CHAPTER III

TEA WORKERS' SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY

Historically, tea workers in the Brahmaputra valley have experienced a process of 'transplantation' from their native places to the plantation areas, and a prolonged period of socialization in the plantation setting in inhospitable natural surroundings, under conditions of severe regimentation of lifestyles and restrictions on individual freedom. The socio-economic situation of tea workers remained virtually unchanged for over a hundred years since the process of recruitment of migrant workers began in the mid-nineteenth century. The extent of their social backwardness exceeded that of any other category of industrial workers in colonial India. This chapter attempts to study the social life of the tea workers, and their search for social dignity and political rights that provides them the impetus to consciously strive to promote a sense of community-feeling and unity of purpose among themselves, and to participate as active players in the political process.

The end of colonialism did not mark the sudden initiation of an era of rapid progress for the tea workers in terms of their social status or economic solvency, but did mark the beginning of a very slow process of improvement both in their economic and social conditions. This has led to a new social awareness and an awakening among them aimed at improving their lot through acquisition of modern education and abandoning of practices like alcoholism that kept them socially backward and retarded their development.
as healthy individuals. The relatively recent construction of a tea tribe identity in the valley is a product of the gradual advent of political consciousness in the context of electoral democracy and constitutional provisions for concessions to members of backward social groups. Thus, any study of the relationship between tea workers and the politics of identity in the Brahmaputra valley has to take into account the existential factors contributing to the formation of the tea workers' social identity and its political ramifications. We shall first examine the inter-relationships among the various ethnic categories including the caste, tribal, religious and linguistic identities of tea workers and then proceed to study their terms of interaction with the outside world and especially with the rural society in their immediate vicinity which condition their patterns of self-identification.

**Ethnic Boundaries among Tea Workers:**

In the context of migration where heterogeneous groups were transplanted even across the seas, the caste system flourished with vigour.¹ The relative prosperity of the overseas Indians helped them renew and reinforce their links with the native land, while in the case of inland migrants to Assam, the perpetual state of poverty and the chains of the plantation system tied the workers to their new home. Some workers have no idea at all of where their ancestors came from and could only provide conjectures about their possible place of origin. A few workers who claimed to be of native

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Assamese descent were also found to follow the plantation way of life rather than the traditional Assamese rural lifestyle, and did not maintain links with their original villages. As Jain notes,

Problems related to their differences in origin made it difficult for them to achieve some kind of consensus for a new social order in terms of their traditional social relationships. The web of caste relationships as existing in the typical setting of an Indian village or town never came into being. The reconstitution of a new community took place in terms of the paternalistic relationships between the higher and lower participants in the plantation social system itself.²

Three major cultural attributes influencing the maintenance of ethnic boundary in the social context of a tea garden are commensality, connubium and language. Other social parameters are either dysfunctional or redundant in such a heterogeneous ethnic situation. No ethnic group usually enjoys overwhelming numerical majority in a garden, though one or more groups may be relatively preponderant in a garden’s labour force. Hence ethnic boundaries are not found to lead to exclusivism, rather there is a process of mutual accommodation between members of diverse ethnic groups within a garden and especially within the labour line. The overriding inter-ethnic solidarity is reflected on social occasions and is reinforced by the practice of the line residents addressing each other with some kinship term according to age.

Co-residence in labour lines with people from various ethnic groups has created a kind of indifference towards values associated with particular castes, leading to ignoring or rejecting of caste ranking in pre-determined

grades. The absence of the Brahmin or for that matter of any 'high caste' among tea workers gives them a free play to define their status according to their perceptions. Every caste may have its own version of ranking justified in terms of food habits and customs related to marriage. Beef eating was ascribed to groups ranked lower. It was common among tea workers to adopt a caste on coming to a garden. Thus the caste and tribal backgrounds of the migrants do not carry the same meaning, as they would do in their villages. Caste labels do not regulate relations within and outside the estate. Within the estate, occupational grading of labourers takes no account of their castes, and outside the estate there is altogether a different system of castes and sects in Assamese society, in which tea workers are known as an undifferentiated group of 'labour'. Even a tea worker from Orissa or Andhra Pradesh may be described as 'deswali' (name of a Bihari dialect and its speakers) or 'Bongali' (Bengali) by Assamese villagers.

Living in proximity with Hindu castes who are governed by a built-in system of hierarchy, the tea workers have imbibed a notion of the same. Except in the realm of commensality, the caste principles do not operate on most occasions of social interaction. Oraons, Mundas, and Kharias could dine with each other but not generally with other tribes. Though this practice is on the wane, some of the womenfolk and elders are still found to be following it. Again, married men are found to be more particular about it than the bachelors. In fact, their concept of pollution and purity closely resembles the traditional Hindu pattern. Rules on commensality may not work where an
individual is concerned, but may operate on social occasions like marriages and feasts, where communities are involved.

The exact hierarchy and the position of different castes/tribes in it are not very clear. Since these groups had migrated from various regions and found themselves in a novel position in the plantation, the resultant notions of hierarchy that developed were unique to the gardens. However, some consensus exists among them in the matter of assigning caste positions to different groups, based on the occupations of the tribes in their places of origin. Broadly two occupational groups migrated to the plantations: agriculturists and the non-agriculturist artisans. The traditionally cultivating groups assume superior status over those who had non-agricultural occupation earlier. The Oraon, Munda, and Kharia were agriculturists and considered themselves socially superior to the non-cultivating artisan groups who engaged in occupations such as weaving, basketry, pottery and ironwork. Among the latter, Lohars were ironsmiths, Baraiks wove clothes and Ghasis made musical instruments on which Mahalis performed on social occasions; Mahalis also wove baskets like the Turis.

Some form of stratification exists not only between the different groups, but also at times within the same group on the basis of religion, food habits and other antecedents. For the Hindu segment, the concept of ritual purity and pollution seems to be an important factor in this regard. For example, the non-converted Oraon, Munda and Kharia as a whole consider themselves higher than their Christian counterparts and avoid cooked food in
Christian households, regarding conversion to Christianity as an act of ritual pollution. In day-to-day life, social intercourse between the Christians and their non-Christian counterparts appears to be limited.

The Munda tea workers present a good example of social stratification between sub-groups. Among Mundas residing in Assam, two distinct endogamous sub-groups are found, the *Nagpuria* Munda and the *Sonpuria* Munda. The former consider themselves higher in social status and consider the latter as ritually impure, probably due to the fact that they do not take beef, whereas the *Sonpurias* do so and practice bull sacrifice as part of the rituals in their *Borpahari Puja*. A *Nagpuria* Munda maintains purity by not accepting cooked food from the members of the other sub-group. The differential status of the sub-groups is also reflected in their ceremonial dress patterns.

Intake of beef and pork seem to play an important role in determining the status of a group/sub-group in the social hierarchy. For instance, the Oraon, Kharia, Savara and the *Sonpuria* Munda are considered to be of lower status by groups such as the Kamar, Patir, Kurmi and a section of Savaras who do not take pork. They do not inter-dine and avoid inter-marriage. The *Borpahari Puja* is prevalent also among the Oraon and Kharia. Sacrifice of bull is considered to be an essential part of the ritual, but under the influence of the neighbouring Hindu population, many have given up this practice, and instead sacrifice an effigy made of dough. Those who have adopted
Christianity take beer and pork and are therefore somewhat segregated from their non-Christian brethren.

So far as marriage is concerned, they occur usually within the ethnic group. Caste labels are significant in the context of marriage. In a bandobast (arranged type of marriage, caste as an endogamous group becomes relevant and caste-fellows are in one's own and other tea gardens and ex-tea worker settlements. In the rajkhusi (based on spouses' mutual consent) marriages however, caste may not be a relevant factor. In the British period, marriages were often arranged at the behest of the manager whose main concern was that useful labourers should not be lost to other gardens by marriage. Here caste was not a determining factor, but managers took care to avoid violation of caste sentiments. While inter-ethnic marriages occur and are tolerated, they are not the norm and their frequency is less in the numerically viable groups.

Marriage between the Christians and non-Christians is not rare, particularly among the Oraons, Munda and Kharia as their status seems to be same. In such a case the boy may have to pay a token fine to girl's parents. Inter-tribal marriage between the tribes having unequal status is considered as an offence. Earlier such couples were ex-communicated. However, now-a-days the panchayat takes over the issue and settles the dispute imposing a fine on the boy. Sometimes trade union takes the responsibility for amicable settlement. Incidence of inter-tribal marriage is higher in big plantations where various tribal communities live together. Residential quarters are
allotted to the workers without considering their ethnic background and thus
different ethnic groups live side by side. This leads to intimate social
interaction between members of two or more tribes, which opens the
opportunity of inter-tribal marriages. Inter-tribal marriages are found more in
plantations that are close to urban centres and those that have tribal groups
with small populations.

**Religious Identity:**

As regards religious identity of the tea workers, we find that they are
drawn from different religions and reflect the diversity in religious beliefs that
prevails in India. However, religious diversity does not create sharp social
divisions and communalism is virtually non-existent in the plantation setting:

> Although they belong to different religions and denominations, it could be
noticed that religion is not a main issue among them. They are unaware of
what is happening at Ayodhya, Mathura or in the neighbouring Pakistan.³

The vast majority of the tea workers are drawn from tribal communities and
the lower Hindu castes. The members of Hindu castes have mostly retained
their caste traditions and, in many cases, adopted some of the local higher
caste traditions. A section of the Panikas known as Kabirpanthis follow the
teachings of Kabir. They are strict vegetarians and do not drink liquor.⁴ In
some of the erstwhile Brahmaputra Tea Co. gardens (presently owned by the
Assam Tea Corporation), such as Negheriting and Rungamatty, in the Jorhat-

³ Thomas D'Silva, "The Survey of the Tea Garden Labourers of Assam: A Report", in
Dergaon area, Muslim tea workers, mainly Julahas (the weaver caste) from Bihar and U.P., are also found.

A sizeable section of the tribals among the tea workers has adopted Christianity, and the rest are mostly Hinduized tribals who have retained many elements of their animistic faith:

The people of the tea labour community follow mainly two religions: Hinduism and Christianity. Hinduism is professed by more than four-fifths of the total population and Christianity by less than one-fifth. But basically the people of this community are animist.  

Very few of those who are not of Chotanagpuri tribal origin are found to have accepted Christianity. Due to the conspicuous presence of Christianity and Christian missionaries among sections of tea workers, we may examine its impact on the lives of Christian tea workers in some detail.

The Chotonagpur tribals who migrated to the tea plantations were mostly believers of animistic religion, except a few who had been converted to Christianity under the impact of missionaries in their native villages. The Gossner Evangelical mission of Berlin and the Belgian Jesuits had carried out the first conversions among these tribes in Bihar. Many were converted after migration to the Assam plantations. Among the Catholic missionaries in the gardens, the Salvatorian, Rev. Rudolf Fontaine was the pioneer. The American Baptist missionaries, who had established a mission in Sibsagar for evangelizing the Assamese, found work among the labourers much more promising than among the local people. In 1871, Rev. E.W. Clerk of this

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5 Ibid., p. 223.
mission baptized four tea labourers who volunteered, heralding the American Baptist missionary activities in the tea areas. Following this, hundreds of tea garden labourers were baptized in Assam every year. Most of the planters, after some initial resentment, extended co-operation to the missions, often using the missionaries' influence to solve labour problems. When the Government made it obligatory for the managements of the tea gardens to provide elementary education to the labourers' children, the planters sought the help of the missionaries to establish schools.

