Social Accountability and Beneficiary Participation: Rural Local Self-governing Institutions (LSGIs) in Barpeta District, Assam

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By

Pankaj Kumar Kalita

Registration No.: 126141015

Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Guwahati, Assam, India – 781039

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Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Guwahati, Assam, India – 781039

Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis, entitled "**Social Accountability and Beneficiary Participation: Rural Local Self-governing Institutions (LSGIs) in Barpeta District, Assam**", is the result of investigation carried out by me in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS), Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati (IITG), India, under the supervision of Dr. Pahi Saikia, Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS), Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati (IITG), India. The thesis, or any part of this, has not been previously submitted for any other degree. This is my original work.

In keeping with the general practice of reporting observations, due acknowledgements have been made, wherever the work is based on the findings of other investigators.

January, 2020

IIT Guwahati

Pankaj Kumar Kalita

PhD Research Scholar

(Political Science)

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, India

Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Guwahati, Assam, India – 781039

Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis, entitled "**Social Accountability and Beneficiary Participation: Rural Local Self-governing Institutions (LSGIs) in Barpeta District, Assam**", submitted by Mr Pankaj Kumar Kalita for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, India, embodies research work carried out under my supervision and guidance. The present thesis, or any part of it, has not been submitted to any other university or institute for award of any degree or diploma. He has fulfilled all the requirements according to the rules of the institute for submission of thesis.

January, 2020
IIT Guwahati

Dr. Pahi Saikia
(PhD Supervisor)
Associate Professor (Political Science)
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, India

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Content

Abstract

Social accountability mechanisms (SAMs) allow transparency and accountability of local self-governing institutions (LSGIs) in the implementation of development programs. Participatory governance literature considers social accountability mechanisms as a key component in development policy making to effectively connect the target population, the beneficiaries with the local self-governing institutions and deepen democracy. However, due to structural conditions and marginalization the beneficiaries fail to effectively contribute to participatory governance and social accountability mechanisms. Social accountability mechanisms are often used and manipulated by political elites, including the elected representatives of the local self-governing institutions, local bureaucrats and affluent villagers, leading to a governance gap that further contributed to marginalization of the beneficiaries. Although social accountability mechanisms have gained attention as an important participatory mechanism in the developing countries there is a lack of literature that adequately explores the factors that may have an impact and challenge beneficiary participation in social accountability practices in the rural areas. An important question that needs to be addressed is, 'what explains the lack of effective beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms organized in local self-governing institutions?' Drawing from secondary sources, in-depth interviews and preliminary surveys, this study examined this particular question on participatory governance in India. The study was based in Assam where we selected a focused study of villages in the district of Barpeta. Two rural development schemes, the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) and Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme were selected to analyse the problem of beneficiary participation in Assam. The study argues that participation is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for empowering village people in rural India. We also argue that beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms may be influenced and challenged by patronage politics, and socio-structural conditions and prevailing cultural norms. The study also explains the type and degree of participation in social accountability practices, particularly social audit in Assam. The study argues that local governing institutions become the sites of intense political competition. Political elites use clientele relations to distribute selective incentives and benefits of the rural development schemes. Socio-structural conditions and cultural norms, such as gender discrimination, power and domination embedded in the caste system, reinforce the

patronage networks which in turn, effect the participation of beneficiaries in social audit forums, door-to-door campaigns and other forms of available participatory practices in India. The study therefore tries to make a humble attempt to contribute to the literature and empirical understanding of participatory governance, deepening democracy and social accountability reforms in India.

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Maps

List of Appendix

Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full form
AAP	Aam Admi Party
AGP	Axom Gana Parishad
AIUDF	All Indian United Democratic Front
ANC	African National Congress
AP	Andhra Pradesh
BDOs	Block Development Officers
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BPF	Bodoland People's Front
BPFF	Bodo People's Progressive Front
BPL	Below Poverty Line
CAG	Comptroller and Auditor General
CCs	Citizen Charters
CDPs	Community Development Projects
CPI-M	Communist Party of India –Marxist
CPI-ML	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)
CRCs	Citizen Reports Cards
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DPAP	Drought Prone Areas Programme
DPC	District Programme Coordinator
DRDA	District Rural Development Agency
EGS	Education Guarantee Scheme
FAs	Field Assistants
GP	Gaon (Gram) Panchayat
HHs	Households
IADP	Intensive Agricultural District Programme
IAY	Indira Awas Yojana
ICSSR	Indian Council of Social Science Research

IIT	Indian Institute of Technology
INC	Indian National Congress
ITDP	Intensive Tribal Development Programme
KCC	Kisan Credit Card
LSGIs	Local Self-governing Institutions
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act
MGNREGS	Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme
MKSS	Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
NCP	Nationalist Congress Party
NES	National Extension Service
NIRDPR	National Institute of Rural development and Panchayati Raj
OBC	Other Backward Classes
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PAPD	Participatory Action Plan Development
PD	Programme Director
PETS	Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys
PG	Participatory Governance
PMAY-G	Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana – Gramin
PRIs	Panchayati Raj Institutions
PT	Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party – PT), Brazil
RTI	Right to Information
SAF	Social Audit Forum
SAMs	Social Accountability Mechanisms
SAU	Social Audit Unit
SC	Scheduled Caste
SECC	Socio Economic and Caste Census
SFDA	Small Farmers Development Agency
SIPRD	State Institute of Panchayat and Rural development

SIRD	State Institute of Rural Development
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TMC	Trinamul Congress
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UP	Uttar Pradesh
VCDCs	Village Council Development Councils
VDCs	Village Development Councils

Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Participation of beneficiaries in social accountability mechanisms (SAMs) is essential to reduce the governance gap that exists in the delivery of public goods and services in the local self-governing institutions (LSGIs) because it allows beneficiaries to monitor development policy decisions (Gibson and Woolcock, 2008). Beneficiary participation ensures transparency and accountability of the local self-governing institutions and allows the scope of participation for the disadvantaged sections of the society (De Sousa Santos, 1998).

In India, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), with elected representatives, are considered as the decentralized institutions that acquired recognition as institutions with the scope of electoral participation.[1] Introduction of social accountability mechanisms to monitor the functioning of these institutions by the beneficiaries provides the space for deepening democracy through networks between the institutions and the beneficiaries (Reames, 2016). Despite benefits, in practice beneficiary participation has been limited and faced challenges in many developing countries including India (Davies, 2001: 194). Scholars, therefore, raise a pertinent question: "If participation is so rewarding and effective, why do citizens fail to participate? (Wandersman and Giamartino, 1980: 218)."

In India, efforts have been made to strengthen the local self-governing institutions and increase engagement of citizens with these institutions. In India, social accountability mechanisms such as social audit have been designed to involve local citizens in the evaluation and the execution of rural development schemes such as the *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)* and the *Indira Awas Yojana (IAY)*. Social accountability mechanisms have been introduced to address the problems related to equitable sharing and distribution of benefits attached to development schemes, over-bureaucratization, misuse of funds and resources. Participation of local citizens through social accountability mechanisms is, therefore, intended to improve governance and public service delivery. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India revitalized the democratic design of the panchayati raj institutions by incorporating provisions for regular elections and

[1] Robinson argued that India's panchayati raj reforms were introduced in the early 1990s to 'galvanize local democracy and revitalize grassroots development efforts' (Mark Robinson, "*A decade of Panchayati Raj Reforms: The Challenge of Democratic Decentralization in India*" in L. C. Jain (ed.) *Decentralization and Local Governance*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 10.

the reservation of seats in the elected bodies for the disadvantaged sections of the society. Further expansion of democratic spaces in these institutions took place in 2005 with the initiatives of social accountability mechanisms, especially social audit in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. These initiatives succeeded in some states while in others they met with severe challenges (Manor, 2009; Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006). The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India Report (Report No. 8 of 2016) identified Assam as a state that failed to implement social accountability mechanisms. What explains the lack of effective beneficiary participation in local self-governing institutions in some states in India including Assam? This study aims to fill up this empirical gap in the literature.

1.2 Research questions and objectives of the study

The primary research questions that the study addresses are as follows:

- What explains the lack of effective beneficiary participation in local self-governing institutions?
- What are the factors that may influence the scope of beneficiary participation in local self-governing institutions?

These questions are addressed with the help of a case study in Assam. The study conducted in-depth analysis of the challenges of beneficiary participation in the Barpeta district of Assam.

The main objective of this research was to explore the factors that may challenge beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in the local self-governing institutions of rural Assam, especially in the district of Barpeta. Barpeta district is located in the western part of Assam. The figure (Map 1.1) below shows the map of Assam and its districts.

Map 1.1: Map of Assam and its districts

Source: www.mapsofindia.com (2017)

1.3 Rationale of the study and case selection

Existing research emphasizes on top-down approaches where development projects are assessed on the basis of the capacity of the state to deliver public goods (Kohli, 2001). However, bottom-up approaches of development need deeper scrutiny. Multiple factors including the capacity of the target population, beneficiary participation, local political practices and socio-cultural norms may have an impact on effective implementation of development policies and programs at the grass roots level. Social accountability mechanisms which allows us to understand the bottom-up approaches and the inter linkages between state and society in this context, need further exploration (Ferraz and Finan, 2008; Lakha et al, 2015).

Issues like breach of public policy regularities, accumulation of resources by the advantageous groups, low level of transparency and the absence of beneficiaries in the decision-making process are imminent problems in the functioning of local self-governing institutions. Beneficiaries face challenges to evaluate the execution of development programs (Agarwal, 2000). Citizen-monitoring mechanisms through social accountability mechanisms with the effective beneficiary participation are essential to improve development outcomes. However, citizen-monitoring mechanisms such as social accountability mechanisms are hindered by a number of factors such as political interventions, lack of civic networks among others (Lakha et al, 2015). Some studies show that patronage politics (clientelism) minimizes the effectiveness of beneficiary participation and limits the practice of good governance (Stokes et al, 2013; Mansuri and Rao, 2012; Moseley, 2017). In order to improve the level of participation of the beneficiaries in local self-governing institutions it is important to first identify the specific contexts and the factors that may impede or influence beneficiary participation.

This research makes a humble attempt to contribute to this set of literature on local governance. The study tries to understand the problems and challenges of beneficiary participation in a specific cultural context in Assam. The study selects one district in Assam – Barpeta where the two rural development schemes have been implemented and panchayati raj institutions are functioning as local self-governing institutions (Yin, 1989). Purposive case selection allowed the scope to choose relevant cases (Merriam, 1998; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003; Patton, 1990) from where the study could gain meaningful insights (Patton, 2002). The district of Barpeta cannot represent the entire state of Assam. However, selection of Barpeta district as the study area rests on the rationale that this district is heterogeneous in terms of its demographic and socio-cultural characteristics. Barpeta was also identified as one of the first set of districts where social accountability mechanisms were initiated in Assam. It was also reported that effective beneficiary participation was missing in Barpeta when social audit was conducted in November, 2014 (Report No. 8 of 2016).

1.4 Argument of the study

Review of the literature shows that patronage politics, where the local politicians provide selective benefits to the beneficiaries to gain electoral support, may have an impact on beneficiary participation and challenge beneficiary participation in social accountability practices. Scholars argue that local politicians are more likely to ensure and sustain the electoral support from the constituents because of competitive elections (Bardhan et al, 2008). Political parties and politicians may use state resources (such as funds or benefits of rural development schemes) to mobilize the constituents to gain electoral support (Maiorano, Das and Masiero, 2018). Scholars show that the recipients of the government-sponsored benefits such as housing facilities are more likely to vote for the political patrons, the parties and politicians who treat the beneficiaries as clients. Beneficiaries are also political constituents (Bardhan et al, 2008). Loyalty and gratitude of the recipients may be expressed in the form of electoral support. Therefore, electoral participation among the clients as these studies show is significantly high. The study analyzes two government-funded rural development schemes, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and Indira Awas Yojana. The local level politicians elected to the village panchayats are responsible for the implementation of the schemes. Literature review shows that a large number of public funded development schemes provide the resources to the political parties and politicians in power. Public funds meant for the schemes are often diverted and channelized through indirect means like allocation of local contracts to middlemen and contractors involved in the supply of tangible materials such as housing materials for the construction of houses allocated under the Indira Awas Yojana scheme or the road construction materials under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. The profits that the local contractors and middlemen make out of the local business and contracts are shared between different sets of actors involved in the process including the local politicians and gram panchayat officials to serve the vested interests (Sadanandan, 2012). The marginalized sections of the society such as the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and poor villagers often get involved in the clientele relations because of their dependency in the state-funded livelihood schemes and resources. Existing social norms and social conditions facilitate the clientelistic links between the patrons and their constituents in the villages ((Njuguna et al, 2016). Certain level of education is essential for effective participation (Rosenstone, Hansen, and Reeves, 1993). Illiteracy or low education attainment of the marginalized beneficiaries therefore acts as barriers to access information and participatory governance.

Social audit is a social accountability mechanism where the ordinary people including the beneficiaries can raise issues and ask questions to the politicians in power. The attempt is often made to prevent the participation of beneficiaries who raise their voices or ask questions on the implementation of the schemes. Political interference in social accountability practices is therefore largely prevalent. This makes citizen participation ineffective. For example, in the state of West Bengal, recipients of benefits provided by Left-owned *gaon panchayats* largely voted for the Left parties; however, they were unlikely to participate in *gram sabhas* and audit process of *gaon panchayat* to raise issues on scheme implementation against the local politicians affiliated to the Left parties (Bardhan et al, 2008).

The current study emphasizes that decentralized service delivery mechanisms and rural development schemes have contributed to democratic deepening in India to a certain extent, yet the participatory practices like social accountability available in different parts of the country are not sufficient to guarantee social justice, empowerment and overall socio-economic development of the marginalized sections of the rural areas. The findings of the study, in fact, reveals that beneficiary participation is low and is affected by a number of factors like political affiliation, social norms and socio-economic conditions of the beneficiaries. In the face of prevailing social norms, gender, caste hierarchy, political intervention and embedded patronage links, participation is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to reduce the governance gap in the rural areas in developing countries like India.

1.5 Understanding key concepts

1.5.1 Beneficiary Participation

Beneficiary participation can be defined as 'a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, and the decisions and resources which affect them (World Bank, 1996: 3).' In this study, beneficiary participation refers to the process of engagement of beneficiaries in the social accountability mechanisms. Beneficiary participation, in this study, indicates three aspects: (i) participation of beneficiary in social accountability mechanisms, especially social audit forums to gather and share information on rural development schemes; (ii) participation of beneficiaries in ground level verification of work carried out by the local self-governing institutions; and (iii) participation of beneficiaries in the discussion over social accountability mechanisms such as the social audit report in the meetings held at the local level by gram panchayats.

1.5.2 Local Self-governing Institutions (LSGIs)

Local self-governing institutions are very essential for democratic decentralization. According to Blair, local self-governing institutions can be conceptualized as 'a meaningful authority devolved to local units of governance that are accessible and accountable to the local citizenry, who enjoy full political rights and liberty (Blair, 2000: 21).' This study refers to rural local self-governing institutions, particularly the panchayati raj institutions at the rural level where powers have been decentralized. Village *(gaon/gram)* panchayats are the local self-governing institutions. Gaon/gram panchayat means the panchayat instituted at the village level in India. In the three-tier system of panchayati raj institutions in India, gaon/gram panchayat (village panchayat) are the institutions at the lowest level of the structure. Gaon/gram panchayats are formally constituted as the local government institutions in the rural areas of India (Sixth Scheduled rural areas are excluded). The study uses both the terms – *gaon panchayat* and *gram panchayat* – to mean the village panchayat. *Gaon* or *gram* means village. In India, panchayati raj institutions have been considered as the 'institutionalized form of local government ordained by the Indian legislation (Mitra, 2001: 109).' There are differences between *gram sabha* and *gram panchayat* (GP). Article 40 of the Constitution of India provides for the institution of panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) in the sub-federal states in India. In order to operationalize panchayati raj institutions in accordance to Article 40, the Balwantarai Mehta Committee was appointed in 1957. The committee recommended the establishment of a three-tier panchayati raj institutions: the *gram panchayat* at the village level, *panchayat samiti* at the block or intermediate level, and *zilla parishad* at the district level. Therefore, panchayati raj institutions comprised of elected representatives, *gaon panchayat* became the lowest unit of government to implement development programs at the grass roots level (Singh, 1994; Mohanty, 1995). The 73rd amendment of the Constitution of India introduced the *Gram Sabha*. *Gram sabha* comprises of all the voters (persons registered in the electoral rolls) in the panchayat area at the village level. *Gram sabha* is the electorate of a *gaon panchayat* (Article 243A; Nambiar, 2001). *Gram sabha* provides the opportunities to the villagers to directly get involved in the decision making process of the *gaon panchayat* and exercise participatory rights (Mathew, 2003). Besley and others in a study stated that *gram sabhas* are the 'village meetings called by the electoral local government (gram panchayat) to discuss resource allocation decisions in the village (Besley, Pande and Rao, 2005: 649).' Nambiar also argued that the decision-making process of the *gram panchayat* is valid if the *gram sabha* endorses the decisions. Therefore, the *gram sabha* is an institution of direct democracy rather than representative democracy introduced in India (Nambiar, 2001: 3114). State legislature enjoys the discretion of powers and responsibilities that can be entrusted to the *gram sabha* (Article 243A).

1.5.3 Social Accountability Mechanisms

Social accountability mechanisms refer to accountability that relies on civic engagement, where ordinary citizen can participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability (World Bank, 2004). Social audit is a mechanism used in social accountability. Scholars define social accountability as 'broad range of actions that citizens, independent media, and civil society organizations can use to hold public offcials and public servants accountable (Malena, Foster and Singh, 2004).'

According to section 17 of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act – MGNREGA (2005), social audit refers to a process of monitoring implementation of rural development schemes. It is an institutionalized accountability tool that engages local citizens to conduct the scrutiny of the implementation of any work rendered under the rural development schemes. Section 17 of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act provides for social accountability particularly, social audit to be mandatorily conducted in Gram Sabha once in every six months. The Operational Guidelines, 2008 for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act also stated in its provisions that social audit has to be conducted by the Gram Sabha after every six months in a year.

1.6 Methodology and research design

A research process involves several important steps of research, framing the research problem, reviewing the relevant literature, data collection, data analysis and analysis of the findings of research (Punch; 2013; Stake, 1995). Prior to conducting the actual field research, a researcher is involved in planning that involves reviewing the existing literature to develop a theoretical framework. Theoretical framework guides the researcher to identify the data collection strategies (Cepeda and Martin, 2005; Punch, 2013; Stake, 1995).

Data collection is followed by data analysis where the collected data are classified, tabled and processed to analyze the problem statement. It is important to note here that research is a continuous exercise where the researcher may engage in reviewing more literature, going to the field again and again, and analyzing data repeatedly to draw conclusions for the study (Silverman, 2005; Cepeda and Martin, 2005; Hartley, 2004; Stake, 1995). In order to conduct the current study, the researcher conducted a pilot study of the field. Collecting data from the villages was followed by analysis of data collected in the field and further incorporation of the relevant literature to formulate the arguments in the thesis.

The study uses a qualitative case study approach to explore the research problem using in-depth analysis of a single case (Cresswell, 1998). The case was selected because of an interest in such cases (See Lijphart, 1971). The study used mostly interviews with the beneficiaries; elite interviews with the concerned government officials (like panchayat secretary), elected representatives (like ward member and president), other concerned authorities (like Director of Social Audit in Assam), local politicians, civil society organization activists and villagers other than the beneficiaries. Semi-structured questions were prepared to conduct interviews with the beneficiaries selected for the study; and, focused group discussions with the selected beneficiaries. The study conducted 23 focused group discussions with the beneficiaries identified as respondents for the current study. In the focused group discussions, 4-21 persons participated. As identified by Stake, there are three kinds of research design techniques: a) intrinsic, b) instrumental, and c) collective (Stake, 1995). Doing research for a specific case is related to intrinsic case study design where independent variables are easily identifiable. Instrumental case study design involves understanding the general phenomena. In instrumental case study research, the researcher has the freedom to choose the respondents or the settings. Instrumental case study design allows the researcher to take a specific case to explore from different perspectives. In a collective case study design, multiple cases can be studied to have a better understanding of a phenomenon. In this kind of a research design, the researcher prefers to study more than one particular case where comparison of cases is made (Stake, 1995). Comparing more than one case leads the researcher to reach to a better conclusion (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003; Punch, 2013; George and Bennett, 2005). The study adopts an instrumental case study research design while choosing one specific case.

This study uses a descriptive and detailed case study analysis. This study follows Cresswell's case study design (Cresswell, 1998: 61).' The method of analysis used in the current study was contextual and descriptive. As the study aims to explore the factors that may challenge and influence beneficiary participation of social accountability mechanisms organized in local self-governing institutions, the core research participants are the beneficiaries of the Indira Awas Yojana and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. The participants selected for this study live in rural areas in different cultural settings. The participants are a heterogeneous group of individuals selected on the basis of different socio-economic grounds including economic conditions, caste identity, gender and the level of education.

In-depth interviews used in this study offered the scope to ask the respondents relevant questions, listen to their narratives, observe their day-to-day activities and gain access into the village settings so that the respondents could share their experiences on local self-governance (Evans and Jones, 2011; Kusenbach, 2003; Carpiano, 2009).

Table 1.1: Summary of respondents of elite interviews in the study

Sl. No.	*Type of interviewee(s)*	*Location of interview*	*Number of respondents*
1	GP President	GP Office	3
2	GP Secretary	GP Office	2
3	GP Ward Member	GP Office	16
4	BDO	BDO Office	2
5	District Project Director	DRDA Office, Barpeta	1
6	Director, Social Audit, Assam	Social Audit Office, Assam	1
7	Deputy Director, SIPRD, Assam	SIPRD Office, Assam	1
8	Faculty, SIPRD, Assam	SIPRD Office, Assam	5
9	Faculty, NIRD, Assam	NIRD Office	1
10	Faculty, NIRD, Hyderabad	SIPRD Office, Assam	2
10	Local Politicians (excluding elected to GPs)	GP Office and Home	8
11	Local CSO activist	Home	3
12	Villagers (Non-beneficiaries)	GP Office and Home	12
13	*Total elite interviewees (in number)*		*57*

This study also uses an elite interview method. This method was used to conduct interviews with the office bearers/the representatives elected to the panchayati raj institutions, officials and other village residents. Table 1.1 summarizes the details of the respondents of elite interviews of the study. We interviewed i) *gaon panchayat* Presidents ii) *gaon panchayat*secretaries iii) *gaon panchayat* ward members iv) block development officers (BDOs) v) the District Project Director, vi) the Director of Social Audit, Assam vii) the Deputy Director, State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development (SIPRD), Assam viii) teaching staffs, SIPRD, Assam ix) teaching staffs, National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR), North Eastern Regional Centre, Assam x) teaching staffs, NIRDPR, Hyderabad, xi) local politicians other than those elected to the gaon panchayat xii) civil society organization (CSO) activists and xiii) villagers other than the beneficiaries. In total, we interviewed 57 respondents for elite interviews for the study.

Interviewing these participants was essential as they provided critical information on the formulation and implementation of development policies at the local level (Harvey, 2010: 2).

1.6.1 Maintaining ethical standards

Ethical issues in research require immense attention from the researcher (Wassenaar, 2006). Maintaining ethical standards is essential not only during the course of field work, but also during the time of reporting the findings (Mason, 1996; Miles and Hubermann, 1994). It is important that we share the information with the respondents and the purpose of the study before conducting the interviews. This study made an effort to share substantive information on the purpose of this particular research with the respondents. This was useful and necessary to build rapport with the respondents (Ritchie and Lewis, 2013). We also acquired prior approval and consent of the respondents for participation in the surveys, interviews and the group interactions. An introductory session with the village elders before conducting the interviews helped to further conduct the research smoothly (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Issues of confidentiality were discussed with the respondents and we tried to maintain confidentiality throughout the research (Miles and Hubermann, 1994).

1.6.2 Documentary evidence and data analysis

Research on available documents is important for conducting research in social sciences. The study reviewed existing documents on local self-governing institutions, the government schemes and documents containing beneficiary information to understand participatory governance in Assam. Relevant documents were collected from different libraries and government offices in Assam.

In order to analyze the field notes, this study used a content analysis method. Content analysis method 'involves the study of existing documents, either to understand their substantive content or to illuminate deeper meanings which may be revealed by their style and coverage (Ritchie: 2013).' The respondents were asked relevant questions on the functioning of the panchayats, implementation of rural development schemes, social audits, their participation and challenges they faced. For the purpose of data analysis, this study used a content-based interpretative method, which provided a better understanding of cases as it enabled us to do a unit level analysis of the interviews (Ayres, Kavanaugh and Knafl, 2003). The responses were identified and catalogued during the course of the research (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The responses were themetized and classified according to the theoretically developed variables. The study used key words and sentences from the interviews 'to establish patterns that reflected the experiences of the respondents and the events recorded for this study (Ravenscroft and Rogers, 2003: 188).' The study used content-based interpretative method to further explore the emergent themes hidden in the contents (Ayres, Kavanaugh and Knafl, 2003). Using theoretical framework and the context of the field study, the study developed its arguments.

Much of the analysis is interpretative within the social, cultural and historical contexts. The semi-structured questions for a preliminary survey are only used to set benchmarks for questions related to core issues informing the analysis of data collected from the interviews. Preliminary survey-based data are used as supplementary to enhance the qualitative findings.

1.6.3 Note on fieldwork

The field work for this study was partly conducted in 2016 and 2017. Selection of the research site and the research participants selected for this study was guided by accessibility of resources and data to conduct the study (Merriam, 1998; Abbott, 1992; Patton, 2002). Familiarity with the region, the local language and the terrain allowed us to gain access to the village residents in Barpeta district. Being a native and a resident of Baksa district in Assam (Baksa was carved out of some districts of Assam including Barpeta district), it was easier for me as a researcher to gain access to the cultural settings in the field. Familiarity with the local language, cultural behavior of the respondents and shared ethnic identity with the majority of the population in the selected villages in the Barpeta district facilitated my acceptance as a researcher among the research participants.

My prior academic training as a student and a research assistant in the project entitled "*Social Citizenship and Decentralized Institutions: Assam as a case*" funded by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, carried out in the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati (IITG) further provided me the scope of trust building and accessibility to research participants in the district of Barpeta. As a research assistant in the project, I conducted a series of fieldwork in the district of Barpeta, Kamrup, Morigaon and other districts in Assam in 2015. The academic training that I received allowed me to detach myself as an insider from the respondents and maintain a middle ground position (not as an insider or an outsider) as a researcher during the field study and keep myself open to intensive social interactions with the respondents. The time that I spent in the villages during this project and subsequently during the course of data collection for this PhD thesis allowed me to gain diverse perspectives on the socio-economic conditions of the village residents, their livelihood needs and cultural norms. However, being a male researcher I had limitations on the interactions with the female respondents in the selected villages.

The choice of Barpeta district for this study was, therefore, purposive as discussed above. Below we provide the profile of the selected villages in the district of Barpeta in the form of a table. Table 1.2 shows the name of the villages, the Gram Panchayats and the blocks selected from the district of Barpeta. The selected villages include: Chaibari, Baghbar Gaon and Bampara.

The district of Barpeta has 70.74% Muslims and 19.11% Hindus. The study selected three villages in the district of Barpeta: Chaibari, Baghbar Gaon and Bampara. The official census of 2011 helped the study to select these villages. Baghbar Gaon is a Muslim-dominated village. The village of Baghbar Gaon has around 92.73% Muslims and 7.26% Hindus. The Hindus are mostly Bengali speaking. Some also belong to the scheduled castes. And, compared to the other two villages, Bampara has different demographic characteristics. Around 50.45% of its populations are scheduled castes. The rest are general, other backward classes and only a few are scheduled tribes. This village is mostly dominated by Hindus. With these considerations, the study selected the village of Bampara.

Table 1.2: Selected villages of the study (Barpeta district)

Sl. No.	*Name of the village*	*Name of the GP*	*Name of the Block*
1	Chaibari	Manikpur	Bajali
2	BaghbarGaon	Baghbor	Mandia
3	Bampara	Batagaon	Chenga

Source: Census, 2011

1.6.4 Sampling techniques and data collection techniques

We used purposive sampling techniques. The beneficiaries of the Indira Awas Yojana and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme were purposively selected as the key informants. The respondents, including the beneficiaries were further grouped according to caste (such as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes) and gender (male and female). Using census reports (2011), electoral rolls and relevant beneficiary lists, this study selected about 10% of the total households in the villages where we conducted the study. The size of the sample was based on the population of the villages. Thus, the total sample size selected for the interviews in the villages of Chaibari, Baghbar Gaon and Bampara was 33, 23 and 31 respectively. Table 1.3 summarizes the sample size and sample division of the study.

Table 1.3: Sample size and sample division of the study

Village (Location Code)	*Number of household*	*Population strength*	*Persons/Males/Females*	*Sample (interviews)*
Chaibari (283435)	333	1516	Persons (Total Sample)	33
		748	Males	16
		768	Females	17
		0	Persons (SC total)	0
		0	Males (SC)	0
		0	Females (SC)	0
		0	Persons (ST total)	0
		0	Males (ST)	0
		0	Females (ST)	0
BaghbarGaon (282844)	234	1225	Persons (Total Sample)	23
		622	Males	12
		603	Females	11
		89	Persons (SC total)	4
		46	Males (SC)	2
		43	Females (SC)	2
		0	Persons (ST total)	0
		0	Males (ST)	0
		0	Females (ST)	0
Bampara (282980)	309	1528	Persons (Total Sample)	31
		687	Males	14
		841	Females	17
		771	Persons (SC total)	16
		400	Males (SC)	8
		371	Females (SC)	8
		6	Persons (ST total)	2
		4	Males (ST)	1
		2	Females (ST)	1

Source: Census 2011, electoral rolls and beneficiary lists

As far as the distribution on the basis of caste and gender was concerned, out of 33 samples in the village of Chaibari, 16 were males and 17 were females. In Baghbar Gaon, out of 23 samples, there were 12 males and 11 females and 4 respondents belonged to the scheduled caste category (SC) samples. There were 31 samples from Bampara village out of which 14 were males and 17 were females. Sixteen respondents belonged to the scheduled caste category and two belonged to the scheduled tribe category.

1.7 Profile of the study areas and the respondents: Barpeta district

The district is located between 26.05 to 26.48 North latitudes and between 90.39 to 91.23 East longitudes. The district is bordered by the district of Baksa to the North, Nalbari district to the East, Kamrup and Goalpara district to the South and the district of Bongaigaon to the West.

Barpeta covers approximately 2282 square kms in terms of landmass. Its rural landmass area coverage is 2245.62 square kms and urban land area coverage is approximately 36.38 square kms. The present district of Barpeta was a part of erstwhile Kamrup district (undivided) until it was carved out in July, 1983. The town of Barpeta is the headquarter of the district. The district of Barpeta consists of two sub-divisions (civil): Barpeta and Bajali. It has eight legislative constituencies. The district is comprised of nine revenue circles: Barnagar, Kalgachia, Chenga, Barpeta, Baghbar, Sarthebari, Sarupeta, Bajali and Jalah. The district has twelve development blocks. It has ten police stations and twelve police outposts. The district of Barpeta comprises of 835 villages. It has 129 gram panchayats (GPs).

Historically, Barpeta was constituted as a part of *Kamapitha* of *Kamarupa*. Like other parts of Assam, Barpeta was also influenced by *Mahapurush Shrimanta Shankardeva's Vaishnavaite culture*. Barpeta was ruled by native rulers from different dynasties (such as the *Varman* and *Koch*). After the Treaty of *Yandaboo* signed between the British and the Ahom rulers in 1826, the British started to administer Assam. The British introduced the *mouzadari* system during this time. In 1841 Barpeta, under the administration of John Batlor, became a civil subdivision (Census, 2011; Bose, 1989). It was administered as a part of the district of Kamrup. In the postcolonial period, Barpeta came under the administration of the district of Kamrup. The British introduced a system of land revenue under the command of William Ward, the Chief Commissioner of Assam. In 1893-94, due to the exploitative nature of the land revenue system peasants started to protest in various places like Lachima and Bajali in the district. Villagers from the district of Barpeta contributed to the struggle for independence of India.

1.7.1 Demographic features of the district of Barpeta

Table 1.4 shows the demographic features of the district of Barpeta. According to the census of 2011, the district of Barpeta has 337,320 households (normal). Census 2011 estimated that the district has a total population of about 1,693,622, out of which 867,004 are males and 826,618 are females. About 1,546,269 persons live in the rural areas, of which 791,789 are males and 754,480 are females. As such, percentage of rural population of the district is about 91.30. The urban population of the district is about 147,353. Percentage of urban population of the district is 8.70. The district of Barpeta is multiethnic in its demographic character. The total scheduled caste population of the district is 95,320 (5.63%) and the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population is 27,344 (1.61%).The district has about 897,058 literate persons (63.81%), including 499,038 males (69.29%) and 398,020 (58.06%) females. Population density of the district is 742 and the sex ratio of the district is 953.

Table 1.4: Demographic representation of the district of Barpeta, 2011

Head	*Number*	*% (if available)*
Number of Households (Normal)*	337,320	
Number of Households (Institutional)**	498	
Number of Households (Houseless)***	111	
Population (Total)	1,693,622	
Population (Male)	867,004	
Population (Female)	826,618	
Rural Population (Total)	1,546,269	91.30 (Percentage of rural population)
Rural Population (Male)	791,789	
Rural Population (Female)	754,480	
Urban Population (Total)	147,353	8.70 (Percentage of urban population)
Urban Population (Male)	75,215	
Urban Population (Female)	72,138	
Scheduled Caste (Total)	95,320	5.63
Scheduled Caste (Male)	49,165	5.67
Scheduled Caste (Female)	46.155	5.58
Scheduled Tribe (Total)	27,344	1.61
Scheduled Tribe (Male)	13,530	1.56
Scheduled Tribe (Female)	13,814	1.67
Literate (Total)	897,058	63.81
Literate (Male)	499,038	69.29
Literate (Female)	398,020	58.06
Density (Persons per sq. KM)	742	
Sex Ratio (No. of females per 1000	953	

males)		
Source: Census, 2011		
*Note: * A normal household is usually a group of persons who normally live together and take their meals from a common kitchen unless the exigencies of work prevent any of them from doing so.* *** A group of unrelated persons who live in an institution and take their meals from a common kitchen is called an Institutional Household. Examples of Institutional Households are boarding houses, messes, hostels, hotels, rescue homes, jails, ashrams, orphanages, etc.* **** Households who do not live in buildings or census houses but live in the open on roadside, pavements, in Hume pipes, under flyovers and staircases, or in the open in places of worship, mandaps, railway platforms, etc. are treated as Houseless households (Source: Census, 2011).*		

1.7.2 Religion-wise population distribution of Barpeta district

Table 1.5 shows the religion-wise population distribution of the district of Barpeta. Census (2011) reports reveal that the district of Barpeta is a Muslim dominated district. Muslims comprise of 70.74% (1,198,036) of the total population of the district. In terms of religion, Hindus comprise the second largest religious group in the district (29.11%). Percentage of other religious groups is relatively less in the district.

Table 1.5: Religion-wise population distribution of Barpeta district, 2011

Religion	*Persons*	*Percentage*	*Males*	*Females*
Hindu	492,966	29.11	248,986	243,980
Muslim	1,198,036	70.74	616,676	581,360
Christian	1,020	0.06	524	496
Sikh	112	0.01	62	50
Buddhist	49	0	26	23
Jain	399	0.02	217	182
Other religion	14	0	10	4
Not stated specifically	1,026	0.06	503	523
Source: Census, 2011				

1.7.3 Workers and Non-workers in the district of Barpeta

Table 1.6 provides the information on the number of workers and non-workers of the district of Barpeta as reported in the Census of 2011.There are 561, 824 (33.17%) total workers (main and marginal) in the district of Barpeta, including 445,297 (51.36%) males and 116,527 (14.10%) females. There are 122,371 (7.23%) marginal workers in Barpeta district out of which 55,925 (6.45%) are males and 66,446 (8.04%) are females. It is significant to note that there are 1,131,798 (66.83%) non-workers, comprising of 421,707 (48.64%) males and 710,091 (85.90%) females. Comparison of the percentage of total workers (main and marginal) (33.17%) with that of the non-workers (66.83%) shows that the district of Barpeta is over-burdened with unemployment and other socio-economic problems. This indicates that rural development schemes in the district are very necessary for the rural population and beneficiaries.

Table 1.6: Workers and Non-workers in the district of Barpeta, 2011

Head	*Persons/Males/Females*	*Number*	*% (if available)*
Total workers (Main and marginal)	Persons (Total)	561,824	33.17
	Males	445,297	51,36
	Females	116,527	14.10
Main workers	Persons (Total)	439,453	25.95
	Males	389,372	44.91
	Females	50,081	6.06
Marginal workers	Persons (Total)	122,371	7.23
	Males	55,925	6.45
	Females	66,446	8.04
Non-workers	Persons (Total)	1,131,798	66,83
	Males	421,707	48.64
	Females	710,091	85.90

Source: Census, 2011

1.7.4 Category of workers (main and marginal) in the district of Barpeta

Table 1.7 shows the category of workers (main and marginal) in the district of Barpeta. Census 2011 reports that there are 205,259 total cultivators in the district of Barpeta, out of which 186,535 (41.89%) are males and 18,724 (16.07%) are females. In other words, more than one third (36.53%) of the workers are employed as cultivators. The district has 98,946 (17.61%) agricultural workers, out of which 70,065 (15.73%) are males and 28,881 (24.78%) are females. The data on the cultivators and agricultural laborers (36.53% + 17.61% respectively) shows that a large number of workers (54.14%) are engaged in agricultural sectors in the district of Barpeta. This indicates higher dependency on cultivation. Moreover, the district of Barpeta has 30,342 (5.40%) workers involved in household industry. This includes 13,209 (2.97%) males and 17,133 (14.70%) females. In the category of Other Workers, there are 227,277 (40.45%) workers, including 175,488 (39.41%) males and 51,789 (44.44%) females.

Table 1.7: Category of workers (main and marginal) in the district of Barpeta, 2011			
Head	*Persons/Males/Females*	*Number*	*% (if available)*
Cultivators	Persons (Total)	205,259	36.53
	Males	186,535	41.89
	Females	18,724	16.07
Agricultural laborers	Persons (Total)	98,946	17.61
	Males	70,065	15.73
	Females	28,881	24.78
Workers in household industry	Persons (Total)	30,342	5.40
	Males	13,209	2.97
	Females	17,133	14.70
Other workers	Persons (Total)	227,277	40.45
	Males	175,488	39.41
	Females	51,789	44.44
Source: Census, 2011			

1.7.5 Brief profile of the selected villages

Table 1.8 provides a brief profile of the selected villages of Barpeta district, namely: Chaibari, Baghbar Gaon and Bampara. The census report of 2011 reports that the village of Chaibari comprises an area of 431.91 hectares with 333 households. The total population of Chaibari is 1,516. This includes 748 males and 768 females. There are 1,231 literates in Chaibari, out of which about 640 are males and 591 are females. The village comprises of 940 workers. This includes 479 males and 461 females.

According to the census report of 2011, the village of Baghbar Gaon covers about 280.63 hectares in terms of geographical area. There are 234 households with 1,225 population including 622 males and 603 females. The village has 89 scheduled castes, 561 literates, including 336 males and 225 females. Baghbar Gaon has 358 workers out of which, 309 are males and 49 are females.

Census 2011 shows that the village of Bampara comprises of 136.10 hectares in terms of geographical area. The total population of the village is 1,528 population, out of which 687 are males and 841are females. There are 771 scheduled castes, and 6 scheduled tribes among the total population of the village. The village has 479 literates, which includes 231 males and 248 females. There are 650 workers, comprising of 375 males and 275 females.

Table 1.8: Brief profile of the selected villages, Barpeta district, 2011						
Village Name	*Area in hectare*	*Population (Males/Females)*	*SC Population (Males/Females)*	*ST Population (Males/Females)*	*Literates (Males/Females)*	*Total workers (Males/Females)*
Chaibari (283435)	431.91	1,516 (M: 748) (F: 768)	NIL (M: NIL) (F: NIL)	NIL (M: NIL) (F: NIL)	1,231 (M: 640) (F: 591)	940 (M: 479) (F: 461)
Baghbar Gaon (282844)	280.63	1,225 (M: 622) (F: 603)	89 (M: 46) (F: 43)	NIL (M: NIL) (F: NIL)	561 (M: 336) (F: 225)	358 (M: 309) (F: 49)
Bampara (282980)	136.10	1,528 (M: 687) (F: 841)	771 (M: 400) (F: 371)	6 (M: 4) (F: 2)	479 (M: 231) (F: 248)	650 (M: 375) (F: 275)
Source: Census, 2011						

1.8 Chapter layout of the thesis

1.8.1* Chapter 1, *Introduction provides an outline of the thesis and discusses the concepts used in the thesis. The chapter also discusses the rationale of the case study, research methodology used in this research including methods of case selection, data collection, sampling, a note on research ethics and fieldwork. In addition, the chapter providesd the details of the case study and the profile of the district selected for this study.

1.8.2* Chapter 2, *Theorizing beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in local self-governing institutions reviews the literature used to understand the research problem in the study. The chapter discusses the theories and approaches on beneficiary participation, social accountability mechanisms and local self-governing institutions.

1.8.3* Chapter 3, *Historical backgrounds of beneficiary participation and local self-governing institutions with special reference to Assam traces the history of local self-governing institutions and beneficiary participation in India, with a special reference to Assam.

1.8.4* Chapter 4, *Understanding social accountability and beneficiary participation: Rural local self-governing institutions (LSGIs) in Barpeta district, Assam discusses the findings from the field. The chapter discusses the research conducted in the selected villages of the district of Barpeta. The chapter examines the scope and challenges of beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms, especially social audit organized in the gram panchayats, the local self-governing institutions (LSGIs) referred to in the study.

1.8.5 **Chapter 5** summarizes the thesis, provides a conclusion, and discusses the limitations of the study and further scope of research.

Chapter 2

Theorizing participation and social accountability mechanisms in local self-governing institutions

2.1. Introduction

Institutionalization of social accountability mechanisms (SAMs) is a key aspect of democratic decentralization, and deepening democracy (Blair, 2000; Priyadarshee and Hossain, 2010). Efforts to reduce the governance gap and improve the linkages between the citizens and the government authorities led to the designing of social accountability mechanisms in the local self-governing institutions (LSGIs) (Brautigam, 2004; Goetz and Gaventa, 2001; Gaventa, 2002). Social accountability mechanisms are related to political development and democratizing efforts at 'good governance, participatory development and empowerment' of the marginalized sections of a society (Lakha et al, 2015: 330; Nordholt, 2004). Social accountability mechanisms are the 'bottom-up' aspects of good governance that allow the formal spaces to the citizens to direct inputs and exercise effective participation (Malena, Forster and Singh, 2004: 3). Accountability and transparency constitute the key elements of social accountability mechanisms. Through participation in social accountability mechanisms, the target stakeholders, also termed as the beneficiaries, can contribute to the establishment of a transparency regime for service delivery at the grass roots level (Ackerman, 2004; Blair, 2000; Malena, Forster and Singh, 2004). Beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms emphasizes the 'demand side of good governance' to ensure 'greater accountability' of those involved in the implementation of the development schemes (Malena, Forster and Singh, 2004: 1-3). Beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms provides 'greater access to decision making to the marginalized social groups and promotes the accountability of the decision makers (Agarwal and Gupta, 2005: 1102).'

The next section of the chapter briefly discusses the government schemes. This is followed by a detailed analysis of the different approaches on participation and participatory governance (PG) in local self-governing institutions. The chapter analyzes the social accountability mechanisms and the problems of citizen's engagement in the social accountability mechanisms. The chapter also provides a critical review of formal participatory mechanisms in the developing countries including India. The review of literature includes sections on detailed analysis of the linkages between participatory mechanisms, patronage politics, socio-economic conditions of the beneficiaries and other variables that may influence participatory governance. The discussion also examines the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) and the influence on beneficiary participation in local self-governing institutions. The review of literature is followed by a brief discussion of the variables and the basic assumptions used to examine the research questions in this study. Having analyzed the existing literature, the chapter discusses the framework of the argument to analyze the problem statement. The final section of the chapter provides a summary of the discussion.

2.2. Introducing the government-funded rural development schemes

Two rural development schemes, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), 2005 and the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) were selected for analysis in this current study. A brief note on these schemes is provided in the following sub-sections.

2.2.1 Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), 2005

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) is the product of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), 2005. Initially the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was introduced as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and was implemented in February 2, 2006 in two hundred selected backward districts in different states across India.[2] The National Rural Employment Guarantee (Amendment) Act of 2009 renamed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA website). The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 'aimed to provide enhanced livelihood security, giving at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to adult members seeking unskilled manual work in every household (Pellissery and Jalan, 2011: 283).' The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was a significant reform in India's agrarian economy because it 'provides every rural household with 100 days

[2] The states include: 1. Andhra Pradesh, 2. Arunachal Pradesh, 3. Assam, 4. Bihar, 5. Chhattisgarh, 6. Goa, 7. Gujarat, 8. Haryana, 9. Himachal Pradesh, 10. Jammu and Kashmir, 11.Jharkhand, 12.Karnataka, 13.Kerala, 14. Madhya Pradesh, 15. Maharashtra, 16.Manipur, 17.Meghalaya, 18.Mizoram, 19.Nagaland, 20.Odisha, 21.Punjab, 22.Rajasthan, 23.Sikkim, 24.Tamil Nadu, 25.Tripura, 26. Uttar Pradesh, 27. Uttarakhand, and 28. West Bengal.

of guaranteed employment per year (Jakimow, 2014: 263).' The scheme was extended in 2008-09 to cover six hundred and twenty five districts in various states in India (Jakimow, 2014). Broadly speaking, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme 'in India is a job assurance scheme enacted by legislation in 2005, which came into force in 2006 (Das, 2016: 420).' 'Construction of water conservation and harvesting structures, roads and irrigation facilities' are some of the public works aimed to offer public goods and benefits to the village residents under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, 2005. The scheme was aimed to provide benefits to the marginalized men and women in the rural areas.

2.2.2 Indira Awas Yojana (IAY)

The Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), another state-funded development scheme, was started in 1996. Indira Awas Yojana is a housing scheme that was launched and administered by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. It needs to be mentioned that the government of India had an earlier mission of providing housing facilities much before Indira Awas Yojana came into existence. The details of the scheme were discussed in the following terms that the government of India provided the financial assistance to the people living below poverty line in the rural areas, as an instrument of poverty alleviation by providing housing facilities to the disadvantaged sections of the society (Gopalan and Venkataraman, 2015; Sivam and Karuppannan, 2002; Nallathiga, 2007).

Despite all these provisions, the Indira Awas Yojana encountered challenges during the course of its implementation in different parts of the country. This is evident from the report of the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India which stated that the Indira Awas Yojana 'addressed the housing needs in the rural areas. Yet certain gaps were identified during the concurrent evaluations and the audit of the performance made by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India in 2014. The report identified several gaps such as lack of proper mechanism to make assessment of the implementation of the housing scheme, lack of transparency in the selection of beneficiaries, low quality of the houses, lack of technical supervision, lack of convergence, misutilization of the loans meant for the beneficiaries and the absence of proper mechanisms for monitoring the impact and the outcome of the programme (Ministry of Rural Development website).' In April 2016, to comply with the committed slogan 'Housing for All' by 2022, the government of India under the leadership of

Bhartiya Janata Party restructured the Indira Awas Yojana into 'Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana – Gramin (PMAY-G) (Ministry of Rural Development website).

Like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act/Scheme (2005), social accountability practices are considered to be a part and parcel of the implementation process of the Indira Awas Yojana (1996). In Assam, social audit was applied for both the schemes as the social accountability mechanisms. In the state of Assam, the first social audit was conducted in November, 2014. The State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD) worked as the social audit unit of the state to conduct the social audit in the gaon (gram) panchayats.

Village residents were much more familiar with the Indira Awas Yojana (1996) than the newly nomenclature Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – Gramin (PMAY-G), 2016. Under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – Gramin (2016), housing assistance per unit 'increased from Rs. 70,000 to Rs. 1.20 lakh in the plain terrains and from Rs. 75,000 to Rs. 1.30 lakh in the hilly terrains in different states including Assam (Ministry of Rural Development website).

Although the two schemes are same, village residents considered the Indira Awas Yojana (1996) and the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – Gramin (2016) as two different housing schemes.

2.3 Conceptualizing participation and participatory governance

Participation is a means to bring about social change and political transformation in modern nation-states. Participation shapes public opinion and creates political consciousness on social issues and public policies. Social choice theory particularly focused on the importance of 'participation of members of a society in the making of social decisions (Dreze and Sen, 2002: 9).' As Dreze and Sen argue, "Participation is intimately connected with demands for equality. At the most immediate level, democratic participation requires the sharing and symmetry of basic political rights to vote, to propagate and to criticize. Actual participation in political movements and public action can make a major difference to the agenda of governments and influence its priorities (Dreze and Sen, 2002: 9)." Social divisions and inequalities like 'caste, gender and even education' may however act as obstacles to effective political participation in a society (Dreze and Sen, 2002: 9). In a way, participation becomes important to meet the challenges of democratic deficit in many developing countries.Participatory governance in this context became crucial as a response to the deficit of liberal democratic principles in the developing countries.

Participatory governance allows ordinary citizens to participate in decision making that affect their lives.Participatory governance provides opportunities to all the participants to share useful information for designing alternative solutions. Participation and deliberation are the two important characteristics of participatory governance (Fung and Wright, 2003: 25). Deliberative decision-making process allows 'participants listen to each other's positions and generate group choices after due consideration (Fung and Wright, 2003: 17).' In other words, participatory governance implies empowered grass roots citizen-centric bodies that prioritize the voices from the bottom to generate effective outcomes affecting the local target groups.

There are various types of participatory governance practices in the developing countries. Some of these include participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil (Fung and Wright, 2003); health councils in Brazil (Geventa, 2004: 9); participatory resource mapping in Kenya (Kalibo and Medley: 2007); overview and scrutiny committee in the United Kingdom (Snape and Dobbs, 2003); and, community-based monitoring in Uganda (Bjorkman and Svensson, 2009). Fung and Wright find that panchayats in India also involve participatory government practices. According to them, these institutions rely upon the commitment and capacities of ordinary people to make decisions through deliberation. These institutions have 'created both direct and representative democratic channels that lead to substantial administrative and fiscal development power to village level institutions (Fung and Wright, 2003: 5).'

Social accountability mechanisms are key to effective participatory governance. There are various types of social accountability mechanismsdesigned and practiced in the developing countries. Abers documented participatory planning administered by the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party – PT) in Brazil in 1990s. Participatory planning came into existence in Brazil, when Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party – PT) designed it to challenge 'the monopoly of traditional elites over local government in a variety of ways' including participation of marginalized sections of the society (Abers, 1996: 35). Participatory planning, executed at the municipality level in the cities like Porto Alegre, Santos, Santo Andre and Ipatinga, made the local citizens as the decision makers of their development policies. Participatory planning in Brazil was successful because the administration of Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party – PT) ensured 'citizen participation not only in the execution of government programs but also in decision making about how government spending should be allocated and the kinds of programs that should be implemented (Abers, 1996: 35-36).' Participatory planning in Brazil received unprecedented popular support (measured in terms of higher people's participation) because Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party – PT) allowed them the opportunity to be the local decision makers. Abers also pointed out that Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party – PT) after winning elections 'represented an important break from the earlier Brazilian leftist political groups' 'principally made up of elite groups within the military and the intelligentsia (Abers, 1996: 36).' Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party – PT) won the elections on themes like 'decentralization of power, government accountability to autonomous social movements, and a reversal of priorities away from the elite groups towards the poor and the disadvantaged (Abers, 1996: 37-38).' Participatory planning administered byPartido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party – PT) faced popular criticism because 'local government spending favored large-scale, centrally located public works at the expense of services and projects meant to provide basic needs to the poor. Such big infrastructure projects filled the coffers of the powerful construction companies that financed political campaigns. At the same times, whatever funds were spent on the urban periphery were usually dependent on promises made by the local neighborhood leaders to support particular mayoral or city council candidates in the elections (Abers, 1996: 39).' Again, participatory planning in Brazil was challenged by the lack of technical knowledge of the local citizens and the authorities implementing the programs. Lack of education of the ordinary citizens limited the scope of participatory planning. 'Incorporating ordinary citizens into budget-making' turned into a difficult exercise (Abers, 1996: 39-40). Therefore, participatory planning in countries like Brazil faced popular criticisms and 'citizens declined to participate without some faith that their efforts would have material results (Abers, 1996: 42).'

Bangladesh initiated the participatory action plan development (PAPD) which was aimed at 'establishing community-based natural resource management' including fisheries. Under this participatory action plan, 'different stakeholder groups participated in the planning for the management of common aquatic resources that the people were dependent upon (Sultana and Abeyasekera, 2008: 202).' The participatory action plan was relatively successful in terms of realizing enhanced social capital at the local level among the participated communities, information collection with lower transaction costs, and restoring common properties, especially fisheries which enabled the households who participated in the action plan to acquire more benefits. However, government officials (Department of Fisheries of Bangladesh) allegedly used their institutional position to distribute benefits of the common resources (fisheries) according to their whims and networks (Sultana and Abeyasekera, 2008: 207).

South Africa experimented gender budgeting for the advancement of gender equity in local governance in 1990s (Beall, 2005: 4). These initiatives however failed to engage and empower women in the local level decision making. It was expected that 'decentralization will make service delivery more gender sensitiveby bringing the locally elected representatives of the decentralized institutions closer to their constituents (Beall, 2005: 9).' However, South Africa's gender-oriented local budgeting failed to make these initiatives work. According to Beall one of the primary reasons for the failure of gender budgeting in this case was that women in these cases were found to be more responsive to informal institutions, such as community networks, rather than formal rules and procedures of local governance. Thus, one of the reasons advanced by scholars as to why local government is less productive for advancing women's rights than is often expected, is because the informal institutions in which local governing institutions are often embedded have historically excluded women from the important positions of power and the decision making process. This is demonstrated and confirmed by the experiences in South Africa particularly in relation to traditional authority systems, which remain 'deeply antithetical towards women and yet are centrally implicated in the exercise of local governance (Beall, 2005: 9-10).'

Key social accountability mechanisms designed and exercised so far in India include social audits, gender budgeting, participatory planning and the application of score cards (Sharma, 2011). The study examines some of these mechanisms at place particularly social audit conducted in *gram/gaon panchayats* (GPs) in parts of Assam. Social audit became indispensable after 2005 when The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, made it mandatory for conducting social audit with effective beneficiary participation (MGNREGA, Government of India, 2005). The aim was to monitor the implementation of the development schemes designed for rural areas (Social Audit Booklet, SIPRD, Government of Assam, 2014). In reality, Assam has shown a dismal picture as far as social accountability mechanisms are concerned. Unlike some other states in India, the local self-governing institutions in Assam at the rural level have not been able to perform and implement these participatory governance practices. Even social audit that was made mandatory in 2005 was formally conducted after almost nine years in 2014 after the Act was passed. Social audit was not conducted in Assam after 2014. What explains lack of beneficiary participation in the rural local self-governing institutions in Assam? What are the challenges in the functioning of social accountability mechanisms in the local self-governing institutions in Assam? These are pertinent questions that we need to address.

A preliminary review of the literature shows that the exercise of patronage politics at the grass roots level may critically challenge beneficiary participation in the social accountability mechanisms in the rural areas (Francis and James, 2003; Kitschelt, 2000; Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007; Piattoni, 2001). Another set of literature review shows that beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in local self-governing institutions is influenced and challenged by socio-cultural factors (Lakha et al, 2015; Evans et al, 2017; Tripp, 2012; McEwan, 2003; Agarwal, 2009). Stobaugh and Yergin argue that 'although some of the barriers are economic', they are largely 'institutional, political and social (Stobaugh and Yergin, 1979: 137).' A detailed analysis of these scholarly findings and existing literature is therefore necessary at this point. The next section provides a detailed examination of these sets of literature.

2.4 Patronage politics and its effects on beneficiary participation in local self-governing institutions

There is a growing evidence that the absence of institutionalization of social accountability mechanisms and the concentration of power in the hands of a few powerful individuals pose serious challenges to participation at the local level (Ackerman, 2005; Francis and James, 2003). Mohanty argues that in order to understand 'participation in state-created development spaces, it is important to understand the nature of the post-colonial state and the depth of people's dependence and patronage. It is important to understand how the state features in people's imaginations, since it is their relationship with the state, ranging from disillusionment and despair to seeing it as a patron and a benefit, which is reflected in their relationships with the state-created institutions (Mohanty, 2007: 78).' Mohanty's work indicates the presence of political influence over participation. Patronage politics, a term often used to examine the linkages between the more powerful and the marginalized is a key challenge to beneficiary participation (Piattoni, 2001; Francis and James, 2003; Kitschelt, 2000; Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007).

Studies show that patronage politics and its impact on participatory governance are evident even in countries like United Kingdom where the 'overview and scrutiny' remained ineffective due to the patronage linkages between the scrutinizers and higher political executives (Ashworth, 2003). In developing countries like Brazil, participatory budgeting faced challenges of inclusion and participation of beneficiaries because of political capacities of the local authorities (Heller, 2012). In South Africa, ‘new participatory spaces’ provided relatively better opportunities and democratic spaces for ‘those who have some resources, for example, links with the party, political system or powerful patrons’ to ‘expand their chances of access to state funded resources and to advance their own agendas (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007: 16).’ In this regard, Heller argued that participatory development spaces in India (Kerala), Brazil (Porto Alegre) and South Africa (South Africa’s Integrated Development Plans) suffered from patronage politics (Heller, 2012). Heller points out that one of the most important democratic deficits that the developing countries are experiencing is the absence of ‘effective citizenship’. Development policy reform in these societies is guided by political incentives, not by motivations to serve the people. Heller argues that integrated development plans executed at the municipality level in South Africa witnessed increased participation rather than effective participation of the local citizens. Likewise, Kerala’s (India) decentralized development initiatives through panchayats could not overcome the challenges of over-bureaucratization and truly engage the village residents in the development activities (Heller, 2012: 653).

Brazil experimented with a new participatory planning process, popularly known as participatory budgeting. Heller shows how Brazil initiated participatory mechanisms during its transition to democracy in the late 1980s. Heller noted, “The new constitution introduced participatory mechanisms, including popular councils in health and education. Despite these reforms, local politics in Brazil was dominated by traditional elites (Heller, 2012: 654).”

It is evident from Heller’s discussion that participatory budgeting in Brazil received political support of the Partido dos Trabalhadores party because it worked to generate electoral support in favor of the party. These participatory developments worked more ‘as an instrument of service delivery rather than a forum for participation’ that would be widely open to the citizens without any discrimination (Heller, 2012: 655). In Brazil, the emphasis of participatory budgeting was ‘less on promoting development and extending service delivery and more on nurturing new forms of state-citizen engagement and specifically on changing the ways in which choices about local development are made’ to suit the political party, the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Heller, 2012: 659). However, Heller admits that despite these challenges, decentralized reformsin developing countries like India, Brazil and South Africa achieved relative success (Heller, 2012).

Some scholars draw evidence from surveys conducted in rural West Bengal to explore clientelistic linkages and benefit distribution on the basis of these linkages. These studies also examine how this has an impact on political participation of the beneficiaries (Bardhan et al, 2008). These studies reveal that the beneficiaries receiving personal benefits are more likely to extend their electoral support (i.e., votes) to the ruling political parties. In this case, the left parties provided the benefits through local government bodies, the panchayats. These studies also found that gender, education and immigrant status also have an impact on the political participation of the villagers. Political parties target poor villagers (such as landless villagers) to provide them with benefits with a view to earn electoral support. *Gaon panchayats* that could deliver benefits to the marginalized groups (such as scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and landless villagers) witnessed higher degree of political participation in the *gram sabha* meetings. Therefore, marginalized sections like poor villagers and scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are more likely to vote in favor of the Left Front, leading to its durability in power in the state of West Bengal. However, the participation rate among the marginalized groups is less compared to advantaged groups (such as landowners) when they count it in terms of 'active participation in the *gram sabhas* (Bardhan et al, 2008: 16).' Local level politicians of the Left parties distributed a large number of benefits (such as houses) among the marginalized scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and poor villagers, which was translated into tangible electoral support to the Left political parties. At the same time it has also been observed that education and economic wellbeing may not be directly related to participation. These sections of the society may be less dependent on government sponsored livelihood schemes and benefits. Conversely, 'rising levels of education and living standards raised the awareness and reduced their dependence on local governments for livelihood related schemes (Bardhan et al, 2008: 9). Educated villagers had access to information about the activities of the *gaon panchayats* including the mechanisms for the implementation of the rural development schemes. These studies also show that the 'villages with a higher incidence of landlessness and comprising of ST (scheduled tribe) population exhibited lower attendance rates' in the *gram sabha* meetings (Bardhan et al, 2008: 32).

Zerah, who examines participatory governance in the urban municipal bodies in the city of Mumbai, India, finds that local participatory governance institutions become the site of the politics and competition for local level politicians. The marginalized and the poor members of community remain excluded and are unable to harness the potential of the community structures (Zerah, 2009:873).' Zerah also argues that the, contrary to the 'romanticized views of community participation' these institutions do not lead to self-management. Instead they have reshaped forms of power asymmetry within these communities. These institutions empower mostly influential members within the communities while, in poorer neighborhoods, it reinforces the importance of the middlemen (Zerah, 2009: 872).'

On the other side of the spectrum, there are studies which show that participatory governance has been relatively successful in some cases. Social audit practices in Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Sikkim in India provide some examples. These scholars argue that democratic decentralization in India has been successful in terms of engaging the disadvantaged sections of the society such as poor peasants, women and weaker castes at the local level decision making processes (Heller, 2001; Harriss, 2000; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001). Hickey and Mohan argued that 'certain cases of democratic decentralization stand out, for instance in West Bengal and Kerala, where greater participation and social justice of the marginal groups and localities are evident. In both cases, decentralization ensured the participation of subordinate groups, such as women, landless people, sharecroppers and small peasants. These groups were directly linked to the pursuit of redistributive policies that had pro-poor outcomes (Hickey and Mohan, 2005:10).' Crook and Sverrisson, however, argued that 'local cultures do not necessarily accept or facilitate democratic procedures which give equal weight to each individual (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001: 8).' While they acknowledged that panchayat governance in West Bengal showed higher participation among the disadvantaged sections this did not lead to empowerment or social justice of the marginal groups in the state. Party politics and clientelistic linkages were evident.

Other studies also reveal that patronage politics is predominant in India's decentralized participatory spaces. Sadanandan examined 'the degree of decentralization and the overall political competition' in states like Kerala, Karnataka and Bihar (Sadananda, 2012: 214). He finds the presence of strong patronage networks and benefit distribution on the basis of these networks, leading to higher but ineffective beneficiary participation in the local decision making processes of the panchayats across the states. Sadanandan's study documented that 'councilors who had won local level elections with narrow margins were prone to distribution of benefits through patronage links (Sadanandan, 2012: 221).'

It has been observed that decentralization of power and resources to the grass roots level creates incentives for politicians to exercise patronage politics (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007). Sadanandan similarly argued that 'decentralization advances patronage politics' to 'enhance their political support' leading to challenges for effective participation (Sadanandan, 2012: 223). Ghatak and Ghatak also argued that the design of institutions of participatory governance is not merely an abstract planning, but a political process.' They further argued that 'political parties may be ideologically committed to decentralization and participatory governance. But when it comes to electoral politics, electoral gains and accumulation of power become more important. While decentralization provides the scope of political accountability of elected officials, in practice it leads to competition for consolidation of power and capturing of local governing institutions particularly in societies characterized by extreme poverty and inequality such as rural India (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002: 54).' Uneven power relations among different classes in these societies (such as rich villagers and poor peasants; local politicians and their supporters) result in 'elite capture of project benefits.' Dasgupta and Beard substantiate this claim when they argued that 'in cases where the rural development projects were controlled by elites', 'resource allocation to the poor was restricted' (Dasgupta and Beard, 2007: 229). Dasgupta and Beard defines local elites as 'locally based individuals with disproportionate access to social, political or economic power' and elite capture occurs when 'these individuals dominate community-level planning and governance (Dasgupta and Beard, 2007: 230).' Due to uneven power relations across classes, decentralization cannot guarantee the distribution of development benefits to the rural poor. Selective distribution creates the conditions that 'may lead to the capture of local governance institutions by the powerful elites and may perpetuate inequality if implemented without acknowledging and taking into account the disparities that exist in terms of ownership of assets and entitlements at the local level (Priyadarshee and Hossain, 2010: 752).' Elites are already rich and powerful. This leads to the emergence of a powerful class within a given social structure that tends to control everything including village meetings as evident in Nepal (Mehta and Kellert, 1998).

Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa also reveals the effects of patronage politics undermining 'the prospects of current efforts at democratization (Berman, 1998:309).' While exploring political power and patronage of the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, Beresford showed how politicians regulate the 'access to the public resources and opportunities that they control' and thereby challenge the effectiveness of participation of people in governance (Beresford, 2015: 226). Beresford argues that South Africa's decentralized reforms led to the establishment of informal patronage-based political networks working in parallel with, and sometimes in opposition to, the political institutions of the state. This undermined the credibility of decentralization efforts and people's participation in participatory governance (Beresford, 2015: 228). Beresford further wrote that instead of being held accountable by the electorate for the lack of public service delivery political leaders gained political legitimacy by distributing public goods such as health and education through informal, deeply personalized patron-client networks built upon mutual expectations of reciprocity (Beresford, 2015: 227).' Beresford continues that distribution of benefits to the clients generated a cyclical relationship in which 'resources and opportunities were distributed through patronage networks to regenerate the political power of the patron (or gatekeeper). Political power (access to state spoils) is in turn, used to replenish the resources needed to maintain these networks and appeal to the political supporters (Beresford, 2015: 229).' This undermined the effectiveness of people's participation in the participatory spaces in South Africa because people participated only for 'individual benefits (Beresford, 2015: 241).'

Therefore, it is important to note that institutionalization of local self-governing institutions cannot automatically ensure and enhance effective democratic participation of the marginalized sections of a society and that such institutions, as witnessed in many cases analyzed above, acted 'mainly for the benefit of the local elites(Turner, 2000: 116).' Localized participatory processes, often positively considered as 'naturally democratic' (Watson, 2003: 299), could not challenge the embedded power structures at the local level because of collaboration of the elites (Mosse, 1994; Leonardo and Leonardo, 2004).

Patronage politics therefore provides the scope of preferential treatment to some individuals or group of individuals, for instance, the affiliated members and the supporters of a political party or other organizations that are influential at the local level. These practices in turn, have an impact on participatory governance. Drawing examples on patronage politics from Brazil, scholars argued that in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, participatory planning, a social accountability mechanism adopted by the local self-governing institutions is affected by patronage politics. It was observed that the level of participation was higher among the target stakeholders, the beneficiaries of these institutions who were mostly affiliated to the ruling Worker's Party (PT) than the rest of the population in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil (Goldfrank and Schneider, 2006). Observing participatory budgeting in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, Goldfrank and Schneider finds participatory budgeting 'as a political institution that, like many others, is intended to privilege the interests of certain social groups in order to advance partisan goals, including electoral success' and therefore it could not 'guarantee of democratic deepening' with effectiveness to people's participation in participatory governance (Goldfrank and Schneider, 2006: 1-2).

Patronage politics as scholars argue is mediated by exchanges and arrangements where politicians use state resources to maintain the patron-client networks and sustain political dominance in these institutions. In such a situation, symbolic participation and genuine exclusion of certain individuals in the decision making characterize the decentralization and service delivery. This is evident in even in India where the presence of patronage networks allows dominant groups to gain access to state resources and rural development schemes. A strong patronage network not only contributes to the autonomy of the dominant groups from the rest of the society but also skewed distribution of resources according to political calculations or the strength of patronage networks. While exploring how decentralization in India contributes to patronage politics, Sadanandan argues that patronage links are strongly embedded in electoral participation in decentralized institutions (Sadanandan, 2012). Electoral gains guide the political parties and politicians to distribute benefits based on patronage. Parties target the disadvantaged sections of the society. Patronage politics become largely evident at the grass roots level because of decentralization and highly competitive elections at the local level. Decentralization with devolved powers in the hands of local elites allows the scope of establishing patronage links for benefit distribution. Local level decentralization widens the scope of patronage politics to extend to higher level of administration and state politics. Local level elections, as these studies revealed, provide the scope of not only establishing the political support at the village level but also increasing participation for electoral purposes in the form of campaigns and other methods of participation. These kinds of participation matters in a country like India where the constituents are mostly based in rural areas and the political leaders at the local, state and national level are dependent on their constituents in the villages for patronage distribution and electoral benefits. Politicians and political parties use programmatic appeals in a particularistic fashion for the distribution of benefits to influence their constituents. Sadanandan argues that the politicians working at the local level gain control over numerous policy domains and resources and have access to wider avenues for distribution of patronage (Sadanandan, 2012: 212). Local politicians have the local knowledge, proximity and networks and are in a better position than their counterparts working for the party at the state or national level to develop clientelistic networks with the local electorates. Targeting the *clients* or the core supporters with particularistic program-based benefits becomes the norm for gaining political benefits (Sadanandan, 2012: 213).

Geographical proximity of the patrons and the clients is helpful for the core supporters to gain benefits from their patrons. Drawing lessons from Uttar Pradesh, India, Priyadarshee and Hossain argue that 'securing pension and other benefits through the government schemes depended on how far one was located from the *Gram Pradhan's* house.' because such geographical proximity helps in establishing direct contact between the patron and clients (Priyadarshee and Hossain, 2010: 758).

Sadanandan argues, "In democracies like India, where the poor are numerous, political parties and politicians consider it as strategic to target the less well-to-do people to build electoral support (Sadanandan, 2012: 213)." He finds that politicians who won elections by narrow margins are more likely to distribute patronage than those who won by wide margins because the latter had already built electoral support by distributing particularistic benefits. Use of patronage benefits, thus, becomes routinized at the local level politics because 'local politicians who win by narrow margins are likely to distribute particularistic benefits more widely to enhance their electoral support and reduce electoral uncertainty than local politicians who win with a broader support base (Sadanandan, 2012: 214).' Sadanandan further argues that in India even the distribution of below poverty line (BPL) cards entails patronage politics. Local politicians were empowered to identify the households to be provided with below poverty line cards, a card used to enlist beneficiary households in social security programs such as the Indira Awas Yojana. With an aim to further their electoral gains, local politicians 'identify the beneficiaries of welfare programs (Sadanandan, 2012: 216).' Sadanandan shows that patronage politics on below poverty line cards was also prevalent in states like Kerala where the degree of decentralization and political competition was considerably higher than other states in India. Local level council elections in Kerala, where more powers are decentralized, are 'the electoral battlegrounds with embedded patron client links (Sadanandan, 2012: 221).' Therefore, Sadanandan takes a cautionary note on the distribution of social security measures at the local level. According to him, deserving villagers may not be able to access the benefits if non-beneficiaries receive benefits through political connections or other forms of linkages (such as kinship ties) (Sadanandan, 2012). A large amount of benefits are also shared among the elites (rich villagers or big land-owners).

Scholars such as Priyadarshee and Hossain term this elite-sharing of benefits as the 'rent seeking behavior' of elites. They argue that rent seeking behavior of elites is dangerous for development programs because this practice diverts the benefits to non-beneficiaries. Priyadarshee and Hossain explore rent seeking behavior of elites in two states in India, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh.

While drawing lessons from Uganda, Francis and James argue that politicians prefer to employ those bureaucrats 'who are more likely to be malleable, or easily enmeshed in local structures of patronage (Francis and James, 2003: 334).' Politically motivated bureaucrats in such cases may use public funds to fulfill their own vested interests (Gibson and Woolcock, 2008; Fung and Wright, 2003).

Patronage politics is dependent on rational choice and selective incentives of the politically dominant groups as well as the beneficiaries. These actors often make a cost-benefit analysis before engaging in such patronage networks (Olson, 1965; Moe, 1980). Political leaders for instance, offer patronage benefits to their constituencies and in return seek guarantees of electoral support from their constituents. Studies reveal that beneficiaries are more likely to participate in governance and social accountability mechanisms when they are provided with personal benefits (Knoke, 1988). Political leaders in India 'have built effective constituencies by holding out economic and commercial rewards to their caste fellows' on the basis of caste identities and linkages (Krishna, 2003: 1172). In such cases, 'decentralization is unlikely to lead to more pro-poor outcomes without a serious effort to strengthen and broaden accountability mechanisms at both the local and national level governance mechanisms (Crook, 2003: 77).'

Evidence from Brazil shows that the country witnessed increased beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms such as participatory budgeting. Studies show that decentralization in Brazil was pursued at an unparalleled pace, both in terms of the country's experience and in comparison to other developing countries (Souza, 2001). Efforts were made way back in 1980s to bring the local governments closer to the community by establishing community councils to decide on education and other social welfare programs and the implementation of participatory budgeting. Skeptics however argue that these efforts produce negative outcomes. For instance, in places like Minas Gerias, Porto Alegre, Santa Catarina and others, state sponsored experiments such as building of houses for the poor were conducted through direct people's participation in the implementation process. These experiments were meant to break away from a system of patrimonialism and clientelism that were in place. However, in reality rather than empowering the local people, these projects led to the transformation of the 'civil society leaders and institutions into brokers of political interests that are not based on people's interests (Souza, 2001).' Thus participatory practices became ineffective due to patronage politics, as witnessed in this case (Avritzer, 2009).

According to Masiero and Maiorano, the state of Andhra Pradesh in India attemptedto combat the misappropriation of funds allocated under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Funds were distributed to village residents who were not entitled to the scheme. Andhra Pradesh devised a state-level information system (i.e. digitalized information system). However, the power to share information about the target groups (beneficiaries) rested with the few officials, known as Field Assistants (FAs), appointed by the state government. Field Assistants enjoyed direct control over the information of beneficiaries that were shared through a digitized and computerized system in different districts. Digitization allowed these officials to keep records of the wages paid, the wage payment procedures and other essential information that were necessary in the accountability system. Despite the advantages of the computerized system, transparency was not absolutely guaranteed.

In Andhra Pradeshinternet-based information could not check the misappropriation of funds under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. The Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme undoubtedly benefitted a large number of needy villagers in Andhra Pradesh where transparency was accelerated through the new information system. However, the payment infrastructure functioning in Andhra Pradesh had numerous other problems. Masiero and Maiorano argued that the computerized system works only till the funds reach the disbursement agencies, after which they are left in the hands of banks and post offices. This makes it difficult for the actual beneficiaries to trace the actual disbursal of the payments. Ten years after the inception of computerization, many workers still reported that the wage payment procedures under the MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act) were delayed and incomplete Digitized information sharing on the flow of fund has not resulted in fostering their participatory budgeting, monitoring or other social accountability mechanisms. These scholars further argue that the 'information displayed online is widely used by activists and community volunteers, but can hardly be accessed by the illiterate MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act) workers (Masiero and Maiorano, 2018: 3).'

Use of technology also reflects a political agenda that crystallizes the local hierarchies on the basis of which these programme are being constructed (Masiero and Maiorano, 2018: 3). Field Assistants responsible for the village-level management of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme reinforced their power and position, rather than challenging the existing power structures and empowering the wage earners (beneficiaries) by building their capacities to use the technology. The study also suggests that there is a problematic nexus between e-governance and accountability, (Masiero and Maiorano, 2018: 3). Implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in Andhra Pradeshis not really rendered by the gram panchayats; rather, the government-appointed Field Assistants implement the scheme, implying breach of Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act. Andhra Pradesh government initiated computerized information system as part of the anti-corruption agenda to 'break the monopoly of information retained by implementing officials, thereby reducing the discretionary power held by bureaucrats (Masiero and Maiorano, 2018: 12).' However, the recently developed information system is not a transparent system, rather it worked to 'create a public image of political accountability' of the state government that was led by Y. S. Rajasekhar Reddy (Masiero and Maiorano, 2018: 12). Though restricted by the new technology regime, it is not 'impossible for the bidders to pursue their own interests of winning over other actors' such as the bureaucrats because bureaucrats responsible for Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme implementation have institutional access to information (Masiero and Maiorano, 2018: 13). Even the appointment of the Field Assistants is not free from political choice of the politicians, where interference is placed by the local members of the legislative assembly (MLAs). 'The interference of the members of the legislative assembly was much more pronounced' in Andhra Pradesh when the state executed the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme (Masiero and Maiorano, 2018: 14). Technological advancements, therefore, failed to fix issues in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme including wage payments. Technology-based transparency system could monitor the wage system only up to a certain level.

The lack of monitoring of disbursement agencies, the place where wage-seekers collect their payments, contributes to uncertainties in wage payments, is frequently mentioned as one of the factors that reduce effectiveness of the programme for the beneficiaries (Masiero and Maiorano, 2018: 15).' Technologies cannot identify the errors of exclusion, which are endemic at the local level as patronage politics and social practices are prevalent. Technology also cannot guarantee fairness of data entered by local implementers such as the field assistants or gaon panchayat representatives. Complaint making is not possible for the marginalized sections of the society because they do not have the expertise to use technology. Technology can ensure accountability only to certain extent (Ambasta, Shankar and Shah, 2008; Mathur, 2007; Pellissery and Jalan, 2011; De Neve and Carswell, 2011).

Another study was conducted to examine the influence of clientelism on the process of implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in Rajasthan. The study shows that clientele networks played an important role in the distribution of public goods under this scheme. Maiorano, Das and Masiero 'used a broad definition of clientelism as an exchange system where state officials (elected or appointed) discretionally distribute state resources to citizens in exchange of political support. Political support does not mean voting alone, but also other forms of support that increase the power and status of the official, like favours, services, respect and other resources considered valuable in an Indian village (Maiorano, Das and Masiero, 2018 538).'

