CHAPTER - V
CONCLUSION

In his article *The Looted Labour*¹, Samir Tanti, discusses issues relating to the exploitation of the labourers by the management. He has rightly observed that, the wage structure and amount of bonus received by the workers in the gardens of Assam are much lower than that received by the garden workers elsewhere in the Country. High rates of illiteracy and lack of political power have resulted in a situation where the labourers do not have any bargaining power. The political parties as well as the Government give promises from time to time but these promises are rarely kept.

Apart from their major contributions to the tea industry, the tea tribes are one of the primary producers of the state. They are cultivators, producing both cash crops and food crops. A large number also make a living by rearing livestock and poultry. Unfortunately, the tea tribes by and large are still educationally and economically very backward. The section of people among them who have moved out of the gardens is very small. The majority still live in the garden leading deplorable lives.²

The aspirations of the people are limited. They are satisfied with whatever they have in terms of food, housing, rations, education and health facility. When

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¹ Tanti, Samir *The Looted Labour*, The Assam Tribune, May 3, 2006, p-4
they have the money they spend lavishly but when faced with monetary crisis they do not hesitate to sell off their material goods at whatever price is offered.

Apart from the Labour Plantation Act, 1951, many other Acts have been enacted since 1947 for the upliftment of tea workers. The State Government has also launched schemes for the development of the people, but the implementation of these schemes in garden areas, has been very slack.

The labourers came from various parts of India having their own culture and traditions and comprise of more than 100 different castes. Most of them belonged to tribal areas and are generally referred to as tea garden and Ex-tea garden labourers. In course of time, they gradually assimilated themselves into a single whole. They have a common language known as ‘sadri’ or ‘sadari’ which serves as a link language among them. The All Tea Tribes Students Association (ATTSA), has been urging upon Government of India to provide adequate facilities for the maintenance and preservation of their unique culture by broadcasting them through Radio and Television in sadri language, as most of the children use their own language at home.

Educational backwardness is an important obstacle in the development of tea garden labourers. Most tea gardens usually have Primary schools up to class-

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4 Memorandum presented to Prime Minister of India by ATTSA, New Delhi, on 13.12.1998
IV. Very few gardens have Middle and High school in the gardens. As a result most of the children do not continue their studies and take up work in the garden. However, with changing times the value of education is being recognized and many workers now want to send their children to schools.5

The Assam Tea Tribe Students’ Association (ATTSA) has demanded among others, the inclusion of all garden schools under Government of Assam, opening of pre-primary school, hostel accommodation for students in every district and sub-division and establishment of libraries in tea areas. Except for a few Government controlled schools in certain districts like Sivasagar, the student-teacher ratio is not what is prescribed in the Plantation Labour Act 1951. At present the Sarba Siksha Abhijan Mission has been trying to fulfill the condition. The ATTSA has also been demanding the adoption of venture schools of garden areas by the State Government. Due to non availability of crèches the elder children are compelled to look after the younger ones at home or work sites. This is the main reason for growing illiteracy in garden areas. Children are the main victims of negligence, exploitation, abuse and ill treatment in the garden society. They suffer from malnutrition and other physical and mental deficiencies. The tragedy is that they are not even aware of their basic rights.

To create economic prosperity among the people, various Government schemes such as Swarnajyonti Gram Swa Rozgar Yojana (SGSY), The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), Chief Minister’s Swo-Niyojon Yojana

5 Interviewed with Ramesh Kumar,(aged-34), a tea labour at Naharhabi Tea Garden,dtd 8/7/06
(CMSNY), etc. have been introduced, but due to lack of correct information and illiteracy, most workers are, unable to comprehend the details. As the wages are low, the workers eagerly wait for the yearly bonus which always becomes an issue of confrontation between the management and the workers during the Durga Puja festival when the bonus is usually given. The management provides the workers with weekly rations but many respondents reported that the provisions were of poor quality. The workers have no excess land to cultivate, so they are basically dependent on rations provided by the management.

During the observation and discussions with local people, it was noticed that though the unemployed youth want to do business or establish themselves as entrepreneurs, the lack of proper guidance and availability of bank loans against mortgage of property is the basic problem. Having no other alternative, they are forced to engage themselves in daily hazira work outside the garden.

Basically the society of the tea garden is a mixture of various cultures of different castes and tribes. However, over a period of time a new culture known as ‘cha bagania Sanskriti’ has evolved subsequent to the assimilation of Tea Tribes. They observe the various festivals. Socially, the labourers also assimilate with the local peasantry. The Ex-tea garden labourers live outside the gardens and hence it is easy for them to mix with the Assamese mainstream, but the garden workers are

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6 Rations given to permanent workers and their family members only. @ Rice and Wheat (12 days) Per Adult- 3.200 gms each item, Children upto 12 yrs @ 1/2 kg. The Every year people died not less than 25 due to Gastroenteritis and Dihorrea, due to poor condition of ration year people died not less than 25 due to Gastroenteritis and Dihorrea, due to poor condition of ration.
generally isolated from the mainstream, though they are not averse to having relations with the outside World.  

Most tea garden workers are addicted to alcohol, though many do realise its evil effects. They also realise that this was the main cause for their social backwardness. 

Women constitute the majority of the tea plantation workers in Assam. All facilities are, however, available only to the permanent female workers and their children. If the worker is a casual labour, then she is entitled neither free medical treatment nor subsidized rations. Most women also have no idea about family planning.  

