Chapter IV

Role of Student Organisations in Education and Identity Assertion

History is testimony to the crucial role played by the student organisations in arousing socio-economic and political awareness among the masses. These organisations are the most influential democratic establishments which enable the youth power to shoulder the responsibility of the community and lead the movement for change in an organised way. This very concept and potentiality of the student organisation are also bound to exert profound influence among the educated younger generation of the labour community living within the tea gardens and outside the tea gardens of Assam in general and in the study area (Udalguri district) in particular being one of the most tea garden labour (Adivasi) concentrated district in Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD). The student organisation like the Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association (ATTSA) and particularly the All Adivasi Students’ Association of Assam (AASAA) has emerged as the leading organisation assuming greater social responsibility to fight for educational and other rights like a legitimate ethnic identity for their community. Despite backwardness in education and several other aspects, a number of youths from the tea garden labour community have immerged as intellectuals, scholars, writers and political leaders particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley. Literary figures like Prahlad Tasha, Deoram Tasha, Bipin Chandra Mohato, Samir Tanti, Sanjoy Tanti, Sushil Kurmi, Ganesh Kurmi, Narain Ghatowar and several others have occupied a distinct position in the society of Assam. In the study area, political leaders like Santiuse Kujur and Tulsi Kujur have emerged from the community who has been able to occupy important spaces in the political domain. The rise of educated segment in the tea garden labour community led to a quest for a separate identity within the society of Assam. They have been seeking protection under the democratic
constitution apart from participating in politics by electing several of their leaders to the legislative assembly as well as to the parliament.

Low wage, poor educational facility, poor living standard and poor health facilities are the inherent problems faced by the labourers. They are unable to get a identity with better socio-economic and educational status rather they are called with humiliating epithet. Achievement of independence and the enactment of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 have not been able to bring desirable transformation in their lives. The management restrictions on their movement outside tea gardens deprive them of their basic human right of assimilation for individual as well as societal developments. Besides exploitation during the colonial period at the hands of the European tea planters and managers, the migrant labourers have been regarded with prejudice in Assam. They are still called as coolie, Bongal, Baganiya etc. by other sections of the population of Assam. They are mostly dependent on the minimum amenities provided by the Tea Estate Management. Housing accommodation within the tea garden is one of the main reasons for their dependence on the tea gardens while for the management it is the most important means to keep the labourers submissive to the Managements. As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, they are mainly concentrated in the major tea growing districts of Assam like Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur and Tinsukia in Upper Assam, Sonitpur and Goalpara in Lower Assam, Karbi Anglong and North Cachar in Central Assam. Many of them are also scattered outside the tea gardens in the state. In BTAD, majority of the tea garden labour populations are concentrated in the study area (Udalguri district). In this chapter, both the terms like tea garden labourers and Adivasis have been used to mean the whole community comprising ninety seven heterogeneous groups as the chapter deals with the identity assertion. The chapter has been written in general context to Scheduled Tribe demand of the Adivasis in Assam particularly led by the student community.
Meagre wage has been a persistent feature associated with tea industry in Assam since its inception and has been the source of labour unrest since the colonial period. They have been placing their demand for legitimate wage, proper implementation of PLA, decent living and working conditions. The regimented working condition in the tea gardens is the stumbling block in the overall development of the labourers. The gross violation of the PLA provisions by the management has resulted in frequent labour-management tussles leading to the severe assaults and brutal killings of the tea garden owners and managers. The gruesome assassination of the owner of the MKB Tea Estate in Upper Assam, Mridul Kumar Bhattacharya and his wife Rita Bhattacharya on 26 December, 2012 is an instance of their animosity developed in them out of utter deprivation and long drawn exploitation in the hands of the owners and the managements. The Chief Minister’s statement regarding the want of 43,000 houses, 57,000 sanitary provisions, 9,392 water plants, 80 health centres, 2,209 medical officers and 150 nurses in the tea gardens of Assam reveals the management negligence regarding the welfare of the tea garden labourers.\(^1\) Moreover, 31 cases were reported to have been filed against the tea garden owners for violation related to poor health and hygiene issues of the tea garden labourers.\(^2\) However, the drawbacks of such legal actions are a nominal fine for faulty act and a short period of imprisonment of the managers or owners. Despite gross violation of the PLA provisions in the tea gardens, there has been no sincere effort made by the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) for ensuring labour welfare. It has contributed to the growing discord between labour and management.

The planters in the twentieth century failed to identify the real reasons of labour unrest. The Management in the post independence period too has not made any sincere effort to recognise the issues related to the labour unrest in the twenty first century. The labourers articulate their grievances on low wage, lack of educational facilities, poor living and

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2. ibid.
working conditions and overall exploitation but the Managements have different stories to
tell. Inspite of the substantial increase in the production and cultivation of tea, the
Managements decline to concede the legitimate wage and other minimum amenities to the
labourers rather they justify their ground considering the rising social costs on maintaining
the labour force.

The feeling of deprivation, marginalisation and exploitation has brought about a sense
of utter socio-economic insecurity among the tea garden labourers of Assam as well as in the
tea garden concentrated Udalguri district. They began to assert not only their rights as
‘workers’ but also for constitutional rights. The failure of the trade unions to bargain for
resolving various issues of the labourers and to fulfill their aspirations led to the growing
discontent of the student organisations from the community particularly the All Adivasi
Students’ Association of Assam (AASAA) against the trade unions. As the tea garden
labourers were drawn from various ethnic groups popularly termed as Adivasi in their
provinces of origin they refer to themselves as Adivasi in Assam too. Apart from the history
of strikes of the tea garden labourers for legitimate wages, bonus and against the oppressive
policies of the management since the inception of the tea industry in Assam, the tea garden
labourers of Assam have launched their movement for identity assertion which is again deep
rooted to the colonial period. Since its inception in 1996, the AASAA has been taking up
broader issues on socio-economic, educational and political aspects of the whole community
in general and various issues related to the overall welfare of the tea garden labour
community in particular. This awakening for a greater interest of the community signifies
their identity assertion. S. Karotemprel reveals the role of Christian Churches in building up a
new Adivasi identity in Assam and referred to the example of Constant Lievens how he
transformed the Adivasi community in Chotanagpur. Karotemprel states, “The Church in the
Brahmaputra Valley is, historically at least, at the service of the Adivasi Community in a
special way……..Lievens’ secret was to give back to the Adivasis a sense of dignity and self-respect which they were deprived of along with their ancestral lands by the dominant social groups”. In the wake of the movement for identity assertion, the unification of the ninety seven heterogeneous ethnic groups under a single platform is also a great challenge before the student organisations. It has also led to the emergence of several militant outfits whose common demand is the Scheduled Tribe status for the Adivasis of Assam.

The demand of Scheduled Tribe status and identity assertion of the Adivasis in Assam has not developed in isolation. The emergence of indigenous movement in India since 1990 has infused more political spirit and widened the historical consciousness of several subaltern and marginal communities. In the recent past, Assam has witnessed the incidences of a series of movements centering upon ethnic issues. Although the essence of these movements is the aspiration to articulate their respective socio-cultural identity, these are closely linked to the political aspects. The study of the Indian Administrative officials (1994) pointed out the role of political parties in fuelling ethnic unrest in the North East and the absence of policy decisions as well as failure of the political parties in establishing psycho-emotional links with the historically neglected population. H. N. Das attributes the factors like the desire for self-expression, perceived prejudices, ambitious designs of politicians and superior economic status of adjoining states etc. for the rise of sub-national and movements that centred round the ethnicity in Assam. B. Dutta holds the view that the stronger groups’ inability and unwillingness to recognise the rightful needs and aspirations of feeble ethnic groups generate

the feeling of deprivation and insecurity. Fabrication of politics with the ethnicity elements and the part played by the State along with the age old deprivation and exploitation are some of the main reasons for identity assertion.\(^7\) The discriminatory policies of the Centre also contribute in the materialisation of ethnic identities while the manipulative and divisive policies of the state lead to the inflammation of such ethnic assertions.\(^8\) Apart from the factors related to socio-economic and political discrimination and exploitations, several developments in the state (Assam) as well as in the country have motivated the Adivasis particularly the elite section of the community to assert their constitutional rights for the cause of safeguarding their homogeneous identity. With the inception of the Adivasi Mahasabha in 1938 the heterogeneous tribal groups in Jharkhand began to assert their common identity as Adivasi. The identity assertion in Jharkhand under the leadership of Jaipal Singh Munda largely influenced the Adivasis of Assam.

Their struggle for Scheduled Tribe status in Assam is not only a part of struggle of identity assertion but also a search for cultural roots and heritage.\(^10\) Their movement aspiring for a legitimate identity has persuaded them to seek the constitutional safeguards. The demand for Scheduled Tribe status by the Adivasis since the post independence period has been denied several times by the various Central bodies like the Scheduled Tribes Commission (1961), the Lokur Committee (1965), the Joint Parliamentary Committee of 1967, the Union Cabinet note prepared by the Home Ministry in 1978, the Advisory Committee on list of Scheduled Tribes in 1994 and the latest by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. The grounds for rejection were the absence of the prescribed tribal traits. Although


the Registrar General of India (RGI) was inclined to grant Scheduled Tribe status to some of the ethnic groups among the tea garden labourers, the move of the Centre was opposed not only by the tribal bodies of the state but also by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. The present chapter attempts to assess the role of student organisations in educational development of the tea garden labour community, historical process of the ‘Identity’ formation of the Adivasis and their struggle for Scheduled Tribe status as this process is closely linked to their educational status.

The tea garden labour community of the Brahmaputra Valley developed as a transplanted composite community within the surroundings of the tea gardens leading a regimented life. The large scale migration of these groups into the Brahmaputra Valley began with the establishment of the tea industry in Assam in the nineteenth century. This large labour force mostly landless peasants belonging to heterogeneous ethnic groups were recruited by the colonial planters as indentured labourers to work in the tea plantations of Assam. The planters patronised by the colonial government mobilised a large labour force from the present Jharkhand region into the tea plantations of Assam. Apart from meeting the acute labour problem in the tea plantations of Assam, the colonial government aimed to suppress and weaken the rebellious tribal elements of the region after the Santhal Rebellion of 1855 by dispersing them far from their home. They lost their land and habitations under the agrarian policies pursued by the British Colonial Government which reduced them to the status of wage labourers in the tea gardens of Assam. Many of those displaced people like Santhals, Oraons and Mundas of Chotanagpur region migrated to Assam on their own to seek their fortune. Arriving in the tea gardens of Assam they lost their respective identities. Pertinent socio-economic discriminations as well as exploitations and consequential backwardness, including education has made the tea garden labourers of Assam more restive.

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since the recent past resulting in a state of affairs of ethnic clashes like the Kokrajhar riot, 1996 and 1998, the Beltola riot in 2007.

The heterogeneous ethnic group living in the self-contained plantation setup had to undergo a process of change from distinctive to general adaptation in Assam. The planters tried to keep these labourers confined within the isolated tea gardens and disorganised while the influx of these emigrant labourers was unwelcome for the local population. Residential provisions were made to the labourers within the gardens as per the strict Industrial discipline and Management regulation but not as per ethnic considerations. Hence in a Labour line heterogeneous ethnic groups were accommodated and each Labour line remained as a separate unit in social relationship. Thus the ‘transplanted community’ of the emigrant Adivasis was separated not only from their native places as well as from the mainstream societies\textsuperscript{12} but also deprived of their original identities in their newly established regions.

The term ‘Adivasi’ literally implies aboriginals or earliest settlers.\textsuperscript{13} The term ‘Adivasi’ (aboriginal or original inhabitants) is commonly applied to refer to the tribal people in the Constitution of India and generally, these Adivasis of India are conferred the Scheduled Tribe status and special rights in the Constitution of India. Some anthropologists viewed the term ‘Tribe’ as a colonial construct of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century for the ‘indigenous’ people who were re-classified as Scheduled Tribes in the Constitution in 1950.\textsuperscript{14} The Constitution, as per Article 342, provided for certain administrative and political concessions to these groups drawing a distinction between the term ‘tribe’ as a socio-cultural entity and ‘Scheduled Tribe’ as a POLITICO-administrative category.