Rajasthan executed the scheme with the help of a more decentralized system where the village head (*sarpanch*), an elected member of the gram panchayat (Maiorano, Das and Masiero, 2018; 537). The *sarpanch* is 'accountable to the beneficiaries who form a sizeable part of the electorate (Maiorano, Das and Masiero, 2018: 537).' The *sarpanch* has the institutional capacity to determine how the works unbder the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme would be sanctioned to the villagers. These representatives have the power to distribute Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme work at their discretion which creates clientelistic arrangement for the distribution of benefits. In Rajasthan, the *sarpanches* had 'a crucial influence on the selection of beneficiaries (Maiorano, Das and Masiero, 2018; 539).' They argue that 'due to budgetary constraints, creation of more employment was not possible. In this situation, the *sarpanches* prioritized their supporters, families and relatives, while allocating the available work under the scheme (Maiorano, Das and Masiero, 2018: 540-541).' Distribution of Mahatma Gandhi

National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme works through clientelistic networks was predictable because s*arpanches* had political and social dominance at the village level. (Maiorano, Das and Masiero, 2018: 541).

As analyzed above, under these circumstances, the process of selection of beneficiaries is influenced by the interest of the brokers and middlemen closely associated with the ruling political elites or traditional elites in the villages. Information on available government sponsored schemes or beneficiary benefits may be selectively disseminated in such cases. State resources, therefore, get selectively channelized to favorable individuals or beneficiary households including privileged groups (such as rich) that are expected to serve as active supporters during the electoral process (Platteau, 2004; Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2000; Agarwal and Gupta, 2005; Labonne and Chase, 2009; Fritzen, 2007; Lund and Saito-Jensen, 2013). At the same time, participatory spaces in state sanctioned schemes remain unutilized as the poor and the marginalized fear the consequences of openly participating in the social accountability mechanisms (for example, taking part in social audit forums). They fear losing their social networks and the benefits distributed through the local brokers.

2.5 Social conditions, cultural norms and the effects on beneficiary participation in local self-governing institutions

2.5.1 Social conditions and participation

Existing literature shows that participation, and structural socio-economic conditions like literacy and education are positively interrelated. Higher level of literacy and education encourages individuals to effectively participate in socio-political and economic activities (Dahl, 1961; Almond and Verba, 1963; Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie, 1993). Literacy and education are important for empowering people to mobilize them in participatory efforts (Villao et al, 2012). Higher level of literacy and education is an indicator of higher socio-economic status that may promote participation (Beard, 2005). Drawing lessons from an experience in Indonesia Hedjazi and Arabi argued that an increase in the decision making process for participation in local self-governing institutions is influenced by education (Hedjazi and Arabi, 2009). Individuals with higher level of education can effectively exert pressures on public authorities because they have access to relevant information (Stem et al, 2003; Adhikari, Di Falco and Lovett, 2004). Causal linkages between participation of people and their educational advancement are evident in a large number of other studies (Miller, 1992; Milligan et al, 2004; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Miller and Shanks, 1996).

Similarly, Wolfinger and Rosenstone argue that education improves participation. They find positive effects of educational attainment on participation. Wolfinger and Rosenstone tried to understand how education can change the voting behavior of individuals. They noted in these words, "Education increases one's capacity for understanding complex and intangible subjects such as politics, as well as encouraging the ethics of civil responsibility (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980: 102)." Converse considers education as a 'universal solvent', enabling citizens to make their participation effective. Converse noted that 'whether one is dealing with cognitive matters such as the level of factual information about politics or conceptual sophistication in its assessment; or such motivational matters as the degree of attention paid to politics and emotional involvement in political affairs; or questions of actual behavior, education acts as the universal solvent. The educated citizen is attentive, knowledgeable, and participatory (Converse, 1972: 324).' Similarly, Almond and Verba argue that 'educational attainment appears to have the most important effect on political attitudes.' (Almond and Verba, 2015: 315-316).' Putnam, draws lessons from Italy on educational attainment and citizen's participation in development activities and argues that educated citizens are more likely to participate in development related decision-making process and their execution. They can have access to relevant information and understand the value of participation to link their grievances. Linkages between educational advancement and participation of people are evident in Putnam's work when he states that 'education is one of the most important predictors, participation that may range from voting to associational membership, to chairing a local committee to hosting a dinner party. Education is also an important predictor of civic engagement (Putnam, 2001: 186).' Similarly, John and Morris conducted a study in the United Kingdom (UK) among 15-17 year old school students. These scholars explored whether civic education contributes to voluntary community engagement. They argued that education enables students to take part in community works (John and Morris, 2004). Like previous studies (Rosenberg, 1988; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Converse, 1972; Putnam, 2001), Mayer also argues that educational advancement contributes to enhanced political participation. Analyzing controlled randomized panel data through R software, Mayer shows that educational attainment of citizens has an impact on political participation. In his panel data-based analysis, Mayer shows that 'postsecondary educational advancement is estimated to produce 18% increase in voter turnout, a 10% increase in individuals contacting public officials, and a 6% increase in participation in demonstrations, protests or rallies (Mayer, 2011: 640).' Though his analysis observes the linkages between educational advancement and its effects on political participation, Mayer has not showed how educational advancement affects political participation such as voter turnout (Mayer, 2011).

Parinduri examines in Indonesia 'whether education increases voter turnout (Parinduri, 2016: 5).' Parinduri argues that education can inculcate knowledge about the political system and the capability to judge the characteristics of the political candidates. Moreover, parental education is important because it allows them to 'discuss the importance of civic duties at home when their children grow up (Parinduri, 2016: 3).' However, education does not change voter turnout in the Indonesian political system. Parents' political socialization orients children's political behavior and values, but cannot increase voter turnout (Colten and Gore, 1994; Beck and Jennings, 1982). Some other scholars, on the other hand, still find that education does have a positive impact on participation.

Crick argues that schools that offer education on citizenship issues can change the behavior of young people to be politically knowledgeable and participatory in democratic decision making (Crick, 2017). Some other studies, again, explore that teaching civics or imparting knowledge on democracy and participation are effective to make individuals aware of their citizenship rights and the scope of decision making (Ehman, 1980; Denver and Hands, 1990). From another perspective, scholars argue that illiteracy marginalizes people and makes them passive in participatory decision making (Sniderman, 1975). Hoskins et al argue that civic competence develops 'through learning experiences such as formal education (civic knowledge, skills, attitudes and values), and this enables people to become active citizens (Hoskins et al, 2008: 387).' These scholars also argue that less-educated individuals may feel that their voices are not heard relative to ones that are educated. This prevents the former group of individuals from taking part in political and civic participation (other than voting). In contrast, a better-educated individual may be a part of different social network groups that allows the scope of civic and political participation (Hoskins et al, 2001: 272).'

Further, Dee argues that education promotes civic participation because it may increase the perceived benefits of civic engagement by promoting 'democratic behaviour' or shaping individual preferences for civic activities. Similarly, it is often alleged that education plays an important role by directly inculcating students with other fundamental democratic and pluralistic values (e.g., support for free speech, for the separation of church and state, etc.) (Dee, 2004: 1700).'

Campbell posits that educational advancement contributes to people's participation such as political and civic participation. Campbell provides evidence that 'education has a causal relationship to multiple forms of engagement, including voter turnout, group membership, tolerance, and the acquisition of political knowledge (newspaper reading) (Campbell, 2006: 27).' Education socializes individuals, imparts bureaucratic competence to interact with government officials, makes them confident to express preferences in policy making and develops critical thinking to engage in participatory democratic spaces.

Critics like Wattenberg however argue that education may not be the sufficient condition as far as political participation such as voting behavior is concerned. Wattenberg makes a comparative analysis of sixteen OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) member-countries such as Germany, Switzerland and Sweden from 1960s to early 2000s. He found that these highly industrialized countries with higher level of educational attainment acquired by the citizens, experienced lower voter turnouts. Voter turnout has fallen in Switzerland by 34%, in Germany 12%, and in Sweden 1.5%, indicating that educational advancement of the citizens does not guarantee their higher political participation (Wattenberg, 2002). Other studies also argue that educational advancement does not necessarily lead to higher participation (Franklin, 2004; Brody, 1978). It is a 'paradox of participation' that industrialized nations such as the USA experienced a decline in voter turnout despite educational achievement (Brody, 1978).

The studies analyzed above, discuss participation in terms of voting behavior and the relationship between participation and the level of education. Some scholars also consider civic participation, as an important means to contribute to democratic practices. Most of these studies are focused on industrialized countries where citizens have acquired higher level of education. There is a dearth of literature which examines the structural factors like education and its impact on participatory governance in developing countries like India.

Few studies examine this relationship between education, participatory governance and policy making in view of the participatory approach in developing countries. Recent studies have been undertaken to examine the relationship between structural variables and governance in developing countries like India. Bernan shows how the state government of Madhya Pradesh implemented the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) in 1990s to improve the efficiency of 'monitoring and verification' and overall community involvement in local governance. Bernan argues in these words, "A good deal of work remains to be done in terms of improving the quality of education offered by these schools, but at least in terms of ensuring access to education the scheme clearly demonstrates the power of the participatory approach (Bernan, 2008: 15)."

2.5.2 Socio-cultural norms and participation

Similarly, socio-cultural norms can influence and challenge beneficiary participation in development projects and social accountability mechanisms. Socio-cultural norms and traditions shape the behavior of men and women differently. In many countries, prevailing social norms present obstacles to participation for instance, participation in efforts at natural resource management. Norms shape gender division of labor, and women often cannot spare time from domestic duties to engage in community work and in attending meetings aimed at social accountability. Segregation of public spaces is also dictated by norms (Nuggehalli and Prokopy, 2009: 289). Studies reveal that men are more active and efficient than women in political participation other than electoral participation. This is because women do not have access to the necessary resources to contribute effectively to participation in local decision making (Schlozman et al, 1994). Social hierarchy and the status of women in the household also determine the differences between men and women in terms of their preferences in participatory governance. Socio-cultural norms and economic conditions put men and women in different positions within a household. Power asymmetry within a household acts as an impediment to women's participatory rights (Agarwal, 1997). Scholars argue that even when both the spouses in a family are employed with salaried jobs, women are often over-burdened because of domestic responsibilities such as child care that reduces her time for actively participating in other activities (Phillips, 1991; Blumberg and Coleman, 1989). This is inevitable 'because the roles of men and women in a society have been traditionally patterned and embedded norms, including gender norms determine the social and political behavior of men and women in these societies (Schlozman et al, 1994: 974).' Nuggehalli and Prokopy therefore argue that socio-cultural norms, puts behavioral code of conduct that the individuals are bound to follow.

The study conducted by Dutta and other researchers sheds critical light on the implementation of India's antipoverty and public employment generating scheme, namely Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in Bihar. The study conducted from 2009 to 2010 argues that the scheme failed to perform well in economically poor states like Bihar. It shows that there was a significant wage-gap between what the workers received and should actually receive as mandated by the scheme. Records on wage disbursements prepared by the implementing agencies are defective. The study also identifies the absence of poor people in decision making (Dutta et al, 2014: 24). Due to existing social norms in the state of Bihar, women could not access into scheme-related information. In both social and household level, men are reluctant to share what they learnt by attending meetings on scheme. Therefore, it is apparent that 'women are less likely to demand work, and the rationing process is less favorable to them' (Dutta et al, 2014: 68).

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme has not been successful to guarantee the poor villagers living in the state of Bihar. Implementation of the scheme faced various challenges including challenges from the local level politicians. The officials who are 'in power locally have little or no incentive to give up their ability to control who benefits from public spending, for that is in large part the way they maintain their power' (Dutta et al, 2014: 24). Rather, they share benefits from the brokers who bribe money from the workers for giving them employment. So, there are also selective errors in employing the villagers in works.

The study argues that women are less likely to participate in MGNREGS works in Bihar. This is because of the fact that women are denied work. There is another reason of their non-engagement; due to their lack of consciousness about their rights under the scheme (Dutta et al, 2014: 24). Socio-cultural norms restrict women's entry into work and men are prioritized. Thus, the local level process of identifying who gets employed under the scheme reduced transparency (Dutta et al, 2014: 24).

Other studies also explore the effects of cultural norms on women's participation in governance practices. To take an example, participatory selection sessions (which were planned to train *chickpea* breeders) in two Ethiopian districts, Ada'a and Ensaro sought for women's participation.[3] The project 'intended to have women's voice' and therefore extended the invitation to male and female farmers for participation (Njuguna et al, 2016: 41). In order to secure female representation and participation, the organizers 'decided to institute an internal policy that all the male farmers who attended the project would be required to be accompanied by their wives (Njuguna et al, 2016: 42).' It was observed that

[3] Also known as *garbanzo* beans, *chickpea* is an annual legume. Its scientific name is *Cicer Arientium*. It is used to supplement protein, carbohydrates and fiber to human body.

‘out of 70 male farmers, only 3-5 women participated in these meetings (Njuguna et al, 2016: 42).’ The study identified some of the reasons for the lack of women’s participation in the agricultural training practices for *chickpea* production. Gender-based social norms were cited as one of the key reasons for the disengagement of women in the agricultural training organized for *chickpea* cultivation in Ethiopia’s Ada’a and Ensaro districts. Due to cultural norms, women failed to take independent decisions. These studies argued in these words, “In some societies, sacrificing of a woman’s wants and desires is encouraged, viewed and interpreted as the character of a good wife. Woman may sacrifice their desires to participate in agricultural trainings to attain social respect as a mark of good wives (Njuguna et al, 2016: 44).” They further argue, “Women are usually busy with their reproductive roles at home, and if they go away from home, their husbands would be unhappy and this would in turn, leave the women stressed (Njuguna et al, 2016: 51).” According to them, women in Ethiopia enjoy a ‘secondary status within the family and in the society (Njuguna et al, 2016: 45).’

This shows that the cultural construction of norms and appropriate female behavior affected the ability of women to bargain and take part in community practices. (Njuguna et al, 2016: 44). Gender identity of service providers (such as the experts who provided the training to the *chickpea* farmers) also shaped women’s decisions to engage in participation. Low level of literacy rate among women in Ethiopia also acted as impediments to take part in the extension activities that required reading and arithmetic skills (Njuguna et al, 2016: 45).’

Agarwal finds that disadvantaged groups such as women are more vulnerable to discipline their behavior and actions due to the overwhelming impact of socio-cultural norms. For example, risk of losing respect and earning social criticism restrict women from participation in the public spaces, especially when their male counterparts are present (Agarwal, 2001). Nuggehalli and Prokopy demonstrate that ‘behavioral norms that expect women to display shyness and obsequiousness prevent them from participatory engagements in local self-governing institutions. For instance, married women in many cultural settings in places like South Asia face restrictions on the expression of their views in the public sphere. They are sometimes prohibited from talking to unknown males and raising their voices in the public meetings attended by elderly men (Agarwal, 2001; Nuggehalli and Prokopy, 2009; Prokopy, 2004). For example, women belonging to the Islamic Hausa community in Northern Nigeria showed reluctance to engage directly with male service provider (such as extension agents) because norms of gender-identity is practiced in a Hausa society where women are secluded and not allowed to openly interact in the public domain (Saito, 1994). Even in Tanzania, female farmers showed reluctance to discuss the issues related to agricultural practices with the trainers/agents if they were males (Due et al, 1997). Male farmers were therefore relatively successful to gain access to state resources whereas the female farmers were pushed into the periphery of the development process (Adenkule, 2013). Marginalized women often accept such socially-created restrictions to avoid social criticisms and even physical assault (Agarwal, 2000). Additionally, men are considered responsible for the implementation of village development programs and local governance (Nuggehalli and Prokopy, 2009: 289).' Scholars argue that due to gender discrimination, countries like India has witnessed less participation of women in local self-governing institutions (Benson and Yukongdi, 2005). Women have representation reserved in the local self-governing institutions to ensure their participation (Agarwal, 2010). Women's increased representation however does not necessarily guarantee effective participation in the decision-making process of the local self-governing institutions. Scholars argue that women and men differ in terms of skills, knowledge and perceptions about development programs. This indicates differences in their roles in the participatory spaces such as social accountability mechanisms as well (Rocheleau and Edmunds, 1997; Agarwal, 2009; Hecht, 2007; Peach Brown, 2011; Mai, Mwangi and wan, 1997). Participatory roles of men and women in development projects and social accountability mechanisms differ because of the differences they exhibit in their preferences (Shackleton, Shackelton and Cousins, 2001; Cavendish, 2000; Shivley, 1997). Moreover, most women in the rural areas often do not have the economic freedom which further limits their mobility, access to information and technology, considered essential to enhance effectiveness in participation (Nuggehalli and Prokopy, 2009; Lewark, Gearge and Kermann, 2011; Reed, 2010; Harris and Weiner, 1998).

Socio-cultural norms therefore limit the spaces of participation for certain sections of the society such as women and other socio-economically marginalized groups. Socio-cultural norms often dictated by the powerful sections (such as rich and higher castes) of the society can prevent the marginalized sections of the society such as people belonging to lower caste categories in India to be part of the decision making process. Marginalized sections do not have the capability to counter elite forces even when elites capture resources and spaces of decentralized development programs actually meant for marginalized groups (Persha and Andersson, 2014). Powerful groups utilize the maximum participatory spaces (Ainlay, Becker and Coleman, 2013; Goffman, 2009; Titchkosky, 2003). Therefore, the impact of caste on participation is another parameter that may be used to analyze participatory efforts in governance (Lise, 2000). Political mobilization on the basis of caste has implications on development efforts in the local self-governing institutions. Political leaders are more likely to use caste linkages for political outcomes (Migdal, 1988; Weiner, 1967). Powerful villagers and dominant caste elites may use their dominant position in the society to capture rural development schemes and state resources for their vested interests. Caste-based social inequalities may lead to unjust benefit distribution in the local self-governing institutions. Political elites of local self-governing institutions may transform caste identity into political goods to fulfill their vested interests. Selection of beneficiaries and allocation of resources in may be based on caste identities. Caste provides the local politicians the spaces to mobilize the local voters including the beneficiaries of rural development schemes.

An analysis of the above literature reveals that despite the advantages of participatory governance and a variety of institutional reforms for social accountability mechanisms, effective participation in various participatory governance practices is therefore still a challenge in a large number of developing countries including India (Croock and Sverrison, 2001; Lakha et al, 2015). In the context of India, Fung and Wright argue that the formal arrangements for participatory governance in local self-governing institutions in India are constrained by larger state bureaucracies that enjoy the lion's share of financing and formal authority over most of the administration and development projects and schemes. Apart from bureaucracies, traditional elites used social and economic power to dominate the formally existing local democratic structures (Fung and Wright: 2003: 12). Participatory governance practices are sometimes used to mobilize popular support by the political elites at the local level because of its immense empowering appeal (Wampler, 2008).

Similarly, critics argue that literacy and education may not be the only reasons why there is lack of effective participation in the local self-governing institutions. Literate and educated individuals may have access to other resources (such as government jobs) than the development schemes offered by the state institutions. According to Jakimow, employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is 'hugely popular among the rural poor, credited with increased earnings and employment during lean periods (Jakimow, 2014: 263-264).' For the marginalized people such as poor, low caste people and landless farmers, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is important as they contribute to the socio-economic conditions of life.

Marginalized landless agricultural workers actively participated in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme as the above studies reveal. The scheme brought ‘changes to labour relations that were formerly buttressed by caste ideologies (Jakimow, 2014: 270).’ Access to benefits of rural development schemes such as the employment opportunity under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, allowed the scope of bargaining to the poor and the marginalized with the big landowners who were earlier dependent on the labor of the landless marginalized farmers. Consequently, ‘large farmers are no longer able to call labourers on demand, but have to go personally and persuade them to come to their work’ and this newly emerging socio-economic relations enabled the marginalized to bargain with landowners, mostly the higher caste land owners (Jakimow, 2014; 271). Therefore, Jakimow shows that in certain ways, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme has transformed the socio-economic discourses in the rural areas of certain districts in India (Jakimow, 2014).Likewise, other scholars documented that the relative success of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in some states was based on efforts to establish a transparent system of payments to the workers by means of technology and also by conducting social audits to allow the accountability of public officials (Jakimow, 2014; Aakella and Kidambi, 2007).

Despite prevailing socio-cultural norms of restrictions, some scholars argue that although women have not been able to take leadership positions, the system of reservation of seats in the panchayats has led to an increase in the political participation of women. In rare cases, however, the system has also led to an increase in the capability of women to make local leaders accountable to them (Deiningr et al, 2015). In terms of policy preferences, men and women differ largely (Edlund and Pande, 2002). Increase in the female representation in these institutions contributes to effective policy outcomes to address women-specific issues, which may encourage women beneficiaries to participate in the local level decision making (Chattopadhyay and Dufflo, 2004). Datta and Singh, examined women’s participation in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in Birbhum district in West Bengal. They argue that the socio-religious obstacles to women’s participation in the scheme were mostly prevalent among the Muslim women in the district of Birbhum. However, in some cases women are independent to make decisions with regard to their participation in the democratic spaces. For example, female-headed households had a control over individual decision making about participation unlike those households headed by males. In the former cases chances were greater for women to participate in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme than those headed by male members (Datta and Singh, 2012: 453). However, women cannot make their participation effective due to social conditions and norms, implying that their participation, if any, in social accountability mechanisms would be mere physical attendance.

Skeptics also argue that the reservation for women in local governance institutions like panchayats has been a challenge because of manipulation and control of the traditional elites over these institutions (Cowley and Childs, 2003; Navivadekar, 2006). Reservation policies have not been able to empower women. Illiteracy and lack of education further act as obstacles and reinforce the marginalization of women in the decision making process. (Cowley and Childs, 2003; Tripp, 2006; Navivadekar, 2006). In the Indian context, Anderson argues that caste structures and ritual practices often act as barriers to female representatives and beneficiaries to contribute effectively to participatory governance (Anderson, 2003). Drawing lessons from India, Johnson, Deshingkar and Start in their analysis of devolution of power to panchayats in Andhra Pradeshand Madhya Pradesh, show that the level of participation and decentralization is dependent on the pre-existing pattern of social inequalities created by caste, religion, class, gender and other forms of social groupings (Johnson, Deshingkar and Start, 2005:938). The presence of political incentives for traditional elites reinforced social conditions and norms at the cost of the beneficiaries. These scholars further argue that these formal institutions of local governance have been usurped by more informal patterns of domination and power' where 'women, for instance, are excluded from formal participation due to lack of experiences or because of male domination (Johnson, Deshingkar and Start, 2005: 943). Institutional structures of the panchayats created a situation where *sarpanches* and other local notables were often the only means by which ordinary villagers could obtain access to the bureaucratic state and the benefits provided through various schemes and programmes (Johnson, Deshingkar and Start, 2005: 962).'

Weaker sections of the society are therefore dependent upon the village *sarpanches*. Despite the real shifts in the government policies towards social development' caste-based mobilization of politics further reinforce the socio-economic influence of the traditionally powerful groups and consolidate their grip over weaker sections, such as the Dalits in different parts of India (Neve and Carswell, 2011: 209). No doubt, participation of women has relatively increased over the years in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment

Guarantee Scheme; but, they remain as mere 'wage-earners' in most cases rather than exercizing their participatory rights in governance (Pellissery and Jalan, 283).

2.6 Assumptions of the study

Review of existing literature helped us to identify the factors that may have an impact on beneficiary participation.

Drawing lessons from the literature review, the study, thus, proposes the following assumptions.

- *Beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in local self-governing institutions in the selected villages of Assam may be challenged by patronage politics.*

- *Beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in local self-governing institutions in the selected villages of Assam may be challenged by social conditions and cultural norms.*

2.7 Summary of the chapter

The aim of this chapter was to examine the established literature on participatory governance. The chapter tried to examine different sets of literature that explore various factors that impact and challenge participation in general and more specifically beneficiary participation in participatory governance especially in the social accountability mechanisms. Monitoring the implementation of development policies, gender budgeting, social audit are just a few mechanisms that can be utilized by the beneficiaries (the target stakeholders) to contribute to effective participatory governance in the developing countries. This chapter also reviewed the relevant literature on the development programs and schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and Indira Awas Yojana to understand how scholars have examined the implementation process and the impact of these government-sponsored schemes on social development in the rural areas. The chapter divided the review of literature into different sections and each section examined factors like patronage politics, social conditions and the existence of cultural norms in greater detail in India and elsewhere in the developing world. The chapter also discussed how these conditions had an impact on beneficiary participation in governance mechanisms andsocial accountability mechanismsin different rural contexts across the developing world.

The analysis of the literature revealed that strong linkages between the patrons and clients influenced local politics and the distribution of benefits under the social development programs such as the Indira Awas Yojana and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (Sadanandan, 2012; Maiorano, Das and Masiero, 2018). Social accountability mechanisms like social audit are intended to monitor the implementation process of the development programs. Given the patronage links and deeply embedded socio-cultural norms, the process of social accountability in local self-governing institutions gets highly politicized and influenced by these pre-existing networks. Implementation of such schemes and the process of social accountability are influenced by the political ambitions and interests of local political elites (such as representatives elected to gaon panchayats) who can determine and manipulate the findings of social audits. Assam also witnessed a phase of where social audit has encountered problems of institutionalization.

In order to sustain political power at the grass roots level panchayat elections, political parties and politicians distribute the benefits of rural development schemes on the basis of clientelistic links with the beneficiaries. This is an exchange system, where politicians give benefits and the benefit recipients provide the electoral support. This exchange is useful for both the patrons and the clients. Marginalized position of the beneficiaries makes them easy targets of the government sponsored schemes. Political parties and politicians are aware of the necessities of the beneficiaries at the grass roots level. Due to available power and authority, the ruling political parties and the traditional elites tend to distribute scheme-based benefits to selective villagers and beneficiaries. Social accountability mechanisms such as social audit where the people including the beneficiaries can raise issues and ask questions to the representatives of the *gram panchayats* therefore remain ineffective. Patron-client relationships influence beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms.

Social conditions and prevailing cultural norms also challenge beneficiary participation. Illiteracy and lack of education can put serious constraints on beneficiary participation. Effective beneficiary participation requires relevant information about rural development schemes and participatory rights. Access to such information is inhibited by structural conditions like lack of education. Gender-norms also challenge the participatory rights of female beneficiaries to effectively participate in social accountability mechanisms. Likewise, marginalized caste identities acts as a barrier in participatory governance. Due to existing structural conditions and norms, elites act as the key decision makers in social accountability mechanisms.

The literature review helps the study to sketch out its conceptual framework.Reviewing the literature related to participatory governance, social accountability mechanisms, patronage politics, socio-cultural norms, deepening of democracy and development, this study draws the conceptual framework to sketch out the influences of social norms, social hierarchy, social difference, and political patronage on beneficiary participation in social audits and other accountability mechanisms. In order to reduce the governance gap and improve the linkage between the citizens and the local self-governing institutions, social accountability mechanisms were introduced in developing countries including India and Brazil (Brautigam, 2004; Goetz and Gaventa, 2001; Gaventa, 2002; Lakha et al, 2015; Heller, 2012). However, the new participatory spaces created by these social accountability mechanisms become highly politicized by the local level politicians. Politicization of these participatory accountability mechanisms is essential for local politicians to hide irregularities they committed while they implemented the development schemes at the grass roots level (Heller, 2012).

Similarly, Sadanandan argues that decentralized participatory spaces advance patronage politics and thus challenge effective participation of people in the state of Kerala, India (Sadanandan, 2012). Tendency to use resources of state-funded development policies is rampant among the political parties when they face higher political competition as evident in India with the presence of multi-party system. So, they engage in selective benefit distribution to attract higher and constant electoral (Sadanandan, 2012). Analyzing the case of African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, Beresford argued that instead of being held accountable by the electorate for the lack of public service delivery, political leaders gained political legitimacy by distributing public good such as health and education through informal, deeply personalized patron-client networks built upon mutual expectations of reciprocity (Beresford, 2015).

Marginalized status in terms of education, caste, religion and gender and related socio-cultural norms reinforce ineffectiveness of people to use participatory rights in social accountability mechanisms. Together these create constraints for the people to challenge the embedded power structures at the local level. Collaboration of the local elites helps them to advance their goals (Mosse, 1994). The institutionalized position of local political elites in local self-governing institutions and well-funded development schemes privilege interests of certain groups at the cost of effective people's participation (Goldfrank and Schneider, 2006).

This set of literature helps the study to develop its theoretical framework. Two rural development schemes, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and Indira awas Yojana, are implemented by the panchayati raj institutions functioning in rural India. The study explore whether political parties use state-funded development scheme resources to target people, mostly disadvantaged sections of society to establish patronage links for benefit distribution. In doing so, the political elites may use the embedded socio-cultural norms on caste, religion, gender etc. Patronage politics, thus, challenge the scope of beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms. Beneficiaries have their own difficulties. For instance, due to lack of education, they may not understand discussion on schemes. When higher level of education promotes participation (Beard, 2005), lack of education reduces capacity of understanding (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). Likewise, power asymmetry within a household and a society creates constraints for women to effectively use their participatory rights in society (Agarwal, 1997; Phillips, 1991). The study also use this set of literature to understand challenges of beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in the district of Barpeta, Assam.

Chapter 3

Historical background of beneficiary participation and local self-governing institutions with special reference to Assam

3.1. Introduction

This chapter traces the history of local self-governing institutions (LSGIs) and beneficiary participation in India. The chapter also provides an account of some of the cases in different states of India to explore what influences beneficiary participation in participatory practices in local self-governing institutions. In order to understand the factors that may influence beneficiary participation, substantive analysis of cases where social accountability mechanisms such as social audit that have been practiced in India is important. A comparative study of the existing literature becomes crucial at this point. The first part of the chapter traces the origin of the local self-governing institutions in India. This chapter also discusses the history and development of local self-governing institutions and beneficiary participation in the state of Assam. Section four of this chapter discusses social accountability mechanisms practiced in various states in India. Section five provides a summary of the discussions in the chapter.

3.2. Origin of local self-governing institutions in India

The history of local self-governing institutions and beneficiary participation in participatory practices in India can be traced back to pre-colonial India. In the book *Status of Panchayati Raj in the States of India, 1994*, George Mathew mentioned that self-governing village communities in India dates back to 1200 BC. He points out: “There is also evidence of the existence of village ‘*sabhas*’ (councils or assemblies) and ‘*gramins*’ (senior persons of the village) until about 600 BC (Mathew, 1995: 1).”

3.2.1 Traces of village institutions in the pre-colonial and colonial period

According to Mathew, these village-based self-governing bodies transformed themselves into panchayats (an assembly of five persons). Panchayats had judicial and police powers to look into the affairs of a village. These bodies exercised power and authority over village affairs backed by religious and customary rules. In addition to the village panchayats, there were caste panchayats to look after the caste-based code of conduct and ensure that these were followed by particular persons belonging to that caste. These bodies were in the apex of administration of the villages. Mathew demonstrates: “Even during the medieval and Mughal periods, this characteristic of the village panchayats remained unchanged. Although under the Mughals their judicial powers were curtailed, local affairs remained unregulated from above and village officers and servants were answerable primarily to the panchayats (Mathew, 1995: 1).” Despite these claims, one should be cautious of the fact that the panchayats in the post-colonial state in modern India hardly resemble the earlier versions. As democratic development institutions, the concept of panchayat is a modern state institution (Furstenberg, 2015).

Though India had traditions of self-governed village administration in the form of traditional village panchayats, institutions for village administration were created during the British colonial rule. Goel and Rajneesh argued that during the colonial period, British adopted and reshaped panchayats as formal administrative bodies (Goel and Rajneesh, 2009: 9). Likewise, Mathew argues: “It is a historical fact that local self-government in India, in the sense of an accountable representative institution, was the creation of the British (Mathew, 1995: 2).” As Mathew argued, the British created the Madras Municipal Corporation in 1687 with nominated members particularly for trade purposes. The corporation was given the power to levy taxes. Similar bodies were created in other major towns and their powers of taxation were extended. However, these bodies did not consist of any elected member (Mathew, 1995).

In the year 1870, Lord Mayo, the viceroy, “got a resolution passed by his council for decentralization of powers, to bring about administrative efficiency in meeting the demands of the people and to add to the finances of the ‘existing imperial resources which will not suffice for the growing needs of the country (Mathew, 1995: 2).” With Mayo’s resolution, efforts were made to transfer some duties to the village bodies (Furstenberg, 2015; Goel and Rajneesh, 2009). The revolt of 1857 put serious financial constraints on the British government. The institution of self-governing administration became necessary to raise local taxes (Mathew, 1995).

In 1870 the British passed the *Bengal Chowkidari Act*. This Act created local units known as ‘unions’ to maintain law and order at the village level. These unions were given the power to levy taxes (Furstenberg, 2015). The Act empowered the district magistrates to set up village panchayats with nominated members from the villages. During the viceroyalty of Lord Ripon, development of local self-governing institutions achieved new parameters. On 18

May, 1882, a resolution was passed by the government which provided for the establishment of local boards. The resolution is considered as the *Magna Carta* of local self-governing institutions in India which provided for the creation of local rural boards with two-thirds members as elected representatives (Mathew, 1995).

Mathew's work shows that the Congress in 1906, under the chairmanship of Dadabhai Naoroji, adopted a resolution on local self-government. In 1907 the Royal Commission on Decentralization was constituted. The constitution of this commission was an attempt to strengthen local self-government. The Royal Commission 'reviewed the already existing institutions and recommended major improvements and further re-establishment of local administrative institutions in all provinces (Furstenberg, 2015: 108).' The report of the Royal Commission came in 1909 with the recommendation that it was necessary to establish panchayats to administer rural India. Ripon's resolution gained momentum in the recommendations made by the Royal Commission, which consisted of five British and one Indian representative (Mathew, 1995). Lahore session of the Congress was held in 1909. This session accepted a resolution to recommend the government to make local bodies elective and to provide them financial aid (Mathew, 1995). However, the recommendations made by all these commissions did not receive adequate responses of the British government. Only in 1915 some of the recommendations made by the Royal Commission were accepted but in practice, only a few panchayat bodies were constituted (Goel and Rajneesh, 2009: 12).

The Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 stated that local self-government would be a 'transferred subject' in the new system of diarchy (Mathew, 1995: 3). By 1925, eight British-Indian provinces passed provincial laws to establish panchayats. These were (a) the Madras Panchayat Act, 1920; (b) the Bombay Village Panchayat Act, 1920; (c) Bengal Self-government Act, 1919; (d) Bihar Self-government Act, 1920; (e) Central Provinces and Berar Panchayat Act, 1920; (f) Uttar Pradesh Village Panchayat Act, 1920; (g). Punjab Panchayat Act, 1922; and (h) Assam Self-government Act, 1925 (Mathew, 1995). By 1926, six native states of British-India passed similar kinds of laws on panchayats. These were (a) Cochin Panchayat Regulations Act, 1919; (b) Indore Panchayat Act, 1920; (c) Travancore Village Panchayat Act, 1925; (d) Baroda Village Panchayat Act, 1926; (e) Kolhapur Panchayat Act, 1926; and (f) Mysore Village Panchayat Act, 1926. Similar kinds of acts were passed by other states like Bikaner, Hyderabad, Mewar and others in the subsequent decades. The panchayats created under these laws covered only a few villages and they performed limited functions (Mathew, 1995).

The Government of India Act, 1935 had provisions for significant amount of provincial autonomy. Under this act, 'the parallel structure of legislation and execution between elected ministers responsible to the provincial legislative assemblies and executors responsible to the governor, laid down in the Government of India Act 1919' came to an end and 'most powers and duties were transferred to the provincial legislatures' (Furstenberg, 2015: 110). Popularly elected governments came into power in all the provinces. The newly elected governments took actions such as legislation of news laws to further democratize the local self-governing institutions in British India. With the declaration of Second World War (1939), Congress-led provincial governments resigned from power. However, the local self-government system remained unchanged until India received independence in August, 1947 (Mathew, 1995).

3.2.2 Local self-governing institutions in post-colonial India

3.2.2 a. Community development and various reforms (1947-1990)

After the independence, Government of India tried to bolster the traditional system of local self-governing institutions (panchayats) to engage local citizens in the decision-making process. The first draft of the Constitution of India did not have any provision for panchayat. Gandhi had his own vision on village republics (*gram swaraj*, meaning village autonomy) (Mathew, 1995). Some of the most prominent members of the Constituent Assembly were in support of establishing panchayats in villages. A provision on panchayats was finally included in Part IV of the Constitution of India. Inclusion of panchayats in Part IV of the Constitution of India deprives panchayats of constitutional status as this Part is not 'justifiable'. Article 40 of the Constitution of India provides: "The state should take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-governance (Mathew, 1995)." According to Mathew, even after independence panchayats failed to acquire proper constitutional status. Mathew argues: "The urban and the rural elites, their representatives in politics, and a bureaucracy conditioned by its class character, had a disdain for panchayats and this remained intact. Whatever genuine attempts were made for the devolution of power, these interests saw to it that the attempts did not succeed. The story of panchayat institutions since independence is precisely this (Mathew, 1995: 5)."

According to Mathew, India started its journey of development 'without taking cognizance of Gandhi's idea of *gram swaraj* (Mathew, 1995: 5).' In 1952, Government of India initiated Community Development Projects (CDPs). Alongside, National Extension Service (NES) programs were also taken. However, these projects were not successful due to the lack of people's engagement in activities carried out through the Community Development Projects or the National Extension Service. To study the drawbacks of these two programs, in 1957, a committee was constituted under the chairmanship of Balwantrai Mehta (a Member of Parliament) (Mathew, 1995).

The Balwantarai Mehta Committee found that Community Development Projects were not successful to deliver public goods to the target groups. It advocated participation of people through their representatives in the Community Development Projects to realize their own development (Dutta, 1989). The Balwantrai Mehta Committee urged for more participatory practices. This committee recommended for democratic decentralization by establishing panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) in all the states of India. One of the most important recommendations of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee is that 'public participation in community works should be organized through statutory representative bodies (cited in Mathew, 1995: 5).' The National Development Council supported the recommendation on democratic decentralization made by the Balwantrai Mehta Committee (Mathew, 1995). The Committee, as observed by Dutta, suggested for institutionalized form of decentralization known as Panchayati Raj to build empowered village communities (Dutta, 1989).

In India, Rajasthan earned the credit as the first state to establish panchayati raj institutions following the recommendations made by the Balwantrai Mehta Committee. On October 2, 1959, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated India's first panchayat in Nagaur (also written as *Nagour*) which is located 260 KMs far away from the capital city of Jaipur, Rajasthan.[4] After nine days, Nehru inaugurated another panchayat in Shadnagar in Hyderabad. The then Minister for affairs on Community Development, S. K. Dey propounded the idea of panchayats in the post-colonial period in India. S. K. Dey is known as the architect of panchayati raj institutions in independent India (Mathew, 1995).

With these inaugurations, India entered into a new era of participatory practices through panchayati raj institutions. Mathew demonstrates, "By 1959, all the states had passed panchayat acts, and by mid-1960s, panchayats had reached all parts of the country, covering over 92 percent of the rural population (Mathew, 1995: 5)." Panchayati raj institutions provided opportunities for the people to participate in the development activities. Panchayati

[4] Nagaur (Nagour) is a district of Rajasthan (Census, 2011). Indian Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated independent India's first three tier democratic panchayats in Nagaur (Nagour) in 2 October, 1959 (Source: Mathew, 1995; website of Rural Development and Panchayati Department, Government of Rajasthan).

raj institutions became instrumental to voice out their grievances in the decision-making processes. Panchayati raj institutions engendered a new set of leadership to represent the interests of the people in rural areas (Mathew, 1995). Several committees were set up by respective state government to examine the functioning of panchayati raj institutions. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, the Purushottam Pai Committee was set up in 1965 and Narasimha Committee was set up in 1972 (Mathew, 1995). The Planning Commission of India appointed a committee under the chairmanship of G. V. K. Rao. This committee emphasized on regular elections to the panchayat bodies.