Though the exact number of tea workers subscribing to Christianity is unclear, about 10% of the tea and ex-tea labour population is believed to be Christian, of whom around 60% belong to three Protestant churches, namely, Baptist, Lutheran and Anglican, the rest being Catholics. The Christian converts have shaken off most of their traditional beliefs and superstitious practices, such as ancestor worship and worship of supernatural spirits for curing disease. They seem to have become receptive to modern ideas including medical treatment, education and gender equality after their conversion and have imbibed desirable habits of health and personal hygiene, sanitation and cleanliness. The trend towards drinking has declined among them. The Christian labourers with a higher level of education have better representation in non-plantation jobs and professions and are economically sounder than their non-Christian counterpart. Most of them have realised the

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7 F.S. Downs, *Christianity in North East India*, Delhi, 1983.
9 F.S. Downs, op. cit.
10 M. Muthumana, op. cit.
value of money and maintain regular savings. Bose also observed similar traits among the converted Oraons and Mundas in their natal home (Chotanagpur).11

Karotemprel charts out the role of the Christian churches in building up a 'new adivasi community'.12 He says that the main task of the church is “to give back to the adivasis a sense of dignity and self respect which they were deprived of... by the dominant groups”.13 To this end, he suggests that the church should conduct surveys and census to gather a clear picture of the adivasi population.14 The next task, he says is to convert the adivasis from unskilled to skilled labour so that they can “enter into the technical, managerial and research areas of the tea industry. Only then will the adivasis who make a substantial contribution to the (tea industry) also enjoy a proportionate amount of benefits, and social and political influence derived from it”.15

Among other measures that Karotemprel wants to be taken by the church for the adivasis are:

(a) provision of higher education,

(b) teaching of adivasi history and culture,

(c) using educational institutions as instruments of social change,

11 N.K. Bose, Culture and Society in India, Bombay, 1977, p. 175.
13 Ibid
14 Ibid, p. 401
(d) bringing about social consciousness so that the adivasis can understand the conditions of their community,

(e) making them politically conscious so that they can play a decisive role in state politics,

(f) spiritual resurrection of the community through the Gospel,

(g) promotion of adivasi literature

(h) improving the status of adivasi women.\(^\text{16}\)

He appeals to the church to rise to the occasion in the service of the adivasis:

We are living in a historic hour in the Brahmaputra valley. We are given a rare opportunity to be the catalysts of social transformation to about four million Adivasi people and many more others and thus build a new future for them... the future of the population of Assam will depend to a great extent on the future of the adivasi community in Assam.\(^\text{17}\)

The Christian converts have been found to maintain an independent identity cutting across ethnic groups. Social interaction between the Hindu and the Christian tea workers has been found to be quite minimal. Troisi observed among the Santals, “the Christian method of evangelisation often tended to draw the Santals out of their own milieu”.\(^\text{18}\) He further maintains,

A cleavage between the converts and their community also arises as a result of the substantial changes in the rites and ceremonies which surround a Santal’s life cycle.\(^\text{19}\)

Bose also observed,

\(^{16}\) Ibid, p. 402-4.

\(^{17}\) Ibid, p. 404


\(^{19}\) Ibid, p. 268.
The converted people often become so completely cut off from the rest of their own people... that they exist in a kind of isolation which is healthy neither for themselves nor for their neighbours.\(^{20}\)

This might have contributed towards the cleavage observed between Hindu and Christian labourers. In matrimonial negotiations however, it is observed that the Christians too prefer mates from the same ethnic groups, though inter-religious marriages are rare.

**Linguistic Identity:**

So far as language is concerned, it is found that among tea garden tribes, there are three linguistic elements, namely (i) Kolarian speaking groups like the Munda, Ho, Santhal and the Kharia, (ii) Dravidian speaking groups, like the Oraon, Kondh, Gond and the Malpahariya and (iii) groups speaking Oriya, Bengali and Hindi or dialects of these languages. Only a few of the tea workers have retained use of their native dialects, prominent among them being Oraons who speak Kurukh, and Mundas, Kharias, Turi and Mahali speak various dialects of Mundari.

The members of the major tribes and castes are still able to retain their respective languages, though in a corrupt form, and speak in their own languages. Mundari, Santhali, Oriya, Bhumij, Kharia, Kurukh-Oraon, Savara and Parji are the languages still prevalent among the tea plantation labourers.\(^{21}\)

While members of an ethnic group may speak in their mother tongue among themselves, communication with others is carried out in a form of Hindi known as Sadri or *garden-baat*, which resembles the inter-tribal lingua franca.

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\(^{20}\) N.K. Bose, op. cit., p. 176.

\(^{21}\) Bhupen Saikia, op. cit., p. 221.
of Chotanagpur. Usually children learn both their mother tongue and Sadri from an early age.

A new language has come up as the lingua franca among these groups. This is formed by an intermingling of Assamese, Bengali, Bihari and Oriya etc., having phonetic impression of Maithili and Magadhi. Locally, it is known as Sadani.  

In the Upper Assam gardens, Assamese words are prominently used and in some cases Assamese has become the lingua franca within the home and outside:

Because of mass illiteracy and exclusive tea labour settlements away from settlements of the host population, the process of linguistic adaptation has been rather slow. But the tea labour immigrants in their own way have adopted the language of the host population for the purpose of communication and social contact. Sample surveys reveal that all adult persons including women can express themselves in Assamese to significant degree. They have developed this faculty on account of their contact with the tea garden ministerial staff consisting of host population and other host population from whom they procure...commodities in the weekly market.

Some of the educated sections of the tea tribes lament the loss of their original mother tongues in the plantation setting and resent the insensitive attitude of the state government on the issue of recognizing the tea tribe languages as media of education:

The tribal immigrants have lost their languages or their linguistic identity partly because they were uprooted from their places of origin and came into contact with other languages and partly because their tribal languages are not official languages nor written languages in the state where they found themselves. As such their languages do not have any educational value i.e. they have no role to play in the educational system, administration or in mass-communication... Constitutionally every child has the right to have instruction in the mother tongue at primary stage of education. But there is no chance for the tribal child to have the instruction in its mother tongue...

And yet language is the soul of one's culture. It gives life and animation to one's culture. It has a definite cultural value. And as such the preservation and maintenance of the language is absolutely necessary for the preservation and maintenance of one's culture...24

Similar views are expressed by Daniel in the context of Santhals tea workers in the Brahmaputra valley:

Santhali language is neither a distorted version of another language nor is it incomplete and inadequate. It would be completely wrong to say that Assamese language says much better what Santhali language can say only inadequately. The aspirations of Santhals in tea gardens of Assam to make their language medium of instruction in lower level, and as one of the modern Indian languages at higher level of education is quite legitimate and warranted. Santhals of the area must be given a free hand and all sorts of support to develop and enrich Santhali language to the fullest extent possible. Santhali language is the very soul of Santhals. Therefore all measures must be taken to preserve and sustain this soul.25

As things stand today, there is little chance of the state government recognizing any of the adivasi languages like Kurukh or Santhali as medium of education in primary schools of the state. The main bodies representing the tea tribes as a whole have not demanded such action; rather they are keen on making the tea tribe people proficient in Assamese so that they can avail of employment opportunities in the state:

The tea labour community members have very limited scope to educate their children because of lack of schooling facilities in tea gardens. But wherever such opportunities in nearby areas exist, they have availed of this by sending their wards to schools where instruction is imparted through Assamese. This shows the process of linguistic and educational adaptation by the Assam-born generation of the community... In addition to schooling with children of the host population and picking up the language through learning and conversation, the younger generation of the community has developed an interest for Assamese language and literature...The school-educated

generation has a tendency to converse in Assamese with parents and relatives at home.\textsuperscript{26}

The ATTSA has demanded that the use of Assamese language should be made compulsory in the tea garden offices, so that the educated workers can read and understand official communications.\textsuperscript{27} In fact, tea workers and their children often exhibit with pride their acquaintance with Assamese language, as knowledge of Assamese seems to carry some social prestige and signifies their interaction with the world immediately outside the plantation. However, the Christian missionaries and the adivasi organizations like the ACA and the AASAA have laid stress on the revival and preservation of adivasi languages along with other elements of adivasi culture.

**Caste/Tribal Identity:**

Amidst the uniformity of social life engendered by the plantation, the ethnic identities of the workers tend to reassert themselves on various occasions. For instance, within a plantation, the numerically dominant group generally dominates the socio-cultural life of the labourers and controls the trade union activities. Such groups include the Savaras in Mancotta,\textsuperscript{28} Tanti in Rajgarh\textsuperscript{29} and Manasi,\textsuperscript{30} and Karmakar in Hilika.\textsuperscript{31} Factors such as the degree

\textsuperscript{26} Bhupen Saikia, op. cit., p. 216.  
\textsuperscript{27} *Protibedon* (in Assamese), Memorandum submitted to the State Government’s Advisory Committee on Welfare of Tea Tribes, All Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Union (ATTSA), Guwahati, 3 October, 1997, p. 25.  
\textsuperscript{29} Kar 1980  
of cohesiveness among the members of an ethnic group and inter-group affinities on the basis of place of origin or other commonalities may also influence the relative social power of groups. The Chotanagpur migrants are often seen as a single 'Bihari' community by other sub-groups of workers. Since they form the largest sub-group among tea workers, many aspects of their cultural life have come to be identified as symbolizing the tea worker community as a whole. For example, \textit{Bagan baat}, the lingua franca among the workers bears close resemblance to \textit{Sadri}, the dialect commonly spoken in Chotanagpur. Drinking rice-beer (\textit{haria}) is a feature of Chotanagpur tribal life, but is practiced universally by all tea workers. Their belief in witchcraft also appears to be a similar borrowed trait.

Membership of exogamous clan is one of the parameters of identification within a tribe/caste, and most of the tea workers, though not all, happen to know their clan names. Many use the clan name as surname, while others use the tribe name as surname. In their native places, the clan name would have served as an important marker of identity and be used as a surname, because in the context of tribal life, intra-group differentiation is clan-based. In the present setting where heterogeneous groups are placed in close proximity, the tribe/caste (\textit{jati}) name carries more significance and is used as a surname in order to assert the group identity. Kar observes that some of the ex-tea garden labourers again started using clan name as surname:
Thus Khalkho, Barla, Bagh, Kujur, Minz, Toppo, etc. appear as surname for the members of Oraon community. These are in fact various clan groups within the Oraons.32

Marriages are generally held outside the clan, and intra-clan marriages are opposed by the elders among the tribe. Beyond this, the clan does not usually serve as a basis of affinity, and tribe affiliation carries far more importance as a marker of identity.