\textsuperscript{14} Report of the High level Committee on Socio-Economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs Government of India, 2014.
In the context of Assam the term ‘Adivasi’ is usually referred to the emigrant tea garden labourers and their descendants who were brought by the colonial planters in the nineteenth century. But they are not entitled to any privileges as Adivasi in Assam. Adivasi as collective identity for these heterogeneous groups has not been accepted universally. Some of them opine that the labour force in the Assam tea gardens belonging to the various tribes of the Chotanagpur plateau like the Mundas, the Kharias, the Hos and the Santals are often commonly called as 'Adivasis' which is not accepted by other scholars. Thomas Pullopillil advocates calling them as 'Tribals from Jharkhand. He states, “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', 'Jatis', 'Adimjatis' and 'Indigenous peoples' are interchangeable. As a suitable term to indicate these tribals is lacking, the term 'tribals from Jharkhand' has been chosen to mean the Adivasis in Assam. But the use of Jharkhand tribal cannot be applicable to the tea garden labourers who hailed from other parts of the country apart from Jharkhand region. As has been mentioned earlier, they belonged to various tribes and caste groups belonging to multi-cultural and multi-lingual backgrounds hailing from different corners of India. The development of a composite community comprising such a large variety of ethnic groups under the single social umbrella in a new socio-political setup in Assam has given them a vague social identity completely different from their counterparts in other parts of India. Under such situation, their identity construction shows a continuous process of assimilation, adjustment and rejection of the varied socio-cultural and linguistic elements. Establishment of a scientific nomenclature to this heterogeneous community in Assam has become a great problem in the post independence period. The concept of tea tribe identity for both Tea Garden and Ex-Tea Garden labourers as a social group, superseding ethnicity was

more prevalent in the Brahmaputra Valley. The articulation of the tea tribe identity had more relevancies with the political consciousness in the context of the electoral politics and constitutional safeguards to the backward social groups. It enabled the tea tribe community to produce a number of political leaders since the colonial period under the patronage of the Indian National Congress. But the tea tribe identity in absence of educational awareness has made them more vulnerable to exploitation in the hands of the management as well as in the hands of the politicians and they began to be considered merely as vote bank. Their socio-economic conditions and other aspects like education and political awareness have remained stagnant century after century. Colonial planters were mainly blamed for all kind of sufferings and backwardness of the tea garden labourers in Assam. But even after several decades of independence, no significant improvement has seen in the overall conditions of the tea garden labourers. The Adivasi identity assertion cannot be analysed in isolation without tracing the colonial background.

The biggest dilemma confronted by the Adivasis of Assam is the dearth of a legitimate identity for them. The identity tag ‘coolie’ or ‘tea tribe’ conferred to them by the colonial planters has left a legacy of a vague identity for this heterogeneous group which has deterred their overall development even after several decades of independence. Although they belonged to multi-lingual and multi-socio-cultural backgrounds, the British planters merely categorised them as ‘coolie’ (labourer). They were brought with the sole aim to work in the newly established tea plantations and induced to live together for generations under the same conditions, environment and the same roof disregarding their existence as a separate social group. Extracts from Census Report of 1931:
Coolies in Assam form, however separate classes of the population, no matter what castes or tribes they belong to, and hence it seems best to treat all coolies, castes and tribes under one heading, for all have one common characteristics and that in Assam, a coolie is always coolie and whether he work in a garden or whether he has left garden and settled down as an ordinary agriculturist, his social position is nil……. Indeed from any point of view, the social position of coolies and ex coolies is worse that any class in the province, they are educationally terribly backward, they have no recognized leaders or association to press their claims or to works or their social advancements.

However, the term ‘coolie’ has different connotations. In Tamil, the term ‘coolie’ implies tenant while in Turkey it implies slave. The labourers who were employed to work in the British colonies, farms, mines, industries under contract agreements were called ‘coolies’. But in Africa, the Europeans applied the term ‘coolie’ more offensively to denote the people of the lowest stratum and to imply all Indian people such as coolie barrister, coolie doctor, coolie professor, coolie judge, coolie magistrate etc. The Colonial government referred to them as ‘Coolie Tribe’ or ‘Tea Garden Coolie Tribe’ in the Official Records.

During the colonial period, they were conceded Tribal status under the ‘Depressed Classes’. As per the Government of India Act, 1935, four seats were reserved for the ‘Tea Garden Coolie Tribe’ (tea garden labourers) in the Provincial Council of Assam. Sanat Kumar Ahir, Chatra Gopal Karmakar, A. K. Chanda and P. M. Sarwan were the first to be elected to the reserved seats. The victory of the labour leaders and the working class awakening against the exploitation of the British provided a great impetus to the students and youths. In course of time, some of the labourers left the gardens and settled in the adjoining villages and adopted cultivation as their livelihood. The labourers who continued to work in the tea gardens came to be known as ‘Tea Tribes’ and those who came out and settled outside the tea gardens came to be called as ‘Ex-Tea Tribes’. Thus the identity of Adivasis in Assam has been associated merely with tea gardens although a number of their population are scattered outside tea

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19 ibid.
20 ibid.
gardens and those who came on their own to settle elsewhere in Assam. Nowadays, both the Tea Tribes and Ex-Tea Tribes have reasserted their common identity as ‘Adivasi’. Though no major clash took place between the tea garden labour community and other sections of society partly due to their confinement in the tea gardens and less assimilation with their neighbouring society the tea garden labour community remained almost as an alien community to the people of Assam. They were treated more or less as untouchables in the societies of Assam. But it was Mahatma Gandhi’s call to the people of Assam which brought about a change in the attitude of the people of Assam towards the tea garden labour community. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala called this culturally rich community as Na Asamiya (New Assamese) including the immigrant Bangladeshis. In the mid 20th century, the Asom Sahitya Sabha began to highlight their life and culture through publications which has helped greatly in enriching the culture of Assam. The literary body of Assam suggests calling them as Chah Bagisar Asamiya. Yet, even today they continue to face social stigma and they are called coolie, Bongali, Bagania by some sections of the population in Assam.

In the post-independence period, the discriminatory attitude of the Centre as well as the State was manifested when the Tea Tribes (or Adivasis as they call themselves) of Assam were de-scheduled in the newly framed Constitution of India under the Gopinath Bordoloi Ministry in 1951. Consequently, they have been deprived of the privileges and special rights as enjoyed by their tribal counterparts in Assam and the rest of India. Officially, they are still categorised as ‘Tea Tribe’ and ‘Ex-Tea Tribe’ in Assam but despite their poor development indicators they cannot avail any special package or privileges and reservations in jobs or educational institutions unlike other Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Constitution. Since then the search for a legitimate identity started amongst the Adivasis of Assam. The emergence of a few educated sections not only tried to organise the

heterogeneous community, to remove their backwardness and to preserve their identity but also to provide them political leadership in the democratic set-up.

The specification of tribes and tribal communities as Scheduled Tribes in Indian context in the post independence period was problematic. The Constitution of India has not referred to any criteria for recognition of a community as Scheduled Tribe. Consequently, the Government of India setup the ‘Advisory Committee on the Revision of the Lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes’ known as the ‘Lokur Committee’ in 1965 to look into this issue. Extracts from the Lokur Committee Report:

The difficulty in setting out formal criteria for defining a tribe arises from the fact that the tribes in India are, and have been for some decades; tribes in transition. The first serious attempt to list “primitive tribes” was, as in the case of depressed castes, made at the census of 1931. Subsequently, under the Government of India Act, 1935, a list of “backward tribes” was specified for the Provinces of India. The list of Scheduled Tribes was prepared in 1950 by making additions to the list of backward tribes under the Government of India Act, 1935; in considering fresh proposals for inclusion in the list, it was noted that “care was necessary in drawing up the schedule in order to ensure that communities which had been assimilated in the general population were not at this stage invested with an artificial distinctiveness as tribes, and that communities which might be regarded as tribes by reason of their social organisation and general way of life but which were really not primitive should not now newly be treated as primitive”.24

The Constitution of India in Clause (25) of article 366 states that “Scheduled Tribes means such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under article 342 (notified by the Presidential Order under Clause (1) of the article 342 of the Constitution) to be Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of this Constitution.”25

The Lokur Committee, 1965 recommended well established five criteria for identification, such as primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, excessive

shyness of contact with other communities and backwardness.26 These criteria trace the genesis from the colonial era and the term ‘tribe’ continued to be a significant identity tag and means of political articulation amongst various communities of the country (India).27 It resulted in the inclusion of many communities throughout the period since the adoption of the Constitution. In the beginning, the number of Scheduled Tribes was 212 as per the first Census of independent India in 1951 which increased to 705 as per the Census of India 2011.28

The Constitution of India assigns a special responsibility to the states for safeguarding and development of Scheduled Tribes. Regarding Scheduled Tribes and the Backward Classes, the Committee stated, “The Scheduled Tribes can also be generally ascertained by the fact that they live apart in hills, and even where they live on the plains, they lead a separate, excluded existence and are not fully assimilated in the main body of the people. Scheduled Tribes may belong to any religion. They are listed as Scheduled Tribes because of the kind of life led by them.”29 Since, tribal identity of Adivasi has been legally and constitutionally recognised; the tea garden labour community on the basis of Adivasi identity has been placing their demand for Scheduled Tribe status in Assam as their counterparts in their ancestral states like Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal and Orissa enjoy the same status.

Linguistic Identity

Language is an essential element in the development and existence of a race or a community. It gives an identity to humankind. Language barrier is one of the main reasons

28 ibid.
29 The Report of the Advisory Committee on the Revision of the Lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Government of India, Para. 11, p. 6-7.
for educational backwardness of tea garden labourers. Speaking their own mother tongues at home and learning in a different language in schools is a great problem for their children. Linguistic identity has become one of the prerequisite for the heterogeneous tea garden labour community in pursuit of their identity. Their linguistic origin traces to different language spoken regions. The regions from which they were mainly recruited are given in Table 4.1, along with the languages spoken therein.

**Table: 4.1 Language distributions in the recruiting regions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regions from which the tea garden labourers were recruited</th>
<th>Main languages spoken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purulia, Bankura, Barabhum, Medinipur etc. of West Bengal</td>
<td>Bengali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranchi, Gorakhpur, Hajaribagh, Singbhum etc. of Bihar and present Jharkhand.</td>
<td>Hindi, Bhojpuri and Magahi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilashpur, Sambalpur, Saibasa, Kalahandi, Ganjam etc. of Orissa.</td>
<td>Oriya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awadh in Uttar Pradesh, Raipur, Rampurhat, Jabalpur, etc. of Madhya Pradesh and present Chattisgarh.</td>
<td>Hindi and Magahi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vijia Nagaram, Ankapalli etc. of Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>Telegu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erstwhile Madras Presidency</td>
<td>Tamil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasik in Maharashtra etc.</td>
<td>Marathi and Telegu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Linguistically, the tea garden labourers belong to the Austro-Asiatic, Indo-European and Dravidian groups. Dravidian speaking groups include Oraon, Khond, Gond, Malpaharia etc., Austro-Asiatic (Kolarian) speaking groups comprise Munda, Ho, Santhal, Bhumij, Kharia, etc. and Indo-Aryan speaking groups include Bhuiyan, Tanti, Kurmi, Nayak, Goala etc. The heterogeneous tea garden labour groups have their respective languages and dialects such as Kurukh of the Oraons, Kharia of the Kharias, Mundari of the Mundas, Santhali of the

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Santhals etc. and dialects like Sadri, Panch Pargania, Kharta, Kurmali are predominant.\textsuperscript{31} Serving and living together for generations under the same conditions and environment on the whole, under the same roof they have adopted a link language among themselves to express and share their feelings and sufferings. This link language commonly came to be called as Sadri/Adivasiya\textsuperscript{32} or Assam Sadri, a mixture of Assamese, Hindi, Bengali and their original dialects. Sadri has been proposed as \textit{lingua franca} by some sections of the tea garden labour community in order to bring unity a sense of belonging and assert linguistic identity among the various ethnic groups residing in the tea gardens and villages in the Brahmaputra valley (excluding the Bengali origin labour population in the Barak valley). In the study district, majority of the tea garden labourers speak Sadri/Adivasiya, some of them speak Oriya, Kurux (Oraon), Mundari and Santhali (Table 3.48).

Sadri or Sadani is a main language of the Sadans in Jharkhand which formed as a link language among the Adivasis of the Chotanagpur plateau (comprising Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, parts of West Bengal and Orissa).\textsuperscript{33} The generations of indentured labourers brought from the aforesaid regions inherited Sadri as a link language among themselves in Assam. The Adivasi Sahitya Sabha asserts essential difference between Nagpuria Sadri and Assam Sadri. G. A. Grierson considered Sadri to be the admixture of Adivasi dialect and Indo-European language. He stated:

The main Aryan language of the feudatory state of Bamra, which lies to the west of Keonjha state is Oriya, most of the aboriginals speak Munda language, but some of them use a corrupt Aryan language, which is locally known as Sadri, or more correctly Sadri-kol, as is in the case of Sadri-korwa, sub-dialect of Chhattisgarhi. The word ‘Sadri’ is used when an aboriginal tribe abandons his own language and takes to an Aryan one.\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} \textit{ibid.}, p. 76.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Adivasi Sahitya Sabha (erstwhile Sadri Sahitya Sabha) in 2004 Lakhimpur Conference decided to change the nomenclature of Sadri language as Adivasiya.
\item \textsuperscript{33} P. S. Navarangi, \textit{Nagpuria Sadani Boli Ka Byakaran}, 1965, 32.
\item \textsuperscript{34} G. A. Grierson, Linguistic Survey of India (1927), Vol. V, Part II, p. 159.
\end{itemize}
However, modern researches claim Sadri as an independent language. Sadri which plays a key role in inter-tribal communication in the Chotanagpur plateau has also been adopted by the tea garden labour community as a link language in Assam.\textsuperscript{35} Some of the tea tribes like Oraons, Mudas, Santhals, Kharias etc. maintain their native tribal dialect and language. The Oraons maintain a great loyalty towards their Kurux language, the Mudas and Santhals equally maintain strong loyalty towards their own language Mundari and Santhali respectively. They use their respective languages or dialects in familial communications but for social communications they need a common language which resulted in the birth of the so called Assam Sadri/Adivasiya under the greater influence of Assamese language. Considering the importance of basic learning in mother tongue, the UNICEF, UNESCO, SCERT, Sarba Shiksha Abhijan have been publishing text books in Sadri, mainly for different adult literacy programmes. The ATTSA also insists the Central government to broadcast Adivasi programmes in Sadri through radio and televisions. The Chah Janajati Sadri Bhasa Sahitya Vikash Manch of Assam, an Adivasi socio-cultural organisation pledges to uphold Sadri and initiated Sadri writings in Assamese script.

