

**DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION, POLITICAL
PARTIES AND GRAM PANCHAYATS: EVIDENCES
FROM ASSAM AND TRIPURA**

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Abstract

The concept of democratic decentralization find its roots across the countries as it has the potential to surmount the problems of centralized planning by adopting a developmental path that reflects on the real needs and preferences of the diverse social setting. Realising such importance of decentralization, India adopted the model of decentralization. However, in due course the model is extended at the grassroots level and this has provided opportunities to the political parties to take part in the working of local governance. Keeping this in view, the present study aims to explore the extent of involvement of the political parties in the working of local governance particularly the Gram Panchayats. The study was conducted in two of the remotest states of India, i.e., Assam and Tripura. The study observed huge enthusiasm among political parties as well as rural masses to participate in the rural governance. In view of the support and zeal of the rural people and the involvement of the political parties it can certainly be said that the introduction of local self-bodies has strengthened the roots of Indian democracy.

Keywords:

Democracy;
Decentralization;
Political Parties;
Gram Panchayats;
Planning.

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1. Introduction

The concept of 'democratic decentralization' find its roots across the countries as it has the potential to surmount the problems of centralized planning by adopting a developmental path that reflects on the real needs and preferences of the diverse social setting. It is a fact that the decentralization in the democratic states has grown exponentially and it has been accepted from all quarters. New paradigms of development that emerge with the collapse of the socialist bloc acted as a great boost to decentralization. Scholars like Robert Ebel articulated the reasons for the spread of the concept of decentralization across the world. To him, the Western world viewed decentralization as an alternative model to provide public services in a more cost-effective way, while in developing countries the model gets popularity in order to respond to economic inefficiencies, macroeconomic instability, and ineffective governance. The post-communist countries adopted decentralization as a natural step in the shift to market economies and democracy. Latin America adopted decentralization as a result of political pressure to democratize, and African states adopted it as a path to national unity. Thus, different countries have different reasons for introducing decentralisation but one fact is that all of them eager to increase people's participation for the stability of the system. Realising such importance of decentralization India has also adopted the model of decentralization since independence. However, in due course the model is extended at the grassroots level particularly in the rural areas and it is popularly known as 'Panchayati Raj.' It got the constitutional status under the Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act (1992) and since then it is in force across the states of India following a uniform structure.

The Panchayati Raj system has two broad aspects- democracy and development. Being a constituent of democratic process, Panchayati Raj 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 Panchayats have been assigned with various rural development schemes to cause all round development in the rural areas and also to provide benefits of national growth to the weakest one of the society.

Political parties are an indispensable part of democracy and in a country like India their involvement is traced at all levels, i.e. from the rural to the national level. They perform varied functions such as a) integration and mobilization of citizens; b) articulation and aggregation of interests; c) formulation of public policy; d) recruitment of political leaders; and e) organization of parliament and government. They are required to formulate policies in accordance with the expectations of the people as well as to implement the various welfare schemes for the development of the locality. Though India is practicing indirect democracy but at the lowest level it has introduced direct democracy (as evident in the functions of GS) so as to make people capable, transparent, accountable and conscious. It was seen that before the introduction of the Panchayati Raj in India, the political parties took part only in the State Assembly and Parliamentary elections and they were not interested in politics at the lowest level. There are arguments against the involvement of political parties in local self government as it is said that panchayats deal with local problems only and these do not require intervention of political parties. Besides, interference of political parties at the village level will invite political bickering and this in turn will hamper the spirit of harmony and unity at the village level. The committees constituted under Sadiq All, Perikh, Hardyal Singh, R.R.Diwakar and Santhanam urged on the non-involvement of the political parties in the village panchayats as it is the way to achieve development in the villages. However, none of these committees put a ban on the participation of political parties at the village level. However, with the passage of time political parties started taking keen interest at the grassroots level. There was a change in people's perception also and it is widely believed that political parties are essential to educate people, smoothens the decision making process and broadens the outlook of the people. Now the involvement of the political parties at the village level has become so natural that all the political parties (National, Regional and Local) contest elections and tries to acquire more and more seats. The involvement of the political parties has also made the local politics very competitive and it is seen that allegations and counter allegations have become order of the day even at the grassroots level. Thus, in order to understand the extent of involvement of the political parties at the Panchayat level (GP) the study was undertaken in two of the remotest states of India – Assam and Tripura respectively. The States were selected as two national political parties [Congress (I) in Assam and CPI (M) in Tripura] ruled the states consecutively for fifteen years and this provides an important ground to explore the involvement of these parties in the working of Panchayats. The Study aims to explore

