

Institutions of Grassroots Empowerment and Rural Development Attainments: Findings from a Study of Six Villages in Assam

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Abstract

Policy approach to rural development in independent India has evolved through various stages. Limited success of different initiatives prompted setting up of *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs) as statutory local self-governing bodies for securing faster rural development through greater grassroots empowerment. After a couple of decades of the 73rd Constitution Amendments that instituted the PRIs, it was felt necessary to ask whether PRIs had succeeded in percolating power to the grassroots, and if so, whether such empowerment expedited the pace of development in villages. In pursuit of this composite question, a field investigation was carried out in six carefully selected villages in Assam in 2012. Development attainments and improvements in such attainments have been found to be higher in the villages where institutions of grassroots empowerment have taken deeper roots. The study makes a case for deepening of the grassroots empowerment process for expeditious overcoming of the backlogs in rural development.

Keywords

Development attainment, development improvement, *Panchayati Raj* Institutions, empowerment, Gaon Sabha

Introduction

Policy approach to rural development in Independent India evolved through various stages. In the early plan period institutional reforms such as land reforms, establishment of community development blocks and promotion of the

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co-operatives constituted the mainstay of government initiative for bringing in positive changes in the organisation economic life in rural areas (Balasubramanyam, 1984, p. 81). These initiatives at best managed to achieve limited and sporadic success in fulfilling the goals set up for them. The Green Revolution, a popular description of diffusion of HYV seeds-fertilisers technology, brought in a much needed step-up in production of food-grains in the late 1960s. However, for a long period the revolution remained confined to a limited geographical area and only to the upper segment of farming community (Bezbaruah, 2010). Hence the impact of the revolution in uplifting economic conditions of the masses across rural India was not discernible. It is therefore hardly surprising that at the end of 1970s nearly half of India's rural population lived below the poverty line. The 6th Five Year Plan of the country beginning from 1980 hence came up with a strategy of direct intervention with special programmes for elevation of the lots of people in rural poverty. Inspired by the success of localised programmes like 'food for work' and 'employment guarantee programme' in Maharashtra, two such programmes—Integrated Rural Development Programme and National Rural Employment Programme—were introduced across states of the country during the 6th Five Year Plan to improve the lot of the rural poor. Although the impact of these programmes in reducing poverty and generating employment opportunities has been found to be varied across different regions of the country, the overall impact has remained disappointing. Dreze (1990) observed the selection of beneficiaries in these programmes was largely biased against the poor in most part of the country except some states such as West Bengal, which had systems of decentralised local governance in rural areas already in place.

The market-oriented economic reforms unleashed in 1991, following a severe balance of payments crisis, have been keenly watched and widely debated in academic and policy making circle. While this macroeconomic structural adjustment programme was oriented to infuse greater competition, investment—both domestic and foreign, and efficiency; the programme was not meant to directly impact poverty and rural development. Hence, the targeted programmes aimed at reduction of poverty and uplift of rural development was continued in the 8th Plan beginning from 1992 and also in the subsequent Five Year Plans. However, the limited success of these different programmes in denting developmental backlogs in rural areas prompted academics and policy makers to call for measures for grassroots empowerment for better success of rural development initiatives. Instead of the top down approach of formulating programmes and allocating funds from the top to the target groups at the bottom, the necessity of the bottom-up approach involving the people and communities at the grassroots in both formulation and implementation of programmes was recognised. As an attempt to associate the communities at the grassroots in formulating and implementing policies for rural development, the constitution of India was amended for the 73rd time in 1992. The 73rd Amendment Act made provisions of setting up of *Panchayati Raj* institutions (PRIs) as statutory local self-governing bodies at the grassroots (Pal, 2004). The *Panchayats* have since been assigned greater roles and responsibilities for formulation and implementation of policies for rural development in the country.

Having achieved an accelerated growth rate for the economy as a whole during the 8th and the 9th Plans (1992–2002), ‘inclusive development’³ became the catchword during the 10th and 11th Five Year Plans (2002–2012). The idea was not only to sustain the high growth rate but also to achieve greater mass participation in the growth process and wider sharing of the fruits of growth so that all sections of the society are benefitted from the faster pace of growth. In this process of inclusive development, the role of PRIs assumed added significance as PRIs were given the major responsibility in implementation of programmes such as MGNREGS and National Food Security Act—programmes founded on the Right-based Approach⁴ to people’s basic economic requirements.

The functioning of PRIs and their delivery of expected results have been varied across various states of India (Narayana, 2005). Induction of the PRIs in Assam was neither prompt nor enthusiastic. However, decision of the Central Government to deliver the fund for several programmes of rural development directly to the PRI institutions only finally enthused even the reluctant state governments to initiate implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in their respective states. The first election to three-tier *Panchayats*⁵ under the Act took place in Assam in the year 2001. Though adequate empowerment of PRIs with transfer of funds, functions and functionaries is yet to be fully accomplished, two more rounds of *Panchayat* elections have been successfully held in the state and the Fifth State Finance Commission is now in tenure looking after devolution of fiscal resources between the Government of Assam and the *Panchayats* in the state (Government of India, 2001). Thus, despite their late inductions in the state, the PRIs have since dug their root in the rural socio-economic set up of Assam. Time is now ripe to probe (a) whether the induction of these institutions have succeeded in achieving some measure of decentralisation of power to the grassroots, and if so (b) whether such empowerment has resulted in expediting the pace of rural development.

In pursuit of this composite research question, a detailed field study was taken up in six carefully selected villages in Assam in the last quarter of 2012.

³ In the Indian context, the phrase inclusive growth gained currency during the 10th Five Year Plan (2002–07). The idea has been carried forward in the subsequent plans too. In fact, the approach paper to the 11th Five Year Plan (2007–12) was titled as ‘Towards Faster and More Inclusive Growth’ (Government of India, 2006).

⁴ There are two stakeholder groups in rights-based development—the rights holders (who do not experience full rights) and the duty bearers (the institutions obligated to fulfill the holders’ rights). Rights-based approaches aim at strengthening the capacity of duty bearers and empower the rights holders.

⁵ As per the provisions of the Act, three-tier *Panchayati Raj* system has been formed in the rural areas of the state comprising of *Gaon Panchayat* at village level, *Anchalik Panchayat* at block level and *Zilla Parishad* at district level except the autonomous districts under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Members to *Panchayat* are to be elected through periodic elections with reservations of specific number of constituencies for representation Scheduled Castes and Tribes and women. The Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution now lists the 29 subjects to be entrusted to the *Panchayats*. The Act has also made provision of establishing *Gaon Sabha* for ensuring direct democracy at the village level and District Planning Committee for preparing plans for the development of both rural and urban areas at the district level.

The present paper is the documentation of the findings from that field study and the inferences extracted thereof.

The paper has been organised in five sections. The next section enlists the materials and the methods used. A brief descriptive account of the sample villages is put up in the third section as a backdrop for presentation and discussion of the analytical output in the fourth section. The broad conclusions and their policy implications have been reported in the final section.

Materials and Methods

The Survey Design

Materials used for the study consist of the information gathered at three levels: at the *Gaon* (village) *Panchayat* level, at village level within the *Gaon Panchayat* (GP) and at household level within the village. Sampling for the field investigation was a multi-stage process, which is outlined below.

First, three non-contiguous and disperse plain districts of Assam have been purposively selected where the system of *Panchayati Raj* is applicable.⁶ The districts of Dhubri, Nalbari and Sonitpur were selected to represent areas with respectively low, moderate and high standard of living.⁷ Two GPs were then selected at random from each of the selected districts in the second stage. In the third stage, one village was selected from each of the GPs taken in the second stage. Finally, 5–10 per cent of households from the selected villages were selected at random for the household round of the survey. Thus, total of 6 GPs, 6 villages and 133 households have been surveyed in the field study (refer Figure 1 for details).

For recoding data at the three levels, three different structured questionnaires comprising of both open-ended and close-ended questions were used. While data at the GPs level were collected from the GP functionaries, the village level data were collected from *Gaon Burhas* (village headmen) and informed villagers. Household level data were collected by interviewing the head or an adult member of the sample household.

Analytical Framework

The core analytical strand of the study is examination of correspondence between effectiveness of the rural grassroots institutions, and attainments and advancement of development in sample villages. This line of analysis hence necessitates measurements of ‘effectiveness of rural grassroots institutions’, ‘development

⁶ The *Panchayati Raj* system is not applicable in the Sixth Schedule areas of Assam consisting of the two hill districts—Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills and the four plain districts—Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Chirang and Baksa.

⁷ By most development indicators including human development index and human poverty index of 2001, Dhubri is the poorest district of Assam. Nalbari falls in the medium category of districts by the same set of indicators. Sonitpur district is relatively better off compared to Nalbari.