Regarding the extent to which different communities constituting the tea tribes have lost or retained their original cultural identity and its attributes, one author has remarked:

They did not totally lose their identity, especially those communities which lived by themselves though a bit isolated. Some lost everything but they preserved at least their names, which helped them to trace back to their origins or original culture, language, dances etc. For example the people still remembered their ‘Karam’ dance though the dance was anything but ‘Karam’. They still called themselves ‘Somra Oraon’ or ‘Mangra Munda’ which reminded them of their original tribe to which they belonged. Similarly many still preserved their tribal surnames, which would enable them to identify their own tribe.33

On the question as to whether the tea workers from diverse ethnic backgrounds are moving closer towards a common ethnic identity due to the homogenizing impact of plantation life, various opinions have been expressed:

Does it mean that the tea tribes and castes have become one ethnic group? The answer seems to be no. According to some authors tea labour and ex-tea labour form a multi-ethnic group. The identity that has emerged through a common food, dress and a common lingua franca (Sadri) and festivals like Karam and Sarhul, seem to be very relative one. The authors point out to the emergence of various organisations to safeguard the culture and language in order to establish group identity and heritage in a multi-ethnic setting.34

33 Robert Kerketta, op. cit., p. 14
34 Thomas Pulipillil, op. cit., p. 7
Caste and tribe associations are found to have sprung up among the tea workers with emphasis on revival and preservation of cultural identity. The Oraons, who are found to be numerically largest among the tea tribes in Brahmaputra valley, have a state-level Oraon association known as Akhil Assam Pradesh Kurukh (Oraon) Sangh. Its annual conference is held every year in different parts of the state. Preservation of Oraon culture and Kurukh language are its main objectives.35 Similarly, the Santhals organize state-level and district level meetings where emphasis is laid on revitalizing and popularizing Santhal traditional values and norms, through the Ad Santhal Samaj and the All Assam Santhali Sahitya Sabha. The Assam Munda Mahasabha performs a similar role among the Mundas. At a wider level, the Adivasi Council of Assam (ACA) serves as an association for different tribal communities like the Oraons, Santhals and Mundas. Founded in at Grahampur in Gossaigaon (western Assam) in 1957 as the “All Assam Munda, Oraon and Santhal Sanmelan” by the local MLA of that time Mathias Tudu, the ACA acquired its present nomenclature in 1959 at a session held in Gorubhasa village. Francis Hanse and Mathias Marandi were prominent among its original leaders. Among the Oriyas, the Utkal Samaj is an important organization which brings the Oriya tea workers in contact with other Oriyas staying in Assam. Other such organizations among the tea tribes include the All Assam Kurmi Sanmelan and the All Assam Mirdha-Turi Sanmelan.

These organizations serve not only as forums for cultural and literary activities and as platforms for forging unity among the members of their respective ethnic groups, but also perform the role of interest and pressure groups on various occasions. They often invite important personalities and cultural troupes from their native places, e.g., from Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, or Orissa, and from tea gardens in other places, e.g., Dooars region of north Bengal, to take part in their annual gatherings. Their activities are mostly confined to organizing of community festivals and cultural meetings, where group demands are also highlighted, and they usually refrain from agitational activities in their articulation of group interests. Among them, the ACA is found to be politically active at election time, helping to consolidate the adivasi votes both within and outside the plantations, on the basis of common identity and interests. However, it is the tea tribe identity rather than that of adivasi identity that plays the decisive role in shaping the voting preferences of tea workers, and the proponents of adivasi consciousness would rarely engage in adversarial activities towards a non-adivasi tea tribe candidate.

**Relations with Neighbouring Communities:**

On the social relations between the tea garden workers the surrounding peasant population, some basic inferences can be made. The social composition of the population around the gardens is varied, and differs from zone to zone within the valley. In the Upper Assam areas on the south bank extending from Nagaon to Tinsukia districts, most of the gardens are found to be surrounded by Assamese population including tribals and ex-tea
garden workers who identify themselves as Assamese. Castes like Ahom, Motok and Moran constitute a majority of the Assamese population in the easternmost districts of the valley. The Mishing tribe predominates in Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts, and the Bodo tribe in the northern areas of undivided Darrang, Kamrup and Goalpara districts where many gardens are located. On the North Bank, a sizeable Nepali population is found in the tea areas of the undivided Lakhimpur and Darrang districts.

In all the tea areas, substantial populations of Bengalis and Hindi-speaking people including Marwaris and Biharis are found, many of who are linked by trade or profession to the gardens. Significantly, except in the areas of the undivided Goalpara district (especially in Gossaigaon area of present Kokrajhar district), there are very few members of the Chotanagpur tribes, not belonging to the ex-tea garden community, who are settled in the tea areas. Hence in Assam, mention of the names of tribes such as Santhal, Oraon, Munda or Kharia is understood in local parlance as a reference to the tea worker community. In view of the close social interaction between the populations of tea workers and ex-tea garden workers in the plantation areas, it would be pertinent to study the ex-tea garden workers and their sense of affinity with the tea workers in some detail.

The process of integration of the tea workers into the local society has been made easier by the growth of the ex-tea garden worker society in the vicinity of the tea gardens. The settlements were initially homogeneous in composition, consisting of ex-tea labourers only. Interaction between them
and the local people has developed very slowly, and is confined mainly to the economic and political spheres:

The socio-cultural interactions of this segment of the population with the local Assamese population were restricted in the initial period. But it has gradually developed and the overall relationship is cordial. Yet some degree of aloofness from the Assamese society is apparent. 36

The ex-tea worker community occupies a position in the lower rung in the social ladder of the local people. The prolonged isolation of the group, initially maintained by the British planters, and subsequently perpetuated by the local people has contributed substantially towards the observed minimum cultural borrowings by the tea labourers.

Phukan considers the tea garden labour society as a sister society of the ex-tea garden labour population:

The present population in the ex-tea garden labour villages had their origin in the tea estates, most usually in the neighbouring tea estates. As such, the existing wage-earning society in the tea estates and the newly developed society in the ex-tea garden labour villages are similar in basic characteristics. 37

Literary and political circles in Assam consider both the societies as one and the same. Ghatwar mentions that both the societies have the same culture. 38 However, the tea garden worker society has an undifferentiated class structure as all members belong to the working class and are similarly situated in relation to the organized industrial structure of which they are a part. They are organized in trade unions and their class interests do not

36 Goswami in Umananda Phukan, *The Ex-Tea Garden Labour Population In Assam*, Delhi, 1984, p. vi
37 Umananda Phukan, op. cit., p. 115.
coincide with that of the ex-tea garden population. Even the temporary workers in the gardens from the ex-tea garden population are not included in the trade unions:

The emergence of the urge for political identity, spread of education and trade union activities among the tea garden labourers have brought them more into focus. But the ex-tea garden labour population in the villages of Assam live, more or less, unknown. They are considered as a shadow population of the better-known tea garden labourers.  

There is little scope for conflict of interest between the tea and the ex-tea garden labour. However, there is competition between them mainly for two scarce resources, land and employment: “These areas of conflict are likely to grow in future”. While permanent employment in the gardens has become quite restricted, opportunities for temporary work during the plucking season are plentiful. The gardens prefer to employ surplus labour from amongst their own resident population, and hire ex-tea workers for any extra labour requirements. The poorer sections of ex-tea workers are found to envy the tea workers whose economic position has improved a lot since the old days. The garden workers are also allotted cultivable land inside the garden where they can raise paddy. So far as ownership or hiring of land outside the gardens is concerned, the ex-tea workers are in a better position than the tea workers. The government has allotted some ceiling-surplus lands to the ex-tea labour population. However, such land has become very scarce, resulting in high levels of landlessness and unemployment among the ex-tea garden worker population.

39 Goswami in Umananda Phukan, op. cit., p. vi
40 Umananda Phukan, op. cit., p. 116
Social relations between tea garden workers and ex-tea garden workers are based mostly on kinship and marital links. The ex-tea garden workers established such links not only with their neighbouring tea gardens but also with gardens situated at considerable distances, on the basis of caste and tribal affinities. Other relations or contacts were individualistic in nature. There are few common secondary social institutions between the two societies other than secondary schools and colleges where only a handful among them get the opportunity to enter. The tea gardens have their own schools, hospitals, shops, and other institutions, hence the workers do not need to interact much with the outside world. Economic relations between the two groups are limited except for the fact that some members of the ex-tea garden labour population are engaged as casual labourers in the neighbouring tea gardens. Though social distance between the two communities is minimal, some of the owner-cultivators among the ex-tea workers are found to maintain distance from their brethren inside the gardens considering them as being lower in status. Thus, the tea and ex-tea labourers in Assam who share many aspects of socio-cultural life appear to maintain their separate social identities, which however does not hinder their forging of unity on issues affecting their common interests.

As regards relations between the tea worker population and the Assamese society, it is observed that the average Assamese peasant traditionally considered the tea garden worker population as a single social group (or caste) of the lowest order. The slave-like conditions of the tea garden workers under the colonial planters and the relative affluence of the
local peasants in an economy based on rural self-sufficiency gave rise to the belief that these workers belonged to inferior races. This stigma was also attached to the ex-tea garden workers, i.e., those workers and their descendants who left the gardens to pursue other occupations like farming in the neighbouring areas. The economic and educational backwardness of the tea worker population in general has contributed to and sustained the segregation between them and the Assamese population. The social distance between the two communities, which is partly a result of caste notions inhibiting social interaction, reinforces this divide. Relations between tea workers and non-Assamese residents of the tea areas are mostly based on economic ties, and social interaction is limited and personalized.

Conscious efforts to integrate the tea labour population and their culture into the mainstream Assamese society have been made by individuals and organisations including the Asam Sahitya Sabha - the premier organisation for the promotion of Assamese language, literature and culture, which has recognised the culture of the tea workers as part of Assamese culture:

It is implicit that the tea garden labour population is not yet integrated in the socio-cultural life of Assam. Integrating them into the greater society means recognition of the culture of the tea garden labour class as part of the Assamese culture.  

The process of transmission of cultural traits of Assamese culture to the culture of the tea workers is evident, though it has been very slow and somewhat confined to the central and eastern parts of the valley. The

41 Umananda Phukan, op. cit., p. 121
dominant section of Assamese population appears to have lessened its discriminatory attitude towards the tea workers facilitating cultural adjustments.

Socio-cultural assimilation as it appears today may be prolonged because matrimonial relations between members of the indigenous community and those of the tea labour immigrants have not yet been established. This is partly because their social status in respect of caste and creed is yet to be considered as being at par with that of the indigenous society. Last but not the least, there are visible physical differences born out of their differing racial background preventing normal matrimonial alliances between the two communities.42

Members of the tea worker community have contributed numerous Assamese literary works including prose, poetry, song and drama. The mouthpiece of the Asam Chah-Mazdoor Janajati Chatra Sāntha (now ATTSA) entitled Seujipait, ACMS’s Chah-Mazdoor, the All Assam Chah-Shramik Sangh’s Smaronika (souvenir) and the monthly journal Madol (now defunct) edited by Ganesh Kurmi have made valuable contributions towards popularizing Assamese language and literature among the tea workers and gave rise to a new genre of Assamese literateurs among them. Many Assamese journals and newspapers have brought out special issues and supplements devoted to the literary and cultural aspects of the tea worker community, or maintain regular columns exclusively on affairs pertaining to tea workers. The well-known weekly magazine of the seventies, Saptahik Nilachal took the lead in this and its special issues on 26 August 1970 and 2 July 1980 focused on the tea tribes. Another popular Assamese weekly, Sonar Asam brought out a special tea tribes’ issue in 1975. The Dibrugarh and Guwahati centres of All India Radio (AIR) and Guwahati Doordarshan have

42 Mahesh Chandra Bhuyan, op. cit., p. 219
special programmes for tea workers. Assamese films like *Chameli Memsahab* (directed by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika), *Kachghar Rangdhali*, *Kecha Son* and *Ratanlal* (the last two were produced by the ACMS) have faithfully portrayed tea garden life, and also brought to light many hidden artists from the tea community.

