1.1 Introduction

Planning becomes a part and parcel of public policy in almost every country in the world. Planning implies a careful husbanding of the resources and their optimum utilization in the best possible manner. Planning is the basic feature and instrument of economic development. The task of planners is to estimate the available resources in a country and to formulate a comprehensive programme for the most effective and planned utilization of a country's resources.

Broadly, there exist two types of planning, e.g., centralised planning and decentralised planning. Soviet Russia, which is the pioneer in economic planning, and
China can be called as best examples of centralised planned economics. There, the final responsibility for taking economic decision rests with the central authority. Means of production are controlled entirely by government. On the other hand, decentralised planning refers to the process of planning where some of the planning functions and responsibility of decision-making are delegated from the centre to the lower levels of administration. As a first step, planning process got decentralised to state level planning, state level to regional level, then from regional level to district level, district level to subdivisional level or block level and ultimately to village levels.

1.2 The Problem and the Issues

Decentralised planning may also be called as grass-root level planning or planning from below. There is immense scope of direct participation of the people, proper utilization of locally available resources with the skills of 'man in the spot', and of mobilization of local resources including human resources. Also, it is easier in such type of planning to give specific attention to the targetted group of people.

But decentralised planning cannot be applied to all spheres of economic activities. It cannot be applied to
national level or state level matters like defence, large scale industries, national highways, power, exploitation of mineral resources, higher education, basic infrastructural or economic and social overhead etc. Here, decision-making process cannot be left to local level planning machinery. It needs large amount of capital and large gestation period and sometimes even tackling of intra-state and inter-state problems.

In the context of the present phase of scientific progress, technological advancement and social change, the rural areas with three-fourth of the country's population are by and large having much lower level of income and consumption per head. Provision of infrastructural facilities which ensure income and employment growth are also by and large not adequate.

1.3 Scope and Objective of the Study

A significant departure was made in the Fourth Five Year Plan (from the earlier ones) in asking the state governments to frame their plan proposals in accordance with their own priorities and resources. This approach may be considered as a beginning of decentralised planning process in India. However, in Assam and perhaps in rest of India the process did not get rooted until very recently. We will concentrate our study by limiting it
mainly to one sub-division of Sibsagar District, namely, Sibsagar Sub-Division, where the sub-divisional planning began from 1986.

The objective of our study will be limited to the following:

a) What could be the lowest level of unit for decentralised planning process? This will be an examination of the hypothesis that the village, Panchayat or Block level are better units to formulate a local plan with reference to their resources and needs.

b) What are the sources of information and how priorities are fixed?

In the context of (a) and (b) it will be also examined whether there was any lacunae in earlier (pre-Fourth Five Year Plan) plans in adding up the village or blockwise demands to make a macro level national plan without any consideration of priorities or the constraints of resources, from the operational point of view.

c) Where the planning process, that is to say, decision-making about strategy, priorities and programmes did actually originate from 1986 onwards? In other words, whether it was at the sub-divisional level upward to the district and the state level or downward from the sub-divisional level to village level?

d) The rationale of planning mechanism, decision-
making authorities etc. for the projects undertaken by the sub-divisional planning unit of Sibsagar sub-division will be critically examined from the aforesaid points of view.

1.4 Methodology

The present study has been made adopting the following methodology:

i) Field visits to State Level Planning offices, District Level and Block Level Planning offices and also with non-officials connected with the planning process with the object of obtaining an overall picture of the planning by discussion on the basis of unstructured interviews. Similarly, some preliminary interviews (pilot study) has been conducted with the concerned people and beneficiaries.

ii) Study of the document prepared by the state planning administration concerned with the district and sub-divisional planning.

iii) Canvassing a set of structured questionnaires which were prepared on the basis of unstructured interviews as mentioned in No.(i), among the district and sub-divisional officials responsible for planning and or execution and monitoring etc.

iv) Preparing a set of structured questionnaire on
the basis of preliminary unstructured interviews as mentioned in No. (i) above and canvassing the same among the non-officials connected with the sub-divisional level planning including Mahkuma Parishad/Gao Panchayat, etc.

v) Besides, secondary sources of data wherever necessary were taken from published and unpublished documents of the government, public institutions concerned, planning departments, etc.

The collected data were analysed with the help of suitable statistical technique and results obtained were subjected to relevant economic tools.

1.5 Chapter Plan

Introducing the theme in Chapter I (sections 1 & 2) we give the scope and the objective of the study, and methodology in the next two sections. The last section of the chapter gives a brief review of literature on the subject.

Next two chapters (II & III) deals with decentralised planning. In Chapter II, we give a brief background of decentralised planning, its rationale (section 2), the multi-level concept (section 4) and the background of district level planning (section 5). Chapter III focusses in depth the various planning units,
their strong and weak points in decentralised planning. The sections have been arranged in a vertical order, taking village at the lowest unit and district as the highest. The chapter closes with an overall assessment of the decentralised planning in India from 1969 onwards.

