Title of the Thesis: Sociology of Governance: A Study in Sonitpur District of Assam

Governance has become a much contentious issue in recent times. Although conventionally this issue mainly comes under the domain of the political scientists, the contemporary sociologists and the social anthropologists have also developed keen interest in studying the issue of governance from their disciplinary perspectives. The main thrust of this new interest lies in exploring the sociological dynamics of the process of governance.

The system of governance is hierarchically organized at different levels. The objective of this thesis is to understand the complex processes associated with governance in the context of the experiences at the local level. With this in view, the thesis attempts to comprehend the idea of the state, the government and the governance as perceived by the communities at the grassroots. For the purpose of this study, data was collected through both ethnographic study and survey across a number of communities based in rural areas in the Sonitpur district under the state of Assam which constitutes one of the most diverse demographic landscapes within the state. In order to grapple with the nuances of governance and politics in a multi-ethnic setting, the thesis examines the sociological dynamics involved with the processes of various elections, the most dominant and dramatic site of democratic participation and performance in India. Besides, the thesis also studies the day to day engagement of the rural communities with the agencies of the state and the way it informs their relationship.

It is well recognized that while all the rules and the policies of governance are framed by the state, their implementation at the local grassroots level is conditioned by a multiplicity of factors. This thesis examines how these factors condition the implementation of the state policies and programmes at the local level by using the idea of ‘embeddedness’ emphasizing the inter-linkages among the state, the society and the community.

Further, the thesis examines the contemporary discourse on ‘good governance’ by locating it in the agenda of neo-liberalism. It also explicates the changing nature of the...
state under the impact of the neo-liberal policies and the manifestation of this change in the implementation and withdrawal of various welfare measures of the state along with its implication on the everyday politics at the local level. The thesis also delves into the role of political parties, pressure and interest groups, and the middle men (*dalal*) in the implementation of various schemes at different levels.

The thesis finds that notwithstanding the overarching nature of the state and its programmes and policies, the system of governance is considerably mediated and conditioned by a host of local specificities. It argues that a system of governance has two facets, formal and informal, and that both are important in the day to day functioning of the state. While the formal governance is employed by the state as a legitimate means of reaching out to the people, the informal governance facilitates the people’s negotiation with the state for access to different limited resources. The thesis explicates this with the example of the class of middlemen who play a very critical role in the state-community transaction. It shows how the functioning of the state leaves space for the emergence of these informal agents. While the middlemen, on the one hand, bridges the gap between the state and the community thereby apparently adding to the legitimacy of the former, on the other, it also erodes the formal legal authority of the state by underscoring its indispensability for the community.

Finally, the thesis argues that the political and the ethnic affiliations of a community in a multi-ethnic society play a significant role with respect to its access to the state machinery as well as to its various welfare schemes. While this may be true even at a broader level, it argues that the ways in which such affiliations play out among the poor, marginal rural communities at the local level has its own distinctiveness. The manner in which the state negotiates and renegotiates with the multiple interests of these local communities and yet sustains its paramountcy makes the functioning of the state in a multi-ethnic context very interesting study.