the political affiliation of the elected representatives of Gram Panchayats in Assam and Tripura and also tries to understand the involvement of the political parties in the working of Gram Panchayats in Assam and Tripura.

2. Research Methods

For the purpose of the study, at first, two districts were randomly selected from Assam and Tripura. In case of Assam, one district each from Barak Valley and Brahmaputra Valley were selected. The districts were - Cachar and Dibrugarh. In case of Tripura also two districts -North Tripura and West Tripura - were randomly selected. From the selected districts of Assam and Tripura GPs were proportionately selected. Accordingly, sixty (60) GPs under eight (8) development blocks of Cachar district and thirty three (33) GPs under four (4) development blocks of Dibrugarh district of Assam were selected through Simple Random Sampling (SRS). Similarly, thirty six (36) GPs under two (2) development blocks of North Tripura district and forty seven (47) GPs under three (3) development blocks of West Tripura district of Tripura were selected through SRS. Finally, from each sampled GP three (3) elected representatives [President and two Members (one male and one female member preferably one SC)] were chosen as respondents. Altogether 528 respondents – 279 respondents from 93 GPs under 12 Development Blocks from Assam and 249 respondents from 83 GPs under five (5) Development Blocks from Tripura- were finally selected for interview. In addition, GP Secretaries, political party leaders and GS members were also consulted in order to understand the intricacies associated with the working of Panchayats. For the purpose of interaction with all the respondents an open ended interview schedule is prepared and administered. The field study was conducted for a period of two years (2016-2017).

3. Results and Analysis

The opinions of the respondents are classified below in tabular forms for analysis and interpretation.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents on the basis of Political Affiliation

Assam				Tripura		
Political Affiliation	President			Pradhan		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Congress	26 (27.9)	28 (30.1)	54 (58.0)	1(1.2)	1 (1.2)	2 (2.4)
BJP	12 (12.9)	12 (12.9)	24(25.8)	0	1 (1.2)	1(1.2)
CPI(M)	0	0	0	38 (45.8)	42(50.6)	80 (96.4)
AUDF	2 (2.2)	4 (4.3)	6 (6.5)	0	0	0
AGP	0	0	0	0	0	0
TMC	0	0	0	0	0	0
Independent	3 (3.2)	6 (6.5)	9 (9.7)	0	0	0
Total	43 (46.2)	50 (53.8)	93 (100.0)	39 (47.0)	44 (53.0)	83 (100.0)
Member respondents						
Congress	82 (44.1)	39 (21.0)	121 (65.1)	4 (2.4)	6 (3.6)	10 (6.0)
BJP	23 (12.4)	9 (4.8)	32 (17.2)	3 (1.8)	4 (2.4)	7 (4.2)
CPI(M)	1 (0.5)	1 (0.5)	2 (1.0)	102 (61.4)	47 (28.3)	149 (89.8)
AUDF	4 (2.2)	2 (1.1)	6 (3.2)	0	0	0
AGP	2 (1.1)	2 (1.1)	4 (2.2)	0	0	0
TMC	0	0	0	0	0	0
Independent	16 (8.6)	5 (2.7)	21 (11.3)	0	0	0