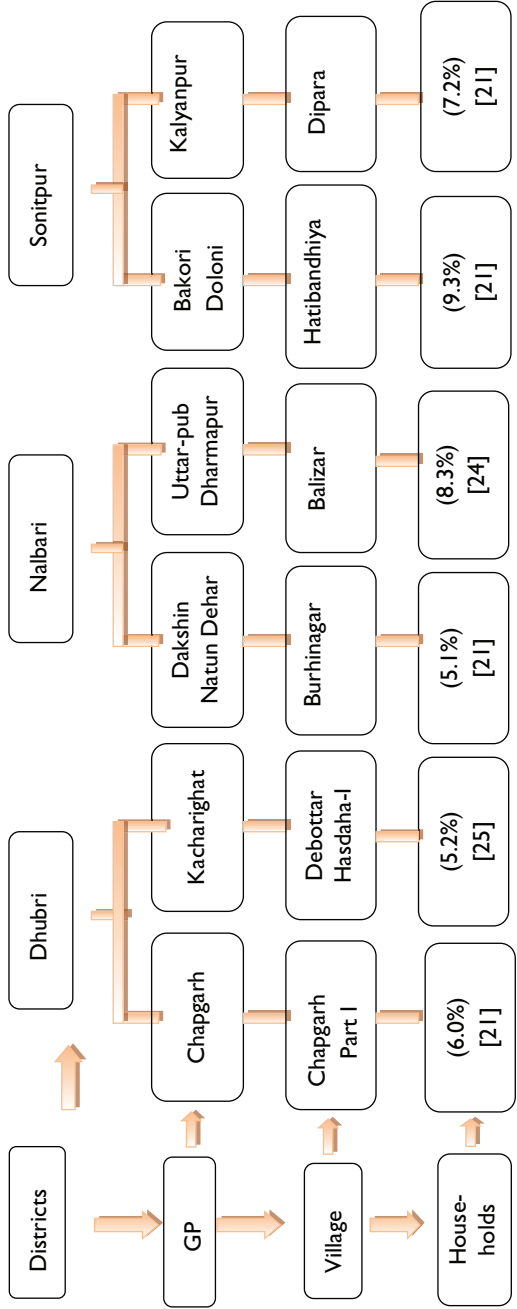


Figure 1: Sampling Design

Source: Authors' calculation.

Note: Figures in round brackets, (), and square brackets, [], represent percentages and numbers of households surveyed respectively.

attainment in a village' and 'improvement of development attainment in a village'. Three separate indices have been designed for these measurements in the sample villages. The methods of constructing these indices are outlined in the subsequent sections.

Having obtained the values of the three indices for the six sample villages, correspondence between effectiveness of rural grassroots level institutions and development attainments/improvements have been examined using radar diagrams.⁸

Institutional Effectiveness Index

Effectiveness of institutions of rural grassroots empowerment has been sought to be captured through three components namely GP activity intensity, effectiveness of the *Gaon Sabha* and people's perception about satisfactory functioning of various village level developmental institutions.

1. *The GP Activity Intensity Index (GPAII)*. On the basis of the activities generally performed by the GPs in Kerala and Tripura, where functioning of these institutions have been relatively better (Santhakumar, 2008), 15 probable activities⁹ have been listed in the Panchayat questionnaire and the involvement of the sample GPs in those activities has been recorded. To get a compact measure of functioning of the sample GPs, a GP activity intensity index has been constructed by assigning scores to each GP equal to numbers of activities involved by them in the reference period out of the listed 15 activities. Then, the score of each GP has been divided by the numbers of maximum probable activities, that is, 15. The ratio so obtained has been taken as the GP activity intensity index.
2. *The Gaon Sabha Effectiveness Index*. In the three-tier Panchayati Raj system the Gram Sabha (locally known as Gaon Sabha in Assam) is a significant component which is supposed to be the main catalyst for securing peoples participation and voice on decisions related to their own socio-economic well-being. The Gaon Sabha is a village-based assembly in which all the adults of the village enrolled in the electoral roll are equal members. Thus, a functioning Gaon Sabha can be a potent instrument for securing empowerment by the people at the grassroots.

⁸ Because of limitation of data pertaining to only six sample villages used in this study, application of regression analysis may not be feasible.

⁹ These 15 activities have no direct correspondence to the 29 departments listed in the Schedule Eleven of the Constitution of India meant to be transferred to PRIs according to the 73rd Amendment of the Constitutions. Rather these are the activities found to be commonly performed under GPs in Kerala and Tripura—states reputed to be among those where PRI are relatively more active. The activities are (1) construction/repair of roads, (2) building/repair of bridges, (3) construction of houses under IAY, (4) construction/repair of school buildings, (6) construction/repair of buildings for Primary Health Centres, (7) construction of sanitary toilets, (8) building of cattle sheds, (9) provision of drinking water supply facility, (10) facilitating provision of electricity connection, (11) construction/repair of minor irrigation projects, (12) building of river embankment, (13) construction of cremation ground, (14) maintenance of *Beel*/fisheries and (15) helping in formation of self-help groups/non-governmental organisation.

Effectiveness of the *Gaon Sabha* has been sought to be captured by means of two factors: (a) frequency of *Gaon Sabha* meetings and (b) attendance in these meetings.

As per norms set up in the 73rd Amendment, the *Gaon Sabha* should assemble at least four times in a year. The *Gaon Sabha* Holding Index is designed to capture the extent to which this norm is achieved in the sample villages. The index has been specified as per the following formula:

$$\text{Gaon Sabha Holding Index} = \frac{\text{No. of Gaon Sabhas held in the village in the reference year}}{\text{No. of Gaon Sabhas to be held during a year as per norms}} \quad (1)$$

The attendance factor has been captured by the proportion of members attending the last *Gaon Sabha* held in the village. The *Gaon Sabha* effectiveness index has been finally obtained by taking the geometric mean¹⁰ of the two proportions.

3. *People's Perception Index about Functioning of Institutions.* Besides the GPs functioning of four other village level institutions, namely the school management committees, self-help groups, non-governmental organisations and field management committees, which are supposed to be involved in implementation of developmental activities the rural areas, have also been included for people's perceptions about effectiveness of grassroots institutions for their socio-economic uplift. People's perception about effectiveness of these institutions constitutes our third component of institutional effectiveness index. The perception index is also comprised of two components: first, the ratio of functioning institutions to total numbers of five institutions mentioned above and second, the average percentage of sample households reporting satisfactory performance of the functional institutions. The perception index then has been obtained by taking a geometric mean of the two proportions.