Empowerment of women is necessary in the gardens. The casual labourers are generally seasonal. They want to improve their economic and social status by being involved in various schemes launched by Government through the Tea Welfare Board of Assam. Due to gender differences, male counterparts are not willing to educate women in tea gardens. Sonal De Desai observed that, "parents' reluctance to educate daughters has its roots in the situation of women. Parents have several incentives for not educating their daughters, for most are of the view

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7 An interview with a tea labour, Dudh Nath Ghasi, aged 30 years, Rajmai Tea Estate, was asked, whether he approved matrimonial or other friendly relations with people outside his community and he eagerly answered positively, dtd 31.3.07
that education of girls brings no returns to parents and that their future roles being mainly reproductive and perhaps, agricultural labour require no formal education."

The situation of the tea garden youth is no better. The lack of parental care, education, adequate nutrition, recreational facilities etc. have all contributed towards his social dysfunctioning. They are frustrated and restless as most of them are unemployed. Without education, they have few options so far as jobs are concerned and therefore are forced to stay in the gardens. Few have ventured out but the majority becomes a reservoir of workforce that is harnessed for economic development of the tea industries. The depressed economic, social and cultural conditions in the tea plantations have had adverse effects on the youth, which is reflected in their behaviour within the family and outside. Due to lack of education they are not equipped to face the problems of the outside world and as a result they suffer from an inferiority complex. The Tea Employees Welfare Board has extended considerable help to these unemployed youth in getting trained in certain vocational courses, but lack of fund is often a severe constraint. The youth with even a little education are not interested in the garden work.\footnote{Mirdha, Nitu. 27yrs. informed that educated youth are given the task of a labour, such as withering, spraying on tea bushes, draining etc. Dtd. 17.05.2007.} Realizing the dichotomy of their situation, they react against the policies of the management, sometimes in an aggressive manner.

The tea garden community believes that if all the clauses of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 are implemented, their condition would improve considerably. We have observed that health care facilities, sanitation, water supply, electricity
facilities and educational facilities are the prime concern of these people. All of these are in a deplorable condition in most tea gardens. Moreover, many remote gardens are not even easily accessible because of poor communication network.

A trade union organization like Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangha is a forerunner for the welfare of tea garden workers. But most of the time, it has been noticed that, this organization is working for the management against the aspirations of the oppressed people. The people who were interviewed feel that the Sangha should give more emphasis on the full fledged implementation of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. The Assam Tea Tribe Student Association (ATTSA) also has many demands for the fulfillment of the aspirations of tea labourers. Their basic demands include welfare activities and social security measures like, supply of fresh drinking water facility, sanitation, housing, electricity, proper education facilities, appointment of welfare officers from eligible candidates of tea and Ex-tea garden labourers, appointment of educated tea garden youths in managements, approval of Permanent Residential Certificates to garden labourers, distribution of lands among people that fall under the Ceiling Land Act. Another important demand is the inclusion of tea garden people under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution as Schedule Tribe. This has been a standing demand of the ATTSA. Further, there are also demands for a Directorate for Tea Tribes, establishment of museum and cultural complex, development of research on Tea Tribes and the award of literary
pensions and other national awards such as *Padmashree, Padmabhusan*, to eminent persons from amongst them.

Politically, these people have been one of the most exploited sections since independence. Every election since 1947 has seen a high voter turnout, with the majority of votes being cast in favor of the Congress. This is not due to political awareness in them, rather political maneuvering by the leaders. Prior to elections many welfare measures are promised to these people. Most are forgotten once elections are over. In recent times therefore, student bodies have tried to prevent political activists from entering the gardens for campaigning or other electoral activities. But they have not been very successful. The garden workers pin their hopes for better life and economic prosperity on their elected representatives.

The participation of women in trade unions or politics is very low. Women are hardly conscious of political affairs which are generally dominated by men. Vulimiri Ramalingaswami\textsuperscript{10}, believes that since they are backward, educationally and less conscious politically. However much a mother may love her children, it is all about impossible for her to provide high quality child care if she herself is poor and oppressed, illiterate and uninformed, anemic and unhealthy, has five or six children lives in a slum or shanty, has neither clean water nor safe sanitation and if she is without the necessary support either from health services or from her society or from the father of the children.

\textsuperscript{10} Kurmi, G.C op.cit
The tea labourers have many aspirations, but the fact remains that, they still fall under the category of indentured labour. In the developmental process of the country they are neither counted nor are they getting adequate attention from the Management or Government. The identity crisis among the Tea Tribes has found reflection in the issues raised by ATTSA, AASA, and by a section of educated youth who have taken up the task of protecting their status. Politically, though if you amongst them have obtained a few seats in the state Assembly, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, the majority remain poor and under developed. Even if the community gets ST status in future, there is no guarantee that it would bring perceptible change in their socio-economic status. Unless NGO’s, Trade Unions, religious institutions and social workers come forward to take collective responsibility for the upliftment of labourers, their future appears very bleak.

The management should take the workers into confidence and make them feel that are an integral part of the industry. They can take positive steps by imparting technical skills to the youth so as to enable them to climb up the ladder in the hierarchy within the gardens. Adult education schemes may be introduced that parents might motivate their children to go to school. Moreover the establishment of schools within the gardens would go a long way in attracting the children. Perhaps the use of 'Sadri' as the medium of instruction at the primary level would be an added incentive.

It is also necessary to create awareness among the women on important issues like health and hygiene, social security measures and micro-credit schemes.
Women may also be empowered through vocational educational and establishment of Self Help Groups within the garden premises.

Finally, the trade unions should not succumb to the pressures of either the political parties or the management. If they are able to withstand these pressures and keep the welfare of the workers in mind, improvements are bound to occur.

Thus, we may conclude that, if the management, the trade unions and the Government want to uplift the labourers from their present condition the Labour Plantation Act 1951, must not only be amended but also fully implemented. Many laws have been enacted from time to time but most of these have remained on paper only. Unless and until there is accountability on the part of the management as well as the government, not much change is likely to occur.