As already stated, due to vested interests of the bureaucracy and elites, panchayati raj institutions were discarded. These elites did not like to reduce their powers with the new breed of leadership at the local level. Panchayati raj institutions became literally ineffective when the government introduced an 'intensive agricultural district programme' (IADP) in 1960s. The Jayapraksh Narayan Committee set up in 1961 criticized this new program. Likewise, the Drought Prone Areas Programme (DPAP), Small Farmers Development Agency (SFDA) and Intensive Tribal Development Programme (ITDP) were launched. In 1971, the concept 'rural development' became important and 'community development' was replaced. Panchayati raj institutions came under the purview of the Ministry of Rural Development (Mathew, 1995).

In 1977, the Ashok Mehta Committee was appointed under the chairmanship of Ashok Mehta to review the functioning of the existing panchayat system and recommended measures for the empowerment of panchayati raj institutions. This committee submitted its report in 1978. The constitution of the Ashok Mehta Committee proved to be a turning point in the history of panchayati raj institutions in India (Mathew, 1995). This committee advocated a three-tier system of panchayats, viz., village level, block level, and district level panchayat. In the report of this committee, it was recommended that panchayats should be empowered to involve local citizens in the development activities (Bhattacharya, Jaiswal and Joon, 2010). The report of the committee suggested that panchayati raj institutions should be converted to political bodies with the involvement of political parties and elections to the panchayats. Involvement of political parties marked a revolutionary success to involve people in the local panchayats. For example, Janata Party achieved tremendous victory in Karnataka in 1985. Scholars associate this victory to the party's commitment to devolve power to the people. Engagement of political parties made the people aware of the participatory practices available to them in the panchayati raj institutions. The panchayati raj institutions that were created after the Ashok Mehta Committee report were known as second generation panchayats (Mathew, 1995). The government of West Bengal was the first state to take the initiatives in 1978 towards the second generation panchayati raj institutions. Other states like Karnataka, Jammu and Kashmir, and Andhra Pradesh passed new laws or revised their existing laws on the panchayats as per the recommendations made by the Ashok Mehta Committee.

3.2.2 b. 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India (1990 to 2000s)

It became essential to bring more reforms and provide constitutional safeguards to the panchayati raj institutions in India. In 1988, a sub-committee of the consultative committee of the Indian parliament headed by P. K. Thungon recommended suggestions to provide constitutional recognition to panchayati raj institutions. This set up the background to the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India. In December 1992, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao-led government at the Centre passed the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution of India. The 73rd Amendment act came into effect on 20 April, 1993. As a result of the Amendment, the Panchayats were recognized as the institutions of self-government. The Amendment provided the formation of a Gram Sabha for each village consisting of all the adult members who are registered as voters in the panchayat area; and, a three-tier system of panchayats: village, block and district level was established. States comprising of less than 20 lakh population were exempted to constitute the intermediate level (block level) panchayats. The reforms also laid down the provisions for direct elections to elect the representatives of the people to the panchayats. Additionally it was provided that the chairpersons of the village panchayats may become the members of the block level panchayats and chairpersons of the block level panchayats can become the members of the district level bodies in the panchayats. The reforms also made provisions for the reservation of electoral seats for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in accordance to the proportion of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population. Likewise, it provides reservation of seats for women. It provides for a fixed term of five years of office to every panchayats. Elections were made mandatory to be held to constitute new panchayat bodies before the expiry of the term of the existing panchayat. In case of dissolution, it was provided that elections would be held within six months. And, the newly elected panchayats will serve for the rest of the five-year term. The amendment also provided for the constitution of an independent Election Commission in every state to prepare the electoral rolls and to conduct free and fair elections to the panchayats. It empowered the panchayats to prepare action plans on the 29 subjects enlisted in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution of India for development and social justice and provided that panchayats will receive funds and grants from the state government to run their development activities. Respective state governments were also required to provide revenues from certain taxes to the panchayats. Panchayats were also entrusted with the power to collect taxes from certain subjects and use the revenues collected from those taxes.

The 73rd amendment provided the scope of deepening democracy in India. This amendment provided the opportunities to the marginalized sections of the society to take part in the decision making process of the local self-governing institutions. The 73rd amendment provides for *gram/gaon sabha* in every panchayat. The provision of *gram sabhas* in every panchayat consisting of village residents registered in the electoral rolls for the panchayats enhanced the participatory spaces in the rural development programs for the marginalized. The *gram sabha* has been given the power to give approvals to plans and projects undertaken by the panchayats. The *gram sabha* can identify the villagers as beneficiaries to get benefits from rural development schemes. *Gram sabha* can discuss and debate any issues related to the socio-economic development of a village within a particular panchayat area and make recommendations. The implementation of state-sponsored development schemes can be reviewed by the *gram sabha*. Participants in the *gram sabha* can ask questions to the panchayat officials and representatives seeking information about the sanctioning and the allocation of funds for rural development programs, their utilization and performance. The creation of *gram sabhas* increased the opportunities for beneficiary participation.

Madhya Pradesh was one of the first states in India to legislate laws in conformity with the 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution. By April, 1994, different state governments passed laws in conformity with the 73rd Amendment (Mathew, 1999). The third generation panchayati raj institutions therefore came into effect across India.

Critics, however, point out that the reforms brought out by the 73rd Amendment had some gaps because it did not clearly specify the functions and powers of the panchayats. Article 243 G stated that the legislature of a state may, by law, endow the panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government. The Constitution enlists twenty nine subjects for panchayats functioning at the rural level in India.[5] This indicates that the state government has the discretion and can

[5] Article 243 G (Eleventh Schedule) of the Indian Constitution earmarked 29 subjects with a view to devolve power to the panchayats. These subjects include: 1. Agriculture, including agricultural extension; 2. Land improvement, implementation of land reforms, land consolidation and social conservation; 3. Minor irrigation,

devolve power to the panchayats. Often the devolution of power depends on the political leadership at the state level.

3.3 History of Local Self-governing Institutions in Assam

Assam located in the north-eastern part of India comprises of various ethnic groups such as Bodos, Rabhas, Mishings, Tiwas, Kalitas, Hajongs, Karbi, Nath-Yogis, Rajbongshis, Tai-Ahoms and others. Historically, Assam was ruled by the Ahoms since 1228 to 1826. Prior to the Ahoms, there were a number of independent chiefdoms The Ahoms subordinated the chiefdoms and administered Assam as an independent political entity. *Khel* was a system of administrative set up in Assam during the Ahom period. A particular *Khel* consisted of members from a relatively homogeneous group of people particularly with specific professions living in a definite area. A *khel* consisted of people from different castes with similar occupation. Each *khel* was a unit providing service to the Ahom chiefs. The Ahom chiefs appointed local governors such as *Barphukans* to administer different areas under the Ahoms. There were other local governors such as *Marangi Khowa Gohain*, *Sadiya Khowa Gohain* and *Salal Gohain* in different parts of the kingdom (Shakespear, 2012; Bose, 1989; Bhuyan, 2015). The Ahoms had a centralized system of governance. Although this type of administration could not provide the scope of direct participation they created platforms for indirect participation through the local officials.

Other community institutions such as *namghars* (community halls used for public gatherings to discuss social problems and issues affecting the villages and for purposes of community prayers) also contributed to develop a sense of community participation. In 1826, the British occupied control over Assam. The British colonial period had an impact on the local self-government institutions. The British supervised the general administration with more emphasis on fiscal affairs. Civil and criminal affairs were left to be exercised by the local

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water management and watershed development; 4. Animal husbandry and poultry; 5. Fisheries; 6. Social forestry and farm forestry; 7. Minor forest produce; 8. Small scale industries, including food processing industries; 9. Khadi, village and cottage industries; 10. Rural housing; 11.Drinking water; 12.Fuel and fodder; 13.Roads, culverts, bridges, ferries, waterways and other means of communication; 14.Rural electrification, including distribution of electricity; 15.Non-conventional energy sources; 16.Poverty alleviation programme; 17.Education, including primary and secondary schools; 18.Technical training and vocational education; 19.Adult and non-formal education; 20.Libraries; 21.Cultural activities; 22.Markets and fairs; 23.Health and sanitation, including hospitals, primary health centers and dispensaries; 24.Family welfare; 25.Women and child development; 26.Social welfare, including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded; 27.Welfare of the weaker sections, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes; 28.Public distribution system; and, 29.Maintenance of community assets.

panchayats. This was evident in the writings of William Robinson (1841) who wrote that the criminal and civil duties during this period were performed mostly by the councils of the Assamese gentry, under the name of Punchayets (panchayats) (cited in Mathew, 1995: 37). The traditional system of panchayats did not cease to function in Assam.

In 1879 the *Assam Local Rates Regulations* was passed to levy taxes. All lands were subjected to payment of a cess additionally with local cesses and land taxes. In 1882, the British passed the Ripon resolution on local self-government. Following this, local boards were set up to administer different sub-divisions in Assam. The sub-divisional boards continued to function until 1915. Under this provision the Public Works Department (PWD) enjoyed enormous power at the local level (Mathew, 1995). The Assam Local Self-government Act was passed in 1915. This act established the panchayats at the village level, and thus panchayats, for the first time, were provided with legal and formal recognition.

In the post-colonial period, in 1948 the Assam Rural Panchayat Act was legislated. This act was replaced in 1959 with the legislation of Assam Panchayat Act, 1959. In 1972, the Assam Panchayati Raj Act was passed which provided for a two-tier system of panchayats, the *gaon panchayats* at the village level and *mohkuma parishads* at the sub-divisional level. This Act abolished the existing three-tier system of panchayats. The objective behind this was to make panchayats economically sound and efficient to reach the aims of democratic decentralization. The Act also provided more powers and responsibilities to the panchayat bodies to perform development activities. *Mohkuma parishads* were empowered with more powers to look into the budget and expenditure of respective departments and coordinate their activities to ensure development. The Act also provided for the post of the chairman and the chief executive councilor. The panchayats, for the first time were run by an executive body rather than a merely advisory body. In addition, the Act provided for the establishment of the Assam Rural Development Fund. The state government could also establish a panchayat court in each *gaon panchayat* under this Act (Mathew, 1995).

In 1986, the Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1986 was passed which came into force on 5th September, 1990. This new act replaced the act of 1973. This Act provided for a three-tier panchayati raj system to be established at the village (*gaon panchayats*), block (*anchalik panchayats*) and sub-divisional levels (*mohkuma parishads*). This Act reduced the size of population to be covered in each *gaon panchayat* and thus increased the number of gaon panchayats (Mathew, 1995). The increase in the number of *gaon panchayats* allowed the panchayats to become closer to the people. This paved the way for peoples' engagement with the panchayat activities. At the same time the Act increased the powers of the state government and bureaucrats over the supervision, coordination and other related subjects of the panchayats. Panchayats were no longer allowed to elect their own staff and officials. The staff and officials of the panchayats would be appointed by the director of the panchayats. All the service related matters of the staffs would be allocated by the state government (Mathew, 1995).

The Assam Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Ordinance, 1992 replaced the act of 1986. In 1994, the Assam Panchayat Act was passed which replaced the ordinance. The Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 was in conformity with the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India. The 73rd Amendment act as we discussed above provided the three tier system of panchayati raj in every state with a population of over 20 lakhs.

3.4. Beneficiary participation in local self-governing institutions in India: Drawing lessons from other states in India

In this section, we discuss some of the important social accountability mechanisms identified by scholars and international organizations/agencies such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program. The following sub-sections also discuss some of the cases of beneficiary participation with the help of available social accountability mechanisms in the local self-governing institutions in India.

3.4.1. Social accountability mechanisms identified by UNDP, CAG and NIRD

Some of the social accountability mechanisms identified by United Nations Development Programs (UNDP) include, gender budgeting, social audits, citizen reports cards (CRCs), public expenditure tracking surveys (PETs), citizen charters (CCs), integrity pacts, and social media initiatives (UNDP, 2011). World Bank identified some important social accountability mechanisms including 'participatory public policy-making, participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, citizen monitoring and evaluation of public service delivery (Malena et al, 2004: 3).'

Social audit is one of the most important participatory practices available in the panchayats in India to evaluate their performance in terms of policy implementation. Social audit provides the opportunities for the beneficiaries to participate in the local governing institutions. This sub-section discusses the practice of social accountability mechanisms in different states in India (Afridi, 2008; Joshi and Houtzager, 2012). United Nations Development Program (UNDP) defines social audit 'as an approach and process to build accountability and transparency in the use and management of public resources. It relies on engagement of citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs) to demand accountability and transparency in the public policy and budget making processes in the governing institutions. An important challenge of social audit is the availability of skills, capacity and tools among the citizens to effectively monitor and evaluate the implementation of the schemes (UNDP, 2011: 20). UNDP documented, "Social audit is a source of policy dialogue and conflict resolution. It can enhance the ability of citizens to move beyond mere protest and/or apathy, toward a process that helps to engage with bureaucrats and decision-makers in a more informed, organized, constructive and systematic manner, thus increasing the chances of effective positive change. By providing critical information on policies and rights and soliciting systematic feedback from constituencies, social audit can provide a means to increase and aggregate the voice of excluded and vulnerable groups. In turn, this can increase the chance of greater policy responsiveness on the part of government. Thus, social audit also become a confidence building measure (UNDP, 2011: 20)".

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India described social audit 'as the verification of implementation of a programme/scheme and its results by the community with the active involvement of the primary stakeholders. The objective of social audit include promoting transparency and accountability in the implementation of the programmes, providing a collective platform such as Social Audit Gram Sabha for people to express their needs and grievances, and strengthening the schemes by deterring corruption and improving implementation.'

Social audit has also been defined as 'a tool through which government departments can plan, manage and measure non-financial activities and monitor both internal and external consequences of the social and commercial operations of the departments' (CGG, 2012). A conventional audit process involves scrutiny of the financial records of the public offices by an external auditor following financial accountancy principles, whereas social audit involves all the stakeholders in the process of auditing. The National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR, Hyderabad) defines social audit as a ‘way of measuring, understanding, reporting and ultimately improving an organization’s social and ethical performances (NIRDPR website).’ Social audit is therefore considered as a tool to measure the performance of an organization (such as panchayat or business enterprise) to check whether they could perform according to the committed goals.

Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) conceptualizes social audit as ‘a public assembly where all the details of the project are scrutinized (Ministry of Rural Development).’ Social audit according to the Ministry of Rural Development is ‘a process of reviewing official records and determining whether state reported expenditures reflects the actual funds spent on the ground (MGNREGA website).’

United Nations Development Program defines ‘citizen reports cards (CRCs), another participatory tool, as ‘participatory surveys that solicits users/clients feedback on the performance of specific public services.’ CRCs are also used where demand-side data, such as user perceptions on quality and satisfaction with public services, are absent. CRCs also provide a system of feedback from the users of services on the availability of services, satisfaction, reliability, responsiveness of service providers and hidden costs (UNDP, 2011: 49).

Public expenditure tracking surveys (PETs) are other types of social accountability mechanisms enabling citizens to ‘identify how much of the allocated resources reach the targets and, in practice, identify whether there are leakages and/or bottlenecks on the way to the recipient institutions and beneficiaries (UNDP, 2011: 52)’. This tool is also known as ‘participatory public expenditure or input tracking (Malena et al, 2004: 11).’ According to some scholars, “Participatory public expenditure involves citizen groups tracking how the government actually spends funds, with the aim of identifying leakages and/or bottlenecks in the flow of financial resources or inputs. Typically, these groups employ the actual users or beneficiaries of government services (assisted by civil society organizations) to collect and publicly disseminate data on inputs and expenditures. This approach often involves the triangulation of information received from the disbursement of records of finance ministries, accounts submitted by line agencies and information obtained from independent enquiries. Information is disseminated through the use of social media, publications and public meetings (Malena et al, 2004: 11).’ These are useful tools to gain access to finances granted and utilized by public offices and implementing agencies.

United Nations Development Program identified citizens charter (CC) as a social accountability mechanism to 'improve the performance and the quality of public institutions and services they offer (UNDP, 2011: 52).' Integrity pacts, other accountability tools are used to prevent corruption especially in public procurement processes. United Nations Development Program conceptualizes integrity pacts in these words, "The 'pact' entails an agreement between the government procurement officials and bidders to ensure that the bidding process maintains internationally recognized procurement standards of fairness, transparency, and efficiency. Government officials commit to transparency procedures and to reject bribes or gifts from the bidders. Bidders also commit not to collude with the competitors to obtain a contract or to offer bribes to the public officials. The integrity pacts also include an independent social audit conducted by the civil society organizations that are in charge of overseeing and monitoring the procurement process and guarantee the integrity (UNDP, 2011: 54)."

Emphasizing on the role of technologies to maintain transparency and accountability, United Nations Development Program considers social media as an important means to utilize the social accountability mechanisms. According to United Nations Development Program, social media may refer to the 'use of web-based and mobile technologies that can transform communication into interactive and fast dialogues, through different forms, including internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, micro-blogging, wikis, podcasts, video, rating and social bookmarking (UNDP, 2011: 54). Social media initiatives are important as they enable social mobilization of citizens. This builds up social networks which 'can also mobilize the population for zero tolerance against corruption (UNDP, 2008: 20).'

3.4.2 Social accountability mechanisms applied in India

The Government of India from time to time initiated social accountability mechanisms in the country. Some of the key social accountability mechanisms designed and applied in India include report cards, score cards, citizens' charters, gender budgeting, participatory planning and social audit (Joshi and Houtzager, 2012).

States like Uttar Pradesh (UP) allowed the provisions of social accountability to the citizens by issuing them report cards. In 1990s, the state government of UP initiated report card facilities to the local citizens to report the performance of the health department in the state. By using report cards, the users were able to identify the issues and deficiencies of the state-run hospitals. The report cards were useful to identify the number of hospitals that failed to perform according to standards in the state of UP. Score cards are also applied in states like Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, and Karnataka.[6]

Gender-budgeting is another important tool used as a social accountability mechanism in India (CAG report, 2015). Gender-budgeting reprioritizes budgetary resource allocation to effectively address issues of women. Gender-budgeting aims at 'examining budgetary resource allocations through a gender lens (Lahiri et al, 2002: 5).' Sodani and Sharma define gender-budgeting in these words: "Gender-budgeting is a process that entails maintaining a gender perspective at various stages like programme/policy formulation, assessment of needs of target groups, review of extant policies and guideline, allocation of resources, implementation of programmes, impact assessment, reprioritization of resources, and so on (Sodani and Sharma, 2008: 227)." In India, the Union Budget in 2005-06 carried for the first time a characteristic of gender-budgeting. This is apparent in the words of Das and Mishra, "In the budget of 2005-06, the union government for the first time included a statement on gender budgeting, which presented the magnitude of allocations for various programmes/schemes under the demands made for grants that were expected to benefit women substantially (and hence eligible to be a part of the gender budget) (Das and Mishra, 2006: 3285)." The demand for a gender-budget does not essentially mean introduction of a separate budget for women. It entails a common budget with women-specific provisions to address discrimination and differences the women have been suffering from. Budget allocation for housing facilities in India symbolizes gender-budgeting. According to Das and Mishra, the union budget of 2005-06 allocated money for housing facilities under the Indira Awas Yojana. However, in India gender-budgeting does not work exclusively to only benefit the women. Das and Mishra explain the gender-based characteristics and criticisms in this budget allocation in these words,

"The entire allocations for Indira Awas Yojana have also been included as women-specific, apparently because the houses built are registered in the name of women members. However, the houses built benefit men and women equally and hence should not be seen as solely for the benefit of women (Das and Mishra, 2006: 3285)*."*

[6] Scorecards and social audits involve face-to-face meetings between citizens and providers. The assumption is that the scrutiny and monitoring by communities will alter the incentives of providers either through reputational repercussions or the simple act of being observed (Ringold et al, 2011: 54).

Panchayati raj institutions are entrusted with the responsibilities to implement socio-economic development policies. A large amount of funds are therefore transferred to these institutions. According to the Annual Report of 2014-15, the Thirteenth Central Finance Commission provided certain percentage of the Divisible Pool to the panchayati raj institutions. This was based on two types of distribution criteria (i) Basic Grant amounting to 1.5% of the Divisible Pool, and (ii) Performance Grant to be paid for a period of four years starting from 2011-12 at the rate of 0.5% of the Divisible Pool in the first year and 1% of the Divisible Pool in the remaining three years. On the basis of these criteria, an estimated amount of Rs. 63,050 crore (Rs. 41,225 crore as Basic Grant and Rs.21,825 crore as Performance Grant) was provided to the panchayati raj institutions for the period of 2010-15. During the period of 2010-15, Rs. 48,580 crore was released to the panchayati raj institutions (Annual Report, 2015). Despite the allocation of huge amount of funds it was observed that socio-economic development programs were not effectively implemented in the rural areas. Lack of accountability and transparency were identified as the fundamental problems in the implementation process. Formal auditing processes have failed to make these public institutions accountable. Tambe and other scholars documented,

"Current mechanisms of audit of panchayati raj institutions by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), local fund audits by state governments, and other internal audits are inadequate due to a shortage of infrastructure, manpower, outreach, audit methodology, and evidence requirements when compared to the magnitude of funds devolved and the huge number of implementing agencies (Tambe et al, 2016: 185)."

In this context, social audit has been considered as one of the most important initiatives towards inclusive and citizen centered governance in India. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India (Comptroller and Auditor General of India, 2010) reemphasized the importance of social audit as an accountability mechanism. The report emphasized that in order to ensure the accountability of panchayati raj institutions there should be proper verification of the policies and their implementation by the primary stakeholders.

India initiated social audits in 2005 under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). It was one of the most important steps taken by the government of India to realize good governance at the village level. Social audit is used in India to ensure accountability and transparency of the implementation of development programmes. Social audits were initiated to ensure transparency in the implementation of rural development policies and schemes. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employee Guarantee Act, 2005 (section 17) further allowed the space to conduct social audit in India (MGNREGA, 2005). The Comptroller and Auditor General's report made it clear that Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 contributed to institutionalizing social audit reforms in India (CAG report, 2015). The Government of India notified that as per the provisions of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Audit Scheme, 2011 an independent organization known as the Social Audit Unit (SAU) would be set up in different states to administer the process of social audit in India. Accordingly social audit units were given the responsibilities to build capacities of *gram sabhas* for conducting social audit, preparing social audit reports, creating awareness among the labourers about their rights and entitlements under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and facilitate verification of records by the primary stakeholders. District Programme Coordinator (DPC) of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employee Guarantee Scheme was required to ensure that all records for the conduct of social audit were provided by the implementing agencies to the social audit units (CAG report, 2015: 12-13). Participatory spaces were therefore formally-sanctioned by the government to the primary beneficiaries. It was provided that the *gram sabha* would play a vital role in the conduct of social audits by reviewing the implementation process of the public funds, and deliberating up on the findings.

In the recent years, social audit has been conducted in different states in India. Some of the social audit experiences in various states of India are analyzed as follows.

3.4.2 (a) Experiences of social audit in Rajasthan

Rajasthan, located in the northern part of India, executed social accountability mechanisms in 2006. Rajasthan conducted social audit in Dungarpur in 2006 under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employee Guarantee Scheme. Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), a civil society organization (CSO) initiated the conduct of social audit as a part of its anti-corruption movement in the state of Rajasthan in 1990s. According Goetz and Jenkins, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan 'sought to involve citizens and their associations directly in the oversight functions (in this case relating to financial auditing) previously exercised by the government bodies, such as the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001: 365).' Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan conducted popular audits to evaluate the performance of local government based on official expenditure records that were informally obtained from the bureaucrats. Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan movement led to reforms in the local governing institutions in Rajasthan and the state was provided to include local residents directly in auditing the government sponsored schemes for development (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001: 365). Following the campaign led by Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan social audit, as a part of the accountability process, was conducted in different parts of Rajasthan. Civil society organizations (CSOs) especially the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan played a vital role in conducting social audit in different parts of Rajasthan. According to Kidambi, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan was the pioneer to conduct social audits in India with the help of the Right to Information which provided the required information, to start the process. As Kidambi notes,

"MKSS's (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan's) first trouble was just trying to get information. When it began 25 years ago, even muster rolls were a secret document. Now it has gone online and anybody can access it. It establishes the primacy and absolute necessity of information in the entire context of good governance."[7]

The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan took the initiatives of conducting social audit in the villages of Rajasthan including the districts of Dungarpur and Banswara (Afrid, 2008). The purpose was to make public officials accountable to the local villagers. The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan under the leadership of Aruna Roy filed petitions to the government under the Right to Information (RTI) Act and sought for 'records of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employee Guarantee Scheme's public works carried out by the gram panchayat. Once they obtained the official documents they randomly chose one project per gram panchayat for public audit. The records on expenditures on wage payments and materials were consolidated by a team of auditors. The auditors consisted of members of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, other NGOs and ordinary villagers (Afridi, 2008).' Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan launched these campaigns called *Jan Sunwai* (public hearing) in different places in Rajasthan which provided the platforms for the beneficiaries to participate in social audit. Public hearings were useful because these 'encouraged ordinary citizens to speak out on issues like the problems of distribution of resources in public works and schemes from which they are supposed to benefit (Social audit toolkit, 2012: 12).' The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan adopted various strategies including rallies, street theater, sit-ins, and music shows to make the villagers conscious of their entitlements. Under the supervision of Mazdoor

[7] Sowmya Kidambi was the Director of the Society for Social Audits, Accountability and Transparency, Department of Rural Development, Government of Telangana, *The Hindu*, dated August 30, 2016.

Kisan Shakti Sangathan, the audit team collected testimonies from the workers who were engaged in works under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). The social audit team visited the work sites, involved the local residents as well as the laborers. They collected relevant information from the work sites about the actual amount of work done. The information obtained from the villagers and the on-site visits were 'cross-checked with the receipts of materials filed in the official documents (Afridi, 2008).' Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan raised various issues including payment of wages to the laborers under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

The role the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan was important in terms of engaging villagers in participatory practices. Before the intervention of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, ordinary villagers hardly had any access to the official records. The panchayat officials and representatives maintained secrecy and denied ordinary citizens the right to information on the utilization of public funds. The movement launched by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan made the local villagers conscious of social accountability mechanisms. The movement launched by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan was successful in pressurizing the government of Rajasthan. The response from the government came in the form of notifications stating that the people would have the right to gain to the access information on the official records. The movement made the public officials accountable to the ordinary citizens. Many malpractices in the distribution of state-sponsored benefits to the beneficiaries and the volume of public works under schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme were made public through Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan activism and these social audit activities (Sarker and Hassan, 2010). All these were possible because of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan-led activism in the state of Rajasthan.

Social accountability movement in the state of Rajasthan was therefore effective. The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan-led social audits made public officials and elected representatives accountable to the beneficiaries and village residents of Rajasthan in a certain way.

Despite these practices in Rajasthan, critics question the role and effectiveness of civil society organizations (CSOs) like Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan in conducting social audits. Critics argue that the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan was not successful in spreading the activism and the movement for social accountability beyond the state of Rajasthan. Mazdoor

Kisan Shakti Sangathan achieved success in the state of Rajasthan but failed to build up networks in other states in India. Civil society organizations' activism in social audit processes is therefore weak in other states in India. Even in Rajasthan, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan was challenged by the bureaucratic machinery. According to Goetz and Jenkins, social audit campaigns led by Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan faced various political and bureaucratic challenges in Rajasthan (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001: 376). Participation of citizens in such activities involves costs for ordinary citizens and can jeopardize the clientele they may have nurtured with the politicians, bureaucrats and the local elites (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001: 376). Moreover, despite the activism and the identification of the discrepancies, there were problems of enforcement and any follow-up actions against actors involved in such discrepancies.

The state police and other enforcement agencies work with close nexus with the government officials which in turn make it difficult to proceed with any follow up actions after the audit process. Other arms of the state were equally ineffective. For instance, the Ministry of Rural Development, government of Rajasthan, responsible for monitoring the performance of local government, was indifferent when Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan brought out *prima facie* evidence of misconduct, even though the discrepancies between the data in the official documents and the physical evidence on the ground could easily be verified through an official inspection (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001: 378). Overcoming such bureaucratic and political obstacles has been a challenge. Therefore, the organized movement of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan could not have a durable impact in Rajasthan nor could it spread the movement to other parts of India.

3.4.2 (b). Experiences of social audit in Andhra Pradesh

Social audit started in Andhra Pradesh (AP) in 2006 in the district of Anantapur. The series of social audits conducted in the state scrutinized mainly the works related to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme performed in the state. Unlike Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan in Rajasthan, social audits in Andhra Pradesh, were not initiated by the civil society organizations but were mainly conducted by the state government agencies. Organizations such as *Action Aid*, an international non-governmental organization founded in 1972 and the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan to a certain extent, provided the training to the state government officials in Andhra Pradesh to develop a state-sponsored team in 2006. The social audit team was given the task of conducting social audit in the state. Through these organizations and government initiatives, citizens participated in the monitoring and implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in various districts of Andhra Pradesh including Anantapur and Mehbubnagar (Aakella and Kidambi, 2007; Dheeraja, Daimari and Rao, 2010; Afridi, 2008).

Scholars reveal that the social audit conducted in the state was beneficial to a certain extent. Aakella and Kidambi argued that one of the most positive developments emerging from the social audits is the creation of new partnerships between the government and civil society organizations. The latter participate in the conduct of social audits on a voluntary basis. Officials at the state and district levels ensure access to official records, provide training to people in the social audits and take corrective measures (Aakella and Kidambi, 2007: 345a). Social audit is a collaborative social accountability mechanism where the effective involvement of the government, local citizens and civil society organizations are necessary. In Andhra Pradesh (AP) social audit was used to monitor the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. The social audit forums held from time to time in Andhra Pradesh raised consciousness among the workers who were guaranteed benefits under the scheme. A preliminary study shows that prior to social audit in Cuddapah, Khamam and Medak districts only 31% of the population (respondents) in that particular study were aware about the provision of 100 days of employment guarantee under the scheme. After social audit was conducted more than 90% of the population of the villages in these districts became aware of the disproportionate distribution of benefits under the scheme (Aiyar and Samji, 2009).

The same study also shows that although the application of social audit increased the level of awareness among the workers, the effectiveness of social audit has been limited to address other development issues. Moreover, despite the revelation of misappropriation of funds under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, only 15% of the total funds were recovered after the conduct of social audit (Aiyar and Samji, 2009; Aiyer, Mehta and Samji, 2010). Due to lack of provisions of enforcement or any corrective mechanisms accountability through social audit forums often remain ineffective to ensure social justice to the beneficiaries directly affected by these schemes. In Andhra Pradesh, public officials continued with the malpractices related to the schemes and also failed to ensure effective beneficiary participation in the SAMs at various places in the state. This led scholars to argue that in the absence of enforcement mechanisms to prevent irregularities within a time frame, participation of beneficiaries in social accountability mechanisms like social audit would continue to remain ineffective in deepening democracy (Afridi and Iversen, 2014).

3.4.2 (c). Experiences of social audit in Assam

In Assam, social audit was conducted for the first time in November, 2014. The State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD), now known as State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development (SIPRD), acted as the Social Audit Unit (SAU) to conduct the social audit in different districts in Assam. The State Institute of Rural Development defined social audit in these words,

"The process of inspection and evaluation of the schemes by the people and implementing agencies together is called social audit. In this process, the implementing agencies, the gram panchayat and the people together, analyze whether the inspection, utility, quality, necessity and success of the schemes running and completed, have properly been implemented. (SIRD, 2015: 1)."

The State Institute of Rural Development emphasized on 'people's participation and awareness' as the 'necessity of social audit' (SIRD, 2015: 2). In accordance with section 17 of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 and Social Audit Principles 2011, every state in India is required to have a social audit unit to conduct public audit of state-sponsored schemes. As mentioned earlier, in 2014, the responsibility to conduct social audit was entrusted with the State Institute of Rural Development.

Social audit was conducted in all the districts of Assam, which covered all the rural development schemes implemented between 2013-14 and 2014-15. However, special emphasis was laid on Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act[8] and Indira Awas Yojana (IAY). Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme was implemented in three different phases in twenty seven districts of Assam between 2006 to 2008.[9] The scheme is still operative in the state. The aim was to provide livelihood security

[8] According to the Section 17 of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, it is mandatory to conduct social audit once in every six months to monitor implementation of the scheme.

[9] Phase 1 (from February 2, 2006): Districts covered were: 1. Bongaigaon, 2. Dhemaji, 3. Goalpara, 4. KarbiAnglong, 5. Kokrajhar, 6. Lakhimpur, and 7. N. C. Hills district.; Phase 2 (from April 1, 2007): Districts covered were: 1. Barpeta, 2. Darrang, 3. Cachar, 4. Hailakandi, 5. Morigaon, and 6. Nalbari; and Phase 3 (From April 1, 2008): Districts covered were: 1. Baksa, 2. Chirang, 3. Dhubri, 4. Dibrugarh, 5. Golaghat, 6. Jorhat, 7. Kamrup (rural), 8. Kamrup (metro), 9.Karimganj, 10.Nagaon, 11.Sivsagar, 12.Sonitpur, 13.Tinsukia, and 14.Udalguri.

of the rural residents by providing them 100 days employment with fixed wages in every financial year (MGNRGA, 2005).

The social audit conducted by the State Institute of Rural Development in 2014 covered 2201 *gaon panchayats*, 515 Village Council Development Councils (VCDC) and Village Development Councils (VDC) in the autonomous districts.[10] For smooth conduct of social audit in all the districts of Assam, 10,015 social auditors were selected in 2014. The selection criteria of the social auditors were provided in the guidelines of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA, 2013). Social auditors in Assam were 'educated but unemployed youth, especially those from poor families with job cards, volunteers from 'Bharat Nirman Volunteers'[11] and 'members of SHGs' (self-help groups) were also selected as social auditors (SIRD, 2015: 5). As per the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act's guidelines, the social audit team comprised of four members, out of which one member was a woman (SIRD, 2015).

Besides the social auditors, there were other resource persons, twelve from the district level and eighty from the block levels in the social audit teams. Resource Persons from the district level were mostly retired academics, retired government officials and social workers. Resource persons from the block level were mostly retired officials, retired school teachers, members of civil society organizations, teaching staff of the State Institute of Rural Development among others. Following the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act's guidelines and Social Audit Principles, in 2014, the State Institute of Rural Development identified and selected 10,015 social auditors for conducting social audit in Assam (SIRD, 2015). In the entire process, the State Institute of Rural Development was assisted by twelve extension and training centers to train the social auditors and the resource persons in Assam. The State Institute of Rural Development claimed that there were two rounds of training including the satellite-based training system. The manual on social audit was prepared in the local languages which helped the auditors, resource persons, and elected representatives of panchayati raj institutions to be sensitized on the social audit process.

[10] The districts of Assam which are included in special administrative structure of autonomy under the Sixth of Schedule of the Indian Constitution include: (from Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Council) 1. Kokrajhar, 2.Baksa, 3.Chirang and 4.Udalguri; (from Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council) 5.Karbi Anglong and 6.Karbi Anglong (West); from (Dima Hasao Autonomous Council) 7. Dima Hasao.

[11] Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, in 2010-11 formed teams with people in the rural areas of India and entrusted them the responsibility to communicate with the villagers, encourage them to participate in development programs, help them in receiving benefits of rural development schemes, create awareness for accountability and transparency, and link government agencies with the villagers. They were provided the training to carry out their duties at the village level. They are known as *Bharat Nirman Volunteers*.

Some awareness camps were also organized and booklets were published to make the rural people aware of the importance of social audit and their participation in the social accountability process of monitoring and implementation of rural development schemes. The State Institute of Rural Development claimed that to maintain transparency in the selection process of the social auditors, the details of the identity of the social auditors including the phone numbers and areas allotted to the social auditors and resource persons were uploaded on the website of the State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD, 2015).

On the contrary, the Comptroller and Auditor General's report shows that the percentage of villagers who 'expressed their ignorance about the process of social audit' in the state of Assam was about 67 percent (CAG report No. 8, 2016: 17). The report also presents that 'only about 25% people were involved by the gram sabha in the social audits.' This indicates lack of beneficiary participation (CAG report No. 8, 2016: 17). Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act's social audit guidelines (2011) prohibit *gaon panchayat* presidents to chair the social audit forum. The act also provides that the social audit forum would be chaired by an elderly person living in the jurisdiction of the concerned *gaon panchayat*. This is to check the influence of an insider, the *gaon panchayat* president on the local governing institutions. However, in Assam this guideline of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was not followed. The Comptroller and Auditor General did not find 'evidence regarding *gram sabha* meetings chaired by the elderly people'. In most cases in Assam, the *gaon panchayat* presidents chaired the social audit forum held in 2014 (CAG report No. 8, 2016: 19). Social audit in Assam also faced challenges due to unavailability of records on works and lack of cooperation from the implementing agencies, especially the *gaon panchayats*. Grievances of the people raised during the social audit were not registered properly as some reports suggest (NIRDPR report, 2018).

In order to verify the information collected from the village worksites, the social auditors visited the officials of the *gaon/gram panchayat* and block offices. Documents like job card application registers, job card issue registers, applications of the beneficiaries seeking the record of dates of employment of the beneficiaries, record of allotment of the work to the beneficiaries, complaint and redressal, record of materials procured under the specific scheme by the *gram sabha*, the proceedings of the meetings of the *gram sabha*, record of financial sanctions, financial statements, electors list among others were verified during the social audit process (SIRD, 2015). The main purpose of these field visits was to identify issues and discrepancies on the implementation of development programs (SIRD, 2015). Social audit reports were prepared on the basis of the information collected during field visits. The State Institute of Rural Development also claimed to have conducted social audit in the autonomous areas such as Dima Hasao, Bodoland, and Karbi Anglong (SIRD, 2015).

As per the guidelines of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the social audit reports were required to be placed in the *gram sabhas* for discussion. The villagers and the beneficiaries were given the space to participate and raise their issues on the failure or actual implementation of the development schemes. The *gram sabha* meeting held for discussion of the social audit report is known as 'Social Audit Gram Sabha'. The State Institute of Rural Development report claimed that the social audit teams in Assam held such social audit *gram sabha* meetings in different districts of Assam covering all the 2201 Gram Panchayats and 515 Village Council Development Councils (VCDCs) and Village Development Councils (VDC). Social audit reports that were prepared by the social audit team were presented in the *Gram Sabhas*, and discussions took place on the basis of the social audit findings. As the State Institute of Rural Development claimed, the social audit team took necessary suggestions and recommendations made by the Gram Sabha and included them in the social audit report (SIRD, 2015). Finally, the social auditors submitted the filled up 'proforma', (i.e. the questionnaire used to collect information on scheme implementation from the gram panchayats) and the proceedings of the gram sabha and their reports to the institute (the State Institute of Rural Development) for further analysis (SIRD, 2015).[12]

The job of analysis and preparation of the final report was undertaken by the State Institute of Rural Development in association with the Extension Training Centers. The State Institute of Rural Development and the Extension Training Centers first analyzed the reports along with the proformas, questionnaires, and gram sabha Proceedings submitted by the social audit teams. Based on their analysis, the State Institute of Rural Development and the Extension Training Centers made the final reports focusing on various issues that would be submitted to the Panchayat and Rural Development Department (SIRD, 2015). In its report, the State Institute of Rural Development claimed that the entire audit process was successful in building awareness among the rural people to take part in social audit to monitor and implement the development schemes for the period between 2013-14 and 2014-15. It was claimed that people became conscious about their participatory rights and they 'spontaneously came out to participate in different stages of the social audit process and to

[12]*Appendix 3.1 shows photos of the proforma used to conduct social audit in Assam*.

share their grievances in the Gram Sabha (SIRD, 2015). The State Institute of Rural Development also claimed that rural people played a proactive role in the social audit process. It was claimed that the awareness camps organized to make the people aware before a month before the actual social audit process took place. People became pro-active and participated in the social audit process. People in remote areas such as Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong also took active part in the social audit processes as the State Institute of Rural Development claimed. Social audit, as documented in the report on Social Audit published by the State Institute of Rural Development, provided the scope for the first time to evaluate a large number of works under different development schemes in the rural areas. It has been documented in these words, "People along with social audit teams audited at least 28580 schemes [documents or worksites] under MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) alone in 9 days (SIRD, 2015: 10)." This was quite impressive that people participated to identify the 'discrepancies (SIRD, 2015: 11). The State Institute of Rural Development also stated that the *gram sabhas* in all the gram panchayats and autonomous council areas were attended by a large number of villagers. In some of the *gram sabhas*, the State Institute of Rural Development claimed, witnessed 700 to 1000 people taking part in the *gram sabha* meetings. The State Institute of Rural Development claimed that the social auditors visited the villages nine days prior to the Gram Sabha meetings. Their visits generated the awareness about the benefits of participation in the Gram Sabha meetings. This motivated the people in the villages to participate in the Gram Sabha meetings in large numbers and place their needs and grievances. This also allowed them the scope to participate in the audit and identify the discrepancies in the implementation process of the schemes. Deputy Commissioners in some Upper Assam districts asked the tea garden authorities to declare holidays to facilitate massive participation of tea garden workers in the *gram sabhas* meetings (SIRD, 2015: 11). The social audit process facilitated the villagers to participate and to critically analyze the social benefits received from the development of schemes in the rural areas (SIRD, 2015).

Despite all these claims made by the State Institute of Rural Development, social audit has been a challenge. Evidence collected during our fieldwork also questions the credibility of social audits conducted in Assam in 2014. People's perspectives were taken into account while making assessments of the practical application of the social audit process in India. The real picture is dismal and these findings are also supported by the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India which showed that social audit in Assam could engage only 10 to 25 percent of people in the villages (CAG Report No. 8, 2016).

The social audit process and experiences in Assam has therefore been heavily criticized. According to the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG), Assam received Rs. 4152.54 crores as funds under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme during 2007-12 out of which Rs. 4060.48 crore (98%) had been spent for the purpose of generating employment opportunities and creating assets under this scheme. It was reported that out of the total 39.21 lakh households in Assam, 13.53 lakh to 21.55 lakh households demanded employment during 2007-12. Out of hundred days-entitlements, the beneficiaries received employment opportunities for only twelve to thirty seven days every year. Moreover, the report shows that out of total 39.21 lakh households registered as beneficiaries in the entire state, during the period of 2007-12, only 3.54 lakh (9.03%) households were provided a maximum of hundred days employment (CAG, 2013).

The Comptroller and Auditor General's report highlighted that the objective of participatory governance in the form of social audit under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme remained unfulfilled due to lack of adequate training of the auditors and other stakeholders (beneficiaries). The report stated that the State Institute of Rural Development developed the training modules without examining the actual requirements. The Comptroller and Auditor General's report also showed that there were a lot of discrepancies in the utilization of funds allocated for the purposes of training the personnel involved in the social audit of the schemes. For example, in Darrang district out of Rs. 7 lakhs received in March 2012 for the purposes of training the social audit team, only Rs. 0.74 lakhs were utilized for providing the training. In reality as the report reveals, out of Rs. 0.74 lakhs, Rs. 0.55 lakhs were actually utilized for other purposes like food for workshop, hiring charges of vehicle, video photography and publication of advertisement rather than for purposes of training to real stakeholders of social audit. This had an adverse effect on the social audit process and beneficiary participation (CAG, 2013).

The Comptroller and Auditor General's report also showed that the mandatory conduct of social audit twice a year under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme was not undertaken in Assam. It is also evident from the report that in Assam the social auditors failed to make door to door visits of the beneficiary households to collect relevant information and evidence during the process of social audit (CAG report No. 8, 2016). One of the most important deficiencies witnessed in the district of Dibrugarh is that social audit had not been conducted as per the provisions of the concerned Act. The reports of the social audit were not produced in the prescribed format. Moreover, the social audit teams failed to verify the important documents and records including job application registers, employment registers, and muster roll registers that were necessary to verify the implementation process of the schemes under investigation. In other words, 'physical verification of work sites' of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme was missing from the social audit process in the state of Assam (CAG report No. 8, 2016: 15).

Similarly, the Comptroller and Auditor General's report documented that the social audit that was in Goalpara was not systematic (CAG, 2013). In the districts of Cachar and Hailakandi, records of holding of social audit at *gaon panchayat* level were hardly available. Further, there was no documentary evidence of the tasks completed under each scheme. In these two districts, the programme officer (PO) and other district level authorities failed to attend the meetings of the social audit (CAG, 2016).

Experiences drawn from other districts are equally disturbing. The Comptroller and Auditor General's report revealed that in Lakhimpur district, the Programme Director (PD) of District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), North Lakhimpur spent Rs. 1.83 lakh for conducting social audit. Social audit was actually conducted by NGOs and the whole process was conducted without following the guidelines of the process of social audit. The two societies involved in conducting social audit were *Khora Pathar Sanmilita Samaj* (Khora Pathar United Society) and *Donypolo Youth Society*. Both were paid Rs. 1.30 lakh and Rs. 0.53 lakhs respectively. Moreover, no records were available to verify the conduct of social audit by these two private agencies. This proved that there was a misuse of funds in the name of social audit (CAG, 2013). In other words, social audit was not successfully conducted in the state of Assam. Social audit in Assam failed to connect the villagers and especially the beneficiaries of various rural development schemes (such as the Indira Awas Yojana and the Mahatma Gandhi national Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) in the entire audit process. The conduct of social audit in the state became a formal exercise for institutional requirements; it could not transform the approach of the villagers on participatory governance and practices.

3.5. Summary of the chapter

This chapter traced the historical background and the development of panchayati raj institutions in India during the pre-colonial, colonial and the post-colonial period in India and Assam. The chapter discussed how 'community development programs' (CDPs) and 'national extension services' (NES) were adopted in India after independence. The Government of India appointed various committees including the Balwantarai Mehta Committee. The chapter also discussed the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India. This Amendment provided the constitutional safeguards to the panchayats in India. It enhanced participatory spaces for the marginalized sections of the society through reservations and regular elections. *Gram sabhas* were created where villagers can take part in the decision making process. The chapter also highlighted various state level executions made in accordance to this Amendment. The chapter also traced the historical development of panchayats in Assam.

The chapter discussed in detail various social accountability mechanisms identified by the international and national agencies like the United Nations Development Programs, the Department of Rural Development (Government of India), Comptroller and Auditor General of India, State Institute of Rural Development and the National Institute of Rural Development . Some of the social accountability mechanisms as the chapter discussed are social audit, participatory planning, gender budgeting, use of score cards, participatory expenditure tracing and surveys. Drawing lessons from states like Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, the chapter tried to examine the social audit that took place in Assam. The chapter examines the beneficiary participation in local self-governing institutions in Assam vis-a-vis other states. Social audit was institutionalized by the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act in 2005. Various scholarly works, government documents and relevant Acts were discussed in this chapter to understand the practice of social accountability and the challenges of beneficiary participation in India.

The chapter discussed how the civil society organizations like the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan initiated participatory reforms. The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan in Rajasthan pioneered and revolutionized the movement for social accountability through their demands, protests and mass mobilization. The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan was effectively involved in social audits in the state of Rajasthan. The civil society organization collected and cross-checked scheme implementation-related documents and verified them through field visits in the worksites. In Andhra Pradesh, social audits were conducted mainly through government initiatives. Government-appointed field assistants implemented the development schemes in the state with the help of civil society organizations.

To sum up, social accountability mechanisms such as social audit is crucial to address the 'lack of responsiveness and accountability in the public delivery system. Social accountability mechanisms as we discussed allow ordinary citizens to have access to information, voice their needs, and demand accountability. Social accountability practiced in some parts of India enhanced the ability of citizens to engage with the public officials in a more informed, organized and constructive way. Theoretically, the effects of application of social accountability mechanisms such as social audit are crucial from a development perspective. Social audit execution, for instance, can improve public service delivery with well-connected and need-based policy design. 'Information asymmetries and lack of communication' between the beneficiaries and the policy makers contribute to policy failure. Existing governance gaps reinforced by political calculations for vote result in policy failure to target the beneficiaries with development benefits. Scholars documented the reforms that can be made in social accountability mechanisms such as social audit or participatory planning.

These mechanisms would be effective development innovation if they could become 'means to increase and aggregate the voices of the disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (Malena et al, 2004: 5).' However, SAMs such as social audit and participatory planning are deterred to prove their credibility to bring a development change to favor the marginalized sections of society (Malena et al, 2004: Rajsekhar, Lakha and Manjula, 2013; Joshi and Houtzager, 2012; Berenschot, 2015; Sadanandan, 2012).

Despite efforts, the social audit process proved to be ineffective due to the clientele politics. One of the most critical challenges of social audit in India as the chapter discussed is the lack of participation of the beneficiaries and the failure of gram sabhas to conduct social audits. Studies point out that only 1,20,841 gram panchayats (GPs) (51%) out of 2,34,594 gram panchayats were covered for social audit during 2014-15 in different states in India (CAG report no 8, 2016).[13] This chapter also reveals that in many places the process failed because the social audit process was highly influenced by the political elites in the village.

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[13] Citing the CAG report, *The Financial Express*, dated 29th April, 2016 published a news on social audit in Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act entitled "MGNREGA: No annual social audit in majority of states, finds CAG".

Marginalized beneficiaries like poor workers under the scheme were excluded from the social audit process (Rajsekhar, Lakha and Manjula, 2013). Exclusion of primary stakeholders, the real beneficiaries (laborers) proved to be a great disadvantage for the social audit process and this resulted in one-sided verification of the facts. Participatory mechanisms like social audit failed in this case primarily due to patronage politics and lack of direct participation of the beneficiaries.

Chapter 4

Understanding social accountability and beneficiary participation: Local self-governing institutions in rural areas of Barpeta district, Assam

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings from field research conducted in the selected villages of the district of Barpeta. The chapter examines the scope and challenges of beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms (SAMs), especially social audits organized in gaon (gram) panchayats (GPs), the local self-governing institutions (LSGIs) as termed in this study.[14] The selected villages from the district of Barpeta where we conducted field research are Chaibari, Bampara and Baghbar Gaon. This chapter also provides information on socio-economic conditions of the state of Assam and the district of Barpeta.

The study identified two rural development schemes – the *Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme* (MGNREGS) and the *Indira Awas Yojana* (IAY) which provided the public policy framework to investigate the scope and the challenges of beneficiary participation. The study examined how beneficiary participation is influenced and challenged by patronage politics and social conditions in the selected rural areas. The study considers patronage politics from two different perspectives – political party affiliation and clientelistic incentives or politically mediated patronage benefits such as housing facilities under certain state-sponsored schemes. Social conditions include structural factors like the level of literacy and education, caste and socio-cultural norms and discrimination on the basis of gender.

The first section of the chapter discusses the socio-structural conditions of Assam and the district of Barpeta. The second section discusses beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in local self-governing institutions in the district of Barpeta. Section three analyses beneficiary participation in various participatory spaces in social audit in local self-governing institutions in the district of Barpeta. Section four discusses the impact and challenges of patronage politics on beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in the district of Barpeta. Section five analyses the effects of social conditions

[14] Gram/gaon panchayat refers to the village panchayats. The study uses both the terms for village panchayats in India.

and cultural norms on beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in the district of Barpeta. Section six summarizes the findings of the chapter.

4.2 Social conditions of Assam and Barpeta district

Preliminary assessment of the socio-economic conditions of the state of Assam, especially in the district of Barpeta is crucial to understand the context how beneficiaries are living in the rural areas of Assam, especially in the district of Barpeta and how political elites exploit such situations to exercise patronage politics in the villages. This chapter draws from data on employment characteristics, monthly income of households (especially, of the highest earning household member), main sources of household income, headship of the households headed by males and females, household land ownership pattern, land irrigation pattern, household accessibility to agriculture and irrigation, accessibility to *Kisan Credit Card* (KCC)[15], highest level of education, ownership status of households, and the quality of housing facilities. The Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC), 2011 also uses similar kinds of data as the criteria for the exclusion and inclusion of the rural households in the categorization of village residents for social protection programmes, for instance, to identify households living below the poverty line (BPL) in India.[16] This kind of data selection is deliberative as the district of Barpeta is dependent on agrarian economy. The data available at the district level have been compared with the data available at the state-level to understand the social conditions of the village residents.

Table 4.1 shows the employment characteristics of Assam and Barpeta district in 2011. In the state of Assam, only 12.27% (704739 in number) rural households have employment in terms of salaried jobs, while in the same category, Barpeta district records only 8.37% (27013 in number) employment in salaried jobs. This indicates low level of salaried jobs in the district of Barpeta.

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[15]The *Kisan Credit Card* (KCC) is prepared by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD). The card allows farmers to have access to formal credit of government banks. KCC is, thus, a credit delivery mechanism. According to Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC), 2011, accessibility to KCC with a credit limit over Rs. 50,000 annually is a criterion to exclude a particular household from the category of being categorized as beneficiaries with low income levels or below the poverty line. In other words, a household with a credit limit of Rs. 50,000 annually is considered to be above the poverty line. Credit to the farmers under the KCC is given for one year to maximum five years of tenure.

[16] Source: Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC), 2011.

Table 4.1: Employment characteristics of Assam and Barpeta district, 2011					
State/district	*Total (HHs)*	*Number of HHs with salaried jobs (%)*	*Number of HHs with salaried jobs*		
			Government sector (%)	*Public sector (%)*	*Private sector (%)*
Assam	5743835	704739 (12.27%)	436879 (7.61%)	50485 (0.88%)	218711 (3.81%)
Barpeta	322866	27013 (8.37%)	23135 (7.17%)	893 (0.28%)	3040 (0.94%)
Source: Socio Economic Caste Census, 2011 [HHs=Households]					

Table 4.2 represents the number and percentages of rural households with monthly income. The data considers the income of the highest earning household member in Assam and the Barpeta district in the year 2011. It was recorded that in Assam, 76.89% (4416524 in number) rural households earned a monthly income of less than Rs. 5000. In the district of Barpeta it was recorded that 80.06% (258498 in number) of the rural households had less than Rs. 5000 monthly income. This shows that Barpeta lies below the state average.

Table 4.2: Number and percentage of households (rural) showing monthly income in Assam and Barpeta district, 2011			
State/district	*Less than Rs. 5000 (%)*	*Between 5-10 thousand Rs. (%)*	*Rs. 10,000 or more (%)*
Assam	4416524 (76.89%)	834420 (14.53%)	492736 (8.58%)
Barpeta	258498 (80.06%)	39429 (12.21%)	24903 (7.71%)
Source: Socio Economic Caste Census, 2011			

Table 4.3 shows the rural household income of Assam and the district of Barpeta according to figures in 2011. Agriculture is the main source of household income for 29.18% (1676266 in number) rural households in the state of Assam and 21.68% (70008 in number) rural households in the district of Barpeta. 42.58% (2445909 in number) rural households in Assam are dependent on casual labour and 53.43% (172512 in number) rural households in

the district of Barpeta are dependent on casual labour, which is the main source of household income.

Table 4.3: Main source of household income (rural) in Assam and Barpeta, 2011			
State/Assam	*Total Households*	*Cultivation (%)*	*Casual labour (%)*
Assam	5743835	1676266 (29.18%)	2445909 (42.58%)
Barpeta	322866	70008 (21.68%)	172512 (53.43%)
Source: Socio Economic Caste Census, 2011			

Table 4.4 shows the number and percentages of households headed by males and females in rural Assam and Barpeta district in 2011. About 86.63% (4975889 in number) and 13.36% (767604 in number) households in rural Assam are headed by males and females respectively. The district of Barpeta has 87.01% (280933 in number) and 12.98% (41923 in number) rural households headed by males and females respectively. Higher percentages of male headship in households of rural areas in the state of Assam and Barpeta district implies the possibility of male dominance in household decision making processes as well economic dependence of women in these households.

Table 4.4: Number and percentage of households headed by males and females (rural) in Assam and Barpeta district, 2011		
State/District	*Number households headed by males (%)*	*Number households headed by females (%)*
Assam	4975889 (86.63%)	767604 (13.36%)
Barpeta	280933 (87.01%)	41923 (12.98%)
Source: Socio Economic Caste Census, 2011		

Table 4.5 represents land ownership pattern of households in the rural areas of Assam and Barpeta district in 2011. According to estimates, in Assam 43.33% (2488717) of rural households have ownership of land, while 56.67% (3255083 in number) are estimated to be

landless. In the district of Barpeta, 36.15% (116712 in number) have ownership of land, while 63.85% (206154 in number) are estimated to be landless.

Table 4.5: Household land ownership pattern (rural) in Assam and Barpeta district, 2011			
State/district	*Total Number of Households*	*Number of households with land (%)*	*Number of households with No land (landless) (%)*
Assam	5743835	2488717 (43.33%)	3255083 (56.67%)
Barpeta	322866	116712 (36.15%)	206154 (63.85%)
Source: Socio Economic Caste Census, 2011			

Table 4.6 shows the pattern of irrigation in the rural areas of Assam and Barpeta district. Nearly, 62.53% (62502848.58 in acres) of agricultural land in Assam do not have access to irrigation facilities. In Barpeta it was estimated that nearly 48.32 % (480738.50 in acres) of agricultural land do not have access to irrigation. Agriculture in Assam and the district of Barpeta depends on monsoons. In other words, agriculture cannot provide self-sufficiency to the rural households in terms of accumulation of capital.

Table 4.6: Land irrigation pattern (rural) in Assam and Barpeta district, 2011 (in acres)				
State/district	*Total land*	*Total un-irrigated land (%)*	*With assured irrigation for two crops (%)*	*Other irrigated land*
Assam	99949483.36	62502848.58 (62.53%)	22334972.39 (22.35%)	15111667.72 (15.12%)
Barpeta	994859.25	480738.50 (48.32%)	221806.42 (22.30%)	292314.33 (29.38%)
Source: Socio Economic Caste Census, 2011				

Table 4.7 shows the number and percentages of households with access to agricultural and irrigation equipments (rural) in Assam and Barpeta district in 2011. Out of the total rural households in the state of Assam, only 1.54% (88258 in number) of the households own mechanized agricultural equipments and 3.72% (213700 in number) owned irrigation equipments including fuel and electric pumps. In the district of Barpeta, 1.61% (5184 in number) of the rural households own mechanized agricultural equipment, whereas 3.96% (12777 in number) have irrigation equipments (such as diesel/kerosene/electric pump set/sprinkler/drip irrigation system, etc.). This indicates that the traditional mode of agricultural practices is heavily practiced in Assam.

Table 4.7: Number and percentage of households with access to agricultural and irrigation equipment (rural) in Assam and Barpeta district, 2011

State/district	*Total households*	*Number of households that own mechanized three/four wheeler agricultural equipment (%)*	*Number of households that own irrigation equipment (such as diesel/kerosene/electric pump set/sprinkler/drip irrigation system, etc) (%)*
Assam	5743835	88258 (1.54%)	213700 (3.72%)
Barpeta	322866	5184 (1.61%)	12777 (3.96%)

Source: Socio Economic Caste Census, 2011

Table 4.8 shows the number and percentages of rural households with access to *Kisan Credit Card* (KCC) with a credit limit of Rs. 50,000 or above in Assam and Barpeta district as estimated in 2011. It is reported that 0.96% (54973 in number) and 0.61% (1958 in number) of rural households in Assam and the district of Barpeta respectively, are in possession of KCC with a credit limit of Rs. 50,000 or above.

Table 4.8: Number and percentage of households (rural) with access to Kisan Credit Card with credit limit of Rs. 50,000 or above in Assam and Barpeta district, 2011			
State/district	*Total households (in number)*	*Number of households having Kisan Credit Card with credit limit of Rs. 50,000 or above*	*Percentage of households having Kisan Credit Card with credit limit of Rs. 50,000 or above*
Assam	5743835	54973	0.96%
Barpeta	322866	1958	0.61%
Source: Socio Economic Caste Census, 2011			

Table 4.9 shows the percentages of the level of education of people living in the rural Assam and the district of Barpeta in 2011. In Assam about 32.06% (9121669 in number) of the population are recorded as illiterates. In Barpeta about 39.23% (648450 in number) of the population are illiterates, which is higher than the state average. About 8.03% (2284315) have been estimated to have attained secondary education in rural Assam and nearly 6.58% (106974) population was estimated to have attained secondary education in the district of Barpeta. Nearly 2.12% (629040) of the total population in rural Assam are undergraduates and nearly 2.15% of the total population in the rural areas of Barpeta are undergraduates. These figures indicate low level of literacy and education both in the state and in the district of Barpeta.

Table 4.9: Population and percentage with highest educational level (rural) in Assam and Barpeta district, 2011									
State/ district	*Total population*	*No. of illiterates (%)*	*No. of literates but below primary (%)*	*No. of primary literates (%)*	*No. of middle literates (%)*	*No. of secondary literates (%)*	*No. of higher secondary literates (%)*	*No. of graduates or higher literates (%)*	*No. of other literates*
Assam	28451916	9121669 (32.06%)	3526778 (12.40%)	5806186 (20.41%)	5619213 (19.75%)	2284315 (8.03%)	1368341 (4.81%)	629040 (2.21%)	95800 (0.34%)
Barpeta	1626957	648450 (39.23%)	201107 (12.36%)	287724 (17.68%)	268298 (16.49%)	106974 (6.58%)	73179 (4.50%)	35012 (2.15%)	6211 (0.38%)
Source: Socio Economic Caste Census, 2011									

Table 4.10 shows the percentages of houses owned by villagers in rural Assam and Barpeta as estimated in 2011. Out of the total houses in rural Assam, 91.91% (5279167) are owned by individual village households and nearly 3.11% (178644) are calculated as rented houses and 4.92% claimed that they use other housing facilities. In the district of Barpeta, 96.18% (310519) village residents (households) claimed ownership of individual houses, nearly 1.14% (3676) lived in the rented houses, and 2.65% (8565) have access to other housing facilities. These figures may represent that the housing facilities in terms of ownership of the houses by the villagers are relatively better in the district of Barpeta compared to the state average. However, in reality, the houses owned by the villagers may not have fulfilled the requirements of the government schemes. Following tables show conditions of housing facilities in the state and the district.

Table 4.10: Number and percentage of households (rural) by ownership status in Assam and Barpeta, 2011

State/district	*Total households*	*No. of owned HHs (%)*	*No. of rented HHs (%)*	*No. of any other HHs (%)*
Assam	5743835	5279167 (91.91%)	178644 (3.11%)	282367 (4.92%)
Barpeta	322866	310519 (96.18%)	3676 (1.14%)	8565 (2.65%)

Source: Socio Economic Caste Census, 2011

Table 4.11 shows the type of houses according to roof type, categorized as *Kuccha* (built by mud-brick) and *Pucca* (built by concrete materials). The table shows the percentages of both types of houses owned by the villagers living in rural Assam and Barpeta district as estimated in 2011. Assam (rural) has about 31.77% (1824901) *Kuccha* houses and 68.19% (3916838) *Pucca* houses. About 33.43% of the houses in the rural areas of Barpeta are estimated to be made of mud and brick.

Table 4.11: Number and percentage of households (rural) by *Kuccha* and *Pucca* (roof) dwelling type in Assam and Barpeta district, 2011				
State/district	*Total HHs*	*No. of owned HHs*	*No. of HHs with Kuccha housing (%)*	*No. of HHs with Pucca housing (%)*
Assam	5743835	5279167	1824901 (31.77%)	3916838 (68.19%)
Barpeta	322866	310519	107932 (33.43%)	214829 (66.54%)
Source: Socio Economic Caste Census, 2011				

Table 4.12 shows the type of houses according to the type of walls, categorized as *Kuccha* (built by mud-brick) and *Pucca* (built by concrete materials). The table shows the percentage of both types of houses owned by the villagers living in rural Assam and Barpeta district as estimated in 2011. Assam (rural) has about 75.07% (4312150) *Kuccha* houses and 24.89% (1429589) *Pucca* houses. About 78.07% (252057) of the houses in rural areas of Barpeta are estimated to be made of mud and brick and 21.90% (70704) houses are made of concrete materials.

Table 4.12: Number and percentage of households (rural) by *Kuccha* and *Pucca* (wall) dwelling type in Assam and Barpeta district, 2011				
State/district	*Total HHs*	*No. of owned HHs*	*No. of HHs with Kuccha housing (%)*	*No. of HHs with Pucca housing (%)*
Assam	5743835	5279167	4312150 (75.07%)	1429589 (24.89%)
Barpeta	322866	310519	252057 (78.07%)	70704 (21.90%)
Source: Socio Economic Caste Census, 2011				

The above tables show the socio-economic characteristics in terms of housing facilities, literacy and agricultural pattern in Assam as well as the district of Barpeta. Based on these characteristics, socio-economic backwardness of the villages in Barpeta district seems to be relatively higher than the state average. It also needs to be noted that the rural areas of the district of Barpeta were covered under the Indira Gandhi Awas Yojana housing scheme as well as the Mahatma Gandhi National Employee Guarantee Scheme for rural employment. Gaon panchayats implement these schemes at the village level (Mohanty, 1995). Categorizing households, with the assistance of surveyors, according to the socio-economic conditions to be included in the beneficiary lists is an important function of the panchayats prior to the implementation of these schemes. Panchayats identify and categorize the households living below the poverty line. Other important criteria used by the panchayats to identify beneficiary households include marginalized land holding, monthly income of the household (below 5,000 per month), headship of households (male or female) and caste category (such as scheduled caste and scheduled tribe). According to Biswas, Indira Awas Yojana was implemented to fulfill the 'objective of helping construction or up-gradation of dwelling units of members of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, freed bonded labourers and others living below the poverty line, by providing them a lump sum financial assistance (Biswas, 2015: 366).' *Gaon panchayat* representatives help the survey enumerators to identify the households that are eligible to be listed as beneficiaries. However, some scholars find flaws in such surveys and the process of identification of the beneficiaries. Scholars who conducted research in the district of Seoni, Madhya Pradesh found that the identification of households that were to be included in the category below poverty line, were fraught with problems. The process excluded genuine beneficiary households living below the poverty line. These studies also revealed that the problem occurred because of inclusion of beneficiaries (both individuals and households) who failed to meet any of the criteria mentioned above. Prevalence of unofficial means and the failure of the state to control such means and practices led to the misuse of beneficiary identity cards and the associated benefits. This in turn deprived the actual beneficiaries from receiving the benefits from government-sponsored schemes (Jain, 2004: 4982).'

It is also important to note that under the Mahatma Gandhi National Employee Guarantee Scheme and Indira Awas Yojana, the beneficiary households have to open a bank account for the transfer of funds (money for housing or wage of employment) allocated under the schemes. However, due to problems of illiteracy and lack of information and capacities, the marginalized beneficiaries are often dependent on intermediaries or brokers who assist the villagers in the process of acquiring the benefits (including opening bank accounts) (Masiero and Maiorano, 2018). Beneficiary households enter into a close network of bargaining with the brokers who act as mediator between the marginalized villagers (beneficiaries) and the panchayat officials to further channelize the funds and the benefits related to specific schemes. In most cases, the beneficiaries are forced to part away with a certain amount of the tangible benefits (e.g. money) allocated under the schemes to the brokers and intermediaries. In the case of Indira Awas Yojana, beneficiary households receive money in installments, depending upon the progress of the construction of the houses. In many cases, translation of funds into tangible assets becomes a real difficult problem under the scheme. Shah identifies some problems related to the Indira Awas Yojana. He states that 'the problem is not the transfer of money. The problem is the translation of that money into concrete assets. In this case the houses constructed under the scheme. Due to thoughtless policymaking, crores of rupees continue to be transferred to the state governments under the IAY (Indira Awas Yojana) scheme. Although these funds are meant for families living below the poverty line (BPL) the actual beneficiary households can hardly avail of quality housing with the money alloted under the scheme. Apart from other reasons the benefits do not reach the real beneficiaries, a) because the money provided under the scheme is not sufficient to construct quality houses, b) at times families have other needs that gain priority over housing and c) because families do not have access to other inputs that are required for building a house (such as skilled masons, materials etc.). Over and above all these reasons (all of which operate in tandem with each other) are the facts of faulty selection of beneficiaries and corruption by *gram panchayat* representatives (Shah, 2008: 77).'

The Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme also provides some criteria to cover the areas under the scheme. The scheme can be executed in areas that fulfill the criteria like 'low agricultural productivity, high incidence of poverty, high concentration of scheduled castes/tribes in the selected geographical areas, areas which are isolated and far away from urban areas (Banerjee and Saha, 2010: 42).' Implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme involves a large number of stakeholders including the beneficiaries, the workers or wage seekers. *Gaon panchayat* is a crucial actor responsible for the implementation of the scheme. The *gaon panchayat* is entrusted with the power of issuing job cards and employment to the villagers in search of unskilled manual labor under the scheme.

Among the stakeholders who form the target populations of the scheme include marginalized villagers belonging to the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe categories, households living below the poverty line and those that are landless (Reddy, Reddy and Bantilan, 2014). The Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme also entails two important principles of execution. Reddy, Reddy and Bantilan discuss these principles in these words:

"The MGNREGA Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act) is based on the twin principles of universalism and self-selection (Reddy, Reddy and Bantilan, 2014: 251-252)."

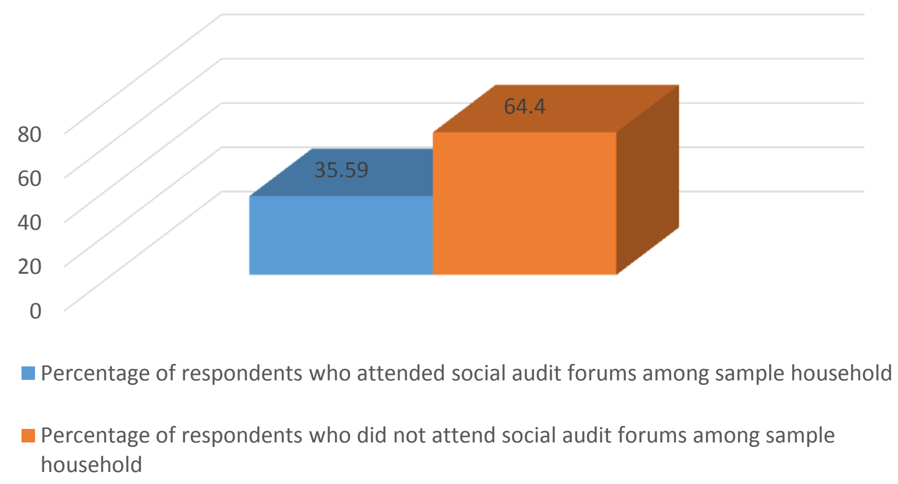
The following sections turn to the analysis of the scope and challenges of beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms, especially social audit organized in the local self-governing institutions in the district of Barpeta in lower Assam.

4.3 Assessing beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in local self-governing institutions in the district of Barpeta

Social Accountability in the form of social audit was conducted in November, 2014 in Assam. The CAG report shows that only 10-25% of the beneficiaries listed in the beneficiary list of different districts participated in the social audit process in the entire state of Assam (CAG report, 2016). Beneficiaries were offered participatory spaces for 12 days to exercise their rights through social audit.[17] Social audit was conducted in the district of Barpeta in 2014. The district of Barpeta was identified as one of the districts in Assam, which failed to engage large number of beneficiaries in social audit. What were the challenges of beneficiary participation in the social accountability mechanisms in Barpeta district? Using surveys and interviews conducted in selected villages in Barpeta, this study tried to understand beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms, especially social audit organized in the gram panchyats in 2014. Figure 4.1 summarizes the responses of beneficiary participation collected through surveys during the fieldwork in Barpeta.

[17] *Appendix 4.1 provides the details of the 'social audit calendar,' the dates scheduled for the conduct of social audit in November, 2014 in Assam.*

Figure 4.1: Percentage of respondents participating in social audit forums in the district of Barpeta

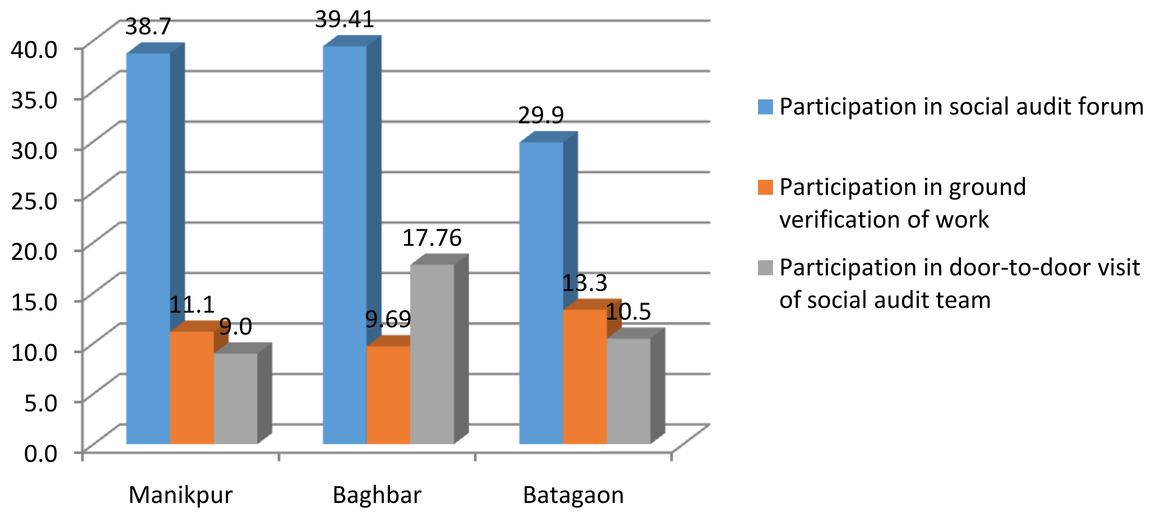


Source: Survey responses, 2018

Figure 4.1 shows the percentage of respondents participating in the social audit forums conducted in the district of Barpeta in November 2014. Among the households (fifty nine households in number) selected as samples in our survey, 35.59% respondents participated in the social audit forums, whereas 64.40% respondents failed to participate in the social audit forums. This indicates that social audit organized in local self-governing institutions of Assam failed to engage a large number of beneficiaries.

Our aim was to examine the probable conditions that may influence beneficiary participation. We also tried to assess the effectiveness of beneficiary participation in the district of Barpeta when social audit was conducted in November, 2014. Our surveys suggest that most of the beneficiaries did not have access to the important information on participatory governance mechanisms as well as the implementation of rural development schemes including the Indira Awas Yojana and the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme. Lack of information primarily effected beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms, particularly the social audit processes. Beneficiaries are largely ignorant about different participatory spaces available to them under the social accountability mechanisms. The entire social audit process of 2014 (November) in Assam allowed participatory spaces to the beneficiaries in three ways (a) participation of beneficiaries in ground level verification of work carried out by the panchayats under the rural development schemes (such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Indira Awas Yojana); (b) participation of beneficiaries during door-to-door visits of the social audit teams (SATs) to share relevant information; and (c) participation of beneficiaries in the discussions in the social audit forums (SAFs) where social audit reports were submitted. Our field research revealed that beneficiaries were not informed earlier about these three participatory mechanisms. On the contrary, representatives of the *gaon panchayats* however claimed that before conducting the social audit forums (the *gram sabha* where social audit reports were presented for public scrutiny), they performed their delegated duties like making public announcements and providing adequate information to the villagers about the meetings. In reality, only few beneficiaries were informed about the social audit. This was also revealed by our respondents. Some beneficiaries were present in the social audit forums but they failed to participate effectively. Moreover, they failed to participate actively in the other two participatory spaces (participation of beneficiaries in ground level verification of work and participation during door-to-door visits of the social audit teams). Survey findings of the study, as represented in Figure 4.2, show that beneficiary presence in the social audit forums was relatively better than the participation in the other two important mechanisms of social accountability. About 38.7% beneficiaries participated i.e. mere presence in the social audit forums in Manikpur, about 39.41% in Baghbar, and 29.9% in Batagaon gaon panchayats. Participation of beneficiaries in the ground level verification of work was relatively low. Only about 11.10% of the beneficiaries in Manikpur participated in this social accountability mechanism. In Baghbar about 17.76% participated in this mechanism and in Batagaon about 13.30% participated in the ground level verification of work during the social audit process. Participation of beneficiaries during door-to-door visits of the social audit team was even less. About 9.00% beneficiaries participated in this mechanism in Manikpur. In Baghbar about 9.69% beneficiaries participated and in Batagaon about 10.50% participated in door-to-door visits to conduct the social accountability practice.

Figure 4.2: Percentage of beneficiariey participation in the three participatory spaces in social audit, Barpeta district
(% counted for each space against the total respondents)

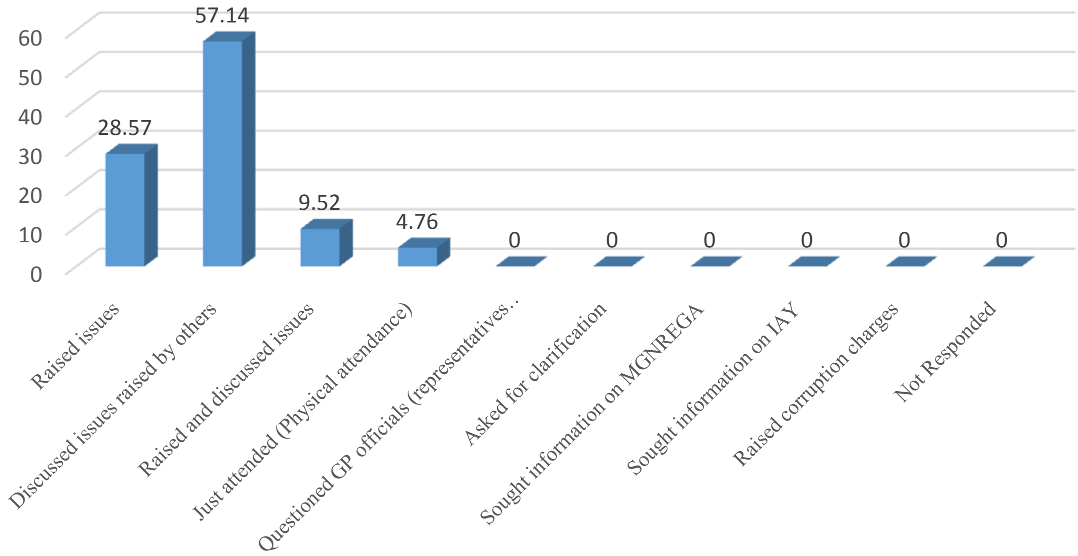


Source: Survey responses, 2018

** Participation in social audit forum, colored Blue, meant mere presence of beneficiaries.*

Figure 4.3 shows the percentage of respondents who took part in participatory governance mechanisms, especially in the social audit forum. Among the households that took part in our survey and participated in social audit, 28.57% respondents raised the issues of rural development during the social audit forums. Out of these, 57.14 % revealed that they did not raise any particular issue on socio-economic development of the village, but they discussed the issues that were raised by others. 9.52% households raised and discussed issues of rural development. Our survey reveals that most of the beneficiaries showed mere presence in the social audit forums. They hardly participated in the forums or asked direct questions to the gaon panchayat representatives on the process of implementation of the government schemes. The beneficiaries failed to share any information on Indira Awas Yojana and Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme or issues regarding non-implementation of public funds allocated for these schemes. Our focused group discussions and in-depth interviews also reveal that the beneficiaries failed to use the participatory spaces although citizen participation was made mandatory as a part of the implementation process of the government-sponsored schemes. Preliminary pilot study that was undertaken at the beginning of the current research showed that a number of reasons could have contributed to ineffective beneficiary participation in the local governing institutions. This study identifies patronage politics, socio-economic conditions and cultural norms as factors that may have influenced participatory decisions in the selected villages in the district of Barpeta.