Source: *Field work*

The above table reveals that in Assam GPs are represented by various political parties like Congress (I), BJP, AIUDF and AGP, while in Tripura the absolute control is in the hands of CPI(M). In Assam 58 percent of the respondents (Presidents) are from Congress (I), followed by BJP (25.8 percent) and AIUDF (6.5 percent) and in the case of Member respondents it is seen that majority of the respondents (65.1 percent) belong to Congress (I), followed by BJP (17.2 percent), AIUDF (3.2 percent), AGP (2.2 percent) and CPIM (1percent). Further, there are a good number of candidates who contested and won election as Independent candidates (President

9.7 percent and Members 11.3 percent). Interestingly, after winning election they started supporting the ruling party so that they get some benefits from the party personnel. On the other hand, in Tripura there is absolute control of CPIM at the grassroots level. It is found that 96.4 percent of the respondents (Pradhans) are from CPIM and the presence of other two national parties like Congress (I) and BJP is nominal. In case of Member respondents also 89.8 percent of the respondents are representing CPIM. Unlike Assam, in Tripura the presence of Independent candidate at the GP level is not found and this indicates that the influence of political party is maximum among the common voters as well as the candidates.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents on the basis of Political Experience

Assam				Tripura		
Elected Earlier in PRIs	President			Pradhan		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Yes	21 (22.6)	10 (10.8)	31 (33.3)	19 (22.9)	18 (21.7)	37 (44.6)
No	22 (23.7)	40 (43.0)	62 (66.7)	20 (24.1)	26 (31.3)	46 (55.4)
Total	43 (46.2)	50 (53.8)	93 (100.0)	39 (47.0)	44 (53.0)	83 (100.0)
Member Respondents						
Yes	15 (8.1)	4 (2.2)	19 (10.2)	51 (30.7)	14 (8.4)	65 (39.2)
No	113 (60.8)	54 (29.0)	167(89.8)	58 (34.9)	43 (25.9)	101(60.8)
Total	128 (68.8)	58 (31.2)	186(100.0)	109 (65.7)	57 (34.3)	166 (100.0)

Source: *Field work*

It is imperative to know the political experience of the elected representatives as it can contribute to the better functioning of the GPs. There are diverse functions entrusted to the GPs, which involves thorough understanding of the Act and, therefore, it is easy for an experienced and trained person to manage the affairs in a better way. Keeping this in view respondents were enquired about their political experience and their responses are recorded in Table 2.

It appears from the above table that majority of the respondents (President/Pradhan) in both the states, i.e., 66.7 percent in Assam and 55.4 percent in Tripura are fresh and do not have any

experience in the working of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Similar trend is noticed in the case of Member respondents also. In Assam, 89.8 percent of the respondents (Members) have no political experience and they are elected for the first time in GPs. Likewise, in Tripura 60.8 percent of the respondents do not have any experience and elected for the first time. Interestingly, it is seen that in Tripura though a significant number of the respondents are fresh but they are closely associated with the various activities of the political party (CPIM), while in Assam, most of the respondents are occasionally involved in the activities of the political parties. It is further observed that without having directly involved in party activities many candidates were able to obtain party tickets to contest GP election, while the same is not the case in Tripura, where serious involvement is required in the party activities (CPIM) to obtain the tickets.