Finally the institutional effectiveness index value for each sample village has been obtained by taking a geometric mean of GP activity intensity index, *Gaon Sabha* effectiveness index and people's perception index (PPI). Thus:

$$\text{IEI} = \sqrt[3]{\text{GPAII} \times \text{GSEI} \times \text{PPI}} \quad (2)$$

The steps involved in the construction of the institutional effectiveness index have been summarised in Figure 2.

¹⁰ For combining component indices into an overall index, geometric mean is now considered superior to arithmetic mean (UNDP, 2010). While arithmetic mean allows for perfect substitution of one component by another, the geometric mean allows only an imperfect substitution between components.

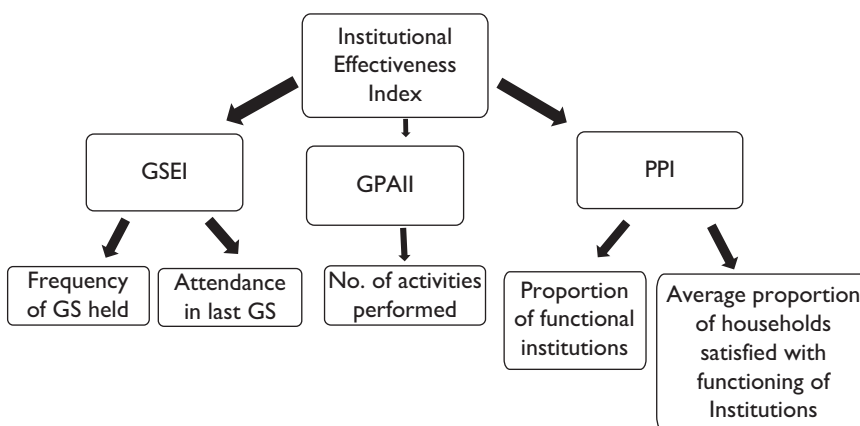


Figure 2: Steps involved in Construction of Institutional Effectiveness Index

Source: Authors' calculation.

Measurement of Development Attainment

Meaning and measurement of development is subject to interpretation according to the context. In the context of the present study, development attainment has been sought to be observed in terms of (a) the quality of living conditions, and (b) the consumption standard of the sample households. Accordingly, the development attainment index for a household has been obtained by combining this quality of living condition index (LCI) and possession of consumer durable index.

Living conditions of a sample household have been captured in four indicators, namely (a) the house type of dwelling, (b) status of electrification (c) place of defecation and (d) source of cooking energy. The sample households have been given scores as per their attainment in each sub-component. These absolute scores have then been normalised by dividing each score by the maximum possible score in each count. Then arithmetic mean of the values of the sub-components has been taken as the household level LCI.¹¹

Possession of consumer durable is an easily observable indicator of a household's consumption standard. It is a better indicator than the household's consumption expenditure as it is less prone to error of reporting and does not require to be adjusted for household size. A household's consumption standard is assumed to be proportional to the number types of consumer durables possessed by it from nine common types of such consumer durables, namely, bicycle, radio, television, mobile phone, motorcycle/scooter, computer, refrigerator, four-wheeler automobile and others (such as washing machine etc.) The component index of

¹¹ Though geometric mean has been earlier stated to be a better average for combining sub-indices, the geometric mean could not be used this time as some of the sub-indices assume the value zero in some cases.

possession of consumer durable is then obtained by dividing the number of types of consumer durables possessed by nine.

Combining these two sub-indices, the household's development attainment index (HhDI) has been obtained as the following:

$$\text{HhDI} = \sqrt[3]{\text{LCI} \times \text{CDI}} \quad (3)$$

For village level representation of the overall development attainments, it is necessary to take an average of the household level development index values. Since the distribution of an indicator of development attainments is likely to be positively skewed across households, arithmetic mean of the indicator is not the best representative average for the village. Since median is better representative under such circumstances, the median values of the development index of the village sample households have been taken as representatives of development attainments of the respective villages. Thus, development attainment index (DAI) of the village has been defined as,

$$\text{DAI} = \text{Median of HhDI Values of the Households in the Village} \quad (4)$$

Capturing Improvement in Development

To examine the progress of development attainments in the sample villages over the years, a rural development improvement index (DII) has been constructed. For this, indices of improvement in living condition and improvement in possession of consumer durables have been formulated first.

Improvement in living conditions of a household over last 10 years from the survey period has been counted in the number of areas of living conditions in which improvements have been attained.¹² Then the relative frequencies of the sample households against the different improvement scores were found out. The improvement index for the village is then calculated as the weighted sum of the improvement scores (with the respective relative frequencies as the weights) divided by the maximum possible improvement score. The improvement in living condition index (LCII) has thus been designed as:

$$\text{LCII} = \frac{\sum(\text{Improvement Score} \times \text{Relative Frequencies of Sample Households})}{\text{Maximum Possible Improvement Score}} \quad (5)$$

¹² Improvements were considered for four indicators of living conditions on which the index of living conditions is based. These are (1) the house type of dwelling (whether *kuchha*, semi-*pucca* or *pucca*), (2) status of electrification of the dwelling (whether electrified or not), (3) place of defecation (open defecation, *kuccha* toilet or sanitary toilet) and (4) source of cooking energy (traditional or commercial). Each household has been given a score from 0 to 4 depending upon the number of areas in which it has had improvements in the 10 years preceding the survey. A household which have had no improvement in any of the four areas gets the score 0 and the household that has had improvements in all the four areas gets the score 4.

