

Rural Governance in Assam and Tripura: A Study

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Abstract:

The rural self government is an age old concept having a long history in India. But the real effort to strengthen the rural self-government was noticed in the last decade of the twentieth century when the Union Government passed the famous Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act, which facilitated decentralization of power across the states and given chance to the people to take part in the decision making process. It is true that despite the implementation of the rural self-government across the states of the country, the development is not significantly achieved. Situation is more critical in the Northeastern part of India as enormous diversities and disagreements exist in the entire region. It is in this context the present study made an attempt to examine both democratic as well as developmental aspect of the lowest unit of the rural self-government i.e. Gram Panchayats in a comparative perspective in the states of Assam and Tripura. For the purpose of the study respondents were selected from Gram Panchayats of both the states. The study observed that the rural local bodies are yet to emerge as true institution of service delivery in both the states. Acute constraints of trained manpower, meagre internal revenue mobilisation, lack of infrastructural facilities, party factionalism etc act as barriers to develop rural self-government a self-sufficient body in Assam and Tripura.

Key Words: *Panchayat, Rural self-government, Participation, Gram Sabha, Political Party, Development plan*

The rural self government is an age old concept having a long history in India. It had existed in India since time immemorial. It is found even in the Rig Veda, where the local bodies were the points of context with higher authorities on matters affecting the villages and residents (Kaushik, 2005). The existence of village 'sabhas' (councils) and 'gramins' (senior persons of the village) can be traced till 600 B.C. Later, these village bodies took the form of Panchayats (an assembly of five persons) which looked after the affairs of the village (Nunthara, 2015). The Vedic evidences reveal that village organizations of that period were more or less independent of external influence and this state of affairs continued in the post-Vedic period also. However, the concept of local self-government witnessed a number of changes during the British rule particularly during the tenure of Lord Ripon , who was instrumental in the structural evolution of local self-government in India.

In the post-independent period, the concept of local self government has further been expanded so as to strengthen the democratic culture in the country. It is realized that involvement of the people in the development activities is a means to fortify democratic institutions as well as building confidence among the people towards the system. To strengthen the process the Government of India introduced the participatory governance at the lowest level and it is evident during the first decade of Indian independence. The Union Government constituted various committees from time to time such as the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957), the Diwakar Committee (1962), the Santhanam Committee (1965), the Ashoka Mehta Committee (1977), the Hanumanth Rao committee (1982), the G. V. K. Rao Committee (1985), the L. M. Singhvi Committee (1986), the Thoungon Committee (1988), and the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill (1989) to review the working of democratic institutions at the grassroots level. However, the real effort to maximize people's participation including the marginalized sections was noticed in the last decade of the twentieth century when the Union Government passed the famous Seventy Third and Seventy Fourth Constitution Amendment Act, which facilitated decentralization of power across the states and given chance to the people to take part in the decision making process. Thus, the introduction of rural governance in the form of Panchayati Raj aims at providing a broad base to democracy, creating awareness and initiative among rural people towards — village development, proper utilisation of the available manpower and other rural resources which have mostly remained unutilized, planning and monitoring the development programmes, participation of marginalized sections in the decision making process, holding of regular elections, and above all working as a training ground for future leadership (Siddiqui, 2013). It is because of these initiatives from both Union and State Governments, India has achieved the spirit of 'multi-level federalism', which has extended the democratic base of the Indian polity (Mathew, 2007) with equal focus on both urban and rural governance.

The rural self-government has two broad aspects- democracy and development. Being a constituent of democratic process, rural self-government has created new opportunities for different social groups to take part in the decision making process as well as opened up new vistas for resolving social and economic problems faced by the varied communities. In the latter case also the rural bodies have been assigned with various development schemes to cause all round development in the rural areas and also to provide benefits of national growth to the weakest sections of the society. This raises a question as to what extent the rural governance is successful in India. It is evident that the success of rural governance vary from state to state and there are multitude of factors operate behind the success or failure of rural self-government in the country. Situation is more critical in the Northeastern part of India as enormous diversities exist in the entire region. Keeping this in view an attempt has been made here to examine both democratic as well as developmental aspect of the lowest unit of the rural self-government in the states of Assam and Tripura. The

study includes the working of Gram Panchayats (it is known as Gaon Panchayat in Assam) in both the states in a comparative perspective.