Table 3: Party wise Composition of GPs under Study

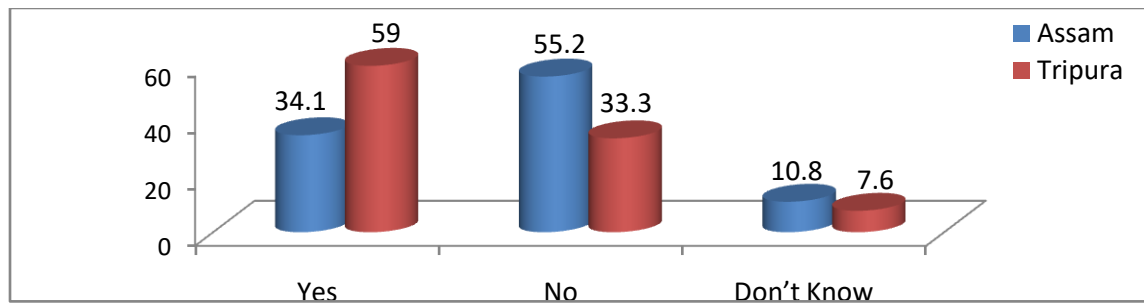
No. of Members in GP	Assam						Tripura				
	Presence of Political Parties (Total GPs: 93)						Presence of Political Parties (Total GPs: 83)				
	Cong	BJP	CPIM	AIU DF	AG P	Ind.	Cong	BJP	CPIM	TM C	Ind .
1- 5	39 (41.9)	56 (60.2)	3 (3.2)	14 (15.1)	03	55 (59.1)	18 (21.7)	7 (8.4)	3 (3.6)	0	2 (2.4)
6 - 10	54 (58.1)	12 (12.9)	-	-	-	-	3 (3.6)	1 (1.2)	35 (42.2)	-	-
11 - 15	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	45 (54.2)	-	-
Presence of Political parties in GPs	93 (100.0)	68 (73.1)	3 (3.2)	14 (15.1)	03 (3.2)	55 (59.1)	21 (25.3)	8 (9.6)	83 (100.0)	0	2 (2.4)

Source: *Field work*

The above table reflects the strength of the political parties in the GPs and it can be seen that there is huge differences exist in the composition of GPs in both the states. In case of Assam it is observed that in 58.1 percent of the GPs Congress got majority, (i.e. it has 6 to 10 members), while in 12.9 percent of the GPs BJP got majority (i.e. it has 6 to 10 members). In Assam, Congress has its members in all the GPs, while other parties do not have their presence in all the

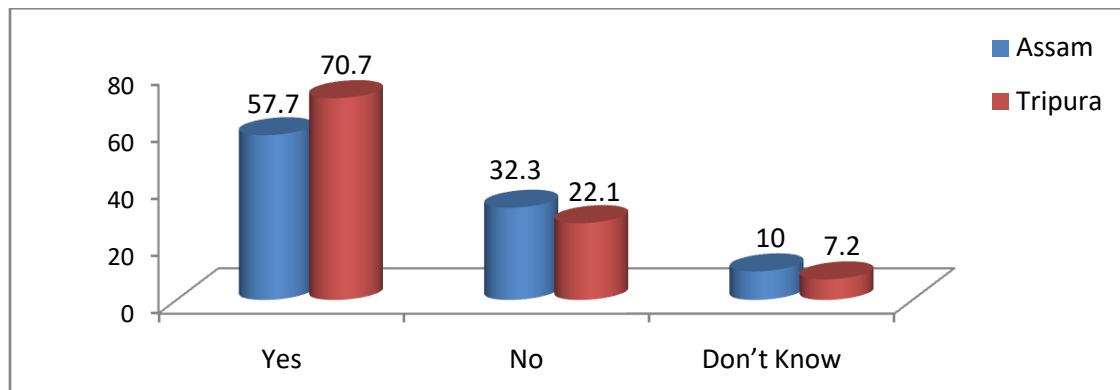
GPs. Interestingly, in 59.1 percent of the GPs a good number of Independent candidates are present as Members of GPs. It is true that that the presence of various political parties in the GPs of Assam has made it competitive and gave people option to choose the best among them. On the other hand, situation is totally different in Tripura, where in 45 GPs (54.2 percent) CPI (M) got absolute control and in another 35 GPs (42.2 percent) it has got majority only. The presence of other political parties is minimal and this has limited the choice of the people. Even no Independent candidates found in the sampled GPs, which proves the monopoly of a single party. It is seen that the party politics has penetrated into the entire social as well as governmental structures and processes.