We move on to Chapter IV which deals with the decentralised planning process in Assam. Broadly, the chapter has been divided into two parts: Part A - pre-1986 period - where we make an attempt to study critically the various local self-government institutions and Acts enacted in relation to formation of Local Boards and Panchayats, etc. In Part B of the same chapter we have tried to evaluate decentralised planning process in Assam.

In Chapter V, we take up very briefly a socio-economic profile of the Sibsagar district namely, its physical features (section 2), demographic characteristics (section 3), and farm and non-farm sectors (sections 4 & 5 respectively).

Next we focus our attention to the planning process at the sub-divisional level, mainly in Sibsagar sub-division in Chapter VI. This chapter has been divided into two broad parts: Part A - General - which deals with the important sections, namely, Agriculture (sections 2 & 3) and Industry (section 4). This part closes with an
evaluation of performance of sub-divisional planning (section 5). In Part B, we have attempted to look critically, with reference to our field investigation, some of the projects undertaken at the sub-divisional level.

Our concluding observation is given in Chapter VII.

5.6 A Brief Review of Literature

The term 'decentralised planning' is comparatively a new concept in Economics. Yugoslavia, which is one of the countries which has demonstrated the functioning of decentralised system of planning, is making ample use of the market mechanism. The trend in other countries of Eastern Europe like Hungary and Poland, the trend was towards decentralisation. Khrushnev's sweeping reforms in Russia were a step towards decentralisation of planning.

In India, the need for micro level planning was increasingly felt from the very first five year plans but it was only in 1969, the Planning Commission under the leadership of Professor D.R. Gadgil draw up a set of detailed guidelines for the formulation of district plan. Among the regional plans undertaken at the state level during the Third Five Year Plan period were those for the Rajasthan canal region in Rajasthan, the Rihand region in U.P., the Bhakra Nangal region in Punjab and Telengana
and Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh in recent years. Thus, regional planning from the grass-roots under the name of 'area development' was initiated. Gradually, stress has been laid on the preparation of district, block and village plan. The reforms in democratic decentralisation carried out in recent years, led to the setting up of Panchayati Raj institutions in some states. Yet, decentralised planning is yet to make much headway in this country and its methodology is still evolving. The experiment carried out (The Institution of Regional Planning) in Wardha district (Maharashtra) has major lessons to offer for future attempts at area planning and development. Besides this, the study of Moradabad district (Bihar) conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research, and the study of Muzaffarnagar district in U.P. conducted by the Department of Human Geography of Delhi University are worthwhile. During the Fourth Plan period, a programme for 20 district level studies aimed at identifying the emerging growth centres, followed by a plan for implementation has been undertaken by the Department of Community Development in collaboration with Ford Foundation. The project started well, but has tended to degenerate into a data gathering pilot project, with very weak conceptual foundation. A good example of an integrated district development plan is the one prepared by the Institute of Development Studies,
University of Mysore. Likewise, we may mention about the Quilon district plan of Kerala, Taluk plan in Gujarat, Mindapore district plan in West Bengal, Kundrakudi village plan in Tamil Nadu, perspective plan of Baster district in Madhya Pradesh, sub-divisional plan in Assam as recent development of decentralisation.

Thus the basic task of regional planning in India is as much concerned with development as with adjustment and reconciliation. The current trend shows that while there is some awareness of the importance of the regional approach and a limited awakening to the spatial dimension of development, no positive action has as yet been taken at the national level to make regional planning a part of Indian system of planning.

D.M. Najundappa in his article 'Block Level Planning for full Employment' (Block Level Planning, Adbul Aziz (ed.), Concept Publishing Co., New Delhi) visualises block planning as an instrument which promotes growth with social justice and benefits of growth to the neglected areas. His paper discusses the process, and presents the step by step task that the planner is expected to undertake in the block plan exercise. In the same book tracing the evolution of the idea of Block Level Planning in the Indian context as a logical culmination of decentralised planning process, G. Thimmaiah in 'Block
Level Planning: A Critique', critically evaluates the block level practice in Karnataka. The most significant point made in this paper is that in essence block plans have merely been rural employment plans rather than plans for development of the blocks in the manner the regional planners had conceived.

Rakesh Hooja (Administrative Intervention in Rural Development, Rawat Publication, Jaipur, 1987) has proposed some new dimension to the government functionaries in formulation and implementation of development projects in rural India.

Iqbal Narain, in his article 'Decentralisation, Development and Democracy' (in Community Development and Democratic Growth, N.R. Inamdar (ed.), Bombay Popular Prakashan, 1969) opines that block as a unit of decentralisation appears more conducive to the cause of democracy than to development in its economic sense. Because it brings to the seat of power and nucleus of participation nearer to the people, though it is not a viable unit in terms of planning and for reasons of non-availability of technical knowledge and expertise. The district serves the cause of planned development more than democracy because it is too remote from the grass-root people. He stated that perhaps a golden mean is to be struck between Rajasthan and Maharashtra model (district
and block) by strengthening the Zilla Parishad at the district level as unit of plan formulation and maintaining block as strong nuclei for programming and actual implementation.