Review of related literature

There is plethora of literatures available on various dimensions of rural governance in the post-Seventy third amendment phase in India. Phukon (2004) examined the efficiency of the rural people regarding the exercise the powers given to them through the institution of Panchayat. He observed that the expansion of decentralization at the lowest level are nothing but lip services made for perpetuating and concentration of power at the centre controlled by the bureaucratic capitalism. Sarmah (2006) made an empirical investigation with the elected Panchayat functionaries of Kamrup, Golaghat and Goalpara districts of Assam. He pointed out that democratic decentralization, transparency, accountability and devolution have very little practical relevance. Though rural governance through Panchayats got constitutional status but still it survives at the mercy of the administrative machineries. Another study conducted by Ghosh (2008) highlighted the socio-economic and political background of women elected representatives in the rural bodies in the state of Tripura. Examining the rural administrative set up in the State of Tripura, he found that participation of women in the affairs of the rural governance has improved due to reservation facilities. Das (2009) made a comprehensive study of the rural local bodies of Assam and observed that the performance of the PRIs was not satisfactory as regard to the implementation of various schemes made for both individual benefit and common welfare. Brar (2014) observed the apathetic attitude of the State Government of Punjab in making rural self-bodies a self-sufficient body. Due to incomplete devolution, the role of PRIs has been limited. Panchayats are mere consultative bodies and the final authority regarding selection of beneficiaries lies with the line department and its functionaries.

These studies highlighted various aspects of rural governance but comparative assessment has not been given due importance. In the context of Northeast India comparative studies on the functioning of rural bodies are very much required as the region is full of diversities, which causes variations in the working of the rural self bodies.

Objectives of the study

- i) To explore the extent of variations between the Gram/Gaon Panchayats (GPs) of Assam and Tripura.
- ii) To understand the working of the Gram/Gaon Panchayats (GPs) in both Assam and Tripura.

Methodology

The study is conducted in the states of Assam and Tripura during the year 2016-17. For the purpose of the study two districts each from Tripura (North Tripura and South

Tripura) and Assam (Cachar and Dibrugarh) were selected randomly. In case of Assam, Cachar district was selected from the Barak Valley and Dibrugarh district was selected from the Brahmaputra Valley. In Tripura those areas falling under the TTAADC were excluded from the study. A total of 93 GPs (60 GPs from Cachar and 33 GPs from Dibrugarh district) from Assam and 83 GPs (36 GPs from North Tripura district and 47 GPs from West Tripura district) from Tripura were selected through simple random sampling. From all the sampled GPs, the elected representatives such as the President and two other members (one male and one female) were selected for collecting necessary information. Thus, a total of 528 elected representatives (279 respondents from Assam and 249 respondents from Tripura) were selected for the study. An interview schedule was administered to all the respondents and data collected were presented through graphs and tables. Besides, Secretaries of GPs and party leaders were consulted to make an in-depth understanding of the working of GPs.

Results and Discussion

GP has been developed as an administrative unit to govern the lowest tier of rural governance in India. It is noticed that the Panchayat Acts of both Assam and Tripura entrusted multifarious functions and responsibilities to GPs, which include plan formulation for village development, preparation of annual budget, preparation of statistics of village, mobilize relief for emergency situation, organize voluntary labour and protection of public property etc. Despite these vast ranges of powers it is seen that GPs are unable to satisfy the needs of the people and, therefore, a thorough enquiry is required. The data collected from the field visit are analyzed as under.