Figure 1: Selection of beneficiaries on the basis of party preferences in Assam and Tripura



The above figure presents an interesting fact about the selection of beneficiaries for various government schemes. In Assam, 55.2 percent of the respondents stated that the selection did not have any party preference, followed by 34.1 percent of the respondents who viewed that selection is done in party line and the remaining 10.8 percent of the respondents have no idea about such selection and all such respondents are female elected representatives. On the contrary, in Tripura it is observed that 59 percent of the respondents reported that the selection is done in party lines, followed by 33.3 percent of the respondents who said that there is no party preference in the selection, and the remaining 7.6 percent (female elected representatives) did not have any knowledge about the process. In course of interaction with the members of the GS of Tripura it is found that there is huge party involvement in all the matters of GPs particularly at the time of selection of beneficiaries for various schemes. Further, the involvement of the political parties is such that supporters or sympathisers of other political parties are deprived of getting minimum benefits under the various schemes. But in Assam, it is found that party preferences do exist but it is not the way practiced in Tripura. The benefits under various schemes are found given to the people irrespective of the political parties they belong to.

Figure 2: Involvement of the party leaders in determining the agenda of Panchayats in Assam and Tripura



The above figure shows that in Assam 57.7 percent of the respondents are of the view that the agenda of the Panchayats are determined by the political parties and 32.3 percent of the respondents stated that Panchayats works independently and there is no involvement of the political parties. Similarly, in Tripura 70.7 percent of the respondents stated that political parties get involved in fixing the agenda of the Panchayats, while 22.1 percent of the respondents answered in the negative. In course of the study it is observed that though the political parties do not involve in the day to day work of the GPs but whenever the question of extending benefits, contracts etc comes it is dictated by the local party leaders. Those GPs where the political parties have absolute majority it is seen that the benefits under various schemes are given to the party supporters and cadres and it is found more in practice in Tripura.

Table 4: Financial assistance and party leaders

Respon- dents	Assam				Tripura			
	Financial assistance & party leaders			Total	Financial assistance & party leaders			Total
	Yes	No	Don't know		Yes	No	Don't know	
Male	0	170(60.9)	1(0.4)	171(61.3)	0	147(59.0)	1(0.4)	148 (59.4)
Female	0	92 (33.0)	16(5.7)	108(38.7)	0	96 (38.6)	5(2.0)	101 (40.6)
Total	0	262(93.9)	17(6.1)	279(100.0)	0	243(97.6)	6(2.4)	249(100.0)

Source: *Field work*

The above table evinces that the GPs do not get financial assistance from the party leaders. In Assam, 93.9 percent of the respondents clearly stated that they do not get any financial assistance

from the elected MPs/MLAs or other leaders. Similar situation prevails in Tripura also as 97.6 percent of the respondents confirmed the position. It is seen that for the development of the local area the GPs do not get any assistance under the MPLAD/MLALAD Fund. In case of some GPs it is seen that those GP President/member who have some contact with the MLA/MP or their nominees are able to get schemes for the development of their areas (particularly related to road construction) under their GPs. One of the most disappointing aspects of entire MLALAD or MPLAD Scheme is that the grant under the Scheme is issued with the advice of the concerned MLA/MP and it is implemented through the Office of the District Administration, but when it is implemented the local bodies are not consulted. It is expected that any developmental initiative for the rural areas from any branch of the government should be processed through the concerned body. But the local bodies are not taken into confidence while making or implementing scheme under MLALAD or MPLAD Fund. This clearly undermines the position and constitutional status of the PRIs as a body.