Although some of the tribes have been maintaining their native dialects and languages; majority population irrespective of their tribe or ethnicity shows loyalty towards Sadri while a few section of the population shows language loyalty towards the Assamese, the language of the majority population of Assam. Coming into a completely new setup in Assam, acquisition of knowledge in the Assamese language along with their respective own dialects and languages became a social prerequisite for the emigrant labour population besides meeting their communicative needs. Hence, in some respects the tea garden labourers

are trilingual. However, the cause of concern is that most of the present generation Adivasis have forgotten their own dialects and tends to shift language loyalty towards mainstream language. Around 99 percent of them can speak Assamese language while less than 25 percent can speak their mother tongues.

In the crucial moment of identity crisis among the tea garden labour in Assam adoption of a common lingua franca is of utmost important to maintain unity amongst the heterogeneous group. Since emphasis has been laid by global organisations as well as national and state bodies on imparting primary education in mother tongue, it has become imperative to facilitate their children to receive basic education in their mother tongue which would help to uplift them from utmost educational backwardness. Use of Sadri is the prerequisite for communicative needs and their language loyalty towards Assamese is the precondition for societal and educational needs. A section of the tea garden labour has advocated the use of Sadri not only as a link language but also to be used in schools for primary education. However, the AASAA and other organisations have mobilised to revive and preserve Adivasi languages to uphold their original identity. As a result revival movements have been intensified. Within the multi-ethnic setting some of the ethnic groups have been maintaining their own identity and tradition. It led to the birth of some specific ethnic organisations such as All Kurux (Oraon) Sahitya Sabha, Assam Munda Mahasabha, Santhali Sahitya Sabha etc. However, through the Adivasi Mahasabha the AASAA strives to unite all the tea garden labour population in Assam.

The assertion for identity and the demand of the tea garden labourers in Assam for inclusion in the Scheduled category can be traced back to the 1930s initiated by a section of educated leaders. It was Chanoo Kheria, a great labour leader hailing from Golaghat district

who for the first time tried to uplift the tea garden labourers of Assam. He was also the first matriculate from the community in Assam and became a member of the Indian National Congress party in 1934. He was also the first to submit a memorandum to the Assam Franchise Committee in 1934 for inclusion of the Tea Garden and Ex-Tea Garden Tea Tribes of Assam in the Depressed Classes. He was also elected as the Member of Legislative Assembly in 1946 and entrusted with the responsibility of the newly formed ‘Tea Cell’ meant for the welfare of the labourers in Assam. He is also credited for his contribution in the formation of the premier labour organisation of Assam, the ACMS in 1946 supported by the Indian National Congress. He was the founder president of the ACMS and tried to organise the workers in the tea gardens of Upper Assam.

Prabhudan Meyrick Sarwan, an enlightened leader of the tea garden labour community also played a crucial role in awakening and organising the tea garden labour community in Assam. His efforts in organising his fellowmen led to the formation of the Chotanagpuri Association, the first tea garden labour organisation in Assam in 1939 on the line of the Jharkhand movement. In order to expand the organisational framework to non-Chotanagpuri tea garden labourers, he renamed the organisation as the Bongali Coolie Sabha. But the very name of the Sabha was largely denigrated by a section of the mainstream society which he retaliated by renaming the organisation as the Letera Coolie Bongali Sabha (Dirty Coolie Bongali Association). But the change in the name of the organisation did not bring any change in the attitude of the local populace. Then, he evolved an alternative measure to organise and unite the labourers. Consequently, the first ever trade union organisation of the

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42 ibid.
tea garden labourers known as the ‘Assam Tea Labourers’ Association’ was formed in 1939 which could draw the attention of Congress and the Communist parties. Moreover, he in association with the leaders and organisations of other subaltern group and depressed communities such as the Ahom Association and the Miri Association submitted a memorandum to Lord Mountbatten, Governor General of India, on June, 1947 seeking protection for their communities as minorities. The memorandum stated, “We rejoice with the major communities that cession of sovereignty to India is going to take place in a couple of months. At this moment, our only hope is that so far as we are concerned, a pledge of protection for our communities as minorities will be honoured by the prospective successor authority…..”

The birth of the Adivasi Council/Association in 1955 gave a new turn to their demand of Scheduled Tribe status. The Council tried to unite the tea garden labourers and raised the demand of Scheduled Tribe status for them in Assam. An extract from the Tribal Movement in India states: “An Association of some section of Tea Garden Labourers and tribes has been formed with the name of ‘Adivasi Association’ is an effort to pursue their goal of scheduling”. The Council also made efforts to provide employment opportunities to the unemployed youths of their community. It was Jaipal Singh Munda, a member of Scheduled Tribe Identification Committee who took the initiative to organise them to fight for their scheduling and his Assam visit gave a new impetus in the identity assertion of the tea garden labourers of Assam. The leaderships of Francis Hans, President of the Council and its Secretary I. S. Ekka and several others like Mathius Tudu at Srirampur, Michael Lugun at

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43 ibid.
44 ibid.
Dhekiajuli, Shyril Topno at Dibrugarh etc. strengthened the Council. Jaypal Singh Munda was invited to Assam in 1958 and he organised several public meetings to mobilise and bring awareness among them to assert their tribal identity. Consequently, their assertion for Scheduled Tribe status assumed a new turn. In 1975, the Council submitted memorandums in demand of Scheduled Tribe status to the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and other Members of Parliament. After several decades of their effort, at the initiative of the Adivasi Council, nine tribes of the Adivasis were proposed to be conferred Scheduled Tribe status in the State’s (Assam) list. During the Ministry of Prafulla Kumar Mahanta (1987), Barki Prasad Telenga, the then Labour Minister held a meeting with Tea Tribe organisations and the members of the Adivasi Council at the Janata Bhawan. But the meeting resulted in dismal failure due to opposition of the majority members for not inclusion of all the tribes in the Scheduled Tribe list. Some of the ATTSA and ACMS leaders vehemently opposed the move of the Adivasi Council. In later periods, due to the lack of proper leadership the Adivasi Council began to lose its stronghold. However, such initiatives and awakenings spread to the present study area (Udalguri district) very late after the formation of the ATTSA in 1987 in the then undivided Darrang district.

**Labour Organisations**

The existence of workers’ organisation in any industry is an indication of the consciousness of the workers about their rights and helps in the fulfillment of their demands in a democratic way. Trade unions also promote labour-management relations and play a vital role as bargaining agent between the management and the labourers. A closer coordination between the management and trade union can ensure the workers their legitimate share of industrial profits. But organisational consciousness and formation of unions among the tea

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48 D. Tasha, “Mahamati Santosh Kumar Topno” in *Santosh Kumar Topno, Jiwan aru Karma*, p. 90.
garden labourers developed quite late particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley. Till 1939 no trade unions of tea garden labourers emerged in Assam. This was largely due to lack of education, ignorance and the Planters prohibition on labourers’ mobility and any kind of gathering. As a result, their grievances remained unrepresented and without articulation.

There was no well organised labour organisation in Assam during the colonial period to safeguard the interests of the workers. The planters never wanted an organised labour in the gardens while they themselves were well organised under the banner of the Indian Tea Association (ITA) formed in 1881 which aimed to safeguard their (Planters’) common interest. The tea garden labourers could not fight unitedly due to lack of awareness and coordination among themselves. Yet, labour unrests ensued often in the form of strikes at the individual garden level since the inception of the tea industry in Assam. The labourers carried out protests against the planters’ exploitation without much fear until the enactment of the Workmen’s Breach of Contract Act in 1859. The ignorant and poor labourers never realised that a strike against the planters meant a strike against British imperialism. The first instance of labour strike took place in 1848 when the labourers surrounded the Company’s Office demanding three months arrears. This demand was pacified on the Company’s assurance to release arrears within three months on regular basis. In 1859, the Kachari labourers also surrounded the bungalow of James Mekentose, the superintendent of Assam Tea Company demanding justice for their fellow labour who was accused by the Company and inflicted punishment with fine. They also demanded increase of wage and continued strike for three days. But the planters suppressed the strike by imprisonment of some active labourers and dismissing several labourers from their jobs. Labour strikes continued in the tea gardens in protest against the atrocities committed by the managers. Extracts from the Report of Sir Henry Cotton:

There is a growing tendency in the Coolie class to resent a blow by striking a blow in return and this soon leads to serious results, as the Coolies act in combination among themselves, and armed with formidable weapons—the implements of their industry; but this very tendency exercises a healthy influence in restraining the hot-headed and impetuous European assistant from raising his hand against them.\textsuperscript{50}

Similarly, Bampfyld Fuller (Lt. Governor of Assam, 1902-06) stated, “There was bound to be some revolt, and on badly managed gardens riots were not very infrequent. They sometimes ended in the burning of manager’s bungalow.”\textsuperscript{51} Labour unrest continued and got momentum during the freedom struggle. Incidences of labour unrests are evident from the available Official Reports. In 1920-21, there were several instances of labour unrest in the Tea Gardens of the Doom-Dooma Company in Lakhimpur district (that included present Dibrugarh and Tinsukia), at Monabari Tea Estate in Darrang district (present Sonitpur district) and at Halem Tea Estate in the Assam Valley.\textsuperscript{52} The rioting labourers resorted to violent means like assaults on the managers and other officials. Instances of assault on the European assistants, Managers and damaging Manager’s bungalows were reported to have occurred at several Tea Estates like Raidang Tea Garden, at Pabhojan Tea Estate and at Dhoedaam Tea Estate in Lakhimpur in 1920, at Halem Tea Garden in Darrang district in 1921 etc.\textsuperscript{53} The common feature of these strikes was a demand for higher wage- a minimum daily wage of 8 annas for men and 6 annas for women.\textsuperscript{54} The planters were able to induce the labourers to resume tea garden works in all the cases. Mr. Laine, Deputy Commissioner of Darrang stated economic reasons to be the sole cause of the labour unrest.\textsuperscript{55} However, no

\textsuperscript{52} Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1921-22, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{ibid.}, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{ibid.}, p. 18.
such tragic incident like the Chargola Exodus (1921)\textsuperscript{56} in the Barak Valley occurred in the Assam Valley.

But, incidence of labour unrest was almost absent in the surveyed Tea Estates during that period as is evident from the available list of witnesses examined by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1921-22.\textsuperscript{57} Mr. D. M. Somerville, Superintendent of the Hattigarah Division of the Consolidated Tea and Lands Company had stated that there was no disturbance of labour unrest on the tea gardens in Mangaldai division, in the same way, Mr. R. Bowder, Assistant, Hattigarah Tea Estate revealed that there was no unrest in Hattigarah.\textsuperscript{58} Mr. J. R. Fraser, Manager, Attareekhat Tea Estate stated, “I have now been 11 years in Mangaldai…..There has been no unrest of any sort in this district (erstwhile Darrang and present Udalguri district) as far as I am aware.”\textsuperscript{59} Further Mr. F. Coutts, Manager, Paneery Tea Estate remarked, “I have been 15 years in Tea, and all my time has been spent in the Darrang district. I have personally had no experience of unrest in this part of the district, not even as a result of the rise in prices. The gardens have so far been unaffected by the political agitation prevailing in the district”.\textsuperscript{60} Likewise, Mr. G. S. Ross, Manager, Dimakuchi Tea Estate revealed, “I think there has been very little unrest in this district-in fact practically, none amongst the coolies. Political agitation has not affected the gardens.\textsuperscript{61} Mr. A. Simmonds, Manager, Orangajuli Tea Estate also stated, “I have not noticed any feeling of unrest on any of the tea gardens I have been connected with. I do not think coolies have had

\textsuperscript{56} In 1921, during the course of the Non-Cooperation Movement, the tea garden labourers in Chargola Valley led a strike demanding for an increase in wage. Consequently, Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code was executed in the surroundings of the tea garden areas and thousands of labourers left the tea gardens on 3 May, 1921 and marched to the nearest railway station to return their native places. But the labourers were prohibited free travel in trains and had to face police atrocities and the climax of their exodus reached on 20\textsuperscript{th} May night when they were brutally chased out of the station yard by the armed police.