Likewise, the index of improvement in possession of consumer durables (CDII) has been calculated.¹³ Finally, the index of development improvement for each sample village has been derived using the following formula:

$$DII = \sqrt[2]{LCII \times CDII} \quad (6)$$

A Descriptive Summary of the Sample Villages

The indices and other tools of analysis outlined in the previous sections are useful for carrying forward the analysis. However, the results of such analysis can give better insights when the results are juxtaposed with the prevailing socio-economic environment of the sample villages. To be able to contextualise the analytical findings in the socio-economic realities of the sample villages, a profiles of the studied villages have been outlined in this section using a few selective indicators (refer Table 1).

Social Composition of the Villages

As seen in Table 1, the six villages vary in population size. Numbers of households vary from the highest of 480 in Debottar Hasdaha to the lowest of 225 in Hatibandhiya. The villages also differ in terms of proportion of the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) components of the populations. While in four of the villages the percentage of ST/SC households is less than 3, in the other two villages there is significant presence of ST/SC population.

In terms of religion Chapgarh is predominantly Muslim, while Debottar Hasdaha is predominantly Hindu. Burhinagar and Balizar are mixed villages. Hatibandhiya and Dipara are exclusively Hindu. The latter is the one where concentration of ST/SC households is the highest.

Living Conditions of the Households across the Villages

General living conditions across the villages show variations as per different indicators. Proportion of household with *pucca* dwellings in the villages vary from 26 per cent to barely 1 per cent. In three of the villages 80 per cent or more of the dwellings are electrified but in another village only a quarter of the dwellings are electrified. As for sanitation none of the villages have attained a notable standard. Not even half of the dwellings in any of the villages have a

¹³ Improvement in possession of consumer durables of a household has been captured in the number of types of consumer durables added by the household from the nine types on which the possession of consumer durable index is based. For instance, if a household added two more types of consumer durables during the ten years preceding the survey, the household gets a score 2. Rest of the calculation procedure of the index of improvement in possession of consumer durables (CDII) is same as that of the living condition improvement index (LCII).

Table I: Socio-economic Indicators of the Villages

Village Name	Social Profile			Economic Profile		
	No. of Households	Percentage of ST/SC Households	Percentage of Hindu Population	Households Having Pucca Houses (%)	Percentage of Electrified Households	Households Having Sanitary Toilets (%)
		(II)	(III)	(IV)	(V)	(VI)
Chapgarh	350	01	15	20	35	43
Debottar Hasdaha	480	02	77	1	25	24
Burhinagar	412	42	60	15	80	19
Balizar	288	–	60	26	90	38
Hatibandhiya	225	03	100	25	92	33
Dipara	293	50	100	15	70	14

Village Name	Occupational Pattern		Profile of Infrastructure		
	Percentage of Cultivator Households	Percentage of Daily Wage Earning Households	Distance from		
		(VIII)	(IX)	Nearest High School	Nearest PHC
(I)	(VIII)	(IX)	(X)	(XI)	(XII)
Chapgarh	99	90	0	0	4
Debottar Hasdaha	50	50	1	1	20
Burhinagar	70	20	0	2	8
Balizar	85	10	1	0	6
Hatibandhiya	50	20	3	2	10
Dipara	15	20	1	0	6

Source: Field study.

Note: PHC, Public health centres.

sanitary toilet. But in two of the villages not more than one-fifth of dwellings have the facility.

Occupational Patterns in the Villages

While majority of the households in three sample villages are dependent on agriculture, exactly 50 per cent households in two villages are associated with agriculture. But agriculture-dependent households are only 15 per cent in the remaining village (Dipara). The village Chapgarh has the highest wage earning households (90 per cent) as against the lowest of 10 per cent of such households in Balizar.

Status of Infrastructure across the Villages

The villages are fairly well connected by all-weather *pucca* roads. Except in one village, *pucca* roads are within 1 kilometre distance from the villages. Although every village has at least one primary school, only two villages have a high school within 1 kilometre radius. For the other four villages the nearest high school is at a distance of 1 to 3 kilometres.

A Public Health Centre is available within 2 kilometres for each of the six villages. However, the distance from the nearest government hospital varies from the minimum of 4 kilometres for Chapgarh to the maximum of 20 kilometres from Debottar Hasdaha.

A close scrutiny of Table 1 reveals that the levels of socio-economic indicators and the availability of different infrastructure facilities do not show a uniform pattern across the villages. A village with a relatively better position in one count is disadvantaged in another count. In that sense the studied villages lack a priori tags of being 'otherwise relatively advanced' or 'otherwise relatively backward'. This lends justification to examination of mutual correspondence between development attainment, development improvement and effectiveness of village institutions reported in the next section.