Table 5: Training the Elected Representatives of GPs

Respon- dents	Assam				Tripura			
	Training			Total	Training			Total
	Yes	No	Don't know		Yes	No	Dont know	
Male	2 (0.7)	169 (60.6)	0	171 (61.3)	5 (2.0)	143 (57.4)	0	148 (59.4)
Female	0	85 (30.5)	23(8.2)	108 (38.7)	3 (1.2)	98 (39.4)	0	101 (40.6)
Total	2 (0.7)	254 (91.0)	23 (8.2)	279 (100.0)	8 (3.2)	241(96.8)	0	249 (100.0)

Source: *Field work*

The above table shows that in Assam 91 percent of the respondents viewed that the political parties do not provide any training to the members on the functioning of GPs. Similar is the case with Tripura also as 96.8 percent of the respondents stated that the political parties have not initiated any step to provide training to the members about the various aspects of GPs. It is seen that political parties have huge enthusiasm in participating in elections and tries to get maximum seats in the PRIs, but when it comes to the question of shouldering responsibilities to empower the elected representatives to perform better they have hardly shown any interest. As the GP representatives have enormous role to play within their respective Panchayat Acts, they require

proper guidance and training and in this regard political parties can play a role. However, the survey reveals that in both the state political parties do not bother about developing skills of the elected representatives in general or their own parties' in particular so as to improve the work culture of the GPs.

Table 6: Panchayat leaders are required to consult the political leaders in performing the functions of GP

Resp- ondent s	Assam				Tripura			
	Consultation with the political leaders in performing the functions of GP			Total	Consultation with the political leaders in performing the functions of GP			Total
	Yes	No	Don't know		Yes	No	Don't know	
Male	60 (20.5)	111(39.8)	0	171(61.3)	125(50.2)	23 (9.2)	0	148 (59.4)
Female	30(10.8)	52 (18.6)	26(9.3)	108(38.7)	78(31.3)	3 (1.2)	20 (8.0)	101 (40.6)
Total	90(32.3)	163 (58.4)	26(9.3)	279(100. 0)	203(81.5)	26(10.4)	20 (8.0)	249 (100.0)

Source: Field work

The above table depicts a sharp contrast in the attitudes of the elected representatives with regard to consulting the leaders of the party in performing the functions of GPs. In Assam, 58.4 percent of the respondents opined that Panchayat leaders should not consult with the leaders of their party in performing their responsibilities, while 32.3 percent of the respondents stated that such consultation is required. On the contrary, in Tripura 81.5 percent of the respondents stated that Panchayat leaders are required to consult their respective party leaders in carrying out their functions, while only 10.4 percent of the respondents felt that there is no need for such consultation. It is seen that in Tripura the political party (CPIM) while distributing tickets for contesting elections take note of the service rendered by the aspiring candidates to the party. Hence, a trend is noticed that these candidates after winning election remain committed to the local leaders and party programmes and this is why they need the guidance of the leaders of their party in carrying out the responsibilities of the Panchayats. But in Assam such rigid norms do not exist at the time of distributing tickets to the candidates and in the post-election phase the elected representatives are not so committed to the party programmes. Only those who are holding some

portfolios in the party are regularly keep touch with the party leaders and follow the party programmes.

4. Findings and Conclusion

An analysis of the respondents' political affiliation reveals that the largest number of elected representatives of Assam belonged to Congress (I), followed by BJP, AIUDF and Independents. It is worthwhile to note that that the presence of large number of Independent candidates signifies the interest and fervour of the people to participate in rural governance. Interestingly, a number of Independent candidates after winning election started supporting the ruling party so that they get some benefits from the party personnel. However, such steps provide stability to the democratic process. It is seen that absence of defection laws in Assam helps the elected representatives to decide their course of action freely. But in Tripura there is absolute control of CPI(M) at the grassroots level as more than 90 percent of the representatives (including the marginalised community) are from CPI(M). The presence of other two national parties like Congress (I) and BJP is nominal at the lowest level. Besides, the availability of defection laws helps the parties to control their elected representatives in a better way. Unlike Assam, the presence of Independent candidate at the GP level in Tripura is not found and this indicates that the influence of political party is maximum among the common voters as well as the candidates. As regard to the experience of the elected representatives at the grassroots level it is found that majority of the respondents including the Scheduled Caste Community (Presidents/Pradhans and Members) in both the states are fresh and they do not have any experience in the working of PRIs. Further, it is observed that in Tripura before obtaining tickets for contesting election representatives are closely associated with the various activities of the political party (CPIM), while in case of Assam most of the representatives are occasionally involved in the activities of the political parties. Without having any contribution to the party activities many candidates are able to manage party tickets to contest GP election in Assam.

It is seen that the presence of various political parties in the GPs of Assam has made it competitive and gave the people option to choose the best among them. On the other hand, situation is totally different in Tripura, where there is negligible presence of the other political parties in rural governance. Even no Independent candidates found in the sampled GPs, which

proves the monopoly of a single party. Above all, the party politics has penetrated into local bodies and processes.

As regard to involvement of political party in the working of GPs it is found that in Tripura there is huge party involvement in all the matters of GPs particularly at the time of selection of beneficiaries for various schemes. The involvement is such that supporters or sympathisers of other political parties are deprived of getting minimum benefits under the various schemes; while in Assam it is found that party preferences do exist but it is not the way practiced in Tripura. The benefits under various schemes are found to be given to the people irrespective of the political parties they belong to. It is further observed that though the political parties do not involve in the day to day work of the GPs but whenever the question of extending benefits, contracts etc comes it is dictated by the local party leaders. Those GPs where the political parties have absolute majority it is seen that the benefits under various schemes are given to the party supporters and cadres and it is found more in practice in Tripura.

It is found that GPs do not receive any fund under the MLALAD or MPLAD Schemes. One of the most disappointing aspects of entire MLALAD or MPLAD Scheme is that the grant under the Scheme is issued with the advice of the concerned MLA/MP and it is implemented through the Office of the District Administration, but when it is implemented the local bodies are not consulted. It is expected that any developmental initiative for the rural areas from any branch of the government should be processed through the concerned body. But the local bodies are not taken into confidence while making or implementing scheme under MLALAD or MPLAD Fund. This clearly undermines the position and constitutional status of the PRIs as a body.

The political parties do not provide any training to the members on the functioning of GPs in Assam and Tripura. It is seen that political parties have huge enthusiasm participating in elections and they effort to get maximum seats in the PRIs, but when it comes to the question of shouldering responsibilities to empower the elected representatives to perform better they had hardly shown any interest. As the GP representatives have enormous role to play within their respective Panchayat Acts, they require proper guidance and training and in this regard political parties can play a role. However, the study observes that in both the state, political parties do not

bother about developing skills and attitudes of the elected representatives in general and their own parties' in particular so as to improve the work culture of the GPs.

The study observes that the elected representatives of Assam are not in favour of consulting the party leaders in carrying out the functions of GPs, while in Tripura representatives are in favour of such consultation. It is seen that in Tripura the political party (CPIM) while distributing tickets for contesting elections take note of the services rendered by the aspiring candidates to the party. These candidates are committed to the local leaders and this is why they look for guidance of the party leaders in carrying out the responsibilities of the Panchayats. However, in Assam such rigid norms do not exist at the Panchayat level while distributing tickets to the candidates and they are not so committed to the party programmes. Only those who are holding some portfolios in the party keep touch with the party leaders and follow the party programmes.

To sum up, it can be said that the democratic decentralisation in the form of Panchayati Raj has become deep rooted in the remotest part of the country. The study observed huge enthusiasm among the rural masses to participate in the rural governance with an expectation of bringing changes into the system. In view of the support and zeal of the rural people it can undoubtedly be said that the introduction of local self-bodies has actually strengthened the roots of Indian democracy. It has contributed to break the feeling of isolation and geographical barriers and motivated people to be a part of democratic process. However, there are certain inherent problems such as party factionalism, apathetic attitude of the government officials, lack of resource mobilisation, low level of women empowerment and awareness of people and less involvement of the political parties/NGOs in providing training to the elected representatives faced by the local bodies in both Assam and Tripura. These bodies need appropriate care and support from both the Union and the State Governments so that they can act as self-sufficient units and meet the needs of the rural masses.

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