\textsuperscript{57} Evidence Recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1921-22, p. 17-24.

\textsuperscript{58} Evidence Recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1921-22, p. 17 & 24.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{ibid.}, p. 18.

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{ibid.}, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{ibid.}, p. 21.
any economic grievances which might have given scope for agitators”.62 But, Mr. H. M. Lepage, Manager, Bhootachang Tea Estate revealed a widespread feeling of unrest among the labourers who wished to leave the garden to become free people.63 Mr. R. M. Clarke, Manager, Corramore Tea Estate stated, “There has been a little disturbance in Ghagrapara hat (a market). There has been no interference at Kerkeria hat”.64 However, as has been mentioned in previous chapter, though not strong as in Barak Valley and Upper Assam, the wave of national movement influenced the tea garden labourers of the study area. Arjun Ghatowar, a popular labour leader of Dhekiajuli is said to have had visited Attareekhat Tea Estate during 1920-21 to spread the wave of national movement. During 1937 to 1941 around 840 strikes took place in many industries of Assam, particularly in the tea gardens.65

In 1927, a delegation of the British Trade Union Congress under A.A. Percell and J. Halsworth visited Assam to investigate the conditions of labour in the tea gardens accompanied by Omeo Kumar Das and found very deplorable conditions of the labourers.66 This marked the first step towards the initiatives taken for the organization of the labourers in Assam. The All India Trade Union Congress also made a vain attempt to organize the tea labourers at its Mariani Center.67 In 1937, Omeo Kumar Das, the then Labour Minister for the first time used the term ‘Tea Garden Labour’ instead of the derogatory term ‘coolie’. He placed a bill called ‘The Assam Tea Garden Labourers’ Freedom of Movement Bill’ in the Legislative Assembly of Assam and submitted a memorandum to the Provincial Government in 1938 pleading to recognise the formation of unions among the tea garden labourers.68

62 *ibid.*, p. 22.
63 *ibid.*, p. 23.
64 *ibid.*, p. 24.
66 *ibid.*, p. 72.
67 *ibid*.
68 *ibid.*, p. 73.
Keeping in view the rising labour unrest, the Indian Tea Association took initiative to evolve strategies to ease the labour unrest and to bridge the widening gap between the labourers and the management which led to the gradual recognition of the Trade Union organisations in Assam on the part of the Planters. Thus during the wake of the freedom struggle, a few Trade Unions sprang up in Assam (Table 4.2).

Table: 4.2 Registered Trade Unions in Assam during the colonial period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Trade Union</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Establishment year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Assam Tea Company Labour Union</td>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>27 April 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajmai Tea Company Labour Union</td>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>27 April 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylhet Cachar Chai Bagan Mazdur</td>
<td>Silchar</td>
<td>27 April 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenwood Tea Company Labour Union</td>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>6 May 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makum Tea Co. Labour Union</td>
<td>Margherita</td>
<td>30 May 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Assam Tea Labourers’ Federation</td>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>1943</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Labour Investigation Committee Report, 1945, p. 71

In the beginning, the leaders of the Indian National Congress were unresponsive to the cause of the tea garden labourers in Assam and at the Madras (Chennai) session of the Congress in 1887, their issue was rejected by most of the leaders. However, at the Calcutta (Kolkata) Bengal Provincial Conference, 1888, the tea garden labourers’ cause was taken up. Though late, on the eve of the independence, the Congress contributed to the birth of the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha. The ACMS is the sole trade union dominating the whole Trade Union movement among tea garden labour in Assam. The ACMS was founded in 1946 and after a decade the organisation was centrally registered in 1958. It was established on a democratic set up with three tiers at Central Level, Branch Level and Primary Committee at Plantation Level. The Sangha bears the responsibility of bringing all round development in its individual members and awareness among the tea garden labourers which encourages the growth of human personality and education in all its aspects. It also aims to eliminate social,

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political and economic exploitation and inequality. The Sangha has been dominated at present by the prominent leaders of the tea garden labour community such as P.S. Ghatowar (M.P.) and Dileswar Tanti (Ex-MLA and Ex-Labour Minister). The ACMS has been able to unite the labourers and to achieve workers’ right and demands through collective bargaining. At the effort of the ACMS, the Payment of Bonus Act came into being in 1965. Further, the ACMS has been able to bargain for establishment of tea garden schools and providing government facilities and incentives to the students of the community.

However, politicisation and affiliation of Trade Unions to political parties have made these unions ineffective and mere a platform of political leaders for their narrow political gain. Under the influence of the political parties the Sangha has failed to discharge its due responsibilities in finding solution to various issues related to the labourers. Inspite of the predominance of the ACMS office by the members from the tea garden labour community they have failed to address the grievances of the labourers. The activities of the trade unions are limited to the immediate economic issues but fail to provide genuine knowledge on politics. Hence, the labourers serve merely as vote bank for the political parties. Absence of women representatives in the ACMS is a matter of concern because a substantial portion of the labour force is females. They face several problems but their grievances receive less focus. Its pro-management policy is manifested in the failure to satisfy the aspirations of the labourers especially on wage issue and it remains as a silent spectator in most of the labour-management issues. The leaders remain more loyal to the Management for their personal gain and interest. Several leaders have also occupied parliamentary seats but no desired result yielded in the aspirations of the labourers. In a personal interview with the president of the ACMS, Mangaldai Circle did not reveal any educational responsibility of the ACMS and he was quite reluctant to reveal the educational rights of the tea garden labours. Moreover,

70 Personal interview with Doyal S. Kujur, Secretary, ACMS, Mangaldai Circle.
another member (Permanent invitee, ACMS Central Office) of the ACMS at the plantation level did not mention any initiative taken by the ACMS for educational development of the tea garden labourers’ children in the study area. The ACMS runs craft training centres at Dibrugarh and Tinsukia to facilitate trainings on tailoring, knitting, embroidery and weaving to the girls belonging to the tea garden labour community. But in the surveyed tea gardens no such training facilities are provided to the girls of the labour community. Several ACMS members of tea estate unit level and circle level did not reveal any kind of educational initiative taken by the Sangha. 72

Initially, the illiterate labourers were ignorant of their rights rather they were more loyal and had a sense of obligation to the Union Office bearers. They being mostly illiterate had very low aspirations due to which they become satisfied with the minimum benefits enjoyed as a result of the collective bargaining of the ACMS. They regarded the leaders of the ACMS who also belong to their own community as their savior. In course of time, the educated and politically conscious younger generation of the tea garden labourers have realised that the ACMS despite being a representative body of the labourers failed to ensure the development and welfare of the tea garden labourers of Assam. The failure of the politically backed trade union like ACMS in bargaining for the welfare of the labourers and its pro-management policy has compelled the student organizations to adopt more vigorous steps in fighting for the legitimate rights of the tea garden labourers which has become one of the primary agenda of the student organisation of the tea garden labour.

The first student organisation called the Chotnagpuri Chatra Sammilani or the Chotanagpuri Students’ Association was founded on 28th December in 1947 under the leadership of Simon Singh Horo and Santosh Kumar Topno at Tengakhat Digholiagaon in Dibrugarh district. The first annual conference of the Association was held in 1948 at Moran

72 Personal interviews with ACMS members see Appendix I.
followed by the second session at Sonitpur district in 1949 and the third session at Golaghat district in 1950. Moreover, the Association in collaboration with the Chotanagpuri Association also published an organ called Chotanagpuri Sanskarak. The Association was influenced by the contemporary political developments that had been taking place at their place of origin as most of them hailed from the Jharkhand region. Within a short period the organisation began to lose its stronghold until it was revived in 1958 at the Tezpur session of the Association and it was renamed as Sadow Assam Chah Bagisa Sampradai Chatra Santha (All Assam Tea Garden Community Students Association) under the presidency of Emele Suren. Like the Chotanagpuri Association (1938), the newly formed student organisation was mostly led by the educated Christian youths. But the involvement of some Hindu youths such as Haladhar Munda, Saroj Baraig, Balaram Nag, Jiten Chundi and Cheniram Kurmi etc. reduced the Christian domination of the Association. The second annual session of the Association was held at Grahampur in Gosaigaon of the undivided Goalpara district in 1960. At that period, the tea garden Management prohibited the formation of any student organisation or conventions and the labour unions also supported the Managements. Such Management prohibition hampered to a great extent in smooth functioning of student organisations. Annual conventions could not be held on regular basis due to the Management’s apathy. Its next convention was organised in Tinsukia district in 1963 under the presidency of Debakanta Baruah, the then Education Minister of Assam. The Session was also attended by several other dignitarians like Suresh Chandra Rajkhowa, Kamal Kumari Baruah, the then Deputy Education Minister of Assam. Its next conventions were held in 1965 at Mekipur Tea Estate and in 1966 at Amlakhi M. E. School premises. The sixth session of the Association was held at Biswanath Chariali in 1968 in which significant

76 ibid.
modifications were brought in the Constitution of the Association. By this modification the
word ‘Sadow’ (All) was discarded and the term ‘Garden’ was replaced with the word
‘Mazdoor’, hence the Association came to be known as Assam Chah Mazdoor Sampradai
Chatra Santha (Assam Tea Labour Community Students’ Association). Sylvious Kondapan
and Pawan Singh Ghatowar were elected President and General Secretary respectively. The
seventh session of the Association was held in 1969 at Rangagora Tea Estate in Golaghat
district which was presided over by Gajendra Tanti, the then General Secretary of the Assam
Chah Mazdoor Sangha. In this session, the Golaghat Branch of the Chah Mazdoor Sangha
also extended co-operation to the Association. It revealed the changing attitude of the trade
unions towards the student organisations. Both Sylvious Kondapan and Pawan Singh
Ghatowar were re-elected to the previous positions. In 1970 at the Moran session, the word
‘Sampradai’ (Community) was replaced with ‘Janajati’ (Tribe) and the Association was
renamed as ‘Assam Chah Mazdoor Janajati Chatra Santha’ (Assam Tea Labour Tribe
Students’ Association). By this time some frictions began to crop up amongst the members of
the Association on the issue of political influence on the Association. In 1984 at the Tezpur
session, the Association was divided into two factions under Nandesh Kumar Praja as
President and Rajen Rabidas as General Secretary of the Northern faction and the Southern
faction under the presidency of Barki Prasad Telenga and General Secretary Naren Tanti.
The Association was also renamed as ‘Assam Chah Mazdoor Janajati Chatra Santha’ (Assam
Tea Tribe Students’ Association). However, within a short period, the two factions united
and in 1985 the session of the united Association was held at Jorhat. The student organisation
has been leading the social movement through various constraints. At a time when the
Management prohibited any organisation, the student organisation strived to exist and

77 ibid., p. 91.
78 ibid., p. 94-95.
continued their struggle. It has been playing an important role in bringing awareness among the tea garden labourers.