Figure 1: Number of total members in GPs of Assam and Tripura

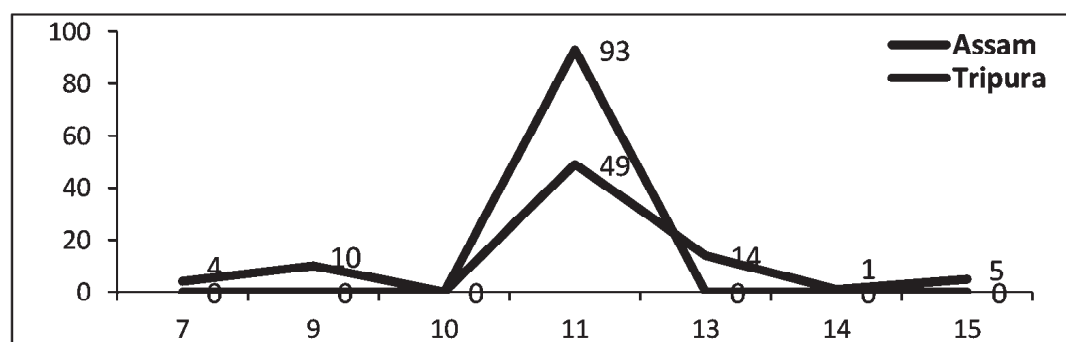


Figure 1 shows that there is a wide variation as regard to the number of total members in the GPs of Assam and Tripura. In Assam, each GP has ten (10) members and the President

is directly elected by the people. So each GP has strength of eleven (11) representatives. It is to be mentioned here that the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 provided that each GP consists of population ranging from 6000 to 10000. But in actual practice, there are a number of GPs having population less than 6000. Thus, it will be appropriate to reconstitute the GPs through merger and reorganization so that the size became viable and conform to statutory provision. On the other hand, there is no uniformity in the number of members in the GPs of Tripura. It varies from seven (7) members to fifteen (15). It deserves mention here that the Pradhan (President) of GP is not directly elected by the people; rather he/she is selected by the members from among themselves in the first sitting.

Figure 2: Number of Staff in GPs of Assam and Tripura

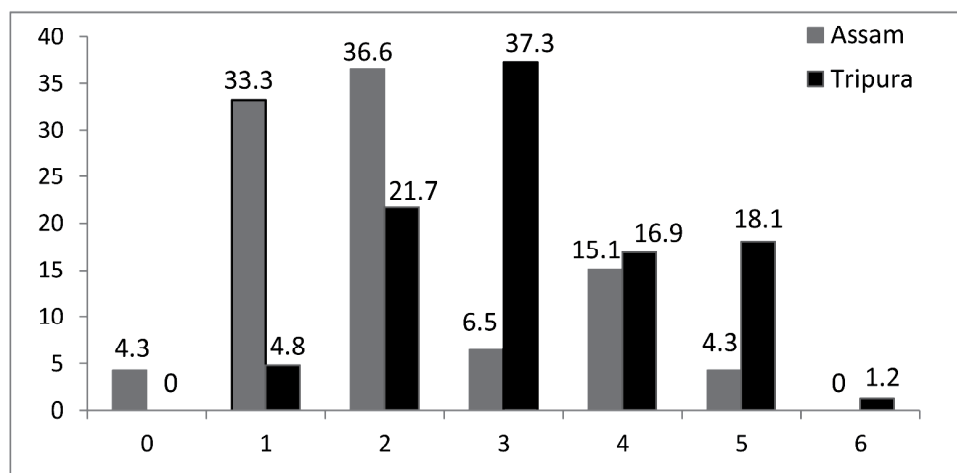
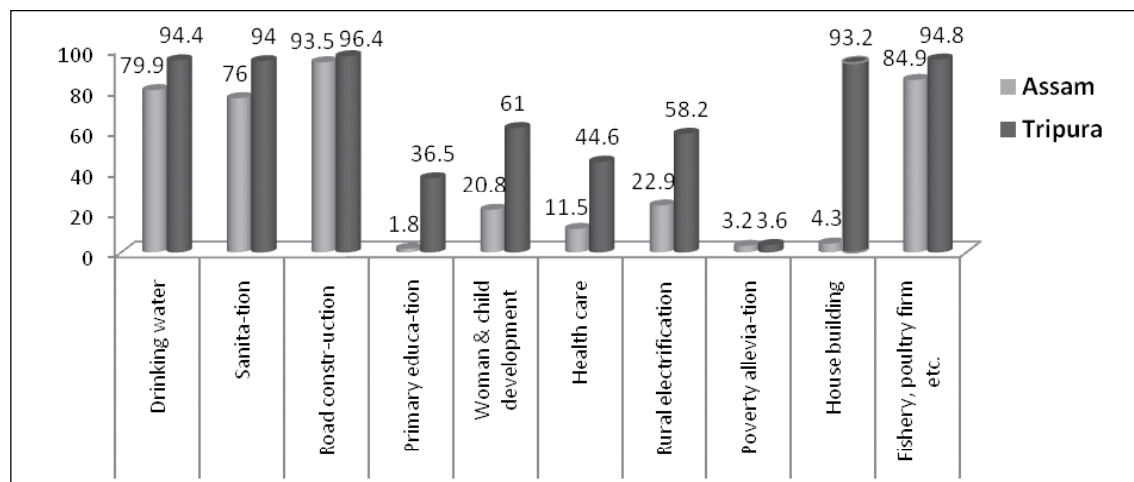


Figure 2 reveals that the number of staff in each GP is better in Tripura than Assam. In Assam, 4.3 percent of the GPs do not have any staff to carry out the day to day work of the GPs which makes it clear that there is apathetic attitude of the government to realize the goals of democratic decentralization. It is seen that 33.3 percent GPs have only 1 staff and 36.6 percent of the GPs is functional with 2 staff only. Further, 15.1 percent of the GPs are found to be well functional with 4 staff and 4.3 percent of the GPs are having 5 staff also. On the other hand, in Tripura all the GPs have their own staff. It is seen that in 4.8 percent of the GPs there is at least 1 staff available, who carries out the day to day work. A good number of GPs (37.3 percent) under study in Tripura have 3 staff, followed by 21.7 percent of the GPs with 2 staff, 18.1 percent of the GPs with 5 staff and 16.9 percent of the GPs with 4 staff. These data reveal that the management of the staff of the GPs in Tripura is better than Assam.

Figure 3: Total percentage showing the functions performed by GPs in Assam and Tripura

Functions Performed by GPC

The above figure shows that both in Assam and Tripura GPs perform some important functions. In Assam, the respondents stated that GPs execute works like construction of roads (93.5 percent), fishery, poultry, firm etc. (84.9 percent), drinking water (79.9 percent), sanitation (76 percent), rural electrification (22.9 percent), woman & child development (20.8 percent), health care (11.5 percent), house building (4.3 percent), poverty alleviation (3.2 percent), and primary education (1.8 percent). On the other hand, in Tripura respondents pointed out that GPs perform functions like providing assistance in opening and maintaining fishery, poultry firm etc (94.8 percent), road construction (96.4 percent), drinking water (94.4 percent), sanitation (94 percent), house building (93.2 percent), women and child development (61 percent), rural electrification (58.2 percent), health care (44.6 percent), primary education (36.5 percent), and poverty alleviation (3.6 percent). It can be seen that the Panchayats in Tripura are working much better on certain areas like house building, women and child development, rural electrification, health care and primary education. It is observed that as per the Panchayat Act of Tripura [Section 35 (2)] GPs have the responsibilities to give permission to the people to erect new structure or new building or make addition to any structure or building within its jurisdiction. But in case of Assam such provision is not given. Again, it is seen that the functions which are specifically delineated in the Panchayat Acts of both the states are not covered by any of the GPs. Looking at the functions carrying out by the GPs it can be said that they are performing only the agency functions and this is mainly because of the indifferent attitude of the government and the elected representatives at the state level. In course of interaction with some of the Political Party leaders/MLAs it is observed that they are reluctant to give more powers to the Panchayat representatives and believe that they should work under their guidance and execute the

decisions taken at the highest level. This sort of outlook is actually working against the emergence of rural bodies as a self-sufficient unit.

