CHAPTER NINE

SOME ASPECTS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC ADJUSTMENTS

INTRODUCTION

The ex-tea garden labour population living in the rural areas of Assam faces some problems of socio-economic adjustments.¹ These are: (1) the problem of adjustment within the heterogeneous elements in the ex-tea garden labour society, (2) the problem of adjustment with the tea garden labour society, (3) the problem of adjustment with the indigenous Assamese society and (4) the overall problem of adjustment to the social and economic changes in the country in general and the changes in the area inhabited by the ex-tea garden labour society in particular.

The first three dimensions of the problem of adjustment are peculiar to the ex-tea garden labour population because there are lack of uniformities between the three.

¹ The aspect of adjustment depends upon cultural and psychological backgrounds of the people. These aspects are related to anthropology and social psychology. References may be made to Herskovits (1955), Majumdar & Madan (1961) and Bonner (-).
societies living in proximity. The fourth problem of
adjustment (to autonomous and induced changes) is faced
by all backward societies which have traditional elements.
All these aspects were implicit in previous discussions
in the preceding chapters. The purpose of the present
chapter is to briefly focus attention on nature and
causes of these changes.

ADJUSTMENTS WITHIN THE SOCIETY

Observations on the ex-tea garden labour
society had revealed that it is composed of heterogeneous
social elements. These elements had made many compromises
within themselves and had made adjustments. A complex
process of social interactions among heterogeneous social
elements of the labour force, recruited from different
parts of the country by the managements of a single (or
several) tea estates, had started as soon as they
commenced living in the tea estates. The impact of the
central authoritarian management on the labour relations
and living in the closely positioned labour quarters had
taught them the cardinal principles of compromises and
adjustments with heterogeneity. Original customs and

2 Studies by RoyDurman (1968), Harlalka (1975) and Kar (1975)
also point to such conclusions. Bhuyan (1960) observed
that the tea garden labourers had to make many compromises
with the situation in the tea gardens.
traditions were modified and respect for each other's customs and traditions was developed. The tradition and training in adjustments that were achieved in the plantations were carried to the ex-tea garden labour villages. It was observed that the ex-tea garden labour villages presented no differences in respect of caste/tribe composition. In the villages also they had to make similar adjustments.

It may be mentioned that the heterogeneity among the ex-tea garden labour population had deprived them of a unified social authority. But, that does not mean that there were tensions and conflicts among them. The heterogeneous society still possessed certain group consciousness based on caste or tribal identity. The groups were informal and were not represented by any personality or leaders. Although in times of social tