4\). But he does not find anybody in office except the chowkidar, who does not have authority to issue this pass. The man, named Abdul Hasim was shouting, “kono nathake office ot... kiman dinor pora ahi aso mor eko kam howa nai,, heiya sauk, president or chaki... khali hoi ase..” (Nobody is present in the office... I have been coming here for so many days but none of my work has been done yet... look at that President’s empty chair).

When it was asked to the chowkidar that whether president will come to the office that day or not, he said no, because of his personal work he will not come that day. He said that it is the time of panchayat elections, and president is busy in several party meetings, therefore it is hard to meet him. Abdul Hasim, while shouting again, said that he was not a Bangladeshi, so actually he need not procure a trans road pass, but nobody listend to the poor man... we are not Bangladeshis but we are made Bangladeshis. Shouting, he came out of the office. Then, he came to me and said, “please, come to my house. I can provide many data relating to panchayat”. I followed him. He lives at Puniyani village near Baghchong village. He is a painter by profession.

He stated that, “Puniyani schoolor head master e mok koisil kone kone BPL card pabo tar list bonabo, kintu xeiya koribo golei manuhe muk bea pabo...” (The head master of Puniyani school asked me to make a list of people who need to get BPL card, but people will hate me if I do so). He implied that there was much corruption in selection of beneficiaries of the BPL card. He even said that officials take bribe to provide any official document.

He narrates that “ami sorkaror prapyo nohoy, sorkar amar prapyo...jiman sakorial manuh ase ei bharotot, sob congressi manuh. Sonia Gandhi, Indira Gandhi bhal manuh, xeiya amar ma-deuta hoteu koi amiu kou... Kintu ji eibur step by step (he means bureaucrats) manuh jene member, president, councilor, xeibilak beiman, dalal,... Ami congress ok support koru karon ma deuta e koi ‘haat\(^5\) nohole kamei nohoy.. kintu congress e aji amak

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\(^4\) To enter into the army cantonment area in Solamar region, one requires a permit.

\(^5\) Haat means hand which is the electoral symbol of the Indian National Congress Party.
eiya dise... congress e amak diya nai, beleg sorkar howa hole dile heten...ami Muslim holeu Bangladeshi nohoy...Muslim holei konob Bangladeshi hoi najai. Hoi iyat Bangladeshi ase. Puniyani gaon ot motamoti dui sha Bangladeshi ase... )

(“Government is our right; it is not the other way around... All the people engaged in government services are Congress party supporters... Our parents said that Sonia Gandhi and Indira Gandhi are good people and I also agree. But these ‘step by step’ people (bureaucrats) like member, president, councilor etc. are actually corrupt and become dalal... We supported Congress because our parents said that nothing can be done without a ‘Hand’. You look today, what Congress has given us. We would definitely be benefited if there were another party in rule... We are Muslims... we are not Bangladeshis, one does not become a Bangladeshi being a Muslim. Yes, there are Bangladeshis here. There are almost 200 Bangladeshis in Puniyani village. They do not have their name in the voter list of 1995 election, but they get control card\(^6\) in their name. Therefore, I think that only Congress betrayed us. All the Muslim (miya) people and government servants are Congress supporters; others do not support Congress...no other party can stand before such a huge support. But these corrupt dalals (presumably MLAs, bureaucrats and gundas) polluted the party.”)

Hasim continued that the fees of a lawyer is Rs. 120/-: But if you go to court today, they will demand rupees 500/- for the initiation of a case. If you go to police station, they will take rupees 50/- for registering a case. So many wine shops, opium business and gambling are in operaton in Puniyani village... these things are known to Panchmile police station, Goroimari police station, Tezpur main police station, even DC and MLA know this. MLAs and MPs take money from these police persons and wine shops. So how can they take action against all these criminals. We cannot provide money, but we provide more valuable thing than money, that is our vote. We give our vote to make them win. In the conversation, Hasim was frequently talking about ‘dalals’. He does not blame the Congress party or the

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\(^6\) Colloquially, the ration card, through which one is entitled to receive a certain amount of sugar, kerosene, rice, and wheat is called control card.
state as a whole, but merely these *dalals* or power hungry bureaucrats and officials, who exercise power over the masses.