Results and Discussion

Development Attainments and Improvements

Values of the development attainment index and the DII for the six studied villages have been presented in Table 2.

Figure 3, emerging out of the numbers in Table 2, is helpful for comparing the development attainment of the villages with their average level of development. While the development attainment of Debottar Hasdaha is below the average level of development, those of Balizar and Hatibandhiya are above the average level. Attainments of Chapgarh, Burhinagar and Dipara more or less are at par with the average level.

Table 2: Indices of Rural Development and Rural Development Progress

Village Name	Development Attainment Index	Development Improvement Index
Chapgarh	0.373	0.076
Debottar Hasdaha	0.215	0.049
Burhinagar	0.400	0.076
Balizar	0.504	0.085
Hatibandhiya	0.451	0.092
Dipara	0.403	0.081

Source: Field study.

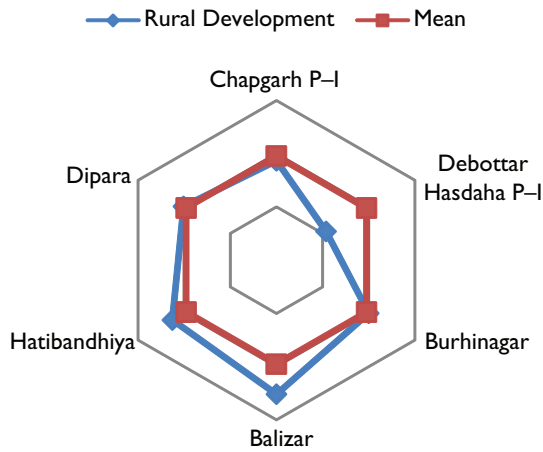


Figure 3: Development Status

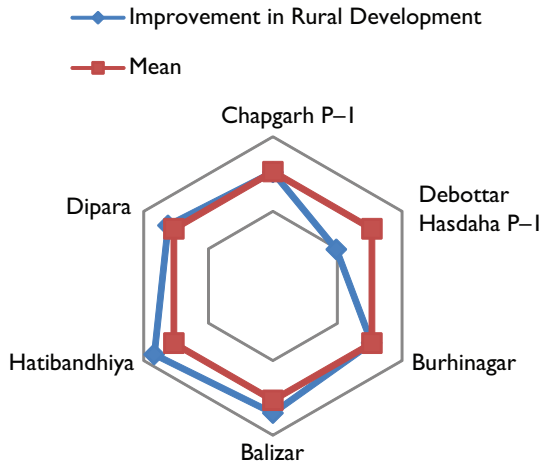


Figure 4: Improvement in Development

Almost a similar picture has been observed in improvements in attainment of development (refer Figure 4). The improvement is higher than average in villages where development status is higher. Villages with lower development attainments than the average are also the ones lagging behind average in the rate of improvement. Clearly, the relatively developed villages have attained higher status of development at the present because of their already developed position in the past and also due to their ability to sustain higher rates of development over the years. On the contrary, the sample villages lagging behind in terms of development attainments have remained less developed not only because of their less development status in the past but also due to their failure to achieve much progress towards development over the last decade. Absence of convergence in the development attainment villages studied is clearly visible.

Effectiveness of Village Institutions

The GPs that cover Hatibandhiya and Dipara are the most active among the sample GPs in terms of village development activities performed. In contrast, the GPs covering Chapgarh, Debottar Hasdaha and Balizar are the least active. This variation is observed despite the fact that during our reference period all the GPs across the State of Assam were supposedly engaged in similar set of activities as guided by the Central Sector Schemes and Centrally Sponsored Schemes meant to be implemented through the *Panchayat*.

Although *Gaon Sabhas* held under all the GPs studied were found to be rather thinly participated, *sabhas* held by the GP covering village Dipara were relatively more effective while those held by the GP covering the village Hatibandhiya were the least effective. (Table 4).

As depicted by the PPI, sample respondents of village Chapgarh were the most enthusiastic regarding the effectiveness of the village level institutions under study within their village. People's perception for such institutions was the lowest in Debottar Hasdaha among the sample villages.

On the whole, as indicated by the institutional effectiveness index values, grassroots level developmental institutional set-up is the most effective village Dipara of Sonitpur district and the least effective in Debottar Hasdaha of Dhubri district.

Correspondence between Effectiveness of Rural Grassroots Institutions and Attainment/Improvement in Rural Development

The values indices of development attainment, improvement in development and institutional effectiveness across the sample villages have been brought together in this section to identify possible inter-relation between development and institutional strength as revealed by the experience of the six villages studied.

The inter-relations between level of development attainment, improvement in development and institutional effectiveness have been examined in the radar diagrams in Figure 5.

Table 3: Institutional Effectiveness Index

Village Name	GPAII	GSEI	PPI	IEI
Chapgarh Part I	0.333	0.126	0.561	0.286
Debottar Hasdaha Part I	0.333	0.109	0.390	0.242
Burhinagar	0.400	0.151	0.526	0.317
Balizar	0.333	0.127	0.418	0.261
Hatibandhiya	0.533	0.103	0.402	0.281
Dipara	0.533	0.250	0.498	0.405

Source: Field study.