Figure 4.3: Percentage of respondents who took part in participatory governance mechanisms



Source: Survey responses, 2018

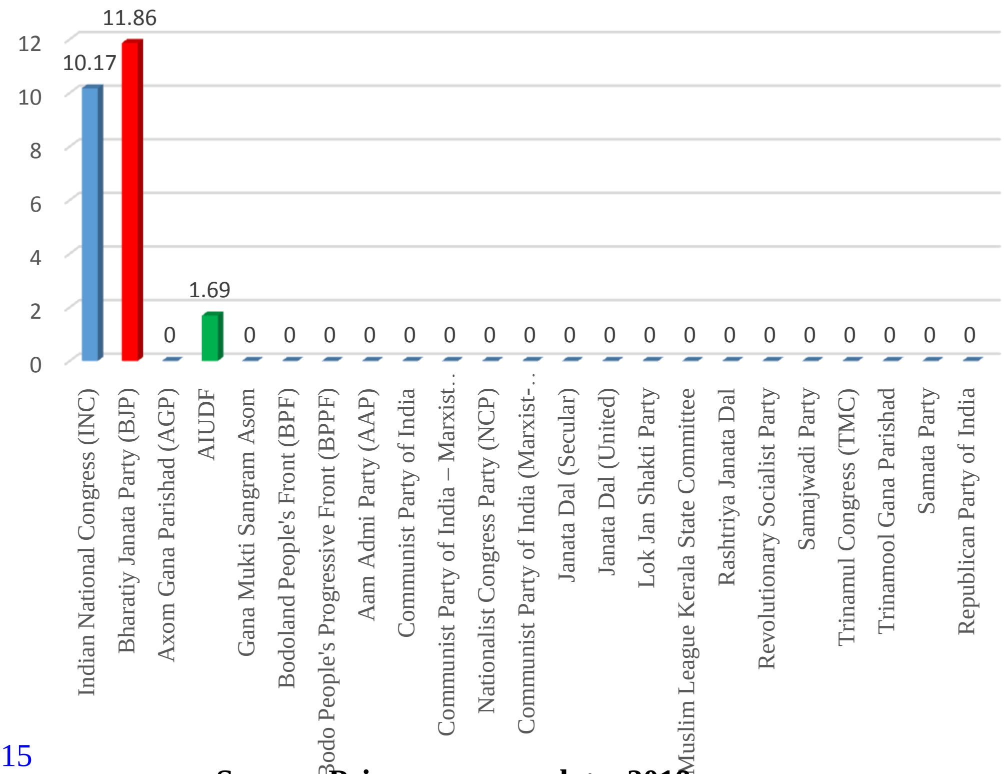
4.4 Patronage politics and beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in local self-governing institutions: Results and discussion of fieldwork data collected from Barpeta district

Existing literature shows that political parties and politicians use state resources to consolidate power (Mwenda and Tangri, 2005). According to some scholars, social accountability mechanisms (SAMs) such as social audits are 'dominated by local elites who stifle the voices from below (Lakha et al, 2015: 330).' Drawing lessons on social audit from the state of Karnataka, scholars show that the formation of committees set up by the government to monitor the implementation of the schemes is often politically mediated and influenced by local political connections (Lakha et al, 2015). These scholars also show that social audits are 'mediated through the hierarchical village social structure where the dominant actors like the rich land owners, contractors and gram panchayat members exercise significant control over the local institutions and the available economic resources (Lakha et al, 2015: 346).'

The findings of this dissertation from the district of Barpeta similarly shows that the politicians at the village level use the existing hierarchical social structures in the villages, the political connections and social networks to appropriate state resources that are available through rural development schemes (such as the Indira Awas Yojana housing facilities and Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme employment opportunities) to exercise patronage politics for electoral gains. Field research conducted in the selected villages of Barpeta district reveals that patronage politics may act as serious challenges for the beneficiaries to participate in the social accountability mechanisms for the implementation of rural development schemes. The study argues that the scope of beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms is influenced by patronage politics because the functions of local self-governing institutions and social accountability mechanisms are politically mediated and these institutions may become the sites of political competition among the different political parties. In this process, political leaders may channelize the state resources of rural development schemes (such as the Indira Awas Yojana housing facilities and the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme employment opportunities) to the members and supporters of the ruling and dominant political party. Our interviews reveal that the local politicians and village representatives, such as the gaon panchayat members shared the benefits attached to the rural development schemes mostly to the beneficiaries/village residents who were affiliated or supported the ruling political parties. Incentives and cost-benefit analysis of the beneficiaries in exchange of electoral support to the village representatives mattered during the participatory process of social audit. The findings on clientelism and patronage politics in the current study are supported by earlier studies on participatory practices in India and elsewhere. Scholars found that in West Bengal the Left-parties distributed benefits (such as housing and employment) of the rural development schemes to certain pockets of the electoral constituencies. They targeted mainly the marginalized sections of the society including poor villagers, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Providing material benefits became an electoral strategy of the Left-parties to sustain support from the recipients of the benefits. The same set of scholars argued that these groups failed to contribute to effective participation in the gram sabhas held at the gram panchayat level. Apart from clientelism and patron client links, lack of literacy and education act as barriers to participation of these groups in the gram panchayats. The electoral participation rate was higher because they had to cast vote in order to gain benefits from the gram panchayats dominated by the left political parties (Bardhan et al, 2008).

Figure 4.4 shows the percentage of respondents with political affiliation and the name of the political parties they were affiliated to. About 10.17% of the beneficiaries were affiliated to the Indian National Congress (INC) and 11.86% of the respondents were affiliated to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). 1.69% of the beneficiaries were affiliated to the All Indian United Democratic Front (AIUDF). Field research of the study showed that beneficiaries who had political affiliation to the ruling parties are likely to be present in the social audit forums but less likely to raise issues in the forums or the meetings. Participation of beneficiaries with political affiliation is skewed in active participation during the social audit process, for instance in the process of gathering information on rural development schemes or ground level verification of work carried out by the *gram panchayats* or making door-to-door visits during the process of social audit. The interviews show that the beneficiaries who had political affiliation to the ruling political parties (those who were in power in the state assemblies and the local governing bodies in the villages) were mostly passive participants or ‘listeners’ to the village elders and political patrons (such as the *gaon panchayat* presidents). Figure 4.4 shows the percentage of respondents with political affiliation by membership.

Figure 4.4: Percentage of respondents having political affiliation and the name of the political parties they are affiliated in (% counted among the total sample size)

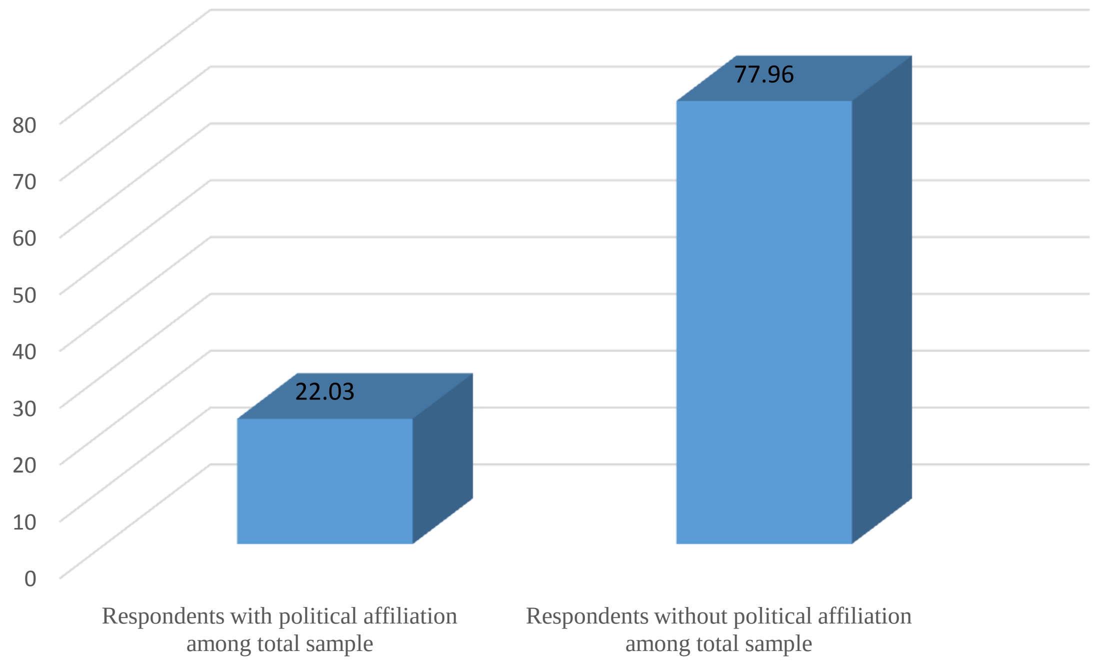


Source: Primary survey data, 2018

Figure 4.5 shows the percentage of respondents (both with and without political affiliation) who showed presence in the social audit forums. These respondents claimed to have attended the social audit forums. Among the total households selected for our survey, 22.03% of the respondents from individual households of the beneficiaries, who attended social audit forum, were closely affiliated to different political parties. About 77.96% of the respondents, who attended social audit forums, did not have any close affiliation to any political party. This means that beneficiaries without political affiliation also attended the social audit forums in large numbers in the selected *gaon panchayats*. It is therefore important to note that beneficiaries with or without political affiliation attended the social audit meetings. However, the level and type of participation of these beneficiaries varied. As mentioned earlier, effective participation of the beneficiaries with political affiliation was skewed in other social audit processes for instance, to gather necessary information on rural development schemes or ground level verification of the actual work completed under the schemes or active participation in the discussions on monitoring the implementation of the scheme and the social audit report.

It needs to be emphasized that the process of social audit allows democratic spaces for the beneficiaries and other villagers (non-beneficiaries) to scrutinize the implementation of the rural development schemes. Beneficiaries with close political affiliation seemed indifferent to actively participate in the social audit forums or to raise issues and ask questions to the representatives of the *gaon panchayats*. Clientelistic links and patronage politics played an important role in the lack of active participation of the beneficiaries in these social accountability mechanisms. Beneficiaries fear that they will lose their benefits and will not be able to avail of the government-sponsored schemes if they become vocal or actively participate or raise questions on the implementation process of the schemes in the respective social audit forums. Interviews also reveal that most of the beneficiaries, refrained from raising questions on the local authorities. Villagers know that gaon panchayat representatives are elected and authorized to implement rural development schemes. Institutional capacity of these representatives to select and prioritize the beneficiaries adds to the clientele linkages and the loyalty of the beneficiaries especially with the ones with close political affiliation to the ruling political parties.

Figure 4.5: Percentage of respondents with political affiliation participating in social audit forum (% counted against the total sample households in the survey)



Source: Survey responses, 2018

Scholars reveal that the distribution of public benefits and the implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan were mediated by clientelism (Maiorano, 2018: 536). Similarly, field research conducted in this study revealed that the exercise of patronage politics has been prevalent in the local self-governing institutions in the selected villages of Barpeta. For example, interviews conducted in the village of *Chaibari* revealed how the ruling party and the members utilized patron client relations for the distribution of benefits under the Indira Awas Yojana and Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme at the village level. Electoral incentives (votes in exchange of benefits from government schemes, such as Indira Awas Yojana) motivated the political parties and politicians to channelize the benefits of the rural development schemes to the party supporters and affiliated beneficiaries. As discussed by scholars like Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007), this study finds that providing personal benefits has been a strategy of the local politicians to trade off political support from the voters including the beneficiaries. Political actors in the district of Barpeta tried to gain votes from the constituents by providing personal benefits to the beneficiaries such as housing facilities under the Indira Awas Yojana and employment opportunities under the Mahatma

Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme. Examining why political parties and leaders are motivated to use state resources under the rural development schemes such as the Indira Awas Yojana's housing facilities and the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme's employment opportunities for personal benefits is important. Similar evidence is available in other studies on participation in the state of West Bengal (Bardhan et al, 2008). According to this study the Left political parties in the state of West Bengal used *gaon panchayats* for their sustenance in political power. It was essential for the Left parties to create and sustain a vote bank with the loyal constituents. The marginalized sections of the society (such as the poor people belonging to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes) became the targets during this process. The gram *panchayats* dominated by the Left ruling parties (the Communist Party of India Marxist) diverted the benefits related to the rural development schemes to the selected beneficiaries among the marginalized sections of the villages. The recipients of the selective incentives in return continued to provide their electoral support to the Left political parties. In a way, this also contributed to the consolidation of power of these political parties in West Bengal. Selective incentives were used as a vote-bank strategy. (Bardhan et al, 2008: 45).'

Local self-governing institutions are important electoral bodies that provide the democratic space for direct elections where 'elected officials provide the benefits to favored constituencies. Political parties distribute everything including leaflets for propaganda to liquor and other material incentives in search of votes (Stokes et al, 2013: 2).' The same study showed that the politicization of local self-governing institutions takes place where 'material benefits are offered to local beneficiaries only on the condition that the recipient returns the favor with a vote or other forms of political support (Stokes et al, 2013: 14).' The prospects of receiving material benefits allow the constituents to respond to the political appeals of the patrons (Stokes et al, 2013). Therefore, politicization of local self-governing institutions becomes a priority for the survival of the political parties and the politicians. (Reinikka and Svensson, 2004: 681). Understanding local level politics is therefore important to fully explore the impact of patronage politics on beneficiary participation in the social accountability mechanisms.

Like previous studies (Mwenda and Tangri, 2005), this study finds that heavily funded rural development schemes created opportunities for patronage politics, particularly for the ruling political parties and the intermediaries. Our research in Chaibari (Barpeta dsitrict) showed that the elected representatives of *gaon panchayats* are often closely affiliated to the ruling political parties (Congress or the Bharatiya Janata Party). The president of the *gaon panchayat* of Manikpur revealed his affiliation and active membership in one of the ruling political parties in Assam. The beneficiaries who were interviewed in the village of Chaibari claimed that the president of Manikpur *gaon panchayat* diverted the benefits associated with the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme mostly to those beneficiaries who had close affiliation with the ruling political party. This was also evident in the villages of Bampara and Baghbar. It was revealed that the representatives of the gaon panchayat of Batagaon village were mostly affiliated to the ruling political parties (either the Bharatiya Janata Party or the *Axom Gana Parishad*). The representatives of Baghbar *gaon panchayat* revealed that they were closely affiliated to the Indian National Congress. Beneficiaries that were interviewed in these villages claimed that a beneficiary without political connections faced various challenges to get the benefits on the schemes.

A similar analysis was done by Reinikka and Svensson in their study on Uganda's development schemes for schooling. According to them, abundance of development resources cannot make a change in the life of the target population if funds were distributed by the local political elites to satisfy a certain section of the society. Uganda in 1990s allocated huge budgetary funds for the improvement of schools including salary for teachers, infrastructure development and distribution of education across the societies. However, increased development funds enabled local authorities and bureaucrats including local politicians engaged in school committees to capture funds and distribute benefits to selective schools and people in these areas. Reinikka and Svensson argue that 'funds were used to increase allowances for councilors and local officers and that on the day funds actually arrived in the district, well-connected citizens and local politicians got together with the district officials to decide how these should be used (Reinikka and Svensson, 2004: 688).' Patronage-based distribution in Uganda 'takes different forms, including government actors diverting public resources for their own campaigns and those of friends and family, and financing of local and private causes, including distribution of private goods such as salt, sugar, and beer to neutralize voter dissatisfaction (Reinikka and Svensson, 2004: 688).' This study, thus, shares similar findings from the district of Barpeta.

According to the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme is a flagship scheme devised to guarantee 100 days of employment per year to every rural household (MoRD, GoI, 2013). Through community asset and infrastructure development at the local level, the scheme aims to offer employment to every rural household as one of the legal rights (Chakraborty, 2007). Major share of funding to implement the scheme comes from the Government of India, whereas the state government through its local self-governing institutions (such as panchayati raj institutions) is responsible to execute the scheme (MoRD, GoI, 2013). More particularly it is the *gram sabha* (village assembly) which is entrusted with the responsibility and powers to suggest selection of work sites where the works related to the scheme would be done, prioritize works according to local needs, monitor execution of scheme and conduct social accountability mechanisms, especially social audit (MoRD, GoI, 2013). The gram (gaon) panchayat is responsible for conducting social accountability mechanisms such as social audit. The gaon panchayat is entrusted with the powers and responsibilities of 'administering the scheme'. The entire process includes wide range of works including registration of persons from households who wish to work, issuing job cards to the beneficiary households, maintenance of records, raising awareness among the beneficiaries about the development schemes. The key task of the gaon panchayat related to social accountability mechanisms is 'calling for the *gram sabha* meetings for the purpose of conducting social audit.' Though the scheme aims to 'promote voice or local-level participation', patronage politics weaken the scope of the marginalized sections to use accountability mechanisms to monitor the implementation of the scheme (Lakha, Rajasekhar and Manjula, 2015: 334). Politicization of gaon panchayats transformed the local self-governing institutions into political battlegrounds for electoral benefits. With wide ranging responsibilities entrusted to the *gaon panchayats* in terms of the implementation of rural development schemes these institutions also provide the political space to the elites to exercise patronage politics through their local elected agents, the representatives elected to *gaon panchayats*. This was witnessed in the concerned *gaon panchayats* in the selected villages of Barpeta district, as the interviews reveal.

The profile of the elected representatives of the *gaon panchayats* selected for this study shows that most of them have political affiliations to the ruling political parties.For instance, the president elected to the Manikpur *gaon panchayat* (in Chaibari village) was an active politician affiliated to the *Axom Gana Parishad*. In the Assam panchayat elections held in 2013, he decided to contest the elections for the post of president of Manikpur *gaon panchayat* from the Bharatiya Janata Party. He was elected to the post of the president of Manikpur *gaon panchayat.* It is significant to note that some of the representatives contested the elections as independent candidates during 2013 panchayat elections. After winning the elections, they joined the ruling political parties and became active members. For example, some of the representatives (ward members) in Manikpur *gaon panchayat* came to power as independent candidates, in the panchayat elections in 2013. However, after winning the elections these elected representatives joined the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. Contesting elections as independent candidates was used as a political strategy to earn maximum number of votes from a larger set of constituents because independent candidature acts as a cover to conceal the political identity of the candidates which in turn, helps the candidate to reach out to more villagers in the local level election campaigns. As mentioned earlier, some of the local level political aspirants (such as the representatives of the *gaon panchayats*) changed their political affiliation from one political party to another even before the elections. Observation made during the course of field research in the district of Barpeta reveals that a significant number of representatives elected to the *gaon panchayats* were used as intermediaries (such as, contractors or local brokers who channelize benefits to the beneficiaries for monetary incentives) by political leaders at a higher level. These intermediaries supported the party leaders with the hope of receiving political support (such as party tickets and funding) or to get re-elected as village representatives.

Figure 4.6 shows that about 90% of the elected representatives of the gaon (gram) panchayats under the study had affiliation to the ruling political parties. Elected representatives of the gaon (gram) panchayats comprise the elected gaon (gram) panchayat members including the gaon (gram) panchayat president. Elected representatives of the gaon (gram) panchayat of Manikpur and Batagaon had affiliation to the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). Elected representatives of the *gaon panchayat* of Baghbar were affiliated to the Indian National Congress (INC). One of the interview respondents (an elected representative of the *gaon panchayat* in Manikpur) narrated his involvement in party politics that helped him stay in office as the President of the *gaon (gram) panchayat*. He said,

"*For many years, I worked as an active member of the Axom Gana Parishad (AGP). I left the party due to some personal reasons. However, my involvement with the AGP allowed me the opportunity to contest the panchayat election of 2013. I saw that there was a wave in favor of the BJP.*[18] *Anti-incumbency against the ruling Congress (both at the state and in our village) and increasing support base of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) influenced my decision to contest the elections. I was also persuaded by a party member of the BJP who was serving at the state level, to join the party. I was advised to contest the Gram Panchayat elections from Manikpur. I was finally voted to this position as the President of the gaon panchayat. My affiliation with the ruling party (BJP) sometimes does not allow me to work independently. I have party obligations. All my colleagues are also affiliated to the*

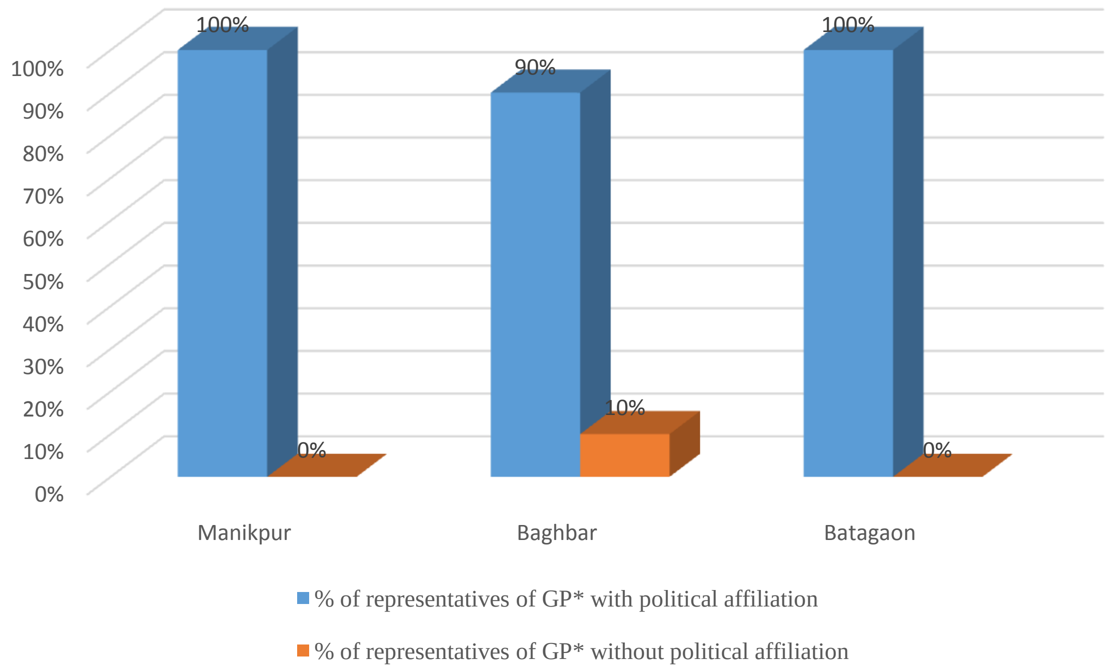
[18] The 'Modi' wave was a decisive factor of the electoral politics of India in the eve of the 2014 General Elections.

BJP. Most of the times we have to act according to our high profile party advisors on any development issues."[19]

Gaon (gram) panchayats as we discussed earlier have a major role to play in conducting social accountability mechanisms such as social audit. The respondents from the village of *Chaibari*, Barpeta alleged that their *gaon (gram) panchayat* channelized the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme funds to a contractor who extended financial help to a former member of the legislative assembly in his earlier electoral contest. The contractor also had political linkages with the higher authorities including the Block Development Officer (BDO). Involvement of contractors in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme's work is prohibited by the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005. However, local political elites do not hesitate to involve the local contractors in order to gain electoral or other financial benefits through these intermediaries. Involvement of local bureaucrats such as the block development officers in the clientelistic practices is evident. This indicates that due to patronage politics, benefits (for instance, Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme's employment opportunities) are diverted from the genuine beneficiaries to those who do not require Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme's employment but possess political linkages with the local political elites.

[19] This interview was elaborate and was conducted for more than an hour on 2 October, 2016.

Figure 4.6: Political affiliation (%) of the elected representatives of the gaon (gram) panchayats in the district of Barpeta



Source: Survey responses, 2018

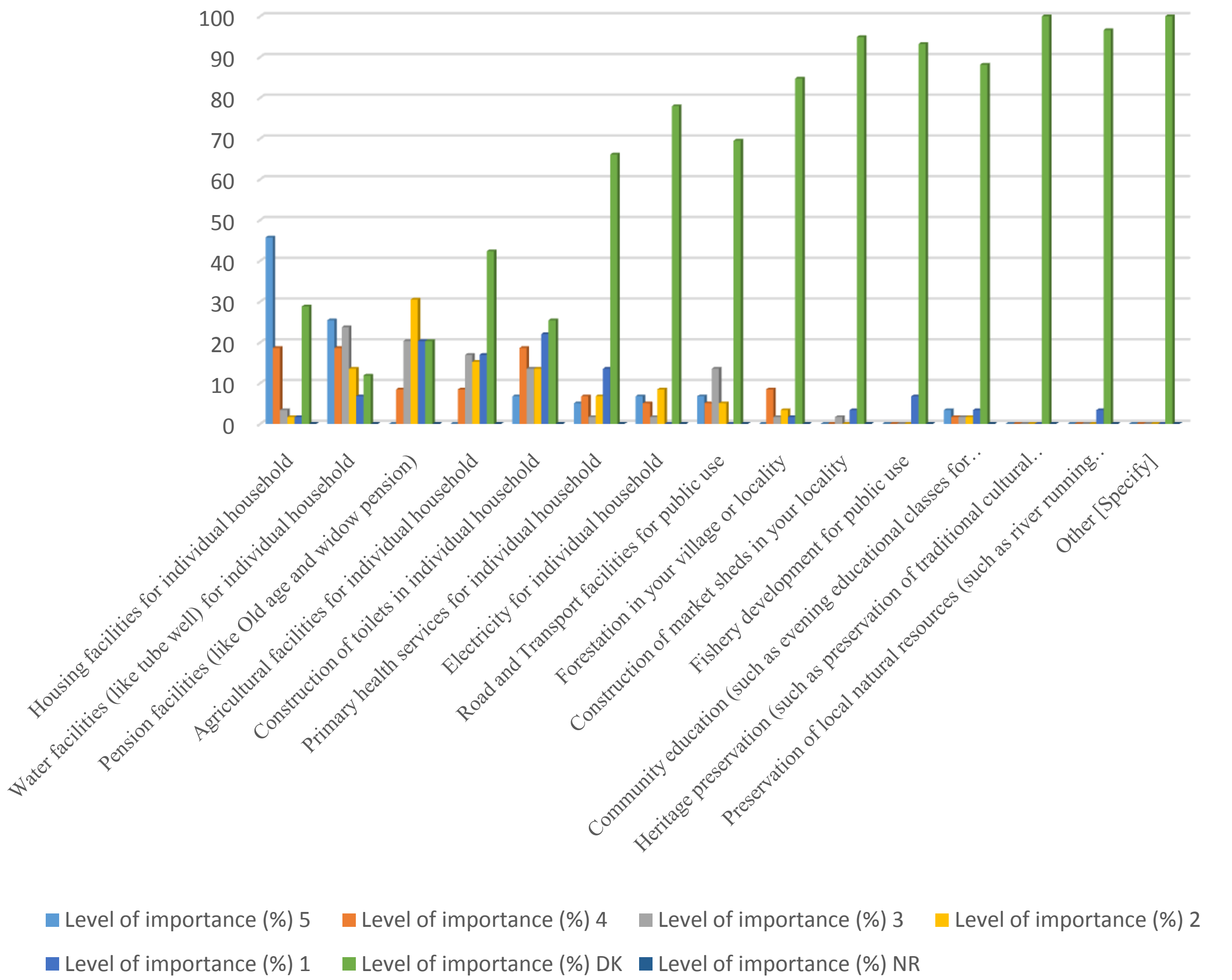
Figure 4.7 shows the percentage of respondents identifying the most important benefits for their households that were received in return for the votes they casted or the political support they extended to the local political leaders and elites. The percentage is counted against the total number of households selected for this study. To understand the level of importance of the benefits, the study used a scale ranging from 5 to 1. The Table listed fourteen benefits, which comprised of 'personal' incentives (benefits from the perspective of the respondents) and 'public' incentives. Among the total households selected as samples in our survey, 45.76% of the total respondents identified housing facilities as the most important benefits for their households. 25.42% of the total sample households in the survey identified water facilities as the most important benefits for their individual households. Construction of toilets in the individual households was marked by 6.78% of the respondents as the most important incentives. About 5.08% of the respondents identified primary health services as the most important incentives/benefits for individual households.6.78% of the respondents said electricity as the most important incentives/benefits. Road and transport facilities for public use were identified as the most important benefits by about 6.78% of the respondents. Merely, 3.39% of the respondents identified community education (such as evening education for the adults) as the most important benefits. Around 46.00% of the respondents identified housing for individual households as the most important benefits/incentives. Political elites make calculated promises and distribute incentives/benefits to the selected beneficiaries. Benefit-seeking behavior of the beneficiaries made iteasier for elites to exercise patronage politics.

What are the implications of selected incentives and selected distribution of benefits to the beneficiaries on their participation in the social accountability mechanisms? As discussed earlier, Gram sabha is authorized to approve the action plans for socio-economic development in the gaon (gram) panchayats. The president of the *gaon panchayat* presides over the meetings of the gram sabha. Thus, he is not only the presiding authority but also a key decision maker of the gram sabha. Selection of beneficiaries often lies at the discretion of the gaon (gram) panchayat officials and other village representatives. These officials have a monopoly over the decision making of the gaon (gram) panchayat. One of the respondents expressed his views on participatory mechanisms in the gram sabha in these words,

"*How do you expect accountability when everything is dependent on vested political interests? In reality the information on the state-sponsored schemes never reach the villagers. It is very difficult for the ordinary villagers to get the information on the amount of funds sanctioned for each scheme or utilized, for instance, the MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme) where even beneficiary selection and the preparation of the beneficiary lists that are submitted to the higher block and district authorities are solely decided by the politically connected representatives of the gram panchayat supported by other bureaucrats such as the BDO (block development officer) among other officials.*"[20]

[20] The interview was conducted on October 10, 2016. The person has expertise as well experience on the functioning of *gaon (gram) panchayats*. He served as a *gaon (gram)* panchayat president of *Manikpur* gaon *(gram) panchayat* and was a political member of the *Axom Gana Parishad*. Now he is a social activist without any active political membership. Currently, he is residing in the village of *Chaibari*, Barpeta district.

Figure 4.7: Percentage of respondents identifying the most important benefits/incentives for their households in the district of Barpeta (% counted against the total sample households)

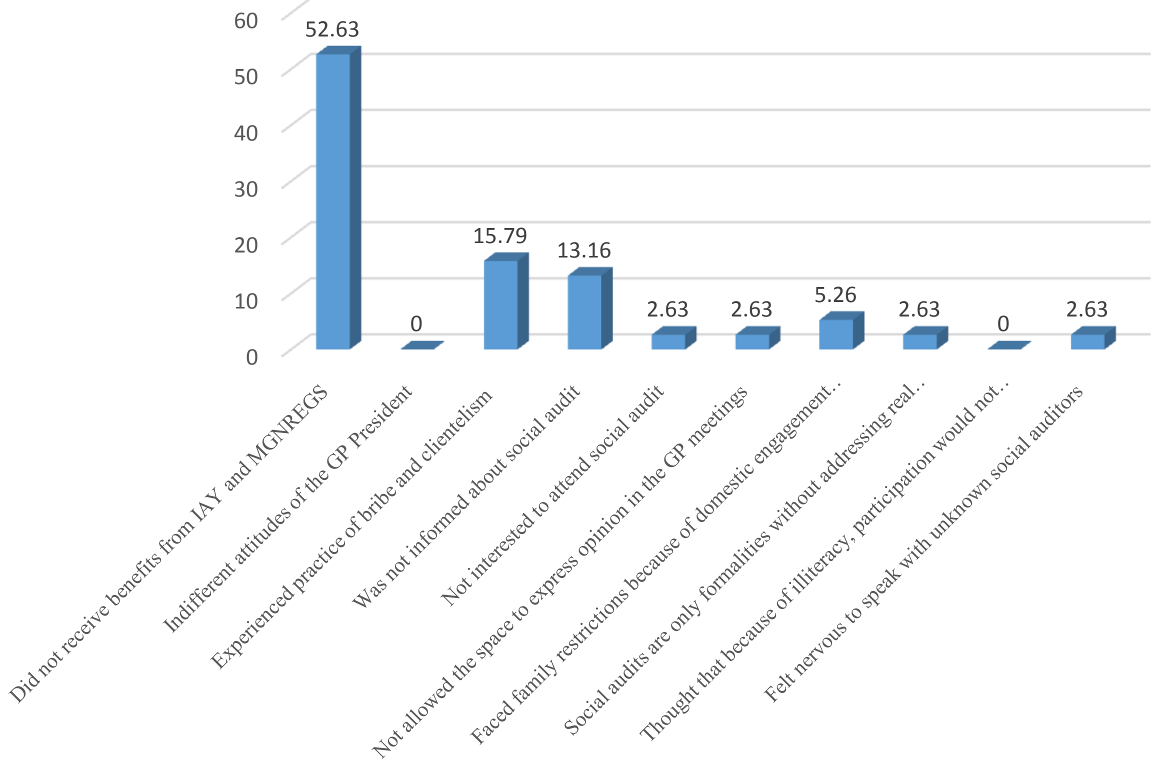


Source: Survey responses, 2018

Monopoly over state resources and control over state institutions therefore helps the ruling political parties to exercise patronage politics (Robinson and Verdier, 2002). This acts as an obstacle in effective beneficiary participation in social audit and other social accountability mechanisms as the above cases reveal.

Figure 4.8 shows the reasons that were cited by the respondents for their absence in social audit forums in the selected villages. Among the respondents in our survey who did not attend any social audit forum, 52.63% identified that they did not receive any benefits such as Indira Awas Yojana's housing facilities and employment opportunities through the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme, and therefore they were unlikely to have attended any social audit forum. Among the total sample households, 15.79% respondents did not attend any social audit forum and they identified that they experienced the practice of bribe (money for benefits) or clientelism (benefits to selected beneficiaries such as political party members or relatives) by their representatives elected to their gaon (gram) panchayats in the delivery of the benefits on the government-sponsored schemes. Out of the total respondents, 13.16% respondents identified that they did not receive any information about the social audit and lack of relevant information constrained their participation in the social audit forum. In the total sample households, 2.63% seemed least interested to attend any social audit forum organized in the gaon (gram) panchayats. 2.63% of the respondents recalled that in the meetings previously held in the gaon (gram) panchayat, they were not allowed the space to express their opinion. Gradually they lost interest in attending these meetings. About 5.26 % of the respondents expressed that they faced family restrictions in attending social audit forum. The study finds that female beneficiaries faced restrictions from family members in outdoor activities beyond the household activities like cooking, collecting firewood, schooling children and taking care of other domestic activities. Over-burdened with such domestic or household activities, some of the beneficiaries could not make it convenient to participate in social audit. Presence of such constraints may hamper both the males and females; however, female beneficiaries are more vulnerable to such restrictions because of the existing social conditions and norms in the society. Another 2.63% of the respondents felt that social audits were only formalities and therefore failed to address the socio-economic issues of the beneficiaries. Our survey results also reveal that lack of personal benefits/incentives had an effect on beneficiary participation in the social audit forums. Nearly 52.63% of the beneficiaries/respondents cited this reason for their absence in the social audit forums.

Figure 4.8: Percentage of respondents who did not attend social audit forum and the most important reason identified by them for their absence (% counted against the total sample households)



Source: Survey responses, 2018

Previous studies show that although formal mechanisms for ensuring transparency and accountability are in place, they are ineffective. Scholars found that the gaps in transparency and social accountability are widely prevalent despite some steps that are being taken in some local governing institutions such as displaying 'the list of works and the beneficiaries employed under the MGREGA scheme (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) on the notice boards of the *Panchayats* (Das, 2013: 58).' There are huge gaps between the displayed information and ground level execution of the rural development schemes. Scholars further argue that the social audit process has a long way to go before these formal mechanisms can ensure transparency, empowerment of rural beneficiaries and good governance in local self-governing institutions (Das, 2013: 59).

Promoting transparency and realizing good governance are the key objectives of conducting social accountability mechanisms, especially social audit under the Indira Awas Yojana and the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme in Assam. Field research, however, reveals that local political elites manipulate the social audit processes. In some cases beneficiaries received invitation to social accountability mechanisms due to their political connections. Their participation may be considered as ‘token participation’ for the sake of fulfilling the requirements to conduct the social audit forum meetings.

Participation of beneficiaries in worksites of the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme and beneficiary household-visits of the social audit team is essential to examine the performance of the schemes when social audit team visits the villages to fulfill the procedures of social accountability (MGNREGA, 2005 and 2013; Social audit booklet, SIPRD, 2014). This is a task that ensures accountability and proper utilization of development funds to a certain extent. However, beneficiaries in Barpeta district could not use these accountability tools.

Focused group discussion with the beneficiaries in Barpeta showed that most of them were not aware of their participatory rights in the social accountability mechanisms. The beneficiaries were not aware of the participatory processes and the accountability mechanisms such as the inspection of the exact worksites in the case of Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA, MoRD, 2013). The study found that those who had the information about the inspection of the ‘worksites’ particularly in the case of Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme had either political connections or were closely associated with the officials of the gaon panchayat. There were instances however, where some beneficiaries without any political affiliation as they claimed, participated in some of the social audit processes such as the inspection of worksites. However, it also needs to be emphasized that physical presence or participation of beneficiaries to fulfill the quorum itself does not mean that the social accountability process was effective. A respondent in *Chaibari* village in Barpeta revealed,

“*The social auditors who visited our gaonpanchayat were not free from the influence of the gaon panchayat members who worked for political gains. Some of the villagers like me are not affiliated to the political parties. We do not have any connection with our representatives. Therefore, we were denied the scope to interact and talk with the social audit team when they visited our village to conduct social audit. In my neighborhood, only a few villagers, who had linkages with our gaon panchayat members, could interact with the team. I found that social auditors were mostly led by the president or the ward members. If we were given opportunities to talk with the auditors, we could have raised a lot of issues.*”[21]

[21] The interview was taken on October 2nd, 2016 in the village of Chaibari, Barpeta.