Among the tea workers, those with the title Tanti are found to occupy positions of influence and high office, such as Minister in the State and member of Legislative Assembly. Tanti is the title of the weaver caste in parts of eastern India. The Tanti of the ex-tea worker community have been able to mix in the Assamese society through inter-ethnic marriages. By adopting this title, many tea workers identify with this group which is well-known outside the gardens. The practice of adopting Tanti title and then Assamese ethnic identity marks a process of upward mobility among the tea and ex-tea worker community. Jain observes that through the medium of their Tanti caste-title, the tea workers have tried to break the barriers between them and their Assamese neighbours:

> Having gained access to the trade union and labour movement in Assam and thus getting a Tanti minister for labour in the state government of Assam, the tea garden workers have been able to assert an image of respectability.43

Similar trends of upward mobility can be observed in case of some other sections of workers such as the Kurmis. An attempt at Sanskritization among the Kurmis for claiming higher status in the caste hierarchy could also

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43 Sobhita Jain, op. cit., p. 36
be observed, though it could not have much impact as the tea worker society is not found to be much receptive to such change unless backed by a long-drawn process of sustained effort. Moreover as Phukan notes, the Sanskritization process has not much relevance to the tea worker society as it meant only certain positional changes within their own castes and tribal situations, and they could not enter the social structure of the local Assamese population. While in their areas of origin most of these workers would have been considered as Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes, in Assam they have been considered as Other Backward Castes, along with indigenous castes like Ahom and Koch-Rajbonshi. However, it is observed that socially the members of the OBC communities in the Assamese society tend to look down upon tea garden worker population, considering them as belonging to lower castes.

Assamese Identity and the Language Issue:

The tea worker community’s search for self-respect and dignity became linked to Assamese identity aspirations, which had been manifest in the writings and speech of the educated Assamese since the mid-nineteenth century. The preponderance of the Bengali language and its speakers in the government offices and educational institutions of the Brahmaputra valley pricked the Assamese conscience, which felt that the numerical strength of Bengali-speakers and their perceived unity enabled them to dominate over smaller language groups. To counter this, the Assamese sought to construct a

45 Umananda Phukan, op. cit., p. 109
larger Assamese society encompassing the smaller tribal groups in and around the valley. However, old racial and caste prejudices in a highly tradition-bound society proved to be a major hurdle in this project of reaching out to those hitherto considered as outcastes. Traditional Assamese caste society was relatively 'open' as compared to that in many other parts of India, but such 'openness' stopped short of embracing within its fold those alien castes and tribes imported by British planters as lowly 'coolies'.

It was the Gandhian call for abolition of untouchability and the resultant change in social attitudes that enabled Assamese society to concede some space within its fold to the tea worker community. Eminent Assamese writers and leftist activists of the Freedom Movement like Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Bishnu Rabha played leading roles in highlighting the plight of workers through their soul-stirring literary and cultural works including popular songs and plays, and appealed to the Assamese to treat them as brothers. Agarwala's role is particularly notable because he hailed from a Marwari trading family that had assimilated into the Assamese community and had adopted the local language and way of life. In his family plantation he had tried to empower the workers, but a fall in profits prompted his family to remove him from charge of the garden. His conviction in worker's empowerment and his hope that the tea worker society would one day be accepted as part of the composite Assamese society inspired a tradition that was carried on in the coming decades by cultural activists, notably Ambikagiri Raichoudhury, Bhupen Hazarika, Keshab Mahanta and others. In the consolidation of an Assamese identity, tea workers were seen as willing
partners, who needed to be raised from their impoverished conditions and assimilated into the local cultural milieu.

The tea workers, on their part, regarded the adoption of Assamese language and culture as a means of upward mobility, which raised their status in the local situation. It also enabled them to seek alternate avenues of employment discarding the plantation work which carried low social esteem. Like the Assamese, tea workers had also come to view ‘outsiders’ as exploiters. As Myron Weiner puts it, Assamese anti-outsider sentiments were directed mainly against Bengali Hindus who dominated in the bureaucracy and educational institutions, and Marwari traders who controlled the economy.46 Work in tea gardens was not an attractive proposition amongst local people. Hence migrant tea workers were not seen as competitors for jobs and resources, but rather as natural, though very weak allies in Assamese aspirations to reduce outsider dominance.

With India’s independence and partition, Assam’s demographic structure changed substantially, as the Surma valley (Sylhet district) got separated, taking away the Bengali majority component of the province’s population. Leaders from the Brahmaputra valley—the traditional Assamese homeland—now dominated in the state legislature. The Assamese language gained importance in government offices and educational institutions. The responses to the gradual “Assamization” policy differed among various ethnic groups, and varied from total resentment in the case of the Bengali Hindus

46 Myron Weiner, Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India, Delhi 1978, p. 91.
and the hill tribes, to open acquiescence in that of the tea and ex-tea garden workers and migrant Bengali Muslim peasants in the Brahmaputra valley.

The separation of a few major hill districts from the state by the early seventies left the population of hill tribes in Assam much reduced and resulted in a sharper division between the two major linguistic communities concentrated in the two valleys of the state – the Assamese in the Brahmaputra valley and the Bengalis in the Barak valley. The Assamese now sought to consolidate their numbers by actively seeking the inclusion of tea workers, immigrant Muslim peasants and other marginalized groups within the Assamese identity:

The loss sustained by Assamese society with the desertion of some tribal communities has been made good by the entry of new groups into it. Frankly speaking, the formation of a greater Assamese society has started in right earnest only now. In such a situation, raising complex questions of finding natives and non-locals would only cause harm to the Assamese interests... Only by increasing their numbers and their strength can the Assamese save themselves.47

The tea workers not only lent full support to the Assamese language policy but also endeavoured to make themselves proficient in the language. Assamese medium schools sprang up rapidly in the rural areas of the valley including the plantations where many of the worker’s children enrolled as first generation learners. By the late sixties, the number of educated among the tea worker community rose significantly, though its proportion to their total population remained miniscule. Literary and cultural figures began to emerge from the community, who could use the Assamese language with skill and finesse to express their feelings and ideas. The noted Assamese literatateur

47 Homen Borgohain quoted in Mahato 1999, p. 11
Homen Borgohain observed that many educated members of the *chah janagosthi* (tea community) could write better and more correct Assamese than some of the contemporary writers from traditional Assamese background

Many students of the tea labour community read Assamese newspapers, magazines and fiction, and listen to Assamese programmes on All India Radio... That the tea labour immigrants have progressively adopted the Assamese language is obvious from the fact that according to the 1961 census, more than 66% of their population had returned Assamese as their second subsidiary language...The process of linguistic adaptation is operating in various directions and the question of complete linguistic assimilation is but a matter of time.

The Assam Sahitya Sabha, the literary body championing the cause of Assamese language actively since 1918, lent support to these trends among the Na-Asamiya (literally 'New Assamese', a term coined by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala) including the tea community and the immigrant Muslims, whom it held as the model for other settler groups to follow. The publications brought out by this organization since the early sixties describing the cultural ethos of the tea worker community were aimed at creating a better understanding among the Assamese about these new entrants into the Assamese fold, who were to be no longer despised as alien outcastes, but were to be considered with trust and sympathy. Respect was to be accorded to their customs and traditions, so that they should feel dignified in identifying themselves as 'chah bagisar asamiya' (Assamese of the tea garden), and not have any sense of shame or inferiority about their past. Rather they should feel secure about

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48 Ibid
49 Mahesh Chandra Bhuyan, op. cit., p. 217

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their future within the Assamese community. In the words of Nagen Saikia, a former General Secretary of the Asam Sahitya Sabha:

Asam Sahitya Sabha prefers to term the tea and ex-tea workers as *chah bagisar asamiya* or simply as Assamese. It is our duty and responsibility to strengthen the cultural and social bonds between them and the old Asamiya society. The neglect and deprivation of a section of society must not be allowed to continue in this age. It is also our duty to put an end to the abusive use of the words *coolie* and *bongali*, which many in our old Asamiya society had, out of ignorance, resorted to.

The issue of integrating the tea and ex-tea garden workers within the 'larger Assamese community' has been focused upon by leading members of the 'tea community' as well as by Assamese writers. A 'tea community' writer states,

Just as Assam's economy would be incomplete without its tea gardens, the Assamese community would be incomplete without the tea worker community.

He laments,

The mainstream Assamese people, because of their high-caste pride and prejudice have not been able to accept the tea tribe people as their own brethren.

Another writer from the 'tea community, Bipin Chandra Mahato says,

While trying to determine who is a native in Assam and who is not, we must follow proper guidelines. Those who have been living here for long, including the Nepalis, the tribals, the Muslim settlers and the tea tribe people, have adopted the sacred soil of Assam as their motherland and have embraced its language and culture as their own. They have enriched and strengthened the Assamese identity. The tea community's contribution in this respect is unlimited and unparalleled... If the tea workers whose hard labour has put Assam on top of the world's tea map are not regarded as indigenous in

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51 Ibid
52 Ibid, p. 6.
Assam, their faith in the goodwill of the advanced sections of society shall be weakened and this threatens our national unity.54

The noted Assamese writer Ajit Barua asks,

If the tribals, the Muslims, the tea workers living in Assam are not Assamese, then whom do we regard as such? Only those socially and economically advanced people such as the Brahmins, Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Ahoms and Chutias? This is a clear-cut case of discrimination against the weaker sections.55

Viewing the issue of linguistic and cultural assimilation from the class perspective a prominent Marxist scholar says:

It would be important to recollect that only the oppressed migrant groups like the black-tribals from the Jharkhand region and oppressed peasants from East Bengal and other indigenous tribes have assimilated deeply with the emerging Asamiya nationality. This also explains the counter-assimilative tendencies among the large section of the Hindu Bengalis and the Marwaris because of their privileged class position – the former being composed of culture-conscious middle class and the latter the economically dominant class. The development of the Asamiya nationality confirms that the oppressed groups take lesser time to assimilate and integrate as part of their survival strategy – to survive with dignity. They are interested in survival – not in identity.56

The educated sections of the tea tribe population in the Brahmaputra valley have not spared any effort to articulate their sense of attachment with Assamese language and culture, while pleading for the tea worker community a place free from any indignity or lowliness in the Assamese society. The belated but clear-cut recognition by the Assamese ethnic elite of the contribution of the tea worker community to Assamese language, literature and culture, and to the Assamese political aspirations including the demographic superiority of the Assamese speakers in the state finds

54 Mahato 1999, p. 11
55 Ibid
articulation in the conferences and seminars relating to various aspects of Assamese culture.