**Panchayat and the Community Life of Village**

Post 73rd Amendment phase is vital for the village society in India. As an institution of local self-government, Panchayat got legal status with this amendment. But the amendment also had vast impact on the community life of the people apart from giving legal status to the panchayats. Caste system constitutes one of the most important components of Indian village society. The complex nature of the village society and the factions formed on the basis of the caste group is seen as an impediment to the implementation of the 73rd amendment. In Assam, even though the practice of caste system is not as rigid as it is found in northern and southern India, it still exists in a very subtle form. The Brahmins and other higher Hindu caste groups in Assam downplay caste as a dominant social category. But people belong to lower caste groups including dalits assert that caste still plays a greater role in high level politics, may it be in legislative arena or in bureaucracy sphere. It is interesting to note that although the caste or various other affiliations played an important role in the working of the panchayat, there are some effects of the panchayat also on the life of the people in the village. The impact of the community on the working of the panchayat ranges from the selection of the beneficiaries and effect on various decision making process. On the other hand, the impact of the institution of the panchayat on the community life is reflected in term of the group formation on the basis of different political parties.

From a sociological perspective, it is very interesting to look at the issue of community life and its changing patterns with the advent of the panchayats. In Assam, the institution of *Namghar* used to work as the mobilising force for the community in the village. It not only works as cultural institution, but it was also a place of village bonding, means of identity and the place for the decision making. The importance of the *Namghar* in Assam also lies in another context. Assam does not have Gram Sabhas in the modern sense of the term. It has been the *Namghar* which performed the function of the Gram Sabha in the Assamese Hindu villages of the Brahmaputra valley. It is because people used to gather in the
Namghar to discuss various matters of social importance including the village development activities. Besides, small conflicts are also resolved in the Namghar.

It is observed that the introduction of the panchayat with the 73rd Amendment became a point of conflict within the community life based on Namghar. There is a visible trend in the shift of the group identity of the village from the community based on Namghar to the faction based on the political parties. The clash in the village on the party line is becoming common nowadays. The situation has reached to such a stage that people have even started performing various religious activities with the people who are from the same political parties.

The mobilisation of the people in the village on the party line is organised specially at the time of elections. The election campaigns provide the occasion for the identification of the people and their political affiliation. Nowadays, it is becoming essential for the people to campaign for the party or to identify with a party to get various material benefits after the elections. Three elections in five years (parliamentary, assembly and panchayat) gave ample opportunity to mobilise the people on the basis of party affiliation. The conflicts that occur in the village are sometime based on the line of politics. I am trying to suggest that there is a clear shift in the nature of grouping in the villages after the advent of the panchayats. This phenomenon is not unique only to the Hindus, is also observed among the Muslim electorates. Those people who previously used to form groups according to religious affiliation have started showing their affinity in terms of political parties. People from Muslim community here in Sonitpur district mainly support Congress and recently the poor Muslim electorates have started supporting AIUDF led by Badruddin Ajmal. This issue is discussed at some length in the Chapter 5.

While electioneering provides a periodic occasion for mobilization of people, the association of villagers with panchayats is a regular phenomenon. People are complaining that the panchayat brought the menace of corruption to the village. Some people stated that those who are in power in the panchayat do not even feel ashamed to indulge in corruption. They do it to fulfill their narrow interests. The beneficiaries of the various schemes are selected mainly on the party lines as well as on the bases of community and kinship ties. In
the process, the actual needy persons are left out from getting the benefit of the welfare schemes. Panchayat members have to oblige the party leaders, workers as well as members from their community. Samuel (2010) argues that India’s system of Panchayati Raj Institutions offers great opportunities for inclusive grassroots democracy, but the federal political structure does not allow the transfer of power and autonomy to local self-governments through various ways. It is argued that there is decentralisation of the corruption rather than the decentralisation of power. The ultimate objectives of electioneering and the institutionalization of panchayats, as it is discussed above, are meant to ensure transparent good governance eventually. It is expected that such processes will lead to decentralization of power. On the contrary, however, what seems to have occurred at the ground level is that some corrupt and dishonest individuals with unholy alliance with broader level political leaders and administrative officials have disrupted and derailed these objectives.