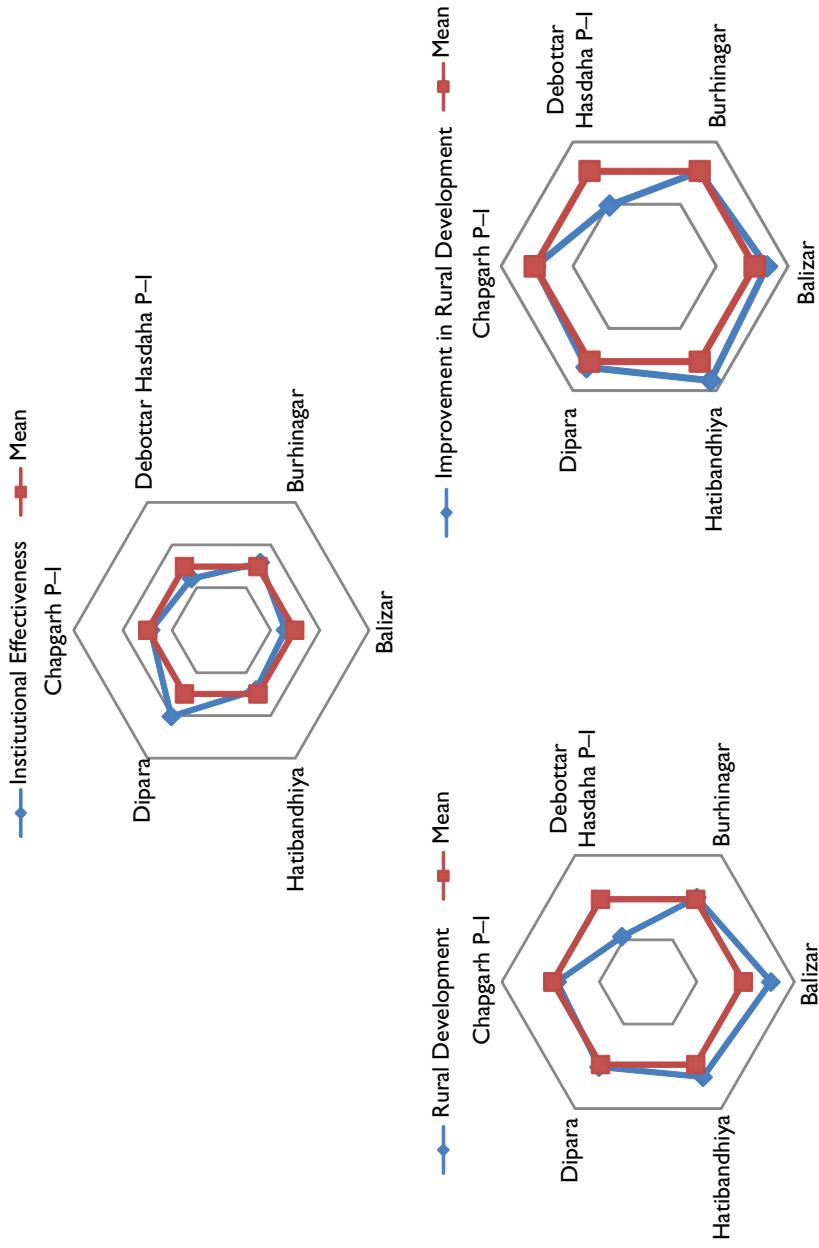


Figure 5: Comparison of Rural Development and Institutional Effectiveness

Source: Field study.

These diagrams show that, institutional effectiveness is more or less similar to the average effectiveness in Chapgarh and Burhinagar. The development attainment and improvement in development in these villages are also more or less at the average level. Effectiveness of village institutions in Balizar and Hatibandhiya is also almost around the average but they have succeeded in achieving higher levels of both development and development improvements than the respective average levels. Although Dipara is found to have relatively more effective village institutions among the sample villages, its level of development and its progress over time in development attainment is found almost at the average level. Institutional strength in Debottar Hasdaha is found to be least among the sample villages and its development attainment and development improvement are also found to be the least.

For quantification of the correspondence between *Gaon Sabha* effectiveness and attainment of development achievements in the sample villages, Pearson's correlation coefficient between the *Gaon Sabha* effectiveness index and development attainment index has been computed. Correlation coefficient assumes a positive value of 0.129 indicating a positive correspondence between the variables.

On the whole, it may be concluded that the level of development and the improvement in development attainments are higher in those villages where village level developmental institutions are more effective.

Inter-connections between Rural Development and Gaon Panchayat Activity

Finding the positive relation between institutional effectiveness and development attainment, we were induced to examine whether there is specifically any relation between effectiveness of GPs and development attainment as per the experiences in the sample villages. Figure 6 represents the relation between GP activity intensity with development attainment and improvement in development respectively in the villages.