The student organisation placed their various demands from time to time before the governments. Consequently, from 1963, the State Government introduced the scheme of special scholarship for the tea tribe students. Moreover, the state government established hostels for the students of the tea tribe under the Assam Tea Labour Welfare Board. In 1976, an elaborate plan was prepared at a meeting held at Dibrugarh for the development of the tea tribe society. They tried to strengthen the organisation and take up the issues of illiteracy, employment, alcoholism etc but not on Scheduled Tribe issue. Their assertion gained momentum since 1984 under the leadership of Lakeswar Kurmi and Bhagirath Karan. The ATTSA prepared its Twenty Points Charter of Demands in 1986 in which the demand for Scheduled Tribe status was included. The ATTSA members also actively participated in the Assam Movement (1979-1985) and they also joined Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), the then a leading political party in Assam. The student organisation submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister of Assam on 7th March, 1987 in demand of Scheduled Tribe status and of solving various issues of the Tea and Ex-Tea Tribe community. Besides amendment and implementation of the PLA, 1951, through the memorandum, the ATTSA demanded for establishment of free hostels for the students of the community at circle level, provincialisation of tea garden schools, more employment opportunity in the tea gardens for the youths of the community, appointment of teachers from the community in the tea garden schools, establishment of pre-primary schools in the tea garden areas, provision of

79 ibid., p. 97.
81 Note: The Assam Movement launched in late 1979 was basically an anti-foreigner movement against the illegal immigrants from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan). The movement was led by the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) and it tried to prevent participation of the immigrants in the electoral process in Assam and deport all foreign nationals who had been living illegally in Assam. The movement culminated in signing with the Assam Accord in 1985 between the leaders of the movement and the Government of India.
compulsory adult education for the illiterate labourers in the tea gardens etc. The ATTSA also participated in the signing of an accord with the then Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) Government on 17th Dec. 1987. By this accord ATTSA got four AGP tickets to contest in the Legislative Assembly but the Scheduled Tribe issue did not feature in the accord. Through their movement, the ATTSA was able to mobilise the tea garden labourers and to raise their demands before the government. In 1990, the ATTSA also submitted a memorandum to V. P. Singh, the then Prime Minister of India for inclusion of Tea and Ex-Tea Tribes of Assam in the state’s Scheduled Tribe list. The student organisation also highlighted the educational, employment and economic backwardness of the community in the memorandum. Extracts from the memorandum:

From the point of education, we would like to state that the overall percentage of literacy among the workers stand at 0.01 percent. Among the women, it is the nil in percentage. The number of Post-Matric and Post-Graduate Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes students can be counted at the tips of fingers. The reason for lack of education among the Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes of Assam are manifold. The primary education of the children of the tea garden workers is nobody’s responsibility. The employers are not interested in the education of the workers’ children for obvious reasons. The State Government is yet to take the responsibility. There are primary schools in the gardens in name only. These people, in general, have not realised the importance of education. Besides, the children, who manage to pass the Primary Schools, cannot afford to go to High Schools and for higher education owing to deplorable economic conditions, remoteness of existing high schools and colleges, lack of educational environment and incentives, either by Government or other voluntary organisations, etc.\(^\text{82}\)

However, the involvement of the ATTSA in the Accord and denial of Scheduled Tribe issue hurt the sentiments of the labour mass. The leaders of the organisation from the community also fail to focus issues of the labourers rather some of the leaders exploited the organisation for their personal and political gains. Gradually, the ATTSA began to lose the goodwill of their community. At the moment of identity assertion, the very name of the organisation has created dissensions amongst the tea garden labour community of Assam. When the Central Government proposed to grant Scheduled Tribe status to nine tribes of the

tea garden labourers of Assam, it was opposed by the then Labour Minister Barki Prasad Telenga and ATTSA leaders.

Although the first student organisation of the tea garden labour community emerged immediately after independence in Assam, the wave of student organisation spread to the study area quite late. The Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association (ATTSA) was established in the undivided Darrang district (Present Udalguri) on 13th August 1987 at Dimakuchi Tea Estate under the leadership of Folinson Sahu. The ATTSA was formed in the study district when the tea garden labourers had been living a miserable life even after several decades of independence. The most serious problem in founding the organisation was lack of educated members from the community in the study area. On the other hand, the ACMS had not extended support to the emergence of student organisation in the tea gardens. The ACMS acted more loyal to the Tea Garden Management rather than acknowledging the issues taken up by the student organisation regarding the grievances of the tea garden labourers. A small section of educated elites from the community realised the need of social change within the community and awareness against exploitation. Through several constraints, Folinson Sahu, Radhamon Bagh, Sohan Gond etc. endeavoured to unite the tea garden labourers under the ATTSA. They moved garden to garden to bring awareness among the tea garden labour community about their rights. They adopted various social reform measures including education as first imperative to uplift their backward community. Night schools were set up at different gardens in which education was imparted to the tea garden labourers. Folinson Sahu and Radhamon Bagh acted as the President and Secretary of the ATTSA since the inception till 1992. The period from 1987 to 1992 marked the formative period of the organisation in the district. At the initiative of those leaders, Assam Tea Garden Tribes (ATGT) hostels at Majbat and Tangla were established in the district under the scheme of the Assam Tea Labour Welfare Board. The Darrang district ATTSA extended full support to the
memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister of India in 1990 for inclusion of Tea and Ex-Tea Tribes community of Assam as Scheduled Tribes in the state list. They were succeeded by Tulsi Kujur as President and Mahendra Tanti as Secretary of the ATTSA in 1992. Folinson Sahu resumed as the president of the organisation in 1993 and Issac Guria became the Secretary of the ATTSA. They continued their positions till 1995.

The organisation began to decline after 1996 and remained inactive till 2002 with the arrest of its secretary Issac Guria. The ATTSA was revived un-officially in the newly created Udalguri district at Hattigarh Tea Estate in 2003. The organisation was reformed officially in 2005 under the leadership of Jitu Kissan in Udalguri district. Elias Puriti assumed as the first President and Uttam Mahato as the first Secretary of the ATTSA in Udalguri district. The organisation raised several issues relating to the tea garden labourers before the Tea Garden Management and the State (Assam) Government. They placed their demands for payment of wage on Sunday, implementation of the PLA, 1951, in the tea gardens of the district, increment on wage etc. including twenty miscellaneous demands. To pressurise the State Government they also resorted to bandh call in Assam including tea estates. Besides, the district ATTSA has been organising free coaching classes for the students of the community at garden levels and tutorial classes at Community Welfare Centres of the Tea Gardens in the district. Moreover, the ATTSA in the district has been trying to solve their problems on employment, reservation and land settlement through discussions with the State Government. The organisation has been instrumental in discussion with the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) administration for promotion of education and employment opportunities for the students of the tea tribe community. They organise awareness campaigns to motivate the labourers to educate their children. Such campaigns led to the gradual improvement in the education among the new generation of the community. After the formation of AASAA in

83 Personal interview with Robertson Tanti, Vice-President, ATTSA, Udalguri district.
84 *ibid.*
1996 most of the ATTSA leaders and members joined the newly formed organisation in the study area and to keep pace with the ongoing identity assertion in Assam.

The AASAA was founded in 1996 with the prime objectives of safeguarding the greater interest of the Adivasis including tea garden labourers and those settled outside the tea gardens to uplift and promote their community. With the birth of the AASAA, the identity assertion assumed greater significance. Since its inception the AASAA has been making effort to unite their heterogeneous ethnic groups in Assam including the tea garden labourers and bring about socio-economic, educational and political awareness amongst them. The student organisation has been striving to harness the youth potentiality to uplift the community in general and the tea garden labourers in particular from the graves of poverty, illiteracy, ignorance, unemployment, and exploitation at the hands of the employers. The foremost demands of the AASAA are Scheduled Tribe status for the Adivasis of Assam and rehabilitation of the victims of the Kokrajhar riots\textsuperscript{85} and the Lungsung forest eviction drive.\textsuperscript{86} It has been addressing not only the identity issue but also the inherent problems of the tea garden labour population. They have placed demands before the management and the government on various issues concerning to legitimate wage, annual bonus, re-scheduling of working time from 9 A.M. to 4 P.M, proper implementation of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 relating to social security provisions like education, health, living conditions, sanitation and amendment of the Act, founding of a separate department for the tea tribes (tea garden labour community) etc.

The AASAA has been resorting to various democratic means for achieving their demands. The organisation has submitted several memorandums to the State and Central Governments on various issues such as demanding Scheduled Tribe Status, redressal of the victims of the ethnic clashes, rehabilitation of the Adivasi victims of eviction drive at

\textsuperscript{85} For details see p. 206-207.
\textsuperscript{86} For details see p. 208.
Lungsung Forest Area, non-implementation of PLA provisions, etc. It also has been organising protest rallies, demonstration, dharna etc to pressurise the government (Table 4.3).