Table 1: Meetings of GP in a year

Respo- ndents	Assam										
	GP Meeting										
	No meeting	4 times	6 times	12 times	24 times	36 times	48 times	Not fixed	When-ever required	Don't know	Total
Male	1	1	8	18	20	2	12	33	75	0	171
Female	0	2	0	0	12	0	0	6	18	70	108
Total	1 (0.4)	3 (1.1)	8 (2.9)	18 (6.5)	32 (11.5)	2 (0.7)	12 (4.3)	39 (14.0)	93 (33.3)	70 (25.1)	279 (100)
Tripura											
Male	0	0	0	1	147	0	0	0	0	0	148
Female	0	0	0	10	52	0	0	0	0	38	101
Total	0	0	0	11 (4.4)	199 (79.9)	0	0	0	0	38 (15.7)	249 (100)

Source: *Field work*

From Table 1 it appears that there is irregularity in holding the meetings of GP in Assam. Though the Assam Panchayat Act has made provision for conducting the GP meeting at least once in two months, but in practice it is seen that meetings are not held as per the provisions laid down the Act. The above table evinces that respondents are divided on the issue of holding the meetings of GP. Majority of the respondents, i.e. 33.3 percent states that meetings are held whenever it is required, while 14 percent viewed that the meetings are not fixed. Only 6.5 percent of the respondents pointed out that GP meetings are held 12 times in a year (i.e. once in two months). Further, it is seen that 25.1 percent of the respondents (female) have no idea about the holding of GP meetings and this confirms their minimum involvement in the decision making process at the GP level. Conversely, in Tripura it is seen that GP meetings are conducted regularly. It can be seen from the above table that 79.9 percent of the respondents reported that in a year GP holds 24 meetings to discuss about the various issues pertaining to the GP. There is a provision in the Tripura Panchayat Act that every GP should hold a meeting at least once in a month in the office of the GP and the data shows that they are conducting more than what is mandated in the

Act. However, 15.9 percent of the respondents (Female) have no idea about the meetings and activities of the GPs.

Table 2: Matters on which GP actively participate

Respondents	Matters					
	Planning development activities for entire panchayat		Making budget for the planned activities		Implementation of development plan	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
	Assam					
Male (148)	109 (39.1)	67 (24.0)	17 (6.1)	154 (55.2)	164 (58.8)	7 (2.5)
Female (101)	43 (15.4)	60 (21.5)	12 (4.3)	56 (20.1)	48 (17.2)	60 (21.5)
Total (249)	152 (54.5)	127 (45.5)	29 (10.4)	250 (89.6)	212 (76.0)	67 (24.0)
	Tripura					
Male (171)	143 (57.4)	5 (2.0)	60 (24.1)	88 (35.3)	142 (57.0)	6 (2.4)
Female (108)	54 (21.7)	47 (18.9)	25 (10.0)	76 (30.5)	56 (22.5)	45 (18.1)
Total (279)	197 (79.1)	52 (20.9)	85 (34.1)	164 (65.9)	198 (79.5)	51 (20.5)

Source: *Field work*

Table 2 depicts that in Assam all the GPs are not engaged in planning the development activities for entire Panchayat. It can be seen that only 54.5 percent of the respondents stated that GPs are engaged in planning the development activities for entire Panchayat. As regard to making budget for the planned activities it is found that 89.6 percent of the respondents are of the opinion that their GPs did not make any budget for the planned activities. However, 76 percent of the respondents reported that their GPs implement the development plans as framed by the government. On the other hand, in Tripura it is observed that 79.1 percent respondents stated that GPs are active in planning the development activities for entire Panchayat. Similarly, 79.5 percent of the respondents also reported that their GPs are engaged in implementing the development plans as framed by the government. But as regard to making budget for the planned activities a common pattern has been observed in both Assam and Tripura. This indicates that GPs in both the states are not sincerely involved in the planning process and whatever the planning they initiated are not well considered. They are satisfied to work as an implementing agency only.