Another respondent from Baghbar Gaon, Barpeta, narrated,

"*I do not like to ask questions to our Gram Panchayat members. My priority is to get the government sponsored benefits for my household. If I ask the members of our Gram Panchayat, especially the president, they would be angry. They can do whatever they wish. They can cut your name from the beneficiary list and include others name. I do not want that to happen. They have the power.*"[22]

Another respondent revealed that he was deprived of employment through Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme although he possessed a valid job-card. The reason why he was deprived of this benefit was that he made a written complaint against the president of the *gaon panchayat* and the concerned ward member who were alleged to have taken money from some beneficiaries in exchange of housing facilities.[23] The respondent said that due to the complaint he made to higher authorities, he was no longer invited to *gaon panchayat* meetings including gram sabhas.[24] He also added that even if he received information and participated in the social audit forums, he would not have raised any issue or asked questions because he feared deprivation of his benefits and entitlements (such as Indira Awas Yojana housing facilities) that he could receive under the rural development schemes. One of our respondents from the village of *Chaibari* claimed that her identity card which gave her the status of a beneficiary below the poverty line, was used by the *gaon panchayat* authority to transfer the housing facility to a neighbor who had connections with the *gaon panchayat* president and the local member of the legislative assembly. She said,

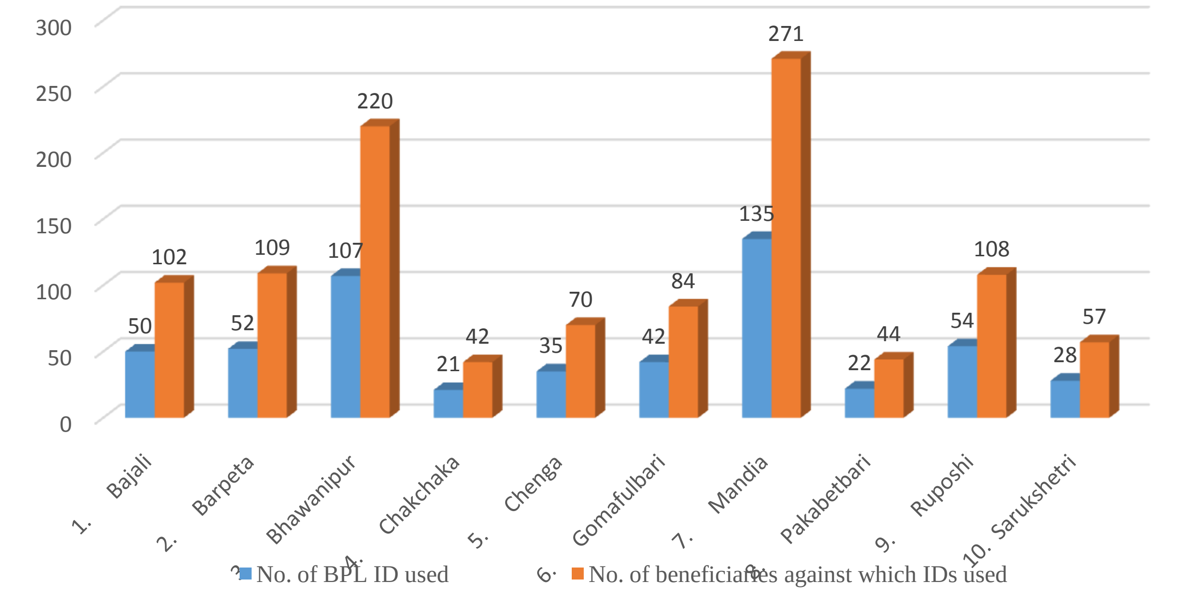
"*My benefits under the IAY scheme (*Indira Awas Yojana*) were transferred to one of my neighbors. I saw my name in the beneficiary list. But, after several months when I visited the gaon panchayat to inquire why it took time to get the benefits under the housing scheme it was revealed to me that my name was missing from the beneficiary list. I was surprised. I thought that visiting the BDO (block development officer) would help me to. I visited the head clerk in the BDO office. I was accompanied by my husband. I came to know in the BDO office that my neighbor had already received the house allotted in the name of my BPL (below poverty line) ID. I made the complaint. But, they have power; we are poor. Instead of further going against them, I am waiting for the next round of the benefits. I thought I should not be vocal more; otherwise they would cancel my benefits.*"[25]

Figure 4.9 indicates multiple use of a single ID (identity) card meant for beneficiaries living below the poverty line in the district of Barpeta, by the *gaon panchayat* representatives and other officials such as the block development officers entrusted with the task of implementing the government schemes. According to the provisions of the Indira Awas Yojana, each

[22] This interview was taken on November 5th, 2015 in the village of Baghbar Gaon, Barpeta district.
[23] The interview was taken in March 2015 in the village of Bampara, Barpeta district.
[24] The respondent made his complaint to the block development officer.
[25] The interview was conducted in June 27th, 2015.

household can be in possession of one beneficiary identity card. The below poverty line identity card and the number is the unique identity that can be utilized by the beneficiary households to receive housing facilities under the Indira Awas Yojana scheme. There are cases where a single identity card meant for the poor beneficiary households are used multiple times to distribute benefits by inappropriate means. Multiple use of a single identity number may also result in the allocation of benefits (such as housing facilities) to non-beneficiaries (such as party members whose household income does not necessarily meet the criteria of living below the poverty line). Our study reveals that political representatives channelized housing facilities to the members of political parties or their supporters. It was revealed that in many cases the real beneficiaries were deprived of the housing facilities under the Indira Awas Yojana in Assam. During the interviews it was revealed that in *Bajali, Bhawanipur, Chenga* among other blocksin the Barpeta district nearly fifty beneficiary IDs were used multiple times to distribute selective benefits to clients. The Comptroller and Auditor General's report on Indira Awas Yojana, 2013 also revealed that in the district of Barpeta the cards were misused and used multiple times to distribute selective incentives to the electoral constituents. This shows that there was a possibility of diversion of benefits from the genuine beneficiaries to others members of the village who mostly shared political affiliation to the ruling political parties or other linkages with the elected representatives such as caste ties.

Figure 4.9: Position of number of BPL ID used against number of beneficiaries in the district of Barpeta (at blocs), 2008-13



Source: CAG audit report on IAY, 2013

Existing power relations, low socio-economic status and lack of institutional capacities among these villagers added to the challenges of effective participation in the social accountability mechanisms. Beneficiaries are socio-economically and politically marginalized and therefore they tend to emphasize more on personal benefits such as housing facilities under the Indira Awas Yojana scheme and employment opportunities under the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme. The concerns of the beneficiaries about the loss of access to state resources deter them to go against the political elites. The lessons learned from our field research in the district of Barpeta shows similarity with some of the findings in earlier studies, for instance, Lakha, Rajasekhar and Manjula's case study on social accountability in Karnataka, as discussed in chapter 2 in this study (Lakha, Rajasekhar and Manjula; 2015).

4.5 Social conditions and cultural norms: Effect on beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in local self-governing institutions in Barpeta

This study argues that existing socio-cultural norms and socio-economic conditions may influence the scope of beneficiary participation. Findings of the study showed that socio-cultural norms are used by the advantaged sections of society including the rich, upper caste and the politically dominant elites to capture local self-governing institutions. Socio-cultural norms position men and women in hierarchical social positions. Socio-cultural norms stereotype gender attributing specific characteristics to men and women. Existing literature shows that gender-based stratification in a society works to reinforce gender discrimination against women. In terms of putting policy preferences, men are in advantageous position because of the socio-cultural norms. Women often suffer from exclusion of policy preferences to address their issues (Verba et al, 1997; Risman, 1998; Young, 2004). The current study based on its field research in the selected villages of Barpeta district provides similar arguments. Similarly, caste hierarchy was prevalent and determined social networks and relations among villagers. Position of beneficiaries in the caste hierarchy mattered when it came to civic participation in local self-governing institutions.

A beneficiary belonging to a low social caste group with low economic background revealed in these words,

"*There is no difference between my participation and non-participation in the social audit forums. I attended the social audit forums organized in our gaon panchayats. Government officials (social audit teams) came to inspect our Gram Panchayats and its works. I thought since government* *officials would be there, villagers like me would get the opportunity to speak in front of them. After I attended the social audit, I discovered I was wrong because like our village meetings, gram sabha organized for social audit went into the hands of the powerful people of our villages. The ones who expressed their views in the meetings were the ones who were powerful and they dominated the entire meeting. What they said were written and reported by these teams. If somebody like me stood to speak, the gaon panchayat president and other officials instructed us to sit down saying that we do not know how to speak before the government officials. Since these people are powerful, rich and educated they dictate the social norms of behavior in our village, I did not have the courage to violate what they dictated.*"[26]

The statement highlights the presence of socio-cultural norms and their effects on beneficiary participation. Despite physical attendance, most of the beneficiaries preferred to remain silent and this is not surprising if we consider lives in the villages where we conducted our study. In each village that we visited, we observed how villagers were accustomed to socio-cultural norms, though in unwritten form, and how adjusted their lives in specific cultural settings.

Previous studies on social networks and civil society organizations (CSOs) like the *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* of Rajasthan (MKSS) argue that social networks through civil society organizations have the potential to make local self-governing institutions accountable to the marginalized sections of the society. Civil society organizations allow building of social networks among the villagers to mobilize and make demands for their entitlements of rural development schemes. However, such activism of the civil society organizations devoted to social audit is missing in the selected villages of Barpeta.

Following Rudman and Glick (2008), this study examined socio-cultural norms and discrimination based on gender (Rudman and Glick, 2012: 9). Following previous studies, this study argues that gender is a social construction (Agarwal, 1997). Popular norms of masculinity and femininity often prescribe how men and women should behave and interact in a society (Rudman and Glick, 2012). While examining whether beneficiary participation is affected by gender-based discrimination and socio-cultural norms on gender stereotyping, the present study found that although women are allowed constitutional safeguards (such as 33% reservation of seats for women in panchayati raj institutions) in the local self-governing institutions, in reality there is a serious lack of female (gender) participation in these institutions. Social norms and gender discrimination are prevalent in rural Assam that restricts female participation in various socio-economic, political, cultural and civic

[26] Dated January, 2016, the interview was conducted in the village of Bampara, Barpeta district. The respondent was a Scheduled Caste.

activities.[27] In practice, women are often discouraged and prohibited from participating in social and development activities. The study found that gender discrimination is quite visible in the selected villages in the district of Barpeta. Patriarchal social norms are prevalent and influence women's participation as well as representation in the local self-governing institutions.

The study found that there are structural inequalities between men and women in Assam. As per the census records of 2001, male literacy in Assam was recorded as 71.93%, whereas female literacy figured at 56.03%. In 2011 census, female literacy slightly increased and figured at 67.27% in Assam. This is slightly higher than the all India average (65.46%). Various reports of the Election Commission of India indicate marginalization of women in electoral participation and representation in Assam. This was evident in the representation of women in the Lok Sabha and Assam Assembly elections too. For example, in the Lok Sabha elections in the recent decade, in 2004, six female candidates contested the elections. None of them could win the elections. In 2009, 11 female candidates contested. However, only two could win the elections. The figures are more striking in the Assembly elections of Assam. In 2006, there were only 69 female candidates contesting the elections compared to 928 male candidates in the elections. In 2011, 85 female candidates contested and only 14 were elected from different constituencies. In the local level elections, the number of women's representation is equally small and insignificant as far as decision-making and participation is concerned in these institutions. Therefore, in terms of political participation and representation, women are far behind compared to men.

Gender-based norms deterred most of the female beneficiaries to participate effectively when social accountability mechanisms were practiced in the *gaon panchayats* in 2014, to examine the implementation of rural development schemes such as the Indira Awas Yojana and the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme. Data shows that there are women representatives elected to panchayati raj institutions in several *gaon panchayats* in Assam. In 2002, out of 2,478 candidates, 821 female candidates were elected as presidents of *gaon panchayats* and out of 24,870 candidates, 8,210 female candidates won the local level elections and were elected as the members of *gaon panchayats* in Assam.[28] However, in most

[27] Previous studies on gender found that gender gap has been a significant characteristic of Indian society that needs attention to reduce disparities between male and female (Das and Pathak, 2012).
[28] Source: Election Commission of Assam.

of the cases, elected representation by women become a proxy as the male members (particularly husbands of married women representatives) exercised the actual powers and responsibilities. Women representation failed to empower women and provide them the opportunities to voice their concerns in the decision making process of the local self-governing institutions or social accountability. It is significant to point out that men, even without being in office as elected members of *gaon panchayat*, appeared to run office in the name of their wives or sisters or mothers. During our field research in the district of Barpeta, we found that some of the elected female representatives were busy with their household activities during office hours. We observed that there were several instances of 'proxy representations' by male members (husbands) on behalf of their wives who were elected as a ward member in the *gaon panchayat* of *Baghbar* in Barpeta district. To narrate an experience during my field visit in *Baghbar*, it was around 11 am on 17 October, 2015, I visited the *gaon panchayat* office. The president of that *gaon panchayat* was not present in the office. The secretary of the *gaon panchayat* (after I interviewed) directed me to meet another member who was a representative of ward number 9 (nine) in the *gaon panchayat*. Before initiating the discussion, I wanted to take due consent of the ward member and also to verify his identity and his official position. It was revealed that he was not an elected official of the *gaon panchayat* and his presence was a 'proxy presence' in place of his wife who was the actual ward member. Later when I interviewed the female member, the actual member of the ward, I was told that she visited the *gaon panchayat* office only if it was extremely necessary and most of her decisions were taken by her husband. Her participation in these institutions was therefore marginal. During the interview the female ward member revealed,

"*I was initially not interested to contest the panchayat elections. My husband served as a gaon panchayat member for many years before I was elected. There was a government order and the seat was reserved for women representatives. Therefore, my husband was unable to contest. I could not override his decision. I am also not aware of many official procedures. I have daily household chores and my children to look after. I am not confident of working independently of my husband because I think he knows the official procedures better than me and I trust him. I sign on the required documents when it is necessary.*"[29]

This narrative by the female representative indicated how women's representation and participation in the local self-governing institutions are effected by gender norms, the existing power relations and hierarchy.

[29] The interview was conducted on October 17, 2015 in the office of the *Baghabar* gaon panchayat, Barpeta district.

Field research revealed that gender-based social norms put constraints on the participation of female beneficiaries in social accountability mechanisms organized in local self-governing institutions in the selected villages of Barpeta. Qualitative research shows that participation of female beneficiaries is determined by their male counterparts, especially their husbands. Women are more likely to follow the decisions of the male members of the household. A female respondent from the village of Bampara said,

"*Grihosthor siddhantok aaokan korib nowaro (I cannot ignore the decisions taken by my husband). If I go against him, I would be unacceptable for the society because it assumes that voice-raising women are astray. My in-laws would feel uncomfortable and will be upset if I attend a public meeting, mostly attended by men. I understand my limitations. After my marriage, my duty is to maintain the respect and the status of this home (in-law's home).Even in my maternal home key household decisions were taken by my father, uncles and even my younger brothers. I can take part in family discussions. But, my husband and father in law take the final decisions. They have experiences and knowledge because they work in the society. Our xamaj (society) also respects them more.*"[30]

This is true for almost every household in the rural areas of India including the selected villages in the district of Barpeta. Male dominance in the households is reinforced by social norms.

A female participant in Chaibari shared her experiences on social accountability mechanisms and social audit in these words,

"*I feel shy to attend and speak in meetings. Generally, my husband participates in all kinds of meetings held in our villages. I never participated in any meeting at the gaon panchayat level. I am a woman and in our village women generally do not participate in public meetings. I am a group member of a women's self-help group. We meet once in every month. I do not have any problem participating in the meetings conducted by the self-help group. We are all women. My family also does not have problem if I attend these meetings. However, my family will not allow me to attend gaon panchayat meetings where there are elderly men from our village and other neighboring villages.*"[31]

In rare occasions some female beneficiaries would raise questions in social accountability mechanisms in local self-governing institutions by overcoming the social norms and restrictions of speaking in the public domain.

Field research in the current study showed that male and female beneficiaries displayed differences on issue preferences. For example, male beneficiaries prioritized long term

[30] The interview was conducted in the village of *Bampara*, Barpeta district dated 11 March, 2015.
[31] The interview was conducted on October 2nd, 2016.

personal benefits such as employment opportunities, whereas female beneficiaries urged for short term but larger personal benefits such as housing facilities. As one male respondent from the village of Baghbar Gaon said,

"*Since I am a poor villager, I need all kinds of benefits from panchayat. But, panchayat provides only a few benefits. I prefer to get employed throughout the year under the MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme). If I could earn money, running my family would be easier for me. In our village, almost all the villagers are workers. But, there are only few work opportunities. I can get works for two to three days per week. How can I live and run my family? My wife wants to have an IAY (Indira Awas Yojana) house. I told her that since we have a house (made of bamboo and clay), we do not require it now. Instead of that we should think of our daily earning. Therefore, I requested our gram panchayat president to give me work if possible under the scheme. Later, they can give me house under the IAY scheme (Indira Awas Yojana). We are dependent on the gram panchayat.*"[32]

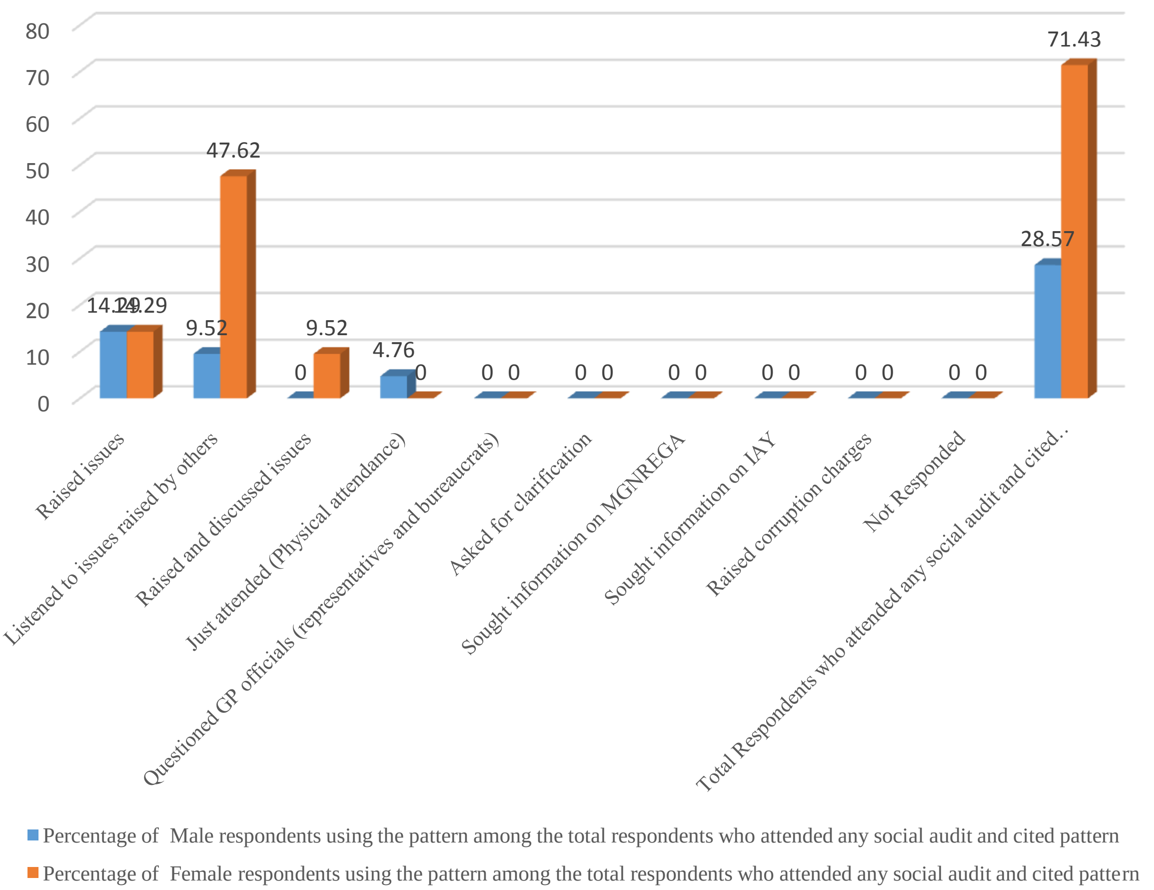
Since male voices are more prominent in local level decision making at gaon panchayats, female beneficiaries may find it unproductive to participate and examine non-prioritized employment works of development schemes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme. Elite-controlled social audit, therefore, witnessed higher ineffectiveness of women voices in using fully potential social audit participatory tools or pattern of participation.

Structural inequalities between men and women influenced beneficiary participation. Figure 4.10 shows the percentage of respondents divided on the basis of gender and the pattern of participation in social audit forums. About 14.29% respondents both male and female, participated in the social audit forums and raised issues. Among the respondents who participated in the social audit forums, 9.52% were males and 47.62% were female respondents. The respondents listened to issues raised by other villager members, gaon panchayat members including presidents, gaon panchayat secretaries and bureaucrats such as block development officers. Female beneficiaries were more active in listening to issues raised by others rather than raising issues or actively discussing the issues that they face in the villages. Our survey shows that among the respondents who participated in the social audit forums, only 9.52% percentage of female beneficiaries raised and discussed issues. The pattern of participation in the social audit forum shows that the respondents were unlikely to directly ask questions to the officials and representatives seeking relevant information on

[32] The interview was conducted on 29th January, 2015.

schemes such as the Indira Awas Yojana and the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme or making complaints against the local level authorities.

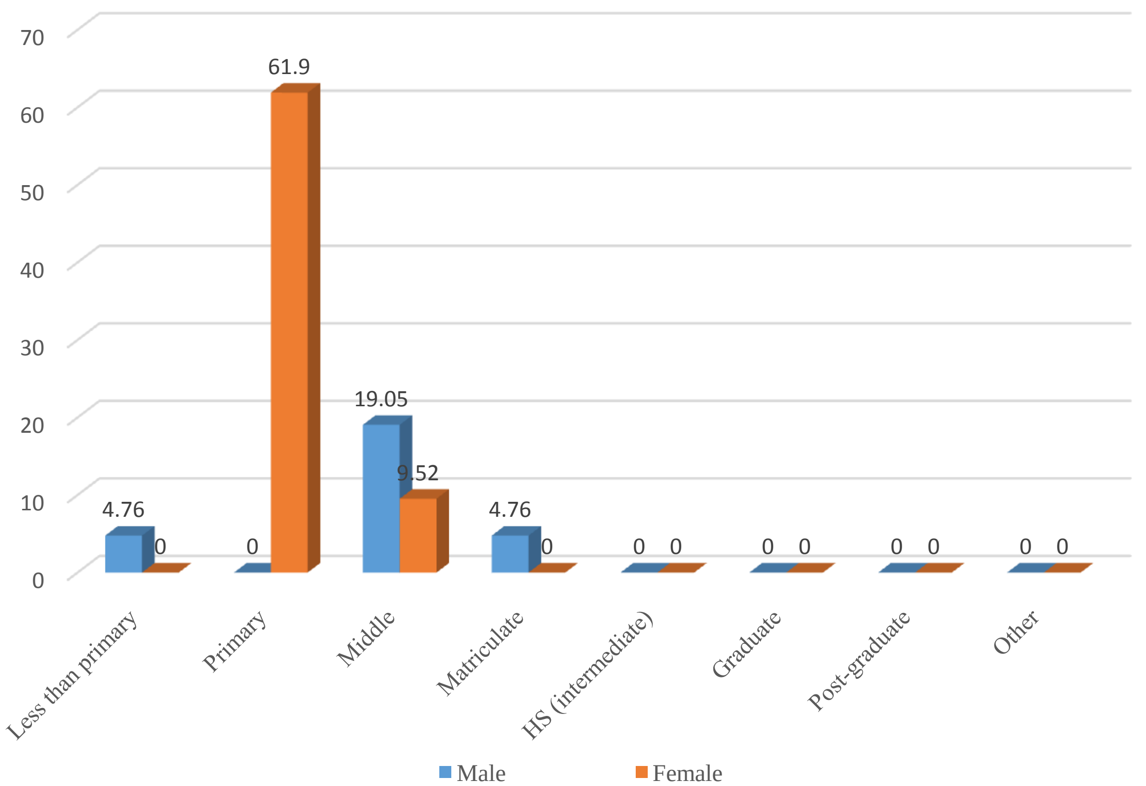
Figure 4.10: Percentage of respondents divided on the basis of gender and the pattern of participation in social audit forums in Barpeta



Source: Survey responses, 2018

Literacy and education are essential to improve people's participation in governance. Education provides access to information to understand rural development schemes and realize the significance of participatory mechanisms such as the social accountability mechanisms. Figure 4.11 shows the percentage of respondents with the level of education divided on the basis of gender. Our survey results show that 61.90% female respondents had access to primary education.

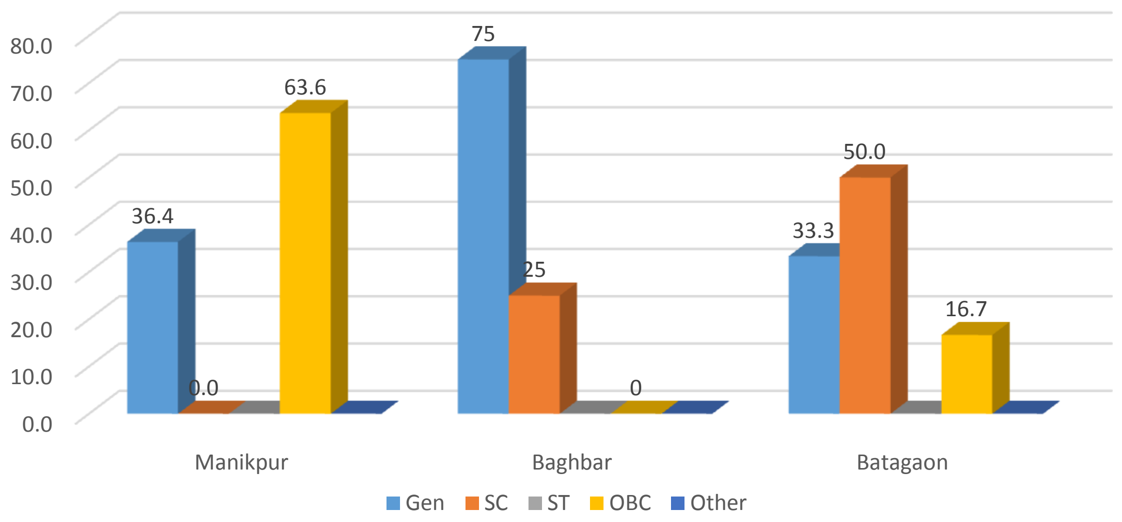
Figure 4.11: Percentage of respondents with highest level of education achieved across gender among the sample households participated in social audit.



Source: Survey responses, 2018

Poor educational attainment means that only a few beneficiaries could receive relevant information on rural development schemes, the Indira Awas Yojana and the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme. And, recipients of higher education belong to high caste and affluent households. Even men receive better education than the women. Gosh (2013), for example, argues that men and women differ to a great extent in the Northeastern state of India including Assam. Likewise, scholars argue that various Indian states including Assam, Bihar, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and some others have poor educational attainmentand women largely suffer educational inequality (Mehta, 1996; Agarwal, 2014; Alcott and Rose, 2017; Asadullah and Yalonetzky, 2012). According to the *socio economic caste census, 2011*, the district of Barpeta has 39.23% illiterates among its total rural population, which is higher than the state average of 32.06% in the same category. Of particular importance, illiteracy or lower level of education had limited access to information. Field research shows that most of the beneficiaries in the selected villages of Barpeta largely failed to participate in social accountability mechanisms because they were illiterate. Lack of education also made the beneficiaries vulnerable to traditional power divides and patronage politics.

Figure 4.12: Percentage of respondents who participated in social audit forum by caste category in the selected gaon panchayats (GPs) in the district of Barpeta (% counted against the total respondents participated in social audit forum in each GP



Source: Survey responses, 2018

Figure 4.12 shows the percentage of respondents who participated in the social audit forums divided on the basis of caste category in the selected gaon panchayats in the district of Barpeta (% counted against the total respondents participated in social audit forum in each gaon panchayat selected). Survey results show that beneficiary participation varied along the lines of caste category. In Manikpur *gaon panchayat* as our survey reveals, only beneficiaries belonging to the general caste category (belonging to higher castes) (36.4%) and other backward caste (OBC) (63.6%) participated in the social audit forum. Most of the beneficiaries belonging to other caste categories (i.e., scheduled castes and scheduled tribes) failed to participate in the social audit forum. According to the provisions of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and Indira Awas Yojana, marginalized sections of the society such as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes form the larger portion of beneficiaries for the distribution of benefits under these schemes. This suggests that social audit should engage these marginalized groups in the monitoring process. However, our survey in the Manikpur *gaon panchayat* shows that the social audit process was marked by the absence of such marginalized groups in the social audit forum. Therefore, our survey results are quite contrary to the claims made by the *gaon panchayat* representatives. They claimed that a significant number of the beneficiaries belonging to the marginalized sections of the society (including those belonging to the lower castes) participated in the social audit forums. Our findings from the Manikpur *gaon panchayat* also reveal that the beneficiaries and non-beneficiary villagers belonging to the general caste category were more vocal in certain cases and became key participants in the social audit forum.

In Baghbar *gaon panchayat*, a large number of beneficiaries (75%) belonging to the general caste category participated in the social audit forum. Only 25% of the beneficiaries who participated in these forums belonged to the scheduled caste (SC) category. We also found that even though beneficiaries were allowed to speak, they could not change their 'marginalized positions' to speak and make huge differences in the decision making process of the gaon panchayats. Qualitative interviews indicate that women made adjustments to historical oppressions that influenced their day to day lives. Most female respondents expressed that they were less comfortable to speak in a formal public forum like the social audit forums. Patronage politics and high illiteracy rate among the marginalized sections of the society, including women reinforced the structural inequalities in the rural areas such as the Barpeta district and the selected villages. Our qualitative research finds that elites in the villages use social conditions and norms to advance their own interests and aspirations such as winning elections at the village level institutions. They are also involved in divisive politics such as unequal distribution of state resources to certain villagers and leaving others in the periphery. Marginalized villagers, (the beneficiaries) prefer to silently bear such clientelistic practices of the local political elites with a view that their 'moderate' behaviour at least would not break the networks with the other villagers and their linkages with the local elites**.** Beneficiary participation from the marginalized groups such as women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the social audit process was less effective because in most cases the female attendees remained silent.

4.6 Summary of the chapter

The chapter presented the findings of the factors that may have an influence or challenge beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in the local level institutions in the villages. The chapter discussed the findings of the social accountability mechanisms particularly social audit in the selected villages in the district of Barpeta. The first part of the chapter discussed the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the district of

Barpeta. The chapter discussed the findings from in-depth interviews with the key beneficiary respondents in the selected villages of Chaibari, Baghbar Gaon and Bampara.The chapter showed that the influential members of the villages such as the village elites, elected representatives of gaon panchayats are involved in patronage politics. The chapter discussed how patronage politics influenced the decisions to participate or not to participate in the beneficiary participation. These beneficiaries faced the challenges not only in terms of receiving the benefits of rural development schemes such as Indira Awas Yojana (housing facilities) and Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme (employment opportunities), but also in using their participatory rights in the social audit forums. Our preliminary surveys also added insights to our understanding of the scope and challenges of beneficiary participation in the selected villages in the district of Barpeta. Our field research in the district of Barpeta shows that the first phase of social audit that was conducted in the district of Barpeta in the month of November, 2014 experienced challenges of participation. The results show the challenges of participatory governance in Assam. The interviews and preliminary surveys revealed that social audit process failed to engage a large number of beneficiaries and those beneficiaries who participated in that round of social audit could hardly contribute to effective participatory governance.

Findings, mainly drawn from in-depth interviews in the selected villages in the district of Barpeta, indicate that patronage politics influenced participatory governance and the functioning of gaon panchayats.We find that politicization of local self-governing institutions and social accountability mechanisms was a calculated move of the local political elites. In a democratic set up like in India where local democracy is well recognized and accepted, politicization of gaon panchayat is calculatedalong the lines of electoral outcomes. Political parties and politicians are more likely to interfere in the functioning of local self-governing institutions to gain and consolidate the electorate support. Distribution of benefits (such as Indira Awas Yojana housing facilities and Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme's employment opportunities) based on clientele networks is a part and parcel of the political calculations in the local self-governing institutions. Patronage politics also involved diverting development-related state resources and funds to certain selected sections of the society. Selective incentive played an important role in selective beneficiary participation especially those who attended extended electoral support to the political patrons in the villages. Political affiliation of the beneficiaries was important for the local politicians to distribute benefits such as the housing facilities. However, we find that local politicians in the district of Barpeta care not only about their political party members, but also the villagers who could show political affiliation by extending their electoral support when elections were held. Political parties and politicians consider electoral support of the beneficiaries as a criterion of political affiliation in the villages because of the fact that most of the villagers do not possess formal political membership to the political parties. Their political affiliation is, therefore, counted not by formal party membership but by the support they extended to the political parties when elections were held.Geographical proximity of the local political elites and the villagers makes this identification easier for them.

The study finds that like the other villagers, beneficiaries constituted a numerically significant electoral strength for the political parties and politicians. Targeting the beneficiaries for electoral gains is guided by two considerations: first, rural development schemes entitled selective incentives and personal benefits (such as housing facilities and employment opportunities) to the beneficiaries. Use of scheme-based benefits for the selective beneficiaries is not a difficult exercise for the local political elites in power who belonged to the ruling political party because they enjoyed the institutional capacities to implement the development schemes. Second, political parties and politicians traded off votes with the constituents. Constituents with socio-economic challenges, tended to accept the politically-mediated benefits such as the housing facilities and employment opportunities. Beneficiaries of the two identified schemes in the district of Barpeta displayed the benefit-seeking behaviour as our field research in the selected villages and gaon panchayat reveals. Local politicians are aware of the necessities of the rural households because they live in same village or neighbouring villages. By framing a politically viable benefit distribution strategy, where affiliated beneficiaries (by membership and support) are prioritized to receive scheme-based benefits such as the Indira Awas Yojana’s housing and Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme’s employment opportunities, the political parties and local politicians especially in power can exercise tremendous influence over beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms. Therefore, distribution of benefit on the basis of clientele relations is advantageous to the political party and politicians in power. This is a major challenge to beneficiary participation in social accountability.

Exercise of political patronage is viable for the local elites including the politicians in power also because of the social conditions and the cultural norms of the society. The social conditions of the rural areas in Assam including the selected villages in the district of Barpeta have been discussed in this chapter. Prevailing socio-cultural norms have also been discussed in detail in an earlier section of this chapter. The study finds that the marginalized social conditions of the beneficiaries and the available socio-cultural norms reinforce the lack of effective participation of the beneficiaries. We discussed how female beneficiaries faced constraints and challenges to raise issues in social audit forums. The physical attendance of the female beneficiaries in the selected villages was relatively higher in the social audit forums. However, our analysis shows that they were not effective in the decision making process. The female respondents often failed to raise pertinent issues in the social audit forums because the male members especially with those with political power and social prestige were the key decision makers in these meetings.

Our study also found that social auditors who conducted social audits in the gaon panchayatsere indifferent to listen to the voices of the female beneficiaries and other marginalized groups in the meetings. Likewise, marginalization of other socially weaker sections such as the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes posed challenges to participation. These groups were accumstomed to the decision making process by the politically dominant and failed to overcome the traditionally practised socio-cultural norms to speak in public spaces such as the social audit forums.

Thus, social conditions and cultural norms, such as gender-based discrimination, poverty, caste-alienation and illiteracy, were important determining factors. The study argues that politicization of the local self-governing institutions in the district of Barpeta under these conditions was much easier. In order to hide the discrepancies of scheme implementation (such as multiple use of below poverty line ID for more than one beneficiary), the village level politicians, in-charge of implementation of the scheme (i.e., the representatives elected to gaon panchayats), engaged in influencing the social audit process. Manipulation of social audit findings is a politically-mediated exercise. This was done to protect and shield the local elites (the elected representatives of gaon panchayat) and other implementing authorities (such as bloc development officers and panchayat secretaries of a gaon panchayat) from public scrutiny. In sum, patronage politics, social conditions and cultural norms reinforced the marginalized conditions of the beneficiaries, leaving them in the periphery of social development and local governing institutions and social accountability.

Chapter 5

Summary and conclusion

5.1. Introduction

Social accountability mechanisms such as social audit are closely associated with good governance, citizen centric governance and participatory governance (Weiss, 2000). Weiss finds that good governance refers to the 'processes and rules of decision making that are more likely to result in actions that are truly in the public interest, rather than favoring the private exploitation of the public interests (Weiss, 2000: 805).' According to Weiss, good governance ensures rights of the people (Weiss, 2000). Social accountability mechanisms are also rights-based democratic exercises where people can demand transparency and accountability of the authorities entrusted with the power and responsibilities of implementing development schemes (Malena et al, 2004). Social accountability mechanisms contributed to deepening of democracy as 'the leaders are being held accountable to higher standards of accountability' through these mechanisms (Weiss, 2000: 803). Good governance of the people 'involves those structures and processes that support the creation of a participatory, responsive and accountable polity (that is, good political governance) embedded in a competitive, non-discriminatory, yet equitable economy (that is, good economic governance) (Weiss, 2000: 805).' Social accountability mechanisms entail these traits of good governance as these mechanisms aim to ensure accountability, transparency and equitable service delivery to the target populations, the beneficiaries (Woods, 1999). Likewise, citizen-centric governance can be achieved through social accountability mechanisms. Reducing governance gap is intended in citizen centric governance. Social accountability mechanisms are initiatives in that direction to engage beneficiaries in the decision making and execution of development schemes (Grindle, 2004). Social accountability mechanisms can improve the capacity of the ordinary citizens to make their government accountable through effective participation (Malena et al, 2004; Grindle, 2004). Social accountability mechanisms largely relate to participatory governance and ensures effective participation of people in the decision making process and the implementation of development programs (Blair, 2000). A study on social accountability mechanisms is timely and relevant from a policy reform perspective on good governance, citizen centric governance and participatory governance to realize transparency and accountability to reduce the governance gap in developing countries (Fung and Wright, 2001; Blair, 2000; Fischer, 2006; Turnhout et al, 2010). The current study is significant in the sense that the study explores the factors that may have an impact and challenge beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms (particularly, social audit) in the selected villages of Barpeta district in Assam. Identifying the factors that influence and challenge beneficiary participation is important to ensure good governing practices in the panchayats in Assam.

This chapter summarizes the thesis and presents a summary of the findings of the research. The chapter also discusses the significance, limitations and further scope of study of this research. In the following sections, this chapter presents the summary of analysis of the chapters.

5.2. Summary of the chapters

Chapter 1 provides an outline of the thesis and discussed the concepts used in the thesis. The chapter also discussed the rationale of the case study, research methodology used in this research including methods of case selection, data collection, sampling, a note on research ethics and fieldwork. In addition, the chapter provided the details of the case study and the profile of the district selected for this study.