**Table: 4.3** Chronology of events and issues of AASAA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Events &amp; Place</th>
<th>Issues addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24 July 1996</td>
<td>Protest march, Judges Field, Guwahati</td>
<td>Demanding solution to the Charter of 12 points demands of AASAA, Memorandum submitted to the Chief Minister through the District Administration on various issues related to ethnic violence at Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-20 Aug. 1996</td>
<td>Fast unto Death, Janata Bhawan, Dispur</td>
<td>To get justice for the victims living in the relief camps at Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts. Submitted a Memorandum to the Chief Minister through Joseph Toppo, Minister of Labour and Employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Nov., 1996</td>
<td>Mass Rally, Judges Field, Guwahati</td>
<td>In demand of immediate solutions to the problems faced by the people in the riot hit districts of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Dec., 1996</td>
<td>Demonstration, New Delhi.</td>
<td>Staged a demonstration and submitted a Memorandum to the Prime Minister, the Union Ministers and Bharatiya Janata Party Members of Parliament to highlight the unaddressed grievances of the Adivasis of Assam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 March, 1997</td>
<td>Submission of Memorandum</td>
<td>Submitted a Memorandum to Sonia Gandhi in demand of rehabilitation of riot affected people and Scheduled Tribe Status to the Adivasis of Assam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 June, 1997</td>
<td>Adivasi Mahasabha and submission of Memorandum</td>
<td>Adivasi Mahasabha held at North Lakhimpur and submitted a Memorandum to Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi through Joseph Toppo, the Minister of State Labour and Employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 March, 1998</td>
<td>Discussion with Chief Minister Prafulla Kr, Mahanta</td>
<td>AASAA delegates discussed with Chief Minister Prafulla Kr. Mahanta on various problems concerning to the Adivasi Community of Assam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 May, 1998</td>
<td>Observed Black Day, Nehru Maidan, Tezpur</td>
<td>Sonitpur district AASAA observed Black Day in demand of immediate payment of Rs. One lakh to the next to kin of those killed and Rs. Fifty thousand to those injured in the ethnic clashes in Lower Assam, rehabilitation of the riot hit Adivasis, proper supply of relief materials and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Events &amp; Place</td>
<td>Issues addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10 June, 1998</td>
<td>Dharna and submission of Memorandum, Delhi.</td>
<td>Organised rally from Rajghat to the Parliament House in demand of Scheduled Tribe Status, relief and rehabilitation of the riot hit Adivasis, implementation of the PLA, 1951, eradication of employing children in the tea gardens of Assam and submitted Memorandums to the Prime Minister Atal Behari Bajpayee, Home Minister L.K. Advani and to several Adivasi Members of Parliament.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 July, 1998</td>
<td>Adivasi Intellectuals’ Meet, Guwahati.</td>
<td>A meeting and Press meet was held amongst the Adivasi Intellectuals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 March, 2000</td>
<td>First Adivasi Sports Week, Gosaigaon</td>
<td>Organised at Gosaigaon by the AASAA Kokrajhar district committee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Feb., 2002</td>
<td>Mass Gathering, Srirampur.</td>
<td>In protest against the proposed BTC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 May, 2002</td>
<td>Rally and Black Day observed, Guwahati.</td>
<td>Adivasis from all over Assam attended a rally in protest against the creation of Bodoland Territorial Council.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Oct. 2002</td>
<td>Mass Rally, Guwahati.</td>
<td>In demand of Scheduled Tribe Status for the Adivasis of Assam, rollback on creation of BTC, 20 percent wage increment for tea garden labourers, rehabilitation of riot affected people in Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Nov. 2002</td>
<td>State wide Dharna</td>
<td>In protest against the creation of BTC and demanding Scheduled Tribe Status to Adivasis of Assam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-11 Dec. 2002</td>
<td>Adivasi Mahasabha, Mazbat, Udalguri</td>
<td>Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi was invited as the Chief Guest and AASAA submitted a Memorandum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-18 May, 2003</td>
<td>Adivasi Mahasabha, Guwahati.</td>
<td>Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi as the Chief Guest and received a Memorandum from the student body.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 June, 2003</td>
<td>Rally organised</td>
<td>In different districts and sub-divisional headquarters in demand of Schedule Tribe Status and improvement of the conditions of the tea garden labourers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 July, 2003</td>
<td>State wide Road</td>
<td>In demand of Scheduled Tribe Status for Adivasis,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Events &amp; Place</td>
<td>Issues addressed</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 July, 2003</td>
<td>Assam Bandh</td>
<td>To pressurise the Assam government in demand of Scheduled Tribe Status to the Adivasis. Eight Adivasi students lost life in police firing at Kochubeel under Panery Police Station in Udalguri district.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Oct., 2003</td>
<td>Assam Bandh</td>
<td>In protest against the killing of eight student activists by the police personnel at Kachubeel, Paneery on 25th July, 2003.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Nov., 2007</td>
<td>Protest rally, Guwahati</td>
<td>In demand of Scheduled Tribe status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Nov., 2010</td>
<td>Assam Bandh</td>
<td>In protest against the eviction of the Adivasis in Lungsung, Kokrajhar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Nov., 2010</td>
<td>Press Meet</td>
<td>Civil Society Organisation had a Press Meet on gross violation of the human rights, right to life and the forest rights of the Adivasis of Assam particularly at Lungsung, Kokrajhar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-19 Dec., 2010</td>
<td>State Level Conference, Sonitpur (Assam)</td>
<td>Amendment of AASAA Constitution, Systematic Plan to organise AASAA from unit to district level on the basis of amended Constitution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Jan., 2011</td>
<td>Central Committee Meet, Sonitpur (Assam)</td>
<td>Central Committee Meeting with AASAA and Adivasi Organisations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Jan., 2011</td>
<td>Dharna, District wise</td>
<td>Dharna, at 11 district and Submission of Memorandums.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Jan., 2011</td>
<td>Dharna, Last Gate, Guwahati.</td>
<td>Gathering of more than one thousand members to protest against eviction drive at Lungsung.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 March, 2011</td>
<td>Dharna, in front of Governor’s palace, Guwahati.</td>
<td>Submitted a Memorandum to the Governor for rehabilitation of victims at Lungsung eviction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-20\textsuperscript{th} Jan., 2012*</td>
<td>Adivasi Mahashabha, Doomni, Baksa, Assam</td>
<td>At the 9\textsuperscript{th} Adivasi Mahashabha Assam Adivasi Vision 2020 was officially declared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9\textsuperscript{th} Feb. 2012</td>
<td>Panchayat level Dharna</td>
<td>Staged by AASAA all over Assam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16\textsuperscript{th} Feb. 2012</td>
<td>Block level agitation</td>
<td>Block level agitation was organised all over Assam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29\textsuperscript{th} Feb. 2012</td>
<td>District level Dharna</td>
<td>District wise Dharna was organised all over Assam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Events &amp; Place</td>
<td>Issues addressed</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th March, 2012</td>
<td>Dharna, Dispur, Guwahati.</td>
<td>Dharna organised at Dispur Last Gate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd April, 2012</td>
<td>Dharna, Delhi.</td>
<td>Dharna was organised at Jantar Mantar, Delhi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th July, 2012</td>
<td>Dharna, Guwahati.</td>
<td>AASAA Central Committee staged a Dharna at Raj Bhawan on Scheduled Tribe Status issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19th July, 2012</td>
<td>Submission of Memorandum</td>
<td>AASAA Central Members met Chief Minister Shri Tarun Gogoi on ST Status issues and submitted a memorandum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13th Aug, 2012</td>
<td>Submission of Memorandum, Delhi</td>
<td>AASAA submitted a memorandum to K.C. Deo, Minister for Tribal Affairs at Delhi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16th Aug, 2012</td>
<td>Submission of Memorandum, Delhi</td>
<td>AASAA submitted a memorandum to the National ST Commission at Delhi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th Sep., 2012</td>
<td>Meeting Rahul Gandhi, Delhi</td>
<td>AASAA team led by Raphael Kujur and Wilson Hasda met Shri Rahul Gandhi at Delhi on ST issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th Dec., 2012</td>
<td>Attending Conference</td>
<td>AASAA team attended the conference with state ministers for ST Status presided by Prithvi Manjhi and also attended by Welfare of Plain Tribes (WPT) Minister Rajib Loshan Pegu and Chandan Brahma in which a decision was taken to send the correct recommendation to the Central Government on Tribe wise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17th Dec., 2012</td>
<td>Dharna, Delhi</td>
<td>AASAA staged a Dharna at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi for ST Status issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th Jan, 2012</td>
<td></td>
<td>AASAA met Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 April, 2013*</td>
<td>Attended Seminar, OKD Institute, Guwahati.</td>
<td>AASAA Chief Advisor and General Secretary attended a seminar on the ‘Right To Education’ at Omeo Kumar Das Institute, Guwahati.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30th May, 2013</td>
<td></td>
<td>AASAA leader Santiuse Kujur elected as member of Rajya Sabha.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15th June, 2013</td>
<td>Meeting with State Government, Dispur</td>
<td>Held meeting with State Government at Dispur Secretariat Building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17th Aug., 2013</td>
<td>All India Tribal Co-ordination Committee meet, Guwahati.</td>
<td>AASAA members attended the All India Tribal Co-ordination Committee meet at Kharghuli, Guwahati. In which resolution was taken acquire Scheduled Tribe Status for six communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18th Aug., 2013</td>
<td></td>
<td>AASAA leaders attended the Bodo National Conference meeting at Bodoland Guest House in relation to peace and stability in BTC area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Events &amp; Place</td>
<td>Issues addressed</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th Sept., 2013</td>
<td>Staged Protest</td>
<td>AASAA leaders of several districts staged a Protest in demand of Scheduled Tribe Status for the Adivasis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19th Sept., 2013</td>
<td>Meet, Minister for Power, Industries &amp; Commerce, Public Enterprise, Assam</td>
<td>AASAA President and General Secretary met Pradyut Bordoloi in relation to electrification of the labourers’ quarters in the Tea Gardens and Adivasi Villages under Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidyutikaran Yojana (RGGVY).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Oct., 2013</td>
<td>Dharna, Delhi</td>
<td>Staged a Dharna at Raj Bhawan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-10 Oct., 2013</td>
<td></td>
<td>AASAA leaders follow up Scheduled Tribe Status in Delhi and they also met several dignitaries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24th Nov., 2013</td>
<td>Anniversary of Beltola Incident observed, Guwahati.</td>
<td>6th Anniversary of Beltola Incident was observed at Assam Sahitya Sabha Hall, Guwahati. In which a documentary film on Laxmi Oraon, the molested girl at Beltola titled ‘Laxmi Oraon-Rising from the Grave’ produced by Parthojit Boruah was released.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th Jan., 2013</td>
<td>Jagriti Sabha, Morigaon</td>
<td>Jagriti Sabha, an awareness meeting was held at Morigaon in which the Rajya Sabha MP Santiuse Kujur attended as the Chief Guest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th Jan., 2013</td>
<td>Central Executive Meeting, Guwahati.</td>
<td>AASAA Central Executive Meeting was held at ACMS Office Hall, Guwahati. In which AASAA took decision to demand monthly wages of Rs. 10,000/- for the Tea Garden labourers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th Jan., 2013</td>
<td></td>
<td>AASAA President and Secretary held a meeting with Advisors at Tezpur to discuss about the future plan of AASAA Movement and strategies to be adopted.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The above chronology of programmes and activities signify the intensity of the Adivasi movement for identity assertion. Since previous demands of the Adivasis for the
inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe list has been rejected by the Central government under the controversial categorisation as ‘Tea Tribe and Ex-Tea Tribe; the AASAA after its inception in 1996 led the movement for unification of all the tea garden labour community and Ex-tea garden labour population under ‘Adivasi’ identity collectively. The emergence of several organisations under the name Adivasi also signifies their growing assertion of Adivasi identity. They include Adivasi Sahitya Sabha (ASS), All Adivasi Women’s Association of Assam (AAWAA), Adivasi Cobra Militants of Assam (ACMA), Adivasi National Liberation of Assam (ANLA), Adivasi Peoples’ Army (APA), Adivasi Dragon Fighters (ADF) etc. Further the foundation of the Adivasi Mahasabha and its annual conventions greatly contributed in the Adivasi identity assertion. On the other hand, several publications, souvenirs, pamphlets, memorandums produced by AASAA have played crucial roles in organising the heterogeneous community and asserting their identity as Adivasi. Such efforts have convinced the State Government to recognise the Adivasi identity. It resulted in passing of a resolution to grant Scheduled Tribe status by including the term Adivasi along with the ‘Tea Tribe’ and ‘Ex-Tea Garden Tribes’ in the Assam Assembly, 2005. Consequently Assam Government sent recommendations to the Central Government identifying some of the ethnic groups for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe list. The post-Beltola incident87 period also marked the submission of memorandums by several organisations to the State and Central Governments demanding ST status.

In the study area (Udalguri district), the then undivided Darrang district, the AASAA was founded in September, 1996. Benedick Murmu was the founder President and Santius Kujur (Present M.P.) was the founder Vice-President of the AASAA in the undivided Darrang district (Present Udalguri district). On the other hand, Francis Minz and Bhupen Lakra were the Secretary and Assistant Secretary of the district AASAA. Keeping pace with

87 For details see p. 207-208.
the Adivasi awakening across the State (Assam), the district AASAA has been taking certain measures for bringing educational awareness and improvement of education for the community in the district. Besides organising coaching classes during the summer vacation for M. E. to H. S. students belonging to the community, the student organisation has launched the educational campaign called *Janajagaran Yatra* in 2015. Moreover, the Udalguri district AASAA has been striving to bring social, political and cultural awareness among the Adivasis. Besides undertaking social welfare measures like ban on liquor consumption, human trafficking etc., the AASAA also has been organising protest rallies in demand of Scheduled Tribe status and various issues related to tea garden labourers like wage increment and Sunday to be included as paid holiday for the tea garden labourers in the district. Udalguri district AASAA also organised bike rallies in 2014 and 2015 in demand of wage hike of the tea garden labourers from Rs 94 to Rs 330 and Scheduled Tribe status as part of the ongoing agitations across the State. The rally started from Dimakuchi Tea Estate to Attareekhat Tea Estate covering ten tea estates in the district. Prabhat Panika, President of the Udalguri district AASAA also decried the Tea Garden Management for denying legitimate wages to the labourers as per the Wage Agreements. The AASAA in the study district has been participating actively in *dharnas, rallies*, agitation programmes organised in demand of Scheduled Tribe status and for other socio-economic development of the community. On the other hand, the ATTSA being organised within the tea gardens bears some restrictions from the Tea Garden Management to participate in the assertions for their rights and identity. Moreover, there is ideological difference between the ATTSA and AASAA particularly on their identity and nomenclature of the welfare schemes and departments. The ATTSA adheres to tea tribe origin while the AASAA decries the term ‘tea tribe’ and asserts them as Adivasi. Although there are organisational and ideological difference between the ATTSA

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88 Personal interview with Akela Purty, Ex-leader of ATTSA and present leader of Udalguri district AASAA.
and AASAA, both student organisations have been striving for the upliftment of the community and for promotion of educational awareness among the community. Though non-political organisation, the ATTSA as well as AASAA in the study area has been serving as a platform of political leaders and has produced a number of political leaders from the community. They include Tulsi Kujur, Santiuse Kujur, M. P., Rajya Sabha etc. Through the political leaders from the community, they have been trying to pressurise the Government to concede their aspirations. However, at various issues, ideological difference crop up amongst the ATTSA, AASAA and the political leaders. When the State Government proposed the creation of a separate development council for the community, the political leaders advocated the term for development council as Tea Tribes Development Council and Adivasi Development Council. But the ATTSA opposed the idea of the political leaders and advocated the creation of the development council in the name of Tea Tribes Development Council. On the other hand, the AASAA decried the use of the term ‘tea tribe’ and adhered to the nomenclature of the development council as Adivasi Development Council. However, the student organisations and other organisations of the community resolved their ideological differences at a meeting held at Guwahati in 2008. The creation of the Adivasi Development Council in 2016 is the result of their co-operative effort for socio-economic, cultural, political and educational development of the community. Access of educational awareness programmes into the tea garden areas was never allowed until the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan Mission concluded an agreement with the Tea Garden Management for extension of Universalisation of Elementary Education in the tea gardens in 2003. The JAWA, a Community Video Unit has been launching awareness campaign on the need of education among the tea garden labour community with the theme “Aiy Podbo” (Meaning Come, let’s study). At the initiative of the student organisations the JAWA has been launching awareness campaign in the tea gardens in Udalguri district in collaboration with ICICI Prudential Life
Insurance. So far, JAWA has launched awareness programme on education in five tea estates of the ten surveyed tea estates.\textsuperscript{89} The JAWA Video campaigns have been screened at Borengajuli, Attareekhat, Bhooteachang, Dimakuchi and Paneery Tea Estates in the present study area. Besides education, the video campaign focus the aspects like importance of savings, preserving culture and tradition, knowledge on health and hygiene, ill impact of alcoholism, absenteeism from work etc. As revealed by the managers the campaign exerted considerable influence on the labourers and as per their demand, facilities of night schools were provided at Attareekhat, Bhooteachang, Dimakuchi and Paneery Tea Estates respectively. The efforts made by both student organisations (ATTSA and AASAA) have yielded considerable results in bringing awareness among the tea garden labour community (Adivasi). Their awareness and changing attitudes have been revealed by their eagerness to provide more facilities to their children for schooling. This has resulted in the greater participation of their children in education and an improvement in the results in Secondary and Higher Secondary levels in the study area. The pass percentage in the HSLC examination results of the Tea Garden students in the study district recorded 42.3 percent in 2015 and 54.3 percent in H.S. examination in 2016.\textsuperscript{90} This was the first ever particular category wise record maintained by the District Inspector of Schools in the study district (Udalguri).

The efforts of the AASAA towards uniting all the Adivasis into a single umbrella led to the birth of the Adivasi Mahasabha in 1997. Since its inception, the Adivasi Mahasabha has been instrumental not only in uniting the Adivasi Community of Assam and bringing awareness amongst the Adivasi community about their rights but also raising voices about various socio-economic and political issues concerning to the all round development of the community. It was at the Doomni (Baksa) session of the Mahasabha held in 2012, the Assam

\textsuperscript{89} Revealed by the respective managers of the tea estates in personal interviews.

\textsuperscript{90} Performance of candidates in HSLC Examination, 2015 and HS Examination, 2016, Inspector of Schools, Udalguri District Circle, Udalguri.
Adivasi Vision 2020 (AAV 2020) document was set to give a solemn purpose to the Adivasi Movement for reasserting their tribal identity.