Table 3: Problem countered by GPs in performing its responsibilities

Respon- dents	Problems countered by GP members in performing their responsibilities									
	Strict govt guidelines		Lack of unity among the GP members		Too much interference from district administration		Party interference		Dearth of fund	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
	Assam									
Male (171)	127 (45.5)	44 (15.8)	55 (19.7)	107 (38.4)	25 (9.0)	146 (52.3)	70 (25.1)	101 (36.2)	171 (61.3)	0
	66 (23.7)	42 (15.1)	60 (21.5)	45 (16.1)	30 (10.8)	78 (28.0)	60 (21.5)	48 (17.2)	95 (34.1)	13 (4.7)
Total (279)	193 (69.2)	86 (30.8)	115 (41.2)	152 (54.5)	55 (19.7)	224 (80.3)	130 (46.6)	149 (53.4)	266 (95.3)	13 (4.7)
Female (108)	Tripura									
Male (148)	118 (47.4)	30 (12.0)	6 (2.4)	142 (57.0)	1 (0.4)	147 (59.0)	16 (6.4)	132 (53.0)	135 (54.2)	13 (5.2)
Female (101)	68 (27.3)	33 (13.3)	2 (0.8)	99 (39.8)	2 (0.8)	99 (39.8)	14 (5.6)	87 (34.9)	90 (36.1)	11 (4.4)
Total (249)	186 (74.7)	63 (25.3)	8 (3.2)	241 (96.8)	3 (1.2)	246 (98.8)	30 (12.0)	219 (88.0)	225 (90.4)	24 (9.6)

Source: *Field work*

Table 3 shows that there are certain similarities exist regarding the problems faced by GPs in performing its responsibilities in both Assam and Tripura. It is evident from the above table that issues like strict government guidelines (69.2 percent in Assam and 74.7 percent in Tripura) and dearth of fund (95.3 percent in Assam and 90.4 percent in Tripura) are the two major problems countered by the GPs of Assam and Tripura in performing their responsibilities. Interestingly, the respondents from both the states are divided on the issue of party interference in the functioning of GP. It is seen that in case of Assam 46.6 percent of the respondents reported that there is party interference in the functioning of GPs, while in Tripura 88 percent of the respondents stated that there is no party interference. The reason for such denial is mainly because of the fact that the ruling party (CPIM) is in majority position in most of the GPs in the state. Being members from the same party they are denying the involvement of party in the functioning of the GP. However, in course of interaction with the villagers and opposition members it is observed that the entire activities of the GPs are monitored and instructed by the Party. Conversely, in Assam such interference is minimal. As regard to the question of unity among the GP members it is seen that in Tripura

members are working in coordination under the guidance of the Party, while in Assam 41.2 percent of the respondents stated that there is lack of unity among the GP members and it is mainly because of the existence of the representatives from various political parties. Moreover, it is also observed particularly in the case of Assam that those GPs where the President work without taking members into confidence, the members irrespective of the political parties gets united against the GP President and it affects the functioning of the GPs significantly.

Findings and conclusion

On the basis of the analysis made above the following findings are drawn.

- The study observes a wide variation as regard to the number of members in the GPs of Assam and Tripura. In Assam, each GP consisted of eleven members including the President who is directly elected by the people. On the other hand, there is no uniformity in the number of members in the GPs of Tripura. It varies from seven members to fifteen members and the Pradhan (President) of GP is not directly elected by the people, rather he/she is selected by the members from among themselves in the first sitting.