R.P. Misra, K.V. Sundaram and V.L.S. Prakash Rao (Regional Development Planning in India, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1978) have given a landmark in regional planning studies in India. It puts the theory and experience of regional development in India into a common whole and gives a new concept of decentralised polarization of spatial planning suited to the socio-economic conditions of a densely populated developing county like India. The book tries to explain how multi-level regional planning can be more effective tool for achieving the triple goals of Indian planning - economic growth, social justice and environmental quality.

S.P. Jain (Panchayati Raj in Assam, National Institute of Community Development, Hyderabad, 1976) in his evaluation of one Mahkuma Parishad, two Anchalik Panchayats and four Gaon Panchayats through a detailed survey maintains that the trend set by the Panchayati Raj institution has so far worked well.

L.S. Bhat in his article 'The Case for Spatial Planning and Decentralisation of the Planning Process' (in
K.R.G. Nair (ed.), Regional Disparities in India, Agriculture Publishing Academy, New Delhi, 1986) stated that without simultaneous devaluation of powers of planning and implementation of development activities to lower order units such as district and development block, no solution to the problem of minimisation of regional disparities could take place. He viewed that district level planning would enable to evaluate the extent of disparities in development within and between districts as they are related to the utilization of physical resources, income originating from sectors of production, infrastructure, social facilities, etc.

D.M. Najundappa (Development with Social Justice, Oxford & IBH Publishing Co., New Delhi, 1976) concludes that to overcome the centralised drawbacks, planning from above should be matched by a process of planning from below. That is, planning is to be rationalised by efforts to prepare the village, taluka or district plans. Decentralisation ensures greater will and determination for carrying out the plan programmes closer to the people.

D. Bright Singh (Tools and Techniques of Planning - An Introduction, Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1984) observed that if planning for the whole country is to be meaningful, disparity between the different regions should be reduced without affecting the growth through 'the man on
P. Chattopadhyay in 'District Planning Horns of a Dilemma' (Facts for You, New Delhi, 1990, Vol. 11, No. 8, pp. 40-43) argued that if district planning mechanism does not distinguish between backward and non-backward areas and programmes are sought to be implemented, different problems would arise. Therefore, it is essential that structural strength should be infused before the new strategies are pursued.

G. Myrdal in his studies (Economic Theory and Underdeveloped Regions, London, Duckworth, 1967) maintained that to develop a backward region one has to evolve a deliberate policy of intervention to neutralize the backwash effects. This intervention has to be made while the economy is still in its development stage, for unless regional equilibrium is achieved at this stage it will be far more difficult to achieve later on and the economy may not be able to achieve its regional development goals.

Kamta Prasad (Planning at the Grass-Roots, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1988) indicates the broad framework within which grass-root planning should be organised, and discusses the reasons for its slow progress and evaluates the Indian experiences with special reference
to recent developments. It analyses the planning functions of institutions working at the district, block and village levels and examines the planning process of poverty alleviation programmes. Moreover, it makes suggestions for raising the quality of planning at the grass-roots, advancing several new ideas and approaches to give it a new thrust and direction.

K.N. Kabra (Planning Process in a District, Indian Institute of Public Administration, New Delhi, 1977) after a detailed discussion of the theoretical background of a new approach to district planning since the fourth plan period, contrasted the 'Prescribed Model' as thrown up by the field study of the sample district. The book provides the basis for a critical assessment of the planning process as it was operating and paves the way, in the light of theoretical framework evolved, for a precise characterisation of the then existing planning process.

P.R. Dubkhasi (Grammar of Planning : Concepts and Applications, New Delhi, IIPA, 1983) discusses, an integrated manner, economic, administrative and management aspects of planning in a logical sequence dealing successively with the concept and rationale of planning, various types of planning, planning methodology, planning process, etc. and concludes with the formulation of the concept of optimum planning.
D.R. Gadgil in his article 'Planning from Blow' (in Sharan D. Wadhva (ed.), *Some Problems of India's Economic Policy*, Tata McGraw Hill Publishing Co. Ltd., New Delhi, 1985) critically examines the planning process in India in its pros and cons of decentralised planning at various levels. Moreover, he has suggested some practical measures for effective implementation of planning system in the existing socio-economic context of India.

The United Nations Asian and Pacific Development Institute, Bangkok (*Local Level Planning and Rural Development*, Concept Publishing Co., New Delhi, 1980) publication is one of the attempts to explore the nature, and implication mechanisms for local level planning and development with focus on people's effective participation in decision-making and equitable sharing in the benefits of development. The book emphasised on practical and operational aspects of development planning and current experiences with the strategy in various countries in the Asia Pacific region.

V.M. Rao in *Studies in Rural Development* (G. Thimmaiah (ed.), Institute of Social and Economic Change, Bangalore, CHUGH Publications, 1979) has presented the findings of his intensive study of Tumkur district in Karnataka. After studying the population size of several villages in the district, he has found that many villages
do not satisfy population threshold criterion required for providing necessary socio-economic infrastructure facilities. He suggested 'cluster approach' to develop infrastructure in Tumkur district.

In the same book G. Thimmaiah has examined the rationale of Gandhian decentralised development strategy and its relevance in present India. He maintained that rural development today requires a more systematic and comprehensive plan (than Gandhian plan) for effective redistributive measures at the village level.