Social accountability mechanisms such as social audit require beneficiary participation to reduce the governance gap (Gibson and Woolcock, 2008). Social accountability mechanisms such as social audit, designed to monitor performance of local self-governing institutions in implementing rural development schemes such as the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), provide the scope of deepening democracy and develop linkages between the governing institutions and the target groups, the beneficiaries (Reames, 2016). In reality, beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms has been limited throughout the developing countries including India (Davies, 2001). Therefore, the question appears, if participation is so rewarding and effective, why doesn't everyone participate? What are the challenges of beneficiary participation? Another pertinent question that remains unaddressed is even if beneficiaries participate in the social accountability mechanisms, does participation necessarily lead to social empowerment and social justice of the participants, the beneficiaries? This thesis makes an attempt to address these questions in the context of Assam.

India made efforts to strengthen local self-governing institutions with increased and effective beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms such as social audit. Assam has been identified as one of the states that experienced major challenges in conducting social audit mechanisms like gender budgeting, social audit among others. The CAG (Comptroller and Auditor General) report (Report no. 8, 2016) revealed that Assam practically failed to institutionalize participatory governance. What explains the absence of effective beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms organized in local self-governing institutions in Assam? The study explored the factors that may influence and challenge the scope of beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in the rural areas of Assam.

Through in-depth interviews and surveys conducted in the district of Barpeta in Assam, this study tried to understand the problems and challenges of beneficiary participation in participatory governance particularly, social audit. The case study was selected on the basis of the rationale that the two rural development schemes, Indira Awas Yojana and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme selected for this study have been implemented in the district of Barpeta but the nature of the implementation of these schemes is in question. The district is heterogeneous in terms of its demographic and socio-cultural characteristics. These characteristics provide the scope of analyzing the nature of social accountability processes and mechanisms available in Barpeta and the practical applicability of these mechanisms to institutionalize citizen centric governance in different cultural settings. Moreover, among other districts in Assam, Barpeta has been identified by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India as a failed case of beneficiary participation when social audit was conducted in November, 2014. Thus, Barpeta becomes a 'selective case' to address the research questions of the study (Yin, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

The introduction chapter provides an understanding of the key concepts used in the study. In this study, beneficiary participation refers to the process of engagement of beneficiaries in social accountability mechanisms from three different aspects a) participation of beneficiaries in social accountability mechanisms, especially social audit to gather and share information on rural development schemes, b) participation of beneficiaries in ground level verification of work carried out by the local self-governing institutions, and c) participation of beneficiaries in the discussions over social accountability mechanisms such as the social audit forums. Local self-governing institutions in the study refer to the panchayats especially the *gaon panchayats*.

The chapter also introduces the methodological approaches in the study. The study used two methods of data collection, in-depth interviews and surveys, though the findings of the study emerged mainly from a qualitative approach and methodology. Again, the study collected some information through focused group discussions. The study uses a qualitative in-depth interview-based case study approach to explore the research problem using in-depth analysis of a single case (Cresswell, 1998). The case was selected because of an interest in such cases (Lijphart, 1971). Designing appropriate case study is not only essential but also specific for each study of social sciences (Merriam, 1998). Sincere care should be taken while designing the research frame for a study that needs systematic and objective inclusion of data collection strategies, data analysis techniques and survey of relevant literature to address the research questions (Stake, 1995; Ragin, 2010).

Following Cresswell's case study design, the study collected empirical lessons from the district of Barpeta over a long period of time since 2015 to 2017 (Cresswell, 1998). Purposive case selection provided insightful understanding of the phenomena studied in this research (Lewis and Ritchie, 2003). The method of analysis was contextual and interpretive. The proponents of this approach argue that focusing on a single case helps the researcher to make in-depth analysis even when the researcher faces the challenge of and from the lack of available resources (Lijphart, 1971). The study applies a descriptive and detailed case study analysis (Swanson, 1997).

The key research participants of the research were the beneficiaries of the Indira Awas Yojana and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in the selected villages of Barpeta district. We interviewed them extensively. The study also conducted elite interviews with the office bearers, the representatives elected to panchayati raj institutions, government officials and other villager residents. Interviewing these participants was essential as they provided critical information on the formulation and implementation of development policies at the local level (Harvey, 2010: 2). We maintained ethical standards while conducting the fieldwork and interviews in the research (Mason, 1996; Miles and Hubermann, 1994). We reviewed various documents including documents on government schemes, panchayats, panchayat laws, assembly debates, government ordinances and guidelines, policies, newspaper cuttings, etc. Documentary evidences provided important insights (Cresswell, 1999). The study used content analysis method to review and understand the content of the documents collected during the fieldwork including the transcribed field notes (Ritchie, 2013).

Fieldwork was conducted in three selected villages, Chaibari, Baghbar Gaon and Bampara in the district of Barpeta in Assam. The details of the villages are provided in the first chapter. Using purposive sampling, the study identified the beneficiaries as respondents of the study. Use of purposive sampling proved to be productive when some of the respondents were selectively interviewed (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 1998). About 10% of the households were selected from each village according to their population strength and socio-economic characteristics, including caste and gender as shown in the Census report of 2011, electoral rolls and relevant beneficiary lists collected during field visits.

The introductory chapter also provided the details and the profile of the study areas and the respondents of the district of Barpeta. Barpeta is located in the western part of Assam. In terms of religious composition of the population, Barpeta has about 70.74% of Muslims, and 19.11% Hindus. The census report of 2011 shows that Barpeta is mostly dominated by Muslims. Agriculture is the main occupation of the population in the rural areas of the district as well as the selected villages within the district. About 91.30% of the population live in the rural areas. The district has 5.63% scheduled caste population and 1.61% scheduled tribe population. Literacy rate of the district is about 63.81%. The district has 129 *gaon panchayats*. The chapter also outlined a brief profile of the selected villages of the district. The introduction chapter also provided the layout of the chapters in the thesis.

Chapter 2 entitled ***Theorizing beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in local self-governing institutions*** reviews the literature used to understand the research problem in the study. The chapter discusses the theories and approaches on beneficiary participation, social accountability mechanisms and local self-governing institutions. Scholars emphasize on institutionalization of social accountability mechanisms to reduce the governance gap (Blair, 2000; Priyadarshee and Hossain, 2010; Brautigam, 2004; Goetz and Gaventa, 2001; Gaventa, 2002). Social accountability mechanisms provide rights and opportunities to the citizens to link their grievances, preferences and issues in development related decision making (Malena, Forster and Singh, 2004). The review of literature reveals that there is a huge governance gap and ineffective social accountability mechanisms to improve public service delivery in many developing countries including India. Absence of beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms has been identified as a governance gap. The study aims to study the factors that have an impact on beneficiary participation in the social accountability mechanisms organized in local self-governing institutions in the rural areas. The chapter also briefly discussed the government-funded rural development schemes, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Indira Awas Yojana. The study conceptualizes participation and participatory governance. Participation is essential to bring about social change and create political consciousness on social issues and public policies like the Indira Awas Yojana and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Participatory governance (PG) allows the spaces for participation (Fung and Wright, 2003). However, social and political conditions and norms restrict such opportunities (Dreze and Sen, 2002: 9). This study reviewed the existing literature and identified that patronage politics, social conditions and cultural norms influence and challenge beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms organized in local self-governing institutions.

The chapter provided various examples of social accountability mechanisms drawn from the developing countries like India, Bangladesh and Brazil. The chapter discussed that there are various type of social accountability mechanisms including social audit, participatory budgeting, practice of using score cards and gender budgeting designed and applied across the developing world. Some of these include 'participatory budgeting' in Porto Alegre, Brazil (Fung and Wright, 2003); 'constitutionally-created health councils in Brazil' (Geventa, 2004: 9); 'participatory resource mapping' in Kenya (Kalibo and Medley: 2007); and, 'community-based monitoring' in Uganda (Bjorkman and Svensson, 2009). The chapter cited Brazil's participatory budgeting practice (Abers, 1996). In Brazil, the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' party) tried to connect people to the governing institutions in the decision making at the grass roots level. Effectiveness of these democratic practices varies from country to country. In terms of participatory planning, Brazil received unprecedented popular support (measured in terms of higher people's participation). Likewise, India experimented some social accountability mechanisms, like social audit, gender budgeting, use of score cards and participatory planning (Sharma, 2011). The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 provides for institutionalization of social audit to monitor development works under the schemes. Later, conduct of social audit was extended to other development projects such as the Indira Awas Yojana.

The chapter discussed that in Assam, social audit was conducted in November, 2014. The report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India showed that in state of Assam, social audit conducted in 2014 could not engage a large number of people including beneficiaries. Therefore, the pertinent question is: What explains lack of beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms organized in *gaon panchayats*, the local self-governing institutions referred in the study? The chapter tried to address this question with diverse examples and a case study in the subsequent chapter.

Existing literature shows that patronage politics at the grass roots level may critically challenge beneficiary participation in the social accountability mechanisms in the rural areas (Francis and James, 2003; Kitschelt, 2000; Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007; Piattoni, 2001). Another set of literature review shows that beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in local self-governing institutions is influenced and challenged by socio-cultural factors (Lakha et al, 2015; Evans et al, 2017; Tripp, 2012; McEwan, 2003; Agarwal, 2009). Stobaugh and Yergin argue that 'although some of the barriers are economic, they are in most cases institutional, political and social (Stobaugh and Yergin, 1979: 137).' A detailed analysis of these scholarly findings and existing literature was provided in the second chapter.

Review of the existing literature shows that patronage politics reinforces marginalization of certain sections of the society including the poor, people belonging to the lower caste, illiterates and women (Njuguna et al, 2016). Political elites pose serious challenges for the disadvantaged sections to make their participation effective (Ackerman, 2005; Francis and James, 2003). Patronage politics is used to examine the linkages between the more powerful and the marginalized (Piattoni, 2001; Francis and James, 2003; Kitschelt, 2000; Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007). Brazil's participatory budgeting was challenged by patronage politics (Heller, 2012). Crook and Sverrisson argued that there is a strong presence of patronage politics in India's decentralized participatory spaces in states like West Bengal (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001). Sadanandan argues that political competition in states like Kerala, Karnataka and Bihar politicians at the grass roots level distributed benefit to the clients who returned gratitude in the form of electoral support (Sadananda, 2012: 221). This is because decentralization of powers and resources to the grass roots level creates incentives for politicians to exercise patronage politics (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007). Sadanandan argues that 'decentralization advances patronage politics' to 'enhance their political support' leading to challenges of effective participation (Sadanandan, 2012: 223). Ghatak and Ghatak argued that though 'decentralization increases the political accountability of elected officials, it also significantly increase their powers, and hence could lead to capture of governments by local elites in societies characterized by extreme poverty and inequality such as in rural India (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002: 54)."

Dasgupta and Beard showed how elites are involved in the capture of decentralized resources (Dasgupta and Beard, 2007). According to Priyadarshee and Hossain, decentralization cannot guarantee the safeguards and development benefits for the marginalized people. They argue that existing local level disparities need to be addressed well prior to designing development schemes (Priyadarshee and Hossain, 2010: 752).

The chapter reviewed the scholarly work of various scholars who argue that political parties and politicians make cost-benefit analysis to distribute state-resources to certain groups and individuals (Sadanandan, 2012; Olson, 1965; Moe, 1980). Priyadarshee and Hossain show that in Uttar Pradesh 'securing pension and other benefits through the government schemes depended on geographical proximity that helps establishing direct contact between the patrons and the clients (Priyadarshee and Hossain, 2010: 758). According to Sadanandan, marginalized sections of the society become the political targets in the patronage networks for benefit distribution.

Masiero and Maiorano contributed to the relevant literature on patronage politics and its effects on Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, especially in Andhra Pradesh (AP). Masiero and Maiorano argue that computerized payments failed to ensure transparency because of interference of local political elites who had the authority and the capacities to control the access to information in the system (Masiero and Maiorano, 2018). Decentralization and heavily funded development schemes therefore transformed civil society leaders and institutions into brokers with political interests (Souza, 2001). Apart from budgetary constraints, representatives 'prioritize their supporters, families and relatives, when allocating the available work' under MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act). This puts serious constraints and challenges to beneficiary participation (Maiorano, Das and Masiero, 2018: 540-541).'

There are another sets of literature that discusses the social conditions and cultural norms and their effects on participation in local self-governing institutions. Education and higher level literacy may contribute to effective beneficiary participation (Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie, 1993). Empowerment of people as well as effective participation requires literacy and education (Villao et al, 2012). Higher-level literacy and education indicate higher socio-economic status that may promote participation (Beard, 2005). Hedjazi and Arabi showed that higher education and literacy promoted beneficiary participation in Iran because of adequate access to required information by the educated beneficiaries (Hedjazi and Arabi, 2009). Access to information is conducive to effective participation (Stem et al, 2003; Adhikari, Di Falco and Lovett, 2004).

Similarly, socio-cultural norms can shape participatory behavior of the individuals in a society. Shaping behavior is engineered by the traditions and norms of a society. Traditional socio-cultural practices and norms are prevalent in many developing countries that often influence, challenge and shape participation of people in development projects and social accountability mechanisms. Women cannot overcome social and cultural norms because these norms are traditionally rooted in these societies. Studies conducted in Ethiopia show that due to social norms women cannot take independent decisions (Njuguna et al, 2016). Similarly, Nuggehalli and Prokopy argue that behavioral code of conduct of men and women are shaped by existing norms of a society. Agarwal finds that marginalized sections such as women cannot overcome such restrictions easily because of social sanctions behind such social norms (Agarwal, 2001). Nuggehalli and Prokopy demonstrate that 'behavioral norms that expect women to display shyness and obsequiousness prevent them from participatory engagements in local self-governing institutions. They are sometimes prohibited from talking to unknown males and raising voices in 'public meetings attended by elderly men' (Nuggehalli and Prokopy, 2009: 289). Beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms in local self-governing institutions in the selected villages of Assam may therefore be challenged by social conditions and cultural norms.

Chapter 3 entitled ***Historical background of beneficiary participation and local self-governing institutions with special reference to Assam*** traces the history of local self-governing institutions and beneficiary participation in India, with special reference to Assam. During the pre-colonial period, panchayats enjoyed judicial and police powers within the jurisdiction of a village. Religious and customary code of conduct provided legitimacy to these local bodies. In ancient India, local governments were represented by various communities living in a particular area, indicating their democratic characteristics. These bodies existed even during the regime of the Mughals (Mathew, 1995). However, the panchayats in modern India differ from its previous forms that existed during the pre-colonial and colonial period (Furstenberg, 2015).

According to scholars, colonial era ruled by the British in India contributed a lots towards the development of the panchayats. The British administration in India formalized panchayats as part of local administration (Goel and Rajneesh, 2009). Creation of local bodies such as the Madras municipal corporation (in 1687) with nominated members was made by the British as a part of their administrative reforms in India, especially for taxation. These bodies also did not include elected members (Mathew, 1995).

British administrators like Lord Mayo passed a resolution in 1870 to decentralize powers to the local bodies of administration (Goel and Rajneesh, 2009). The *Bengal Chowkidari Act* of 1870 led to the establishment of local territorial units at the village level for the purposes of levying taxes and policing local issues. The act authorized district magistrates to establish village panchayats with nominated members from the villages. During the time of Lord Ripon, the Viceroy of British India, a resolution was passed in 1882, known as the *Magna Carta* of local government in India, which provided for the establishment of local boards consisting of a large number of elected non-official members (Mathew, 1995). In 1907, the British government constituted the Royal Commission on Decentralization. The commission recommended further decentralization of powers to local bodies such as municipalities with a view to reduce workloads from higher administrative wings of the government (Chishti, 2001). Likewise, from time to time, the Congress was forwarding their demands for more decentralization to the local village panchayats with elected members (Mathew, 1995). The colonial acts such as the Government of India Act of 1935 contributed to the decentralized administration in India. The chapter traced the history of the panchayats in India during the colonial period.

This chapter also tried to examine the development of participatory governance institutions in independent India. The chapter briefly discussed the various committees formed by independent India to look into the constitution of the local governing institutions. The chapter discussed the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India. The Amendment provided the constitutional status to panchayats and laid down the provision for the reservation of seats for the marginalized sections of the society.

The chapter also discussed various social accountability mechanisms such as social audit practices, use of score cards, participatory planning, and gender budgeting, designed and practiced in developing countries including India. The chapter discussed the experiences of states like Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan with respect to social accountability mechanisms.

Chapter 4 entitled ***Understanding social accountability and beneficiary participation: Rural local self-governing institution in Barpeta district, Assam*** discusses the findings from the field. The chapter discusses the research conducted in the selected villages of the district of Barpeta. The chapter examines the scope and challenges of beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms, especially social audit organized in gram panchayats.

The chapter learnt from data on employment characteristics, monthly household income, main sources of income of a household, headship of households by gender, land ownership pattern of a household, irrigation facilities and other land related facilities, education (literacy), quality of housing in both the state and the district. A comparative analysis was made about these data between the state (average) and the district. The analysis showed that on many of the social characteristics, the district of Barpeta has marginalized status than the state average. The chapter found that social conditions of the district were conducive for patronage politics.

The chapter mainly presented and discussed the findings from the Barpeta field. Existing literature shows that SAM are politically mediated and based upon hierarchical social structures, where local elites play a dominant role (Lakha et al, 2015; Mwenda and Tangri, 2005). The findings suggested that local self-governing institutions transformed into political spaces rather than participatory spaces for the beneficiaries and other local citizens. In order to win a politically competitive seat in local self-governing institutions, political parties and politicians may channelize state resources of rural development schemes such as the Indira Awas Yojana and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme to the affiliated members and supporters. This tendency and practice is higher among the ruling political parties and politicians. Their institutional capacity made them capable to distribute public goods on the basis of such patronage easily. The chapter discussed the survey responses conducted in the district of Barpeta. Social audit is a participatory forum where the beneficiaries and other villagers can participate and account their representatives of local self-governing institutions for implementation of rural development schemes. The study showed that patronage politics was prevalent in the selected villages. Political participation such as participation in electoral campaign is higher among the affiliated beneficiaries and villagers to politically draw attention and support of the politicians to get patronage benefits (Bardhan et al, 2008).

Similar to previous studies (Bardhan et al, 2008; Maiorano, 2018), the current study finds that panchayats elections are highly competitive with the involvement of political parties. In order to maintain the vote banks, local politicians need to provide them with benefits. The chapter examined how local institutions were politicized and the government sponsored benefits including beneficiary cards were misutilized by local authorities to provide selective incentives and preferences to supporters of the political parties and the clients. The chapter also revealed that beneficiary participation in the district was influenced and challenged by social conditions and cultural norms of a society. Profile of the Barpeta district showed prevalence of rural characteristics of the district. The selected villages of Barpeta district suffer from traditional caste and gender-based norms and conditions. Patriarchy is a system where women suffer from male domination (Hartman, 1976). Women, we found, do not have independent participatory decision status because they live in a male dominated society. They do not attend soial audit forums and raise voice against the male members because they have to survive in a society where social conditions and cultural norms consider them as inferior and dependent to male fellow. In development decision making, women are in the periphery and men decided everything. Therefore, local development decision making could not address the problems and issues of the women. Women, therefore, believed that they should not attend any social audit where 'masculine development programs' would be evaluated. We, however, reported that a significant number of female beneficiaries participated in the social audit forums. But, their participation is questionable because they simply 'attended' (physical attendance) without raising any issue during the social audit. Accustomed to socio-cultural norms, women beneficiaries could not transform their participation into effective participation because sometimes they were not heard, sometimes not allowed to speak against the local politicians and elders in the local self-governing institutions, sometimes they preferred not to stand and raise issue in public forum attended by elderly, mostly male. Absence of civil society organizations (CSOs) devoted to social audit in Barpeta district contributed largely to the ineffective representation and participation mostly of the marginalized sections of society including women. Existing power relations both in the villages and local self-governing institutions challenged and influenced beneficiary participation in social audit in the district. Lack of education is also reported as a challenge for beneficiary participation. Thus, the chapter explored the impact and challenges of patronage politics and social conditions and cultural norms over beneficiary participation in social audit in the district of Barpeta.

5.3 Implications of the study

The study argued that beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms were impeded by structural factors like lack of education, traditional cultural norms, including caste and gender-specific norms and patronage politics. Absence of gender-specific development policies reinforced gender-based inequality restricting women's participation in social audits and overall participatory governance. Lack of literacy contributed to information asymmetry in the villages. Hierarchical relations are rampant in every *gaon panchayat* that we visited in the district of Barpeta.

From a policy perspective, the study contributes to understanding the problems of participatory governance. The study identifies some of the key issues and problems related to beneficiary participation. In a nutshell, the study argues that participation is necessary but not sufficient to empower the marginalized rural poor in the villages in socio-cultural settings like India. Formal audit mechanisms have failed to have an impact on the accountability of governing institutions. Social accountability mechanisms as we discuss in this study are useful and would endure only if we are able to meet the challenges of beneficiary participation as identified in this study.

The major findings of the study can be highlighted in the following ways. The study contributes to literature on participation, deepening of democracy, decentralization and accountability mechanisms. Like the previous studies (Malena et al, 2004), the study finds that beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms is essential. Social accountability mechanisms can improve the capacity of the ordinary citizens to make their government accountable through effective participation (Malena et al, 2004; Grindle, 2004). However, the current study argues that beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms is not sufficient in certain settings as evident in the district of Barpeta, Assam.

In order to ensure accountability and transparency of the local self-governing institutions, the implementing agencies of development schemes at the grass roots level, various studies argue to institutionalize social accountability mechanisms (Woods and Narlikar, 2001; Blair, 2000; Priyadarshee and Hossain, 2010; Brautigam, 2004; Goetz and Gaventa, 2001; Gaventa, 2002). Social accountability mechanisms can reduce governance gap (Malena et al, 2004). They argue that institutionalization of social accountability mechanisms enhance participatory democratic spaces (Fung and Wright, 2001; Blair, 2000; Fischer, 2006; Turnhout et al, 2010). The current study also agrees to this set of literature. However, the study argues that mere institutionalization of social accountability mechanisms at the local self-governing institutions is not a sufficient condition to ensure accountability and transparency.

Existing scholarship argues that functioning of local self-governing institutions is affected by patronage politics. For example, Mohanty's work reflects that political patronage influences participation of people in local self-governing institutions (Mohanty, 1995). Bardhan and other scholars argue that due to political patronize, local elections to panchayat bodies in West Bengal witnessed higher political participation of the marginalized sections of society. However, the marginalized sections do not make effective participation when gram sabhas were held in village panchayats in the state (Bardhan et al, 2008). The current study finds that patronage politics influences political participation in local self-governing institutions and also beneficiary participation in social accountability mechanisms. Previous studies show that socio-cultural norms, by shaping and reshaping behavior of individuals, constraint participation of people in local self-governing institutions. Ongoing gender norms, for instance, do not allow women to access into information (Nuggehalli and Prokopy, 2009). Tight domestic schedule does not allow women to participate in local government functioning (Agarwal, 1997; Phillips, 1991). The current study finds that there are some socio-cultural constraints in front of the beneficiaries leading to their ineffectiveness.

5.4 Limitations in the Study and future scope of research

This study suffered from some limitations. First, the study is conducted only in one district. The researcher agrees that a cross-districts analysis would have been better. A comparative study of Barpeta with other districts highly dominated by tribal populations that have relatively empowered women with domestic and social settings would have furthered its arguments. Second, there is lack of systematic data (maintenance and storage of data on beneficiary participation in social audit and function of local self-governing institutions). Third, there was the chance of manipulation of data by the local level politicians while they were interviewed. Fourth, interviewing the female respondents was a big challenge in a rural society setting because of prevailing traditional social conditions and cultural norms. However, there is the possibility to further develop the case study chapters with incorporation of other variables, other case studies from Assam and beyond and survey methods. For instance, exploration and incorporation of effects of newly-initiated Aadhar-based e-governance in service delivery and beneficiary participation in local self-governing institutions would further the scope of the study. Aadhar-based governance initiatives as a part of e-governance may have changes in the implication of social welfare programs. It may further contribute to reducing governance gap. The current study, however, has not explored the impact of Aadhar-based e-governance. Aadhar-based e-governance is yet to be institutionalized and initiated in the state of Assam. The current study can expand its scope for further research in future. The suggested work (Banerjee et al, 2015) sheds light on e-governance, accountability and leakage in public programs in India. Analyzing Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme implementation, the scholars argue that e-governance initiatives taken in the state of Bihar are successful to increase accountability and reduce corruption in a fiscal transfer system. These initiatives ensure direct transfer and cut out administrative tiers, where corrupt practices were formerly exercised. The study also shows that direct fund transfer to the beneficiaries under the e-governance initiatives made it difficult for the authorities at gaon panchayat to create ‘fake beneficiaries or workers’ (Banerjee et al, 2015:10).

According to the study, e-governance has other advantages. E-governance initiatives are effective to reduce information gap between the officials and the ordinary people. Information disclosure with people’s access to information can be guaranteed when e-governance initiatives are executed at the grass roots levels.

In Bihar, when e-governance initiatives were not introduced, intermediaries were active playing a greater role in transferring fund. The intermediaries caused higher leakage because they were more likely to earn their share. Leakage is higher in Bihar because of widespread corruption at the grass roots level. The e-governance initiatives wiped out the presence of intermediaries and allowed direct transfer of funds or wages that enhanced transparency. The scholars, from the perspective of the beneficiaries, argue that the e-governance initiatives provide them more control over the process because they have to be present to use the smart card. The e-governance initiatives, thus, made it difficult for the intermediaries (including local authorities) to share entitlements of the beneficiaries. In other words, it reduced the rent-seeking behavior of the authorities and other intermediaries at the grass roots level.

The lessons of the study would be helpful for the current study. E-governance has positive effects in implementing development policies. However, e-governance initiatives would be more successful when the beneficiaries are educated.

The research tried to explore the factors which had an impact and could challenge beneficiary participation in social audit organized in local self-governing institutions in the district of Barpeta. However, there is a possibility to further conduct research how beneficiaries participate in other social accountability mechanisms such as gender budgeting and participatory planning. It can be a comparative study with other district of Assam. Further comparative research can be conducted by taking cases of Assam with other relatively successful cases such as Kerala.

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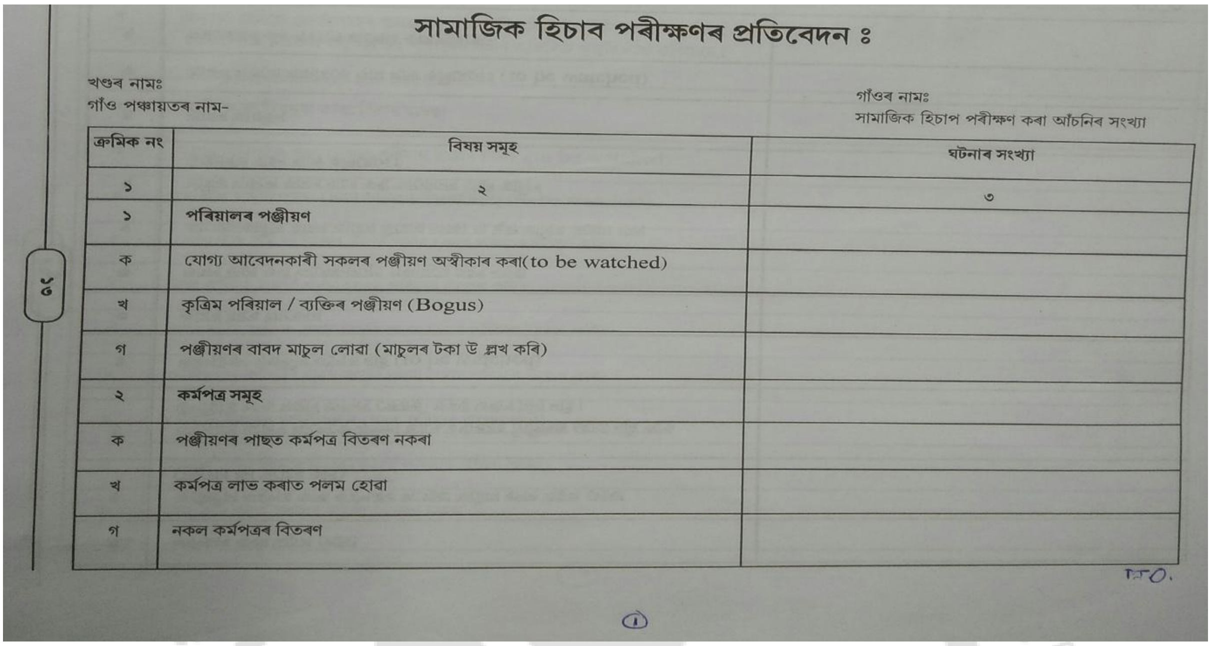
Appendix 3.1

Photo 1: Report of the social auditors (Proforma)



সামাজিক হিচাব পৰীক্ষণৰ প্ৰতিবেদন ঃ

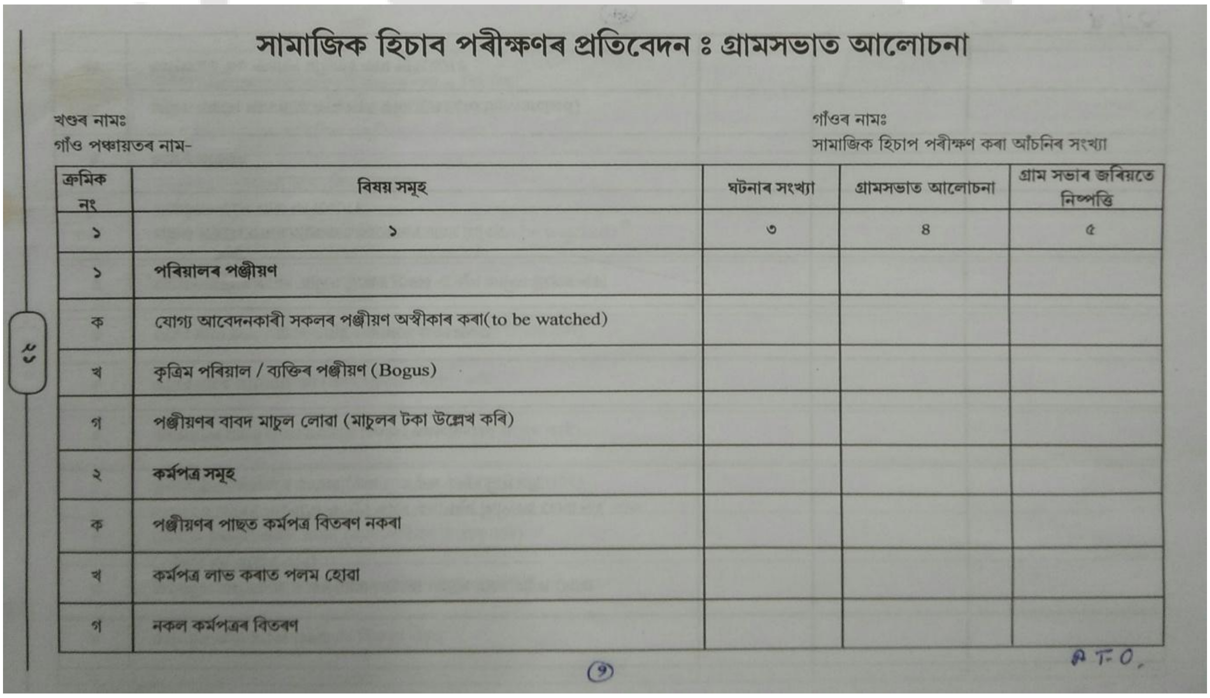
খণ্ডৰ নামঃ
গাঁও পঞ্চায়তৰ নাম-

গাঁওৰ নামঃ
সামাজিক হিচাপ পৰীক্ষণ কৰা আঁচনিৰ সংখ্যা

ক্ৰমিক নং	বিষয় সমূহ	ঘটনাৰ সংখ্যা
১	২	৩
১	পৰিয়ালৰ পঞ্জীয়ণ	
ক	যোগ্য আবেদনকাৰী সকলৰ পঞ্জীয়ণ অস্বীকাৰ কৰা(to be watched)	
খ	কৃত্ৰিম পৰিয়াল / ব্যক্তিৰ পঞ্জীয়ণ (Bogus)	
গ	পঞ্জীয়ণৰ বাবদ মাচুল লোৱা (মাচুলৰ টকা উল্লেখ কৰি)	
২	কৰ্মপত্ৰ সমূহ	
ক	পঞ্জীয়ণৰ পাছত কৰ্মপত্ৰ বিতৰণ নকৰা	
খ	কৰ্মপত্ৰ লাভ কৰাত পলম হোৱা	
গ	নকল কৰ্মপত্ৰৰ বিতৰণ	

P.T.O.

Photo 2: Report of the social auditors to be discussed in gram sabha (Proforma)



সামাজিক হিচাব পৰীক্ষণৰ প্ৰতিবেদন ঃ গ্ৰামসভাত আলোচনা

খণ্ডৰ নামঃ
গাঁও পঞ্চায়তৰ নাম-

গাঁওৰ নামঃ
সামাজিক হিচাপ পৰীক্ষণ কৰা আঁচনিৰ সংখ্যা

ক্ৰমিক নং	বিষয় সমূহ	ঘটনাৰ সংখ্যা	গ্ৰামসভাত আলোচনা	গ্ৰাম সভাৰ জৰিয়তে নিষ্পত্তি
১	১	৩	৪	৫
১	পৰিয়ালৰ পঞ্জীয়ণ			
ক	যোগ্য আবেদনকাৰী সকলৰ পঞ্জীয়ণ অস্বীকাৰ কৰা(to be watched)			
খ	কৃত্ৰিম পৰিয়াল / ব্যক্তিৰ পঞ্জীয়ণ (Bogus)			
গ	পঞ্জীয়ণৰ বাবদ মাচুল লোৱা (মাচুলৰ টকা উল্লেখ কৰি)			
২	কৰ্মপত্ৰ সমূহ			
ক	পঞ্জীয়ণৰ পাছত কৰ্মপত্ৰ বিতৰণ নকৰা			
খ	কৰ্মপত্ৰ লাভ কৰাত পলম হোৱা			
গ	নকল কৰ্মপত্ৰৰ বিতৰণ			

P.T.O.

The photographs above show the format of Proforma (questionnaire) used by the social auditors to conduct social audit ingaon panchayats of Assam in 2014. These entail questions on scheme implementation such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and Indira Awas Yojana. ***(Source: Social audit booklet, State Institute of Rural Development, Guwahati, 2014.***

Appendix 4.1

The following table (Table 4.1.A) provides the scheduled timeline of social audit in Assam.

Table 4.1.A: Scheduled Timeline of Social Audit in Assam (First phase of social audit, 2014)

SL No	*Date*	*Agenda/Plans/Works of the social audit team*
1	20th – 30th October, 2014	Awareness camps for rural development programs, social audit and gaon sabhas
2	5th November, 2014	Visit to panchayat for verification and cross checking of records
3	6th November, 2014	Visit to panchayat for verification and cross checking of records
4	7th November, 2014	Visit to worksites (ongoing and completed) of works under MGNREGS, IAY, NSAP, BRGF (backward regions grant fund), DDP (desert development programme), and Finance Commission Grant
5	8th November, 2014	Visit to worksites (ongoing and completed) of works under MGNREGS, IAY, NSAP, BRGF, DDP, and Finance Commission Grant
6	9th November, 2014	Visit to households of MGNREGS, IAY, NSAP, NRLM households and interaction/focus group discussion with villagers
7	10th November, 2014	Visit to households of MGNREGS, IAY, NSAP, NRLM households and interaction/focus group discussion with villagers
8	11th November, 2014	Visit to households of MGNREGS, IAY, NSAP, NRLM households and interaction/focus group discussion with villagers
9	12th November, 2014	Visit to households of MGNREGS, IAY, NSAP, NRLM households and interaction/focus group discussion with villagers
10	13th November, 2014	Preparation of draft report for submission in the Gram Sabha
11	14th – 19th November, 2014	Social Audit Gram Sabha, i.e. Social Audit Forum (SAF) in the panchayats

Source: Report on MGNREGA social audit, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, 2015.

It is evident from Table 4.1.A that although Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme has been implemented in Assam since 2006, the first phase of social audit was conducted in November, 2014.

It is evident from the above table (Table 4.1.A) that villagers, especially the beneficiaries had opportunities to participate in social audit in the dates shown in Table 4.1.B. Beneficieries and other villagers were given twelve days to exercise participatory practices, including (i) participation of beneficiaries in ground level verification of work carried out by the panchayats under the rural development schemes (ii) participation of beneficiary in door-to-door visit of social audit team to share relevant information; and (iii) participation of beneficiaries in discussion in social audit forum where social audit reports were submitted.

Table 4.1.B: Scheduled date and participatory spaces for beneficiaries in social audit				
SL No	*Days opened for beneficiary participation [No. of days]*	*Prescribed workloads for the social auditors*	*Place of interface for beneficiaries and social auditors*	*Role of beneficiaries to exercise social accountability mechanisms (i. e., social audit)*
1	7th – 8th November, 2014 [2 days]	Visit to worksites (ongoing and completed) of works under MGNREGS, IAY, NSAP, BRGF, DDP, and Finance Commission Grant	Worksites where works under MGNREGS, IAY, NSAP, BRGF, DDP, and Finance Commission Grant were completed or are in progress.	(i) To share relevant information (such as how much money they received for IAY housing facilities and MGNREGS wage); (ii) To identify discrepancies of works (such as disproportionately less volume of works compared to the funds sanctioned and utilized); (iii) To raise issues (such as distribution of double benefits to some beneficiaries); (iv) To ask questions (such as status of a particular work); (v) To identify real beneficiaries; (vi) To discuss and raise problems and issues in SAF on all concerns relating to execution of rural development schemes, specifically MGNREGS, IAY, NSAP, and NRLM.
2	9th – 12th November, 2014 [4 days]	Visit to households of MGNREGS, IAY, NSAP, NRLM households and interaction/focus group discussion with villagers	Residence of the beneficiaries.	
3	14th – 19th November, 2014 [6 days]	Held Social Audit Gram Sabha, i.e. Social Audit Forum (SAF) in the panchayats	Specifically, GP premises. On unavailability of infrastructure to held SAF in GP premises, other public places (such as playground) were selected.	
Source: Report on MGNREGA social audit, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, 2015 and Booklet on social audit, SIRD, 2014.				

Appendix 5.1

Photo 1: A photograph taken after a focused group discussion in the village of Chaibari, Barpeta. (Photo: Pankaj Kumar Kalita, October, 2016).

Photo 2: Scheduled Tribe (Bodo) respondents in Manikpur gaon panchayat, Barpeta. (Photo: Pankaj Kumar Kalita, January, 2017).

Photo 3: A woman is making clay items in the village ofBampara, Barpeta. (Photo: Pankaj Kumar Kalita, September, 2017).

Photo 4: An interview with a male respondent in the village of Bampara, Barpeta. (Photo: Pankaj Kumar Kalita, May, 2015).

Photo 5: Photograph of the village of Bampara, Barpeta (Photo: Pankaj Kumar Kalita, May, 2015).

Photo 6: Some villagers are engaged in fish-processing (sun-drying) in the village of Baghbar Gaon, Barpeta. (Photo: Pankaj Kumar Kalita, February, 2016).

Photo 7: A horse-driven cart carrying commodities symbolizestraditional transportation in the village of Baghbar Gaon, Barpeta. (Photo: Pankaj Kumar Kalita, August, 2015).