- As regard to working of GPs the respondents of both Assam and Tripura reported that GPs perform some important functions like construction of roads; poverty alleviation programmes; providing assistance in opening and maintaining fishery, poultry firm; drinking water; women and child development etc. It can be seen that the Panchayats in Tripura are working much better on certain issues like house building, women and child development, rural electrification, health care and primary education. The major responsibility of the GPs in both the states is related to construction of road under MGNREGA. Both the GPs and the Block Development Offices are engaged in making plan estimate and executing the schemes. In course of the field study it is observed that the quality of roads constructed under MGNREGA is much better in Tripura than Assam. There are corruption charges against some of the GP Presidents in Assam particularly in Cachar district as regard to the execution of work under MGNREGA. In case of Tripura, as there is absolute control of the political party (CPIM) at the state level as well as at the GP level there is no voice raised against the party elected representatives. But due to recent changes in the political set up of Tripura (formation of government by BJP) the PRIs will witness transformation and role of opposition will be prominent at the lowest level.

- The study observes that the functions which are specifically outlined in the Panchayat Acts of Assam and Tripura are not executed by any of the GPs. It can be said that they are performing only the agency functions. This is because of the indifferent attitude of the government and the elected representatives at the state level. Interestingly, it is observed during the course of interaction with the Political Party leaders that they are reluctant to give more powers to the Panchayat representatives and believe that they should work under their guidance and execute the decision that has been taken at the highest level. This

sort of outlook is actually working against the emergence of Panchayats as a self-sufficient unit.

- In the course of the Study it is found that the GPs of both Assam and Tripura did not prepare any database of their locality. No representatives are well versed of the resources available in their locality. It is essential that a GP should maintain statistics of its villages as it is required to prepare development plan and budget estimate for the GP, but no such effort is seen in any of the GPs of the two states.

- As regard to GP meetings an irregularity is observed. In Assam, the Panchayati Raj Act has made provision for conducting GP meeting at least once in two (2) months but in practice it is seen that meetings are not held as per the provisions laid down in the Act. Conversely, in Tripura it is seen that GP meetings are held regularly. There is a provision in the Tripura Panchayati Raj Act that every GP should hold a meeting at least once in a month in the office of the GP and the data shows that they are conducting more than what is mandated in the Act.

- In both Assam and Tripura it is seen that GPs are not sincerely involved in the planning process and whatever the planning they initiated are not well considered. They are satisfied to work as an implementing agency only. In case of Assam it is noticed that there is lack of coordination among the three tiers of Panchayat and it is reflected in the preparation of development plan and execution of various schemes at the GP level. On the other hand, in Tripura it can be seen that there is coordination exist between upper two tiers and GP. The reason for such coordination lies in the fact that the majority of the elected representatives in all the three tiers are from the same political party (CPIM) and it is due to the strong influence of the party leaders that the elected representatives at all the three tiers work as a unit.

A thorough investigation into the working of PRIs of both Assam and Tripura evinces that the rural local bodies are yet to emerge as true institution of service delivery. Acute constraints of trained manpower, shortage of fund and functionaries, meagre internal revenue mobilisation, lack of infrastructural facilities, inability in budget preparation, low level of women empowerment and awareness of people, lackadaisical attitude of the government officials, party factionalism and above all geographical isolation act as barrier to develop PRIs a self-sufficient body in Assam and Tripura. It is unfortunate to note that even after twenty five years of institutionalisation of democracy at the grassroots level; the local bodies are unable to provide any core civic service to the rural people. Whatever Services provided by these institutions are just backed by the Union and State Government. To be precise, the rural local bodies in both Assam and Tripura have become dependent on the exogenous bodies and it is high time that the government must develop the PRIs taking into account its inherent problems. The problems and remedies mentioned above are required to be addressed so that PRIs become financially and functionally stable so as to accomplish the role envisaged for them in the

Constitution. It is expected that the findings and suggestions of the study will definitely help the policy makers at the time of initiating development schemes and formulating policies for the rural local bodies in Assam and Tripura.

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