The radars show that GPs in Debottar Hasdaha are relatively less active as compared to the mean level for all the six villages, and the village also lags in both development attainment and development improvement behind the respective average levels. But Hatibandhiya's GPs are more active and its development and improvement in development are also found relatively higher. Though GPs in Chapgarh are less active, it has succeeded in achieving development attainment and improvements in it nearly at the average level. All these three indicators are almost at the average level in Burhinagar. However, two distinct exceptions can be observed in the diagram. While Dipara is having average levels of development and improvement in development with more active GPs, Balizar is having relatively higher development achievements and its improvement with less active GPs. In general, a positive correspondence of development attainment and development improvement with the level of GP activities in the villages can be traced.

The above findings make a strong case for deepening of the institutions meant for securing greater participation of people at the grassroots in development agenda of the state. Specifically, further empowerment of the PRIs can be instrumental for expediting the process of rural development in the state.

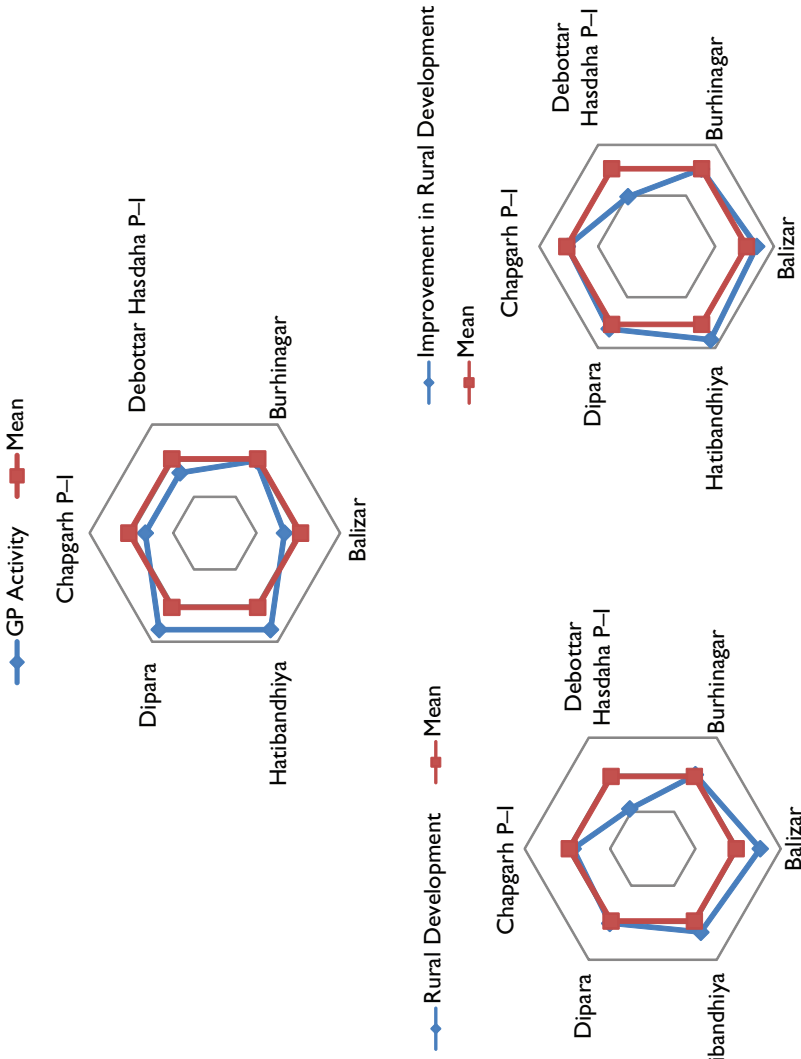


Figure 6: Comparison of Rural Development and Effectiveness of GPs
Source: Field study.

Conclusion

This study, despite its limited coverage of only six villages, indicates that development process across villages in Assam may not have had much convergence. While better off villages might have succeeded in further raising their levels of development attainment, many less developed villages have probably tended to lag further behind. This finding calls for intensification of developmental efforts in relatively more backward areas.

The institutions for grassroots empowerment have been found to play a critical role in the dynamics of rural development. Both development attainments and improvements in development attainment are observed to be higher in the villages where these institutions are better entrenched.

Our findings make a strong case for strengthening of institutions of rural grassroots empowerment in the state. There is an urgent need for expansion and intensification of the activities of these institutions for the sake of expediting development attainments of the rural population of the state. Empowering the PRIs in the true and full spirit of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act needs to be carried further forward and accomplished quickly. In particular, vitalising the *Gaon Sabhas*, the basic forum for participation of people at the grassroots in self-governance, is the need of the hour. In the absence of effective *Gaon Sabhas*, the empowerment process can stop percolating down to the grassroots, which in turn can block the development process from being truly inclusive.

Appendix A

Table A.1: Details of *Gaon Sabha* Meetings held by the Sample GPs in 2011–2012

Panchayat Name	No. of GS Held	Percentage of Members Attended
Chapgarh GP	4	1.6
Kacharighat GP	3	1.6
Dakshin Natun Dehar GP	4	2.3
Uttar-pub Dharmapur GP	4	1.6
Bakori Doloni GP	4	1.1
Kalyanpur GP	3	8.3

Source: Field study.

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