**Tea Tribe Identity:**

The intermingling of various cultures in the plantation setting provides the background for growth of a composite tea worker community culture in the Brahmaputra valley. The heterogeneous groups are found to have retained many of their original cultural practices, but their prolonged interaction in the plantations has fostered a process of mutual borrowing of cultural attributes and formation of a common tea worker culture, in which elements of tribal culture of the Jharkhand region are prominent, while elements from other cultures like Oriya, Bengali, Bhojpuri, and even Assamese culture find a place in it. Thus the tea and ex-tea garden workers have come to accept certain attributes of their original cultures, including musical instruments like the madol, songs and dances such as jhumur-geet and domkos, and festivals like tusu puja and karam parab, as symbols of pride signifying their unity and shared way of life.

The notion of tea worker identity as a social category, overriding ethnic considerations and including both tea and ex-tea garden workers, appears to be strongest in the Brahmaputra valley as compared to the neighbouring tea areas. In the Dooars region of West Bengal, for example, a significant line of ethnic division among tea workers runs between the adivasi and Nepali
There, as in the Barak valley and Tripura, the workers usually identify themselves by their caste/tribe names and by their place of origin, and seldom is there a sense of social identification among tea workers as a community. In the Brahmaputra valley, the descendants of tea workers who might have left the plantation over a century ago and settled in its vicinity identify themselves as ex-tea garden people and the legacy of their association with the plantation thus endures.

A type of tribalization among the workers belonging to Hindu castes can be traced in their adoption of tribal cultural practices like taking part in the celebration of the Karam festival; a simultaneous Sanskritisation process among many of the Hinduized tribal workers can be observed in their adoption of Sanskritic traditions like participation in the Durga Puja festival and observance of satyanarayan brat. Some of the tea workers are found to have embraced the Assamese form of Vaisnavism, under the influence of the neighbouring Assamese population, while retaining most of their own cultural practices. Such a fusion of cultures provides the cultural base for construction of a tea tribe identity:

A separate culture of the tea garden labour class (i.e. tea garden and ex-tea garden labour population taken together) has now been recognized. This was revealed by a number of publications of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, an organization in Assam for the promotion of Assamese language, literature and culture, which had started taking interest in the tea garden labour society so as to bring them into the mainstream of socio-cultural life of the area...the identification of a separate culture known as the chah mazdoor samaj sanskriti (culture of the tea garden labour society) is a process of integration. The integration of different elements of tea garden labour through the medium of the Assamese language in itself has made it easier to integrate the tea garden society with the local Assamese society.58

58 Umananda Phukan, op. cit., p. 120-21
During our fieldwork we noted that the extent to which the tea tribes have retained their social customs and traditions or been integrated within the Assamese society varies according to zone and community. Regarding the impact of the local culture on the tea workers in northeastern India, Dr. B.B. Das says,

It can be safely asserted that the labourers settled in the tea belts of North East India are not a floating mass of immigrants. The workers employed in the tea plantations and their kith and kin and also the ex-tea garden labourers are now a settled population and have little or no connections with their original homes. The absence of social connections with their places of origin has led to the relaxation of many of the social customs and rites of different communities. They have adopted the local culture and customs and also the local ways of life including food habits. By socioeconomic adjustments with the local inhabitants they have become part and parcel of the main stream of population of North East India.  

Many sections of workers, especially the Oriyas in Upper Assam appear to have been largely assimilated within the Assamese society while retaining some of their cultural practices such as observance of nua-khai (harvest) festival. On the other hand, the tribal adivasi workers are seen to be less integrated with the local community and more protective of their separate cultural identity, a trend that is more pronounced in Western Assam and in the areas on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra. As Dr. Francis Ekka says, Contrary to the generally held assumption about widespread assimilation process among the Adibasis we observed popular tendency for integration with stronger maintenance of tribal culture and linguistic identity. The factors responsible for this phenomenon are mainly patterns of settlement, lack of educational facilities and resultant lack of social mobility. Though there is clear evidence of assimilation process mainly observable in housing, socio-cultural and linguistic aspects, they have maintained Chotanagpur identity in every aspect of their socio-cultural life.  

60 Robert Kerketta, op. cit., p. 14
The nomenclatures and symbols through which the tea worker community identifies itself are indicative of its yearning for dignity in the society at large. Since the early years of tea in Assam, the local population applied such terms as *coolie* and *bongali* to the migrant tea workers, including those workers and their descendants who had left plantation work and settled outside. The word *coolie* is not of local origin. Colonial planters in various parts of the world used the term *coolie* for their labourers, and it came to imply labouring classes or races, e.g., in colonial South Africa all Indians were called in derogatory sense *coolies*. The term *bongali* (or *bongal*) literally meant Bengali but was applied with contextual modifications by the Assamese to all foreigners, e.g., Europeans were despised as *boga-bongal* (white foreigners) and tea workers were *coolie bongali*.\(^{61}\)

During the early stage of Adivasi labour migration into Assam, they were not known as Mundas, Oraons, Santhals, etc. but by the derogatory name of ‘coolies’. Today they are called ‘mazdoor’ (workers).\(^{62}\)

The stigma associated with such terms deeply affected the psyche of the tea and ex-tea worker community as a whole.

The educated members of the community particularly resented the appellation *coolie* and pressed for its abrogation from the local lingo. Though they are commonly referred to in Assamese as *chah-mazdoor* (or *chah-bonua*) *sampraday*, meaning tea labour community, many among them disapprove of such terms, viewing them as extensions of the derogatory term

\(^{61}\) Sushil Kumar Kurmi, op. cit., p. 10.
cooler that imply a race or caste of people meant only for menial work. In fact, these terms are not meaningfully applicable to those ex-tea garden workers who are no longer associated with the plantations as workers:

Their social worth is not recognised. They are designated as "Tea and Ex-tea tribes". It means they are designated by what they do than for what they are.

The younger members of this community prefer to call themselves chah janajati meaning tea tribes, or as seuj sampraday meaning green community, referring to the greenery of the plantations. At present, the former term (chah janajati) has gained currency and has been generally accepted as representing the tea community in the valley. Some writers prefer to call them 'black tribals' to distinguish them from the mongoloid or 'yellow tribes' of Assam.

The two-day convention of Chah-mazdoor Yuba Santha and Chah-mazdoor Chatra Santha held at Partapgarh T.E. (11-12 November 1981) witnessed some debate centering around the need for an appropriate nomenclature for the tea community, and though no conclusion could be reached, it was generally agreed that the terms chahmazdoor and chahbonua were not only incorrect but derogatory when applied to the community as a whole:

Some have tried to divide the tea community saying that tea labour community refers only to those in the gardens...we need a more inclusive

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63 Sushil Kumar Kurmi, op. cit., pp. 9-12
64 Thomas D'Silva, op. cit., p. 179.
65 Ibid, p. 10.
66 Thomas Pullopillil, op. cit., p. v
term. How can we call the descendants of those who were tea workers once upon a time as *chah-mazdoor* today?\(^{67}\)

Resenting the fact that the tea community womenfolk have not been able to engage in free and meaningful social interaction with the larger Assamese society, partly due to their inhibitions about introducing themselves as *chah-mazdoor*, the noted writer from the tea community, Mrs. Mamata Koiri suggests the term *seuj Asamiya* ('green Assamese') as a dignified way of identifying the tea community.\(^{68}\) The traditional image of a *chah-mazdoor* woman in the general Assamese society being the degraded one of a tea-leaf plucker, the term *chah-mazdoor* acquires distasteful connotations. The Asam Sahitya Sabha also held similar views and suggested *chah-bagisar Asamiya* ('tea garden Assamese') as a substitute:

Various opinions have been expressed upon finding a pleasanter substitute for the word *mazdoor*. Following Meghraj Karmakar's use of *seuj-sanskriti* ('green culture') to denote the culture of tea worker society, the use of the term *asamiya seuj sampraday* ('Assamese green community') for the tea worker community may be contemplated upon.\(^{69}\)

Kurmi suggests *chah janaaji* as an inclusive term, which removes the labour appellation from the ex-tea workers while maintaining the unifying ethnic identification of the descendants of migrant tea workers.\(^{70}\)

At present, terms like *chah-mazdoor* or *chah-bonua* meaning tea labour are used mainly to refer to those actually working in tea plantations, e.g., in the names of trade unions, and are seldom used in relation to the

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\(^{67}\) Sushil Kumar Kurmi, op. cit., p. 11  
\(^{68}\) Ibid, p. 12.  
\(^{69}\) Foreword by Saikia in ibid, p.  
\(^{70}\) Ibid, p. 11
community as a whole including the ex-tea garden workers. Most of the organizations pertaining to this latter entity, such as the All Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (ATTSA), the Assam Chah Janajati Juba Chatra Parishad, the Assam Tea and Ex-Tea Tribes' Youth Association, the Assam Chah Janajati Naba Sanskriti Parishad, and the Tea Tribes' Volunteer Force prefer the terms tea tribe or tea community, discarding the earlier ones implying 'tea labour community'. However, Biswajit Chakrabarty of the CPI-ML says that the term 'tea tribe' cannot serve as a marker of ethnic identity; it is just a substitute for the term 'tea and ex-tea garden worker community', with the appellation 'tribe' here having no justification as it is an entity composed of heterogeneous castes and tribes. He asserts, for example, that the Tanti who constitute the relatively advanced section of the tea worker community are a caste and cannot be considered as a tribe by any stretch of reasoning. 

He says that in the context of tea workers, it is the 'Jharkhandi adivasi' identity that indicates the ethnic character of the majority, as well as of the most backward sections among them.

Socio-cultural interaction between the tea worker populations in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys of Assam is limited, both due to geographical and cultural factors, although their original homelands were the same and their experiences as plantation workers have been similar:

The poly-cultural character of the recruited labourers on one hand and that of the people of the two valleys into which they were recruited on the other, stood in the way of identity formation of tea garden labourers and ex-tea garden labourers in Assam. It is an established fact in human history that illiterate and minority groups of poor cultural manifestation generally identify

themselves with the majority cultural group. This explains why the tea
garden settlers of the two valleys from outside Assam are inclined to
separate cultures even within the same state. 72

Despite the efforts of tea tribe leaders belonging to the Brahmaputra
valley to unite the tea workers of the Brahmaputra and the Barak valleys
under the common banner of tea tribe identity, there does not seem to be
much scope of their achieving an enthusiastic response from the Barak valley
workers towards this goal. Apart from the factor of geographical divide
between the two valleys of the state, their socio-political situation also differs.
Unlike in the Assam valley, the leadership of tea workers in the Barak Valley is
mostly in the hands of Hindi-speakers. The ‘Hindustani’ labourers hailing from
Hindi-speaking areas like eastern Uttar Pradesh and northern Bihar do not
seem to share much social affinity with the other tea workers, who in turn are
divided into groups in terms of Oriya, Adivasi, Bengali, Muslim, Telegu and so
on. Even the ACMS, the main tea workers’ union in the Brahmaputra valley,
does not exist in the Barak valley where another union affiliated to the INTUC
dominate among tea workers. The attributes of Jharkhand culture like karam
parb and jhumur geet, which have been adopted by the tea tribe communities
of Brahmaputra valley as part of their common culture and as symbols of their
unity, do not appear to have any appeal for the non-adivasi tea workers in
the Barak valley. The notion of ‘tea tribe’ identity forming part of the larger
Assamese community does not have relevance in the Bengali-dominated
Barak valley, neither do the tea workers there demonstrate much attachment

72 Bolin Hazarika, “In Search of an Identity for an Ethnic Group: The Case of Tea and Ex-Tea
Labourers of Assam”, in K.M. Deka & K.N. Phukan (ed.), Ethnicity in Assam, Dibrugarh,
2001, p. 124
for the language and culture of the local population. Rather the separate ethnic groups have retained most elements of their native cultures, and Hindi or Sadri language forms the medium of inter-ethnic communication. Notably, however, at least one well-known Assamese poet, namely Sananta Tanti has emerged from the tea worker community of Barak valley.