The XI Adivasi Mahasabha held on 28-30th January, 2014 at Moran in Upper Assam took up the issues of the tea garden labourers in particular and Adivasis in general. With the very theme *Hamar Mati Aur Banal Bagan Hamar Haq* (meaning Our Rights over our land and our nourished tea gardens) the Mahasabha\(^1\) attempted to address the myriad of problems faced by the tea garden labourers like low wage, deplorable working conditions, lack of adequate educational facility, child labour, poor health and living conditions, etc. intensified the Adivasi movement for their Constitutional rights (ST Status) raised the issues of socio-economic, educational backwardness, political and legal biasness etc. AASAA has also provided a platform in creating several political leaders who began to play active roles since 2005 in the BTAD elections, as Member of Council Legislative Assembly (MCLA), Executive Member of the BTAD Legislative Assembly. The Udalguri district AASAA reiterated their demand on wage hike for the tea garden labourers and Scheduled Tribe status by organising a bike rally on 27 October, 2015. In the last Assam Legislative Assembly election, the Udalguri district AASAA has extended support to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its ally Bodoland Peoples’ Forum (BPF), the ruling political party in BTAD in order to bring an all round development of the community.

The *Adivasi Seva Samiti*, a registered socio-economic organisation was founded at Kokrajhar in 1986. The organisation also contributed towards the awakening of the Adivasis and uniting the Adivasis in Assam. The *Adivasi Seva Samiti* established in the undivided Darrang district with its Headquarters at Sikaribungla, nearby Dimakuchi Tea Estate has been contributing to the socio-economic development of the community besides solving various issues with other communities in the district. Other organisations which have been

contributing towards Adivasi awakening and fighting for Scheduled Tribe status include Adivasi Sahitya Sabha (ASS) and other respective Sahitya Sabhas of the major ethnic groups like Kharias, Mundas, Santhals, Oraons/Kuruxs and Adivasi Women’s Association of Assam (AAWAA), All Assam Santali Students’ Union (AASSU), the Adivasi Karmachari Parishad, 1996, Chah Janagosthi Surakshya Samiti, 2001, Adivasi Social, Educational, Cultural Association, 1977, Adivasi People’s Party of Assam, 1999, etc. Though not as active as in North Bengal, the increasing labour unions in the tea gardens of Assam such as Assam Sangrami Chah Sramik Sangha, Assam Chah Sramik Parishad, Assam Tea Workers’ Union, Federation of Tea Labour Union of Assam, Assam Tea Labour Union (ATLU) etc. also signify the awakening of the labourers for identity assertion. Moreover, throughout the course of their struggle, several extremist outfits have emerged and have been resorting to violence. Their main demands include Scheduled Tribe status and overall improvement of their community and extension of the Adivasi Development Council to cover the entire state. Such organisations include Birsa Commando Force (BCF), Adivasi Cobra Militant of Assam (ACMA), 1996, Adivasi People’s Army, Santhal Tiger Force and Adivasi National Liberation Army (ANLA). In 2012, the Government concluded a surrender deal with the Adivasi militant groups with the promise to look into the ST status issue. The surrendered five outfits have formed the Adivasi Ceasefire Coordination Organisation (ACCO) to fight for the political rights of the Adivasis of the State. During the course of democratic movements launched by the student organisations, several AASAA leaders and members have lost their lives which indicate the intensity of the Adivasi assertion. In the study area in 2003, eight members were also killed at the protest rally organised by the district AASAA at Paneery. The available data on the casualties of AASAA members on various protest movements including the study area has been presented in Table 4.4.
**Table: 4.4 Adivasi Martyrs during agitations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Occasion</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hemlal Sona</td>
<td>AASAA member</td>
<td>Dhekiajuli</td>
<td>Agitation programme</td>
<td>1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saitendranath Sore</td>
<td>Secretary, Adivasi Seva Samity</td>
<td>Kokrajhar</td>
<td>Killed by Bodo extremist</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dipak Soren</td>
<td>AASAA member</td>
<td>Kokrajhar</td>
<td>Killed by Bodo extremist</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrias Marandi</td>
<td>AGS, Central Committee AASAA</td>
<td>Kokrajhar</td>
<td>Killed by Bodo extremist</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danial Topno</td>
<td>Advisor, AASAA</td>
<td>Gohpur</td>
<td>Killed by miscreants</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philimon Murmu</td>
<td>President, Kokrajhar district AASAA</td>
<td>Srirampur</td>
<td>Killed by Police</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dipak Soren</td>
<td>AASAA member</td>
<td>Kokrajhar</td>
<td>Killed by Bodo extremist</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrias Marandi</td>
<td>AGS, Central Committee AASAA</td>
<td>Kokrajhar</td>
<td>Killed by Bodo extremist</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danial Topno</td>
<td>Advisor, AASAA</td>
<td>Gohpur</td>
<td>Killed by miscreants</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philimon Murmu</td>
<td>President, Kokrajhar district AASAA</td>
<td>Srirampur</td>
<td>Killed by Police</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Killed by Bodo extremist</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrias Marandi</td>
<td>AGS, Central Committee AASAA</td>
<td>Kokrajhar</td>
<td>Killed by Bodo extremist</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danial Topno</td>
<td>Advisor, AASAA</td>
<td>Gohpur</td>
<td>Killed by miscreants</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philimon Murmu</td>
<td>President, Kokrajhar district AASAA</td>
<td>Srirampur</td>
<td>Killed by Police</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiten Tanti</td>
<td>AASAA member</td>
<td>Paneri</td>
<td>Killed in Police firing at protest march in support of Bandh called by AASAA</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arun Tanti</td>
<td>AASAA member</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathanial Munda</td>
<td>AASAA member</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dambu Hasa Purti</td>
<td>AASAA member</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanika Sawasi</td>
<td>AASAA member</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Barla</td>
<td>AASAA member</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mangra Munda</td>
<td>AASAA member</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basdeo Kherwar</td>
<td>AASAA member</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samson Lagori</td>
<td>AASAA member</td>
<td>Karbi Anglong</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mangal Hemrom</td>
<td>_</td>
<td>Lungsung</td>
<td>Burned by SFS</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosco Chermaco</td>
<td>President, AASAA</td>
<td>Srirampur</td>
<td>Killed by miscreants</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The apathy and discrimination on the part of the Centre as well as the State Governments, social coercion and deliberate attempts of the State to suppress their demands led to the rise of insurrection concerning over land, civil liberties and constitutional identity. During the course of Adivasi assertion for identity, the outbreak of ethnic clashes between the Bodo community, one of the earliest inhabitants and the Santhals (Adivasis) centering at Kokrajhar district in 1996 and 1998 have exposed the socio-political tensions arising out of ethnic assertions in Assam and generated broad debates. The dormant cause of the clash is deep rooted in their socio-economic aspects. Ban on their entry into the forest areas severely hit their livelihood. The pretext of the sudden outburst of clash was the killing of three Boro women in the Santhal vicinity. The clashes between the two inter dependent communities who have been living in harmony for over a century is linked with the Adivasi awakening and their settlement issues i.e. land. Hostility did not occur between the two communities until 1996. Mutual hatred germinated between the two communities due to alleged intrusion of the Santhals in to the Bodo dominated areas and the ban on the entry into forest areas by Bodo militant group National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). Land has been a key issue of the Adivasi movements in Jharkhand as well as in Assam. Several intellectuals\textsuperscript{92, 93, 94} termed it as ‘Ethnic Cleansing’ for the creation of a separate state of Bodoland. P. K. Narzary points out the deep rooted socio-economic factors, conspiracy and involvement of third parties and the influence of the Jharkhand Movement on the Santhals of Assam which contributed to the outbreak of the ethnic clash.\textsuperscript{95} The State Government bears the same responsible on the failure to identify the main culprit of the killing of three Bodo women in the Gouma Forest, a


\textsuperscript{93} D. Gopal, “Role of Bangladesh in Insurgency in the North East” (Excerpts from the keynote address delivered at the seminar), 2004, p. 20 in Dipankar Sengupta and Sudhir Kumar Singh (ed.) \textit{Insurgency in North East India, The Role of Bangladesh.}, p. 20.


Santhal locality under Gosaigaon sub-division that kindled the ethnic clash. The retaliatory attack by the National Democratic Front of Bodoland on the Santhals aggravated the situation. On the other hand, the involvement of the Adivasi militant outfits like the Adivasi Cobra Force, the Birsa Commando Force also added fuel to the fire. As per the District Relief Camp report, 2003, these ethnic clashes affected about 1.23 lakh population (20 percent Bodo community and 80 percent Santhal community). The ethnic clash left about 42,214 families consisting of about 2,02,684 people homeless. The resumption of the ethnic clash in 1998 displaced some 48,556 families comprising about 3,14,342 people. The ethnic clash was confined to the Adivasis residing in the adjoining forest areas of Kokrajhar although it tended to spread to other Adivasi inhabitant areas. Although critics regard the incidences as ethnic cleansing between the Bodos and the Adivasis, the clash was confined solely to the Santhals. The Santhal in the riot hit districts were the descendants of the uprooted landless peasants whom the colonial government deported to Assam in the aftermath of the Santhal Rebellion of 1855. They settled down largely in the North-Western part of Lower Assam in the undivided districts of Goalpara. Many of them also settled in the study area (Udalguri district). But the ethnic riots in Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon did not affect the Adivasi of the study area because most of the Adivasis in the district are concentrated in the tea gardens. Land alienation policy of the Government and increasing devastation of the forest areas and threats posed by the Bodo militants who consider them intruders have stirred up the identity movement in demand of Scheduled Tribe status for tea garden labour community and Adivasis.

98 Government of Assam.
The Beltola incident on 24 November in 2007 has exposed not only the apathy of the state government but also revealed certain fault lines of the society of Assam in general. The AASAA organised rally in which around 5000 Adivasis participated comprising of men, women and children demanding Schedule Tribe status turned violent at Beltola when the local public brutally assaulted the demonstrators for the acts of vandalism committed by some demonstrators. The violence reached the climax with the public assault of an Adivasi girl. This was also regarded as a possible treachery on the part of the leaders who may have stage managed the violence for political purposes. Arrival of Jharkhand leaders like Arjun Munda and Shibu Soren further politicised the matter. The 36-hour Assam bandh call witnessed several instances of violence across the state. The incident again exposed the complete administrative failure and helplessness of the State Government. The incident has generated heated debates on the movement for identity assertion of the tea garden labours (Adivasis) in Assam. The media portrayed the incident as an effect of the inherent enmity of the local Assamese towards the tea garden labour community and also viewed by many as an ultimate expression of the inbuilt prejudice and class hatred of a sizable section of the Assamese middle class towards the tea tribes. The incident was severely criticised by the civil society and from all the corners of the country but the real issue related to the socio-economic aspects of the Adivasis has received less focus as identity politics have occupied the forefront. The demonstrators were mostly Adivasis of western and central Assam districts who have been living an isolated life in the far flung villages untouched by any development process under the central or the state government. The state government discharged its responsibility in a limited capacity by suspension of a few low-ranking police officers and transferring the District Commissioner (DC) and the Superintendent of Police (SP). The ultimate measure was a CBI probe into the incident to identify the culprits.

100 ibid.
The eviction of the Adivasis in Lungsung forest division under Haltugaon Forest division in Kokrajhar district, in 2010 also caused a serious concern among the Adivasis regarding their rights over land. The eviction drive undertaken by the government started in 1974 which culminated in the promise of providing land entitlements. Samar Brahma, the then forest minister initiated the land allocation process but the process remained incomplete with his removal from the portfolio. The Forest Rights Act, 2006 entitles to claim rights on forest land if the Adivasis are in possession of such lands before December 13, 2005. The Adivasis claimed their settlement in the Lungsung Forest areas before 1965 but their eviction rendered several families homeless. The Government has failed to resolve this long drawn land issue. These incidences indicate the state government’s heedlessness towards the ethnic issues in which many innocent people lost lives and became homeless.

The Kokrajhar riots in 1996, 1998, the Beltola incidence, 2007 and the Lungsung eviction drive, 2010 gave a new turn to the identity assertion of the Adivasis in Assam and the birth of AASAA in the aftermath of the Kokrajhar riot in 1996 has strengthened the Adivasi movement which has been able to mobilise tea garden labour community in the western and northern Assam including Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji. Such incidences have led the community to intensify their movements for Scheduled Tribe status and raise their demands for greater share of development under the democratic Constitution. It is the educated youths from the community who have come out from the tea garden regimented life and have articulated their identity as Adivasi.