Within the Brahmaputra valley, the geographical distance between the main tea-producing areas in the east, and the western part of the valley, where a few gardens are located, manifests in patterns of social interaction. The tea worker population in Western Assam, i.e. west of Darrang district in the north and Nagaon district in the south is relatively small and scattered. Here the tea labour identity tends to be weaker as an identification marker, and those of Chotanagpur origin, who are more among workers here, identify themselves as *adivasis* as well as tea tribes. Unlike in Upper Assam, tea workers in western Assam are found to be severely isolated and marginalized due to their limited social interaction with the wider society. This is truer in case of tea workers in the Bodo-dominated areas. In Kokrajhar, the westernmost district, the tea workers are found to maintain some social relations with their counterparts in the adjoining Dooars region on ethnic basis:

The socio-political climate of Upper Assam is different from that of the Goalpara district and particularly of Kokrajhar sub-division... The tribal labourers... (in Kokrajhar) do maintain social link with their brethren working in other tea gardens in North Bengal and Assam but they do not involve themselves in local or regional politics.\(^{73}\)

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**Adivasi Identity:**

The term Adivasi or Adibasi in the context of Assam generally refers to those aboriginal tribes who came from various parts of India, especially from the Chotanagpur region to work in the tea gardens and became permanent residents of the state.

When we speak of the Adibasis in Assam we mean in particular those aboriginal tribes who came from Chotanagpur in Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh to work in the tea gardens of Assam and who later settled down there. This term with this particular meaning has been accepted in general by the different sections of the people and the administration of Assam. Their descendants still carry on working in the tea gardens. Others have settled down in the villages and give themselves to the cultivation of land... It is said that in Assam there are about 50 lakhs of Adivasis - 20 lakhs working in 770 tea gardens and 30 lakhs in the villages.74

Guha notes that the proportion of migrants from Chotanagpur was 44.7% in 1884-85, which increased to 50% by 1889.75 Today it may be even more. Among the sixty-one tribes and forty castes in the tea gardens of Assam, the Oraons, Mundas, Santhals, Hos, Kharias and other Chotanagpur tribals were the earliest recruits.

Most of the labour force in the Assam tea gardens is made up of the tribal people who were originally brought or who migrated into Assam between 1840 and 1961. They belonged to various tribes of the Chotanagpur plateau. The most numerous groups are the Mundas, the Kharias, the Hos and the Santals. Often they are called by the common and popular name of 'Adivasis' though scholars are not agreed upon this name.76

Pullopillil however prefers to call them 'tribals from Jharkhand':

Often the term Adivasi is used for the tribals from the Jharkhand region. The term 'Adivasi' may not be scientifically correct nomenclature for the tribals of Chotanagpur. As B. Pakem has pointed out, terms like 'Aborigines', 'Adivasis',

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74 Robert Kerketta, op. cit., p. 10.
76 S. Karotemprel and B. Datta-Ray, op. cit. p. vii
'Jatis', 'Adimjatis' and 'Indigenous peoples' are interchangeable. As a suitable term to indicate these tribals is lacking, we have chosen to term them 'tribals from Jharkhand'.

The term Jharkhandi originates from 'Jharkhand', a cultural and territorial entity in East-Central India consisting of large parts of Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. The present states of Jharkhand and Chhatisgarh are parts of the larger Jharkhand region. As tea workers were also recruited from regions other than Jharkhand, the term Jharkhandi cannot be applied to all tea workers. In his essay focusing on the tribals from Jharkhand, Pullopillil asks,

> Is not the existential situation of the tribals of Jharkhand same as that of the rest of the so-called Tea and ex-Tea garden labourers of Assam and Bengal?

He says that the grouping that of the tea and ex-tea garden workers "is based on class, not on anthropology or culture. Indeed in the political and economic field such a grouping would add to strength and unity." Justifying his separate treatment of the tribals from Jharkhand, he says,

> The tribals from Jharkhand share not only the same geographical background but also same cosmogony and many aspects of culture as well.

As to the territorial coverage of the 'cultural area of Jharkhand' he says, following from Mahato, that it includes a vast area consisting of "Purulia, Bankura and Midnapore district of West Bengal; Ranchi, Palamau, Singbhum,

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77 Thomas Pullopillil, op. cit., p. 3.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
Hazaribagh, Gumla, Giridih, Dhanbad and Santhal Parganas of Bihar; Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Sundergarh of Orissa and Raipur and Jashpur districts of Madhya Pradesh.  

While in northern India the term *adivasi* refers to tribals in general, in Assam it refers especially to the migrant Chotanagpur tribes, and the indigenous tribes are commonly referred to as 'janajati'. As a cultural entity, *adivasi* consciousness has gained ground among tea workers in the western and northern parts of the valley including Kokrajhar, Darrang, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji, with the organizational support of the Adivasi Council of Assam (ACA) and the AASAA, which have been trying to strengthen *adivasi* identity among tribal tea workers. Such efforts have received active cooperation from the Christian missionaries:

The *adivasi* has a special community sense to a very great degree. The *adivasi* has always belonged to a community. This sense of belongingness is a very positive element. 

On the other hand, the more inclusive appellation *chah janajati* ('tea tribes') finds acceptance among members of the 'tea community' as a whole, including the tribal and non-tribal sections of tea and ex-tea garden workers. Regarding the emergence of 'adivasi' identity in Assam, Hazarika notes:

...a section of the Tea and ex-Tea Tribes had started to organize themselves with a separate identity, viz. the 'Adivasis'. Some of such organizations were Adivasi Council of Assam (1968), All Adivasi Students Union of Assam (1996), Adivasi Social, Educational and Cultural Association (ACESA) and Adivasi Peoples Party of Assam (1999). Under the banner of these organizations the

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82 Thomas Pullopillil, op. cit., p. 2
83 Sebastian Kerotemprel, op. cit., p. 400-405.
84 Ibid, p. 398.
Adivasis placed a variety of demands before the government which were more or less identical with those of the ACMS and the ATTSA.\textsuperscript{85}

Despite the terms \textit{adivasi} and \textit{chah janajati} being rather synonymous, except for the prefix in the latter term marking the tea worker identity, their usage symbolizes the users' ethno-social orientations. For example, the tribal sections of tea workers from Jharkhand, especially the Christianized ones, are seen to prefer the term \textit{adivasi} to \textit{chah janajati}, while the non-tribal sections of the tea community refer to themselves as \textit{chah janajati} rather than as \textit{adivasi}. Many say that 'adivasi' refers only to the Chotanagpur tribals and not to tribal tea workers from other regions, e.g., Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. Amongst the latter, adivasi consciousness has not been observed to be pronounced as in the case of the Chotanagpuri tribals, whose usage of the term adivasi implies a desire to go back to their roots, to associate more closely with their Chotanagpur identity than with the tea bush in their land of domicile.

However, there has been some effort to make the \textit{adivasi} identity more inclusive in terms of a division between Aryan and non-Aryan, though such a definition would still exclude the miniscule higher caste component of the tea community. Fr. Sebastian Karotemprel, a Catholic missionary scholar defines \textit{adivasi} broadly as non-Aryan people who lived isolated for centuries from the Indo-Aryan people in Chotanagpur and adjoining areas, including "Munda and Gond of Madhya Pradesh; Santal, Tanti and Bhumij from Bengal and Bihar; Oraon from Bihar and Orissa; Savara from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa; Goala

\textsuperscript{85} Bolin Hazarika, op. cit., p. 140.
from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh; Lohar from Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh; Khond from Andhra Pradesh; and Boya from Tamil Nadu”.

Some educated adivasi ex-tea garden people confided that they could not accept the term ‘tea tribe’ as their forefathers had left the plantations long back and they had nothing to do with tea plantations. “The new generation of adivasis does not want to go back to the gardens as their elders did.”

As a representative of the Catholic Church, Karotemprel outlines the course of action to be undertaken by the church for the salvation of the adivasis in Assam. The first task, he says, is to give back to them a sense of dignity and self-respect, which had been taken away from them by powerful social groups:

For too long adivasis have been treated with contempt and exploited by various groups of people. They were considered as cheap labour. As Indians and human beings they deserve to be loved and treated with respect. This can come about only by a two-fold change of social attitudes: an awareness of self-respect in the adivasis and an awareness of their dignity as human persons in other social groups in Assam.

He alleges that “the Assam and Central governments have been withholding or ignoring accurate figures about the adivasis and thus suppressing the emergence of an adivasi identity”, saying that the total adivasi population in the Brahmaputra valley would be about 3-4 million, which is approximately 20 percent of the population of Assam. A clear picture of the adivasi population in the Brahmaputra valley “will certainly make the adivasis themselves

86 Ibid, p. 394.
87 Sebastian Karotemprel, op. cit., p. 399.
88 Ibid, p. 400
89 Ibid, p. 395
conscious of their potential power. No one can then go on suppressing the real figures and ignoring the specific political and cultural identity of the adivasis".90

Karotemprel views the preponderance of Assamese language and culture or “assamization” among the adivasis and their gradual assimilation into Assamese society as a threat to the revival and preservation of adivasi culture among the migrants who are cut off from their original homeland. This process is equated with Sanskritization or Hinduisation of the aboriginal tribes who were not originally Hindus but followers of animistic religions:

In the first place, there are two apparently contradictory social movements. One is the process of Sanskritization or Hinduization. We may also call it Assamization. Gradually the dominant or majority Hindu society around absorbs the adivasis into Hindu culture in general and Hindu religious beliefs, customs, social habits in particular. This is a social irony since the exploited class tends to adopt the culture of the very exploiters. Such a process takes place only very gradually and subtly, through social contacts and social and religious festivals. There is no coercion, not even direct evangelizing effort... The second and apparently contradictory movement is the growing awareness of the adivasi identity.91

The revival of adivasi identity, in this view, is the responsibility of the Christian church, which can not only uplift the adivasis from their oppressive existence in the plantations of Assam, but also save their culture in its pristine form from the overwhelming influence of the surrounding Hindu-Aryan culture premised on the exploitation of the non-Aryan aboriginals of India. Thus Hinduism is seen as incompatible with and contradictory to the development of adivasi identity. It finds a parallel in the ideology of the DMK, which extols the virtues of Dravidian culture as against the pervasion of Aryan culture. The

90 Ibid, p. 401
91 Ibid, p. 398-9 (emphasis ours)
political and cultural identity of the adivasis "will also be a counterbalance to the dominance of Assamese culture, politics, education, etc. The Assamese, like the adivasis, are migrated people in Assam. This does not mean that there must be a collision course, or that the adivasis should not absorb elements of Assamese culture but that one should not be swallowed by the other forcibly."\textsuperscript{92} Such a view is echoed by S.C. Daniel in the context of Santhal tea workers:

Many in Assam advocate that Assamese language must be the common as well as the official language. This has created suspicion in the minds of linguistic minorities. This is not peculiar to Santhals as a linguistic minority... The Assamese language as the common as well as the official language has caused many a turmoil.\textsuperscript{93}

After the Bodo-Santhal clashes of 1996, the Christian missionaries have been trying to maintain amity between the two groups of tribals, especially as both these groups have substantial Christian populations. Such reconciliatory moves have succeeded to some extent in mitigating violence and providing succour to those living in the refugee camps in Kokrajhar and adjoining areas\textsuperscript{94}. Hindu right-wing organizations have accused the Christian missionaries of trying to proselytize the tribals taking advantage of their miserable conditions\textsuperscript{95}. With regard to the motives behind the construction of 'tea tribe' or 'adivasi' identity, Kar observes that the demand for treating all the tea and ex-tea labourers as 'adivasi' is motivated by the desire to derive

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid, p. 401 (emphasis ours).
\textsuperscript{93} S.C. Daniel, "The Impact of Migration on the Santhals of Chotanagpur in the Tea Plantations of Assam with Special Reference to Language and Culture", in Thomas Pullopillil, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 114-115
\textsuperscript{94} 'Christian missionaries try to unite Bodos and Adivasis', \textit{The Sentinel}, 31.5.2000.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
political and economic benefits such as the Scheduled Tribe status rather than by a wholehearted urge for cultural amalgamation:

At the micro-level, the people by and large are not in favour of doing away with their individual tribe/caste identity in favour of their common identity as chah janajati. Nevertheless, with regard to the common label of "Adivasi" for all sections of people including the caste groups, many of them believe that the united collective effort under that banner of a single cultural group provides a better and stronger bargaining power to achieve the desired goal.96

The Issue of SC/ST Status for Tea Workers:

One of the long-standing demands both of the tea garden labour and the ex-tea garden labour communities is that of their inclusion in the list of Scheduled Tribes in Assam.97 This demand has received support from various organizations in Assam including trade unions, political parties, Christian missionaries and all bodies representing tea and ex-tea garden workers. A missionary activist remarks:

The so-called tea and ex-tea tribes are numerically the largest tribal group in the N.E. which constitutes the most numerous tribal population of any state in the region, though they are not scheduled as tribes by the government. Tea garden labour had enjoyed scheduled status until 1947 when they were de-scheduled by the Assam Government.98

Having become an inseparable part of the local society in the Brahmaputra valley, the tea worker community feels deprived as they have not received their due status as SC or ST in Assam, unlike their counterparts

98 Thomas Pullopillil, op. cit., p. v
in the neighbouring tea-growing states of West Bengal and Tripura, who enjoy the status of SC or ST depending upon their actual status on this count in their respective states of origin:

Ever since India became independent these people lost their Scheduled Tribe status in Assam and thus they were deprived of their educational, economic and political privileges guaranteed by the Constitution of India. Instead they were classified as O.B.C.\textsuperscript{99}

Their recognition as OBC or MOBC in Assam cannot substitute for the SC/ST status as the latter gives statutory and constitutional reservation in jobs, representation in the state and central legislatures and other privileges, which the former does not. This situation has made the tea workers increasingly restive in recent years. It would therefore be pertinent to examine here in detail the issue of SC/ST reservation for the tea and ex-tea garden workers, that has been a major source of political concern in the state.

During the British period, it was specifically the tea workers and not the ex-tea garden workers in Assam who were bestowed certain constitutional rights. This measure was backed not by any altruistic motives of the rulers, but by a desire to perpetuate their hold over the legislature in which some seats were reserved for the tea workers’ representatives. The planters and the British government expected that because of their near-total control over the tea workers’ lives, their representatives would be acquiescent and pliable, an assumption that did not always prove to be right. Since the planters had not much hold of a over the ex-tea workers who worked mostly as

\textsuperscript{99} Robert Kerketta, op. cit.
agriculturists in the neighbouring villages, they saw no cause to press for similar privileges for the ex-tea workers also.

The issue of enscheduling the tea garden tribes was raised in the 1930s when the Schedules were being prepared. The Reforms Officer of the time in charge of drawing up the list expressed resentment over the fact that “600,000 ex-tea garden coolies have been excluded though the names of most of our cooly castes appear as scheduled in their home provinces”.

In the 1931 census, the Census Superintendent of the Province, C.S. Mullan in his note on the depressed and backward classes in Assam classed the ‘tea-garden castes’ as Hindu exterior castes that were entitled to certain benefits:

Coolies in Assam form however a separate class of the population no matter what caste or tribe they belong to, and hence it seems best to treat all cooly castes and tribes under one heading for all have one common characteristic and that is, in Assam a cooly is always a cooly and whether he works on a garden or whether he has left the garden and settled down as an ordinary agriculturist, his social position is nil. From the point of view of Assamese society, a person belonging to any cooly caste or tribe is a complete outsider and is as exterior as any of the indigenous castes. I have classed them as exterior. Indeed from many points of view, the social position of coolies and ex-coolies is worse than any class in the province, they are educationally terribly backward, they have no recognized leaders or associations to press their claims or to work for their social advancement, they are foreigners to the country...

However, Mullan’s thesis that envisaged ‘depressed caste’ status for all tea and ex-tea garden workers was nullified by the creation of separate labour constituencies for tea garden workers and inclusion of ex-tea garden groups in the general electorate. The Assam Government in its comments on the Lothian Committee Report agreed that only the Hindu exterior castes as

100 Bimal J. Dev & Dilip K. Lahiri, *Cosmogony of Caste and Social Mobility in Assam*, Delhi, 1984, p. 66.

101 *Report of the Lothian Committee*, Govt. of Assam, Shillong, 1932, p. 222
enumerated by Mullan should be treated as depressed. The Lothian Committee had not included the tea garden castes in the list of depressed castes although a majority of its members had favoured their inclusion. While most of them could be classed either as Hindu exterior castes or as aborigines, they were not given such status for electoral purposes owing to their scattered location, and because they had little or nothing in common with those indigenous to Assam and belonging to these categories. As payers of land revenue and chowkidari tax, ex-tea workers had a vote in the general constituencies. But they were not entitled to separate representation.

The ex-tea garden castes were excluded from the 'Scheduled' category despite the government's recognition that most of them were classed as such in their home provinces and were more depressed than any of the indigenous exterior castes of Assam. The stand of the Indian Franchise Committee that only local Hindu exterior castes should be considered as 'depressed' in Assam was untenable as the Bengal list had included non-indigenous castes, e.g., Ghasi, and even included Mundas, Hos and Oraons who were aboriginal tribes rather than castes, among the depressed castes. The real reason for the exclusion of ex-tea garden castes from political concessions was that they had neither leaders nor any organization to forward their cause, and the European lobby did not see much reason to promote their interests in the government.

On the eve of the Assam Depressed Classes Conference on 13 February 1934, Chanoo Kharia, the first matriculate of the tea labour

102 Ibid.
community approached the representative of the Depressed Classes in the Assam Franchise Committee. While condemning the attitude of the local high castes who considered the ex-tea garden groups as nothing but untouchables, he said that they had permanently settled in Assam by adopting the language and customs of the province. In the conference, Sonadhar Das Senapati highlighted 'the serious grievance of these unfortunate people' and observed:

Their caste fellows who live in the same locality with only a line of demarcation of garden land will enjoy the special labour seats and their maternal and paternal relations in their home districts will enjoy the 'depressed' seats, but they themselves will be left to the general electorate without any special privileges for no fault of their own. Ex-tea garden coolies are four and a half lakh in the Assam valley and half a lakh in the Surma valley—most of them, it is believed are exterior Hindu castes.  

The conference recommended the inclusion of ex-tea garden 'coolies' in the list of Scheduled Castes in Assam. The very object of the recommendation was to raise the ratio of Depressed Classes in Assam to the total population so that they could get a greater share or appointments in public service. However, the majority of the garden castes were totally ignorant of their status and had absolutely no part in the agitation for separate representation for depressed classes in Assam. The Secretary to the Governor of Assam therefore remarked,

Because they are silent, it is all the more incumbent on Government to intervene for their protection.  

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The Governor however was unwilling to reopen the issue of exclusion of the ex-tea garden labour from the category of depressed classes although he admitted that it was not "strictly logical". He sought to justify his stand saying that the communal award as modified by the Poona Pact was a final act.

Sonadhar Das Senapati, the President of the Assam Depressed Classes Association referred the issue to Mahatma Gandhi for his intervention, saying that the inclusion would not necessarily call for a revision in the allocation of Council seats, at least during the first term of the revised and reconstituted council. However, he wanted proportionately higher percentage of services, scholarships and reserved seats in the municipal and local boards on account of the possible addition to their numerical strength. Gandhi gave his blessings to Senapati "to have the ex-tea garden coolie question settled" as he wished. Gandhi further observed:

I quite agree with you that their inclusion ought not to be used now or hereafter for increasing the representation of Harijans. If the increase or decrease in the number of Harijans is used for regulating the number of representatives, very dangerous results are likely to follow.

However, Gandhi's support to the stand taken by Senapati bore no fruit as the government declined to pursue the issue any further.

Thus the omission of ex-tea garden castes from the lists of Scheduled Castes and Aboriginal Tribes remained a constitutional anomaly, which was not rectified even in the post-colonial period. On the other hand, the

105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
reservation of seats for the tea workers' representatives in the provincial legislature was also done away with in Independent India. In later years, the U.N. Dhebar Commission observed,

The Government of Assam has consistently opposed any change in their status on the ground that it would disturb the local political picture.  

The Lakar committee has made a similar observation:

It is unfortunate to note that the state government of Assam which is responsible for descheduling these tribes in free India, has been consistently opposing their inclusion as Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe on the ground that it would seriously disturb the local political scene.

The point is further stressed by the A.K. Chanda Committee, which says:

The committee has accepted the overwhelming note that the Scheduled Tribes who have migrated from Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa and settled down in Assam should be recognized as the Scheduled Tribes... there is no change in the social conditions of the persons who migrated in large numbers from one state to another and settled in the same place. The labourers had gone to Assam in large numbers some years back. They have carried along with them and retained the tribal characteristics and their way of life is the same. These tribes were recognized even in Assam before 1947. But after 1947, these tribes were descheduled, not because of any principle but purely on political ground... the (state) government wants to perpetuate the ignorance, backwardness, poverty of the tribal people, only because that will disturb the political pattern in the state. This objection is not valid and is against the principle of social justice and social equity.

Bhattacharya blames Assamese chauvinism for denying to the tea workers their legitimate right of inclusion in the SC/ST lists with the aim of reserving these categories solely for indigenous castes and tribes:

They reveal the nature of chauvinism in its ugliest aspect. The 'coolie bongal' or 'coolie foreigner' of long Assamese usage— are Assamese alone when it comes to Census enumeration... but when it comes to their legitimate rights,
don't give them anything. Instead take away even what the British imperialists were forced to concede. 111

A difference of opinion seems to exist between the tribal and non-tribal sections of tea workers and ex-tea garden community regarding their inclusion in the list of SC/ST. The plantation way of life does not distinguish between tribal and non-tribal workers, and has little similarity with the conditions of their brethren in their places of origin. Their social life is determined in a way peculiar to the plantations and hierarchy amongst them is based mainly on the allotment of work by the management. The argument put forward by those of non-tribal origin for inclusion of all tea garden castes/tribes in the SC/ST lists is based on the assumption that the plantation life being equally oppressive for all workers, and the social position of all ex-tea workers being similar, they are equally entitled to the benefits of reservation.

Yet most of the workers have retained their original caste/tribe identifications and many of their beliefs, including the notions of caste hierarchy that their ancestors had carried over from their native places. The caste ranking that develops among workers in the plantation environment is rather vague because of the heterogeneous composition of the labour force, and each caste or tribal group may have its own version of social ranking. For example, the opinion on whether a Ghasi is superior to a Chik Baraik depends on whether the question is addressed to a Ghasi or a Chik Baraik, as each would claim a higher status. Caste and tribal groups are intertwined in such a

ranking, and a sharp division is not found between tribals and non-tribals on a plantation. Outside the plantation too, the socio-economic conditions of ex-tea garden workers is similar, and the surrounding population views them as a homogeneous group, though their caste/tribe identifications are found to assume greater importance among themselves.

At present all tea and ex-tea garden people have been included in the list of OBC as per the Mandal Commission Report and in the State Government's list of Most Backward Classes. If those who are regarded as SC/ST in their places of origin are given the same status in Assam, then those among the 'tea tribes' who are not of SC/ST background would remain as OBC in Assam. The main bodies representing tea workers as a whole such as the ACMS and the ATTSA (which also represents ex-tea garden people) advocate inclusion of the entire tea community in the SC/ST list. But those organizations which are more exclusivist in the sense of being constituted solely by people from tribal background, such as the adivasi organizations (e.g., the Adivasi Council of Assam and the AASAA) do not favour this view.

Some scholars have also lent support to the latter viewpoint:

Within the limitations of the present discourse, it may be concluded that the tea and ex-tea labour, in view of their relative backwardness socio-economic spheres, may be considered for some special constitutional facilities, but scheduling may be considered only on the basis of their individual affiliation to the particular tribe/caste; status of S.T., or S.C., may be recognised depending upon their actual status in this respect in their state of origin.  

The 18th annual conference of the ACA at Udmari near Nagaon (19-21 May 2000) and the AASAA delegation that met the Prime Minister in

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December 1999 reiterated the adivasis' demand that those tribes which are regarded as STs in their states of origin should be given the same status in Assam.\textsuperscript{113} The Central Government seemed to have virtually conceded this demand as the Union Minister of State for Water Resources, and Assam BJP leader, Bijoya Chakraborty while addressing the 19\textsuperscript{th} State-Level General Conference of the Adivasi Council on March 6, 2001, announced that the Adivasi people living in Assam prior to Independence would soon be accorded SC status, and that the proposal for effecting the required constitutional amendment had already been forwarded to the Prime Minister.\textsuperscript{114} However, this might have been just a stance to influence voters before the state assembly elections, as the necessary official notification in this regard is yet to be issued.

In our field survey, we found that the demand for SC/ST reservation among tea workers is found to be popular and widespread, though some of those demanding it are not aware of the fact that tea tribes in Assam enjoy OBC status at present. Most of those who are aware of the tea tribes' OBC status said that it entitles them to certain benefits including reservation in recruitment to government jobs and admission to educational institutions. They said that SC/ST reservation would entitle them to more benefits, but mostly could not specify the advantages. The common belief among a good number of them is that it is much easier to gain admission in educational institutions and scholarships, to get various types of financial assistance from

\textsuperscript{113} The Sentinel, 30.5.2000, p. 2; The Sentinel, 27.12.99, p. 2; The Sentinel, 13.3.2001, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{114} The Sentinel, 7.3.2001, p. 1.
the government and to get government jobs with SC/ST reservation as there is much more competition for various benefits within OBC category than within ST or SC category. They said that advanced sections of Assamese society were included in OBC category in Assam and even in SC category, so ST status is preferable and appropriate for the backward tea tribes. A few said that such reservation would enable tea tribe candidates to contest elections in constituencies reserved for SC/ST.

The issue of S.C./S.T. reservation for ‘tea tribes’ or ‘adivasis’ in Assam is potentially explosive as it contains the seeds of latent social conflict. Some members of the community believe that the constitutional lumping together of different castes and tribes may in the long run prove to be counterproductive as it may disturb the “apparent homogeneity, unity, peace and tranquillity among them” and “lead to internal tension between the constituent communities”:

Actual problems are likely to develop when the question of identifying the required or desired number of beneficiaries of beneficiaries will arise for certain schemes meant for the Scheduled Tribes. Problems may crop up at different levels: between tea and ex-tea, and also between the different ethnic groups... The ex-tea labour communities have already settled permanently in various revenue villages and are enjoying a relatively better socio-economic condition. When they will be deriving benefits at par, they may be considered as privileged ones by their counterparts, still in tea gardens... Besides, there is every possibility of generation of some dissatisfaction among some identical and relatively backward castes outside the fold of tea culture who are not enjoying any special constitutional facilities for their overall development.\(^\text{115}\)

Significantly, many of those claiming to be ST in their places of origin said that only those tea workers who are ST in their place of origin should be

\(^{115}\) R.K. Kar, “Ethnicity among the Tea Labourers of Assam”, op. cit., p. 118
included in the ST list in Assam also. While nearly all the workers identified themselves as members of 'tea tribes', and said that the ex-tea garden workers were also 'tea tribes', consciousness of adivasi identity was found mainly among those who claimed to be S.T. in their place of origin, and many who claimed to be of non-tribal origin vehemently denied that they could be termed as adivasis. However, those claiming to be either SC, OBC, or non-SC/ST/OBC (general category) in their places of origin mostly preferred that all tea and ex-tea garden workers in Assam be given specifically ST status as tea tribes rather than SC status, irrespective of their constitutional status in their place of origin. This has also been the position of the ACMS, which has warned that if the tea labourers are not included in the SC/ST lists, "it may be difficult to contain the youth of the tea labour community". The ACMS General Secretary explained that all tea workers are equally backward due to historical reasons, and it would be unwise to divide them—on lines of tribal/non-tribal origin in the matter of assigning constitutional concessions.

Considering the present political situation in Assam and the social distance between the tea worker community and the indigenous tribals already included in ST category in Assam, it can be inferred that any move to include tea tribes in the ST list would meet severe opposition from the indigenous tribals, especially if this is done without regard to the constitutional status of various caste/tribal groups among tea tribes in their places of origin. This is because a good number of those considered as the

116 The Assam Tribune, 26.2.99, p. 6
117 Interview with Madhusudan Khandait, Dibrugarh, December 1999.
tea tribes in Assam belong neither to SC nor to the ST categories in their respective home states and they are regarded as the ‘advanced’ section among the ‘tea tribes’. The All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU) has already declared that it would be averse to the inclusion of Adivasis and Koch-Rajbongshis in the ST list of Assam unless the reservation quota for ST is increased from the present 10%. The ABSU leaders said that it would be a better idea to include these communities, which are presently considered as OBC, in a separate category so as not to harm the interests of the Bodos and other tribal groups who are ST at present. Those included at present in the SC category in Assam are also likely to protest the proposed inclusion of the tea tribe people in the SC list as announced by the Union Minister mentioned above. Thus the issue of inclusion of all or part of the ‘tea tribe’ people in Assam in the SC/ST lists has proved to be a thorny issue in the state’s political scene, which the politicians find safer to avoid, despite pressure from organizations representing the ‘tea tribes’.

**Conclusion:**

Social life of the plantation workers is mainly confined within the plantation. Although significant differences exist among the workers in terms of language, religion and culture, they have developed a sense of affinity through mutual adjustments, and often present themselves to the outside world as a single community:

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119 Ibid
The inter-caste understanding developed to some extent due to mutual help and trust has widened their attitude and outlook towards a common socio-economic life. Because of such a growing feeling of commonness in their social outlook, they like to call themselves as tea tribes to the outside world rather than to show the identity of their separate castes and tribes.\textsuperscript{120}

The standardization brought about by the homogenizing effects of plantation life has done away with much of the distinctive lifestyles of the ethnic migrant groups constituting the tea labour force and has led to minimization of internal variations among them. This brings their 'tea labour' identity to the fore in their interactions with other sections of population in the state. Their economic specialization sets them apart from other segments of the labour class in the state, and this divide is reinforced by ethnic consciousness. In fact, the term 'labour' is used in the sense of a social category in Assam to refer to the society of tea and ex-tea garden workers, a practice that is today much resented by members of the ex-tea garden worker community. Thus at the level of social interaction and political activity a conflict between ethnicity and class-consciousness is evident, insofar as class unity between labour in various sectors including industry and agriculture is restrained by ethnic factors.

Regarding the tea workers' interaction with the wider society, we could observe that the average tea worker spends most of his or her time inside the plantation where one stays and works. The gardens usually have their own markets, primary schools and dispensaries; hence the workers do not have much need to venture out of the garden. We could come across elderly workers, especially women, who have rarely ventured out of the garden and

\textsuperscript{120} Bhupen Saikia, op. cit., p. 221
its vicinity throughout their lives. Only on social functions like marriage, they may have occasion to visit some other garden or ex-tea worker village. Therefore there is little scope for them to have much social interaction with people outside their gardens. Moreover the plantation, although located in the countryside, does not blend into the traditional rural setting as its mode of organization and hierarchy differs from that of the surrounding villages, and economic linkages between them are very limited. The traditions, beliefs and other cultural attributes of the migrant tea workers, in particular the adivasis, also differ significantly from that of their rural neighbours. This leads to a difference in the world-views of the two communities.

The process of integration that has developed between the migrant tea worker community and the indigenous society in the valley owes its origin to deliberate efforts of enlightened individuals of both communities at the local level. The ex-tea garden worker community has served an important role in this respect. Another contributor to this process has been the growth of educational institutions in the garden areas, where the children of tea workers can not only learn about the wider world, but also can interact with other children and get to know about the society surrounding them. The trade unions and socio-cultural organizations that have taken shape among the tea workers have been initiated and developed either by outsiders, including the ex-tea garden workers, or by children of tea workers who have managed to gain higher education. Social change among the tea workers has occurred slowly but steadily bringing about an improvement in their social and political conditions. Their search for social dignity and rise of political awareness has
important consequences for the political situation in the state as a whole. We shall discuss some of these aspects in our next chapter.