So far as the Adivasi identity construction is concerned, it has not developed equally among the people of the community. The tea garden labourers prefer to introduce themselves as ‘Tea Tribe’. Hence, the organisations like 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’. Identity consciousness tended to be stronger among the Adivasis who had been settled outside the tea gardens. As has been mentioned previously, many of the tribals like the Santhals, Mundas and Oraons migrated to Assam on their own and settled independently in the peripheries of the forests and adopted a similar livelihood based on forest resources. Unlike their other emigrant counterparts (who came to Assam initially as indentured labourers), the Santhals have been living an independent life free from the regimented and confined tea garden life. As such, they have been able to maintain and preserve their culture and ethnic features in the new settlements. The Adivasis particularly the Santhals who settled in the erstwhile undivided Goalpara district (comprising Goalpara, Dhubri, Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar) of Assam has been playing a key role in the assertion of ‘Adivasi’ identity in Assam. In the study area, the Adivasis who live outside the tea gardens have extended active support to the AASAA which has emerged as strong as the AASAA in Kokrajhar district. The new generation Adivasis under the banner of AASAA has decried the use of the term ‘Tea Tribe’ and ‘Ex-Tea Tribe’ which conceals their existence as an ethnic group. The first collective organisation called All Assam Munda, Oraon and Santhal Association founded in 1957 originated in Gosaigaon sub-division in Kokrajhar district. The organisation was merged with the Adivasi Council of Assam in 1959.

State/Centre response on the issue of Scheduling of Adivasis

The Adivasis of Assam have launched the vigorous movement for identity assertion which has generated heated debates and has proved as a major political issue in the State (Assam). The initiatives taken by the State on this issue seem to be diplomatic and divisive. Though the State Government has been making repetitive correspondence with the Central Government for inclusion of the Adivasis of Assam in the Scheduled Tribe list, it has not
yielded any constructive development. The major aspects involved in the inclusion of the tea garden labour community (Adivasis) in the list of Scheduled Tribes are the removal of area restrictions (geographical isolation as one of the criteria for scheduling in tribe list) and fresh inclusion of the Adivasis in the ST list. The issue of identity for the Adivasis in Assam is centred on the question of legitimacy to their primary demand of Scheduled Tribe status in Assam. The long standing demand has been rejected time and again throughout the course of their history in Assam. As has been mentioned earlier, the Adivasis of Assam bracketed as ‘Tea Tribes’ comprise 97 ethnic groups.\textsuperscript{101} The composite community includes various tribes and castes belonging to multi linguistic as well as multi cultural background. The recommendation of the Lokur Committee regarding the recognition of Scheduled Tribes concerning to one area of a particular State or Union Territory (UT) in other parts of the same State or UT as well as in other States had clearly decreed the fate of the Adivasis of Assam. The Lokur Committee did not recommend the inclusion of the tea tribes/tea garden labourers under the list of Scheduled Tribe due to loss of tribal characteristics and assimilation with the general population. The following extracts from the Report of the Lokur Committee, 1965 clearly states this predicament:

\begin{quote}
During the past 60 years or more, a large numbers of Santals, Mundas, Oraons, and Gonds from Bihar, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh have migrated seasonally, and sometimes settled permanently as plantation labour in the Tea Gardens of North East, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. The number of people involved is approximately 20 lakh. The question whether such migrant tribes should be treated as Scheduled Tribes in their new habitat has engaged the attention of the Government of India and various committees set up by them in the past. The Backward Classes Commission was of the opinion that these groups are quite backward socially, educationally and should be included in the list of Other Backward Classes. Similarly, the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission did not insist on immigrant tribal labour being regarded as Scheduled Tribes; the Chairman of the Commission, in his letter forwarding the Report has stated that in our
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{101} The Assam Tribune, 24 February, 2015.
opinion assistance is needed in order to enable it to maintain contacts with its home, and more especially maintain its way of life.  

The Report of the Lokur Committee, 1965 further stated:

We are inclined to agree with the opinion previously expressed and do not recommend the tea plantation tribal labour to be treated as Scheduled Tribes. Apart from the fact that the Government of Assam has consistently opposed any change in their States on the ground that it would seriously affect the local political picture, we are reliably given to understand that in recent years, the economic standard of the average immigrant labourer, who is in receipt of regular wages and the protection afforded by special law, is far better than that of indigenous tribal communities in the plains of Assam. It has also been reported that settlers in the tea estates have tended to lose their tribal characteristics in the new surroundings, and that special educational assistance is already being extended to them.

Thus the demand of the tea garden labour community for Scheduled Tribe status received a set back and the issue remained unsolved partly due to the apathy of the State Government. In 1996, Prithvi Majhi, the then Speaker of the Assam Assembly submitted a letter to the Centre to remove the area restriction and fresh inclusion of the 97 ethnic groups representing ‘Tea Tribes’ and ‘Ex-Tea Tribes’ in the Scheduled Tribe list. But the Registrar General of India and the Central Government rejected the demand mainly due to lack of tribal traits among the community and illogical nomenclature of the heterogeneous community under the single category as ‘Tea Tribe’.

In 2002, a Parliamentary Standing Committee had recommended the grant of Scheduled Tribe status to the six communities of Assam including tea tribes which was also rejected by the Centre. In 2004, the Assam Assembly had passed resolutions to grant Scheduled Tribe status to the six communities including the Adivasis. The Resolution states, ‘The House do now unanimously resolve to impress upon the government of India for inclusion of six communities of Assam namely Koch Rajbongshi, Tai-Ahom, Chutia, Moran, Matak and communities belonging to Tea Garden and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes in the list of

103 ibid., Para: 33, p. 18-19.
Scheduled Tribes (plains) of the state of Assam.”.\textsuperscript{105} Again in 2005, the Assembly passed an exclusive resolution for the Adivasis of Assam which stated:

> Considering the socio-economic condition of Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes and communities who enjoy the status of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in their original states, this House do now unanimously resolve to recommend to the Government of India for inclusion of 42 Tribes of Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes (Adivasis) as shown in Annexure-I in the list of Scheduled Tribes (Plains and Hills as the case may be) and 40 castes of Tea and Ex-Tea Garden communities as shown in Annexure-II for inclusion in the list of Scheduled Castes.\textsuperscript{106}

But this time also the Central Government rebuffed the demand as the Registrar General of India did not find any tribal traits in the Adivasis of Assam and also due to lack of ethnographic data in support of Adivasis from the Assam Institute of Research for Tribes and Scheduled Castes as well as on political grounds. Again, Joseph Toppo, the M.P. from Tezpur constituency raised the demands of ST status for the Adivasis before Parliament during 2009-2010. He also requested the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh through a letter to grant ST status to the Adivasis of Assam. However, the Twenty-Third Report on the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Second Amendment) Bill, 2011, found large number of pending proposals sent to the Registrar General of India (RGI) for incorporation of several ethnic groups in the Scheduled Tribes list.\textsuperscript{107} Extracts from the Report:

> The Committee is constrained to note that as of now 242 proposals for modification in the list of Scheduled tribes are pending with State Governments/UTs, office of the Registrar General of India (RGI) and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes. The Committee also note that the list of proposals sent by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs on 23rd December, 2011 have not been received in the office of Registrar General of India. However, the Secretary, Ministry of Tribal Affairs during evidence has given assurance to the Committee that he would hand over all the relevant papers to Registrar General of India (RGI).\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{105} W. Topno, “Scheduled Tribe Status for Adivasis in Assam”, Injot Dahar, Souvenir, 9\textsuperscript{th} Adivasi Mahasabha, 2012, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{106} ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} The Twenty-Third Report of the Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment (2011-2012), Ministry of Tribal Affairs, The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Second Amendment) Bill, 2011, Para, 1.12, p. 11-12.
\textsuperscript{108} ibid., Para, 1.19, p. 15-16.
It implied the lack of co-ordination between the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the Registrar General of India. As per the available records in the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, nine proposals (Table 4.5) from Assam including the Tea Tribes (Adivasis) for inclusion in the list of Scheduled Tribes have been pending which has been referred to the State Government for further justification based on the comments of the Registrar General of India in 2005.  

**Table: 4.5** Proposals pending for inclusion in the list of Scheduled Tribes of the State

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name of Community</th>
<th>Status of the proposal</th>
<th>Referred to the State/UT Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Phakes (Phakeals), Khamyang, Turung &amp; Aiton under Man (Tai) Speaking Tribes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Referred to State Government for specific recommendation on 6.2.2012.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Adivasi (Tea Tribes), Ahom, Matak, Maran &amp; Chutia</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Referred to State Government for further justification on RGI's comments on 7.12.2005.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Amri Karbi</td>
<td></td>
<td>Referred to State Government for ethnographic report and detailed justifications on</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

110 *ibid.*, Annexure-III, p. 27.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name of Community</th>
<th>Status of the proposal</th>
<th>Referred to the State/UT Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Sarania Kachari</td>
<td></td>
<td>Referred to State Government for further justification on the comments of RGI on 5.5.2006.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note*: National Commission for Scheduled Tribes

In 2011, a tripartite talk was held among the elected representatives of the Assam state and Central Government and Adivasi organisations regarding the ST issue of the Adivasis. Consequently, the Central Government asked the State Government to submit correct ethnographic reports of the ethnic groups of the tea garden labour community. Consequently, in 2011, a three member committee for preparation of ethnographic report under S. D. Pando was setup by the State Government. In 2012 the Ethnographic Report prepared by a three member committee headed S. D. Pando found 97 ethnic groups among the Adivasi community of Assam and showed 36 ethnic groups recognised as Scheduled Tribe, 27 ethnic groups as Scheduled Caste and the rests categorised as Other Backward Class in other states of India. The Assam Government submitted a proposal for inclusion of six communities including 36 tea tribes in the Scheduled Tribe list on the basis of the ethnographic reports. The Government of India has not considered the inclusion of all the Adivasis bracketed as ‘tea tribes’ of Assam in the Scheduled Tribe list as only 26 tribes are
considered as tribals in the place of their origin while the rest are categorised under Other Backward Classes (OBC) and More Other Backward Classes (MOBC) in their ancestral places. As such the majority of these tribes do not fulfill the criteria for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe list.\textsuperscript{111} The decision of the Centre was based on the declaration of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs which was entrusted the responsibility to decide instead of the Registrar General of India under the Ministry of Home Affairs. The Tribal bodies vehemently opposed the process of scheduling new ethnic groups within the list of Scheduled Tribes in the state since it is bound to create simultaneous problems without provisions for reserving electoral constituencies for the existing Scheduled Tribes. The Task Force set up by the Government of India under the Chairmanship of H. Panda, Secretary; Ministry of Tribal Affairs to study the issue of ST status demand in 2014 has also failed to find a solution to the pending problems on the ST demands by various groups.

However, the State Government devised for extension of the ST list by dropping the percentage of OBC quota could not satisfy the ST communities because inclusion of more communities in the ST list would affect the political as well as the employment and education sectors.\textsuperscript{112} The Central as well as State Governments move for granting ST status to the Adivasis and other five communities in Assam has been opposed by the All Assam Tribal Sangha, the parent body representing the ST communities in Assam. Inclusion of more communities in the ST list has implications in socio-economic and political aspects as it would erode the entitlements of existing Scheduled Tribes. Consequently, the State Government proposed to grant ST status to the six communities devoid of political privilege. But it also failed to satisfy the existing ST communities as well as the six communities. The ST demand of the Adivasis entangled the State Government in a political dilemma because if the State Government did not comply with the demand of the Adivasis it stands to lose its

\textsuperscript{111} The Assam Tribune, 24 February, 2015.
traditional vote bank; but if it considers the Adivasis’ demand for Scheduled Tribe status, it stands to lose the cooperation of its coalition partner, the Bodoland People’s Progressive Front (BPPF), a leading Bodo political party in BTAD. Thus it comes to light that the issue of the Scheduled Tribe demand of the Adivasis is closely related to the political agenda of the State Government. The long standing demand has remained unresolved. Although the struggle of the student organisations and Adivasis has not yielded the ultimate goal, their relentless efforts have made the government to take some more accommodative steps. Besides the Directorate for Welfare of Tea Garden and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes, the State (Assam) Government set up the Tea Tribes Welfare Department in 2004 and recently the Adivasi Development Council in 2016. However, mere acquisition of ST status to the community would not ensure their overall development unless their children can enjoy the fundamental Right To Education particularly in the tea gardens where there is still no provision for eight years cycle of elementary education. Hence, amendment of the Plantation Labour Act and ban on child labour are pre-requisite for the overall development of the community. The AASAA has adopted some constructive measures to uplift their community by drafting the Assam Adivasi Vision 2020 (AAV 2020). It identified certain crucial issues set as Goals to be achieved by 2020. These goals are concerned with overall development of the community which includes universal literacy, employment avenues for all, electrification of villages and tea estates, facilities of modern communications, social security, prohibition of land alienation, education in respective mother tongues etc. In this Vision, the Adivasis have pledged to achieve the goal of Scheduled Tribe status by 2020. The student organisations have been trying to convince the State and Central Governments for affirmative action for inclusion of the community in the Scheduled Tribe list which they deem necessary to improve their overall conditions including educational status. They have realised that

113 ibid.
granting of Scheduled Tribe status to the community would provide them with more opportunity in every sector such as higher education, employment and ensure them more representation in different areas of the society in the district in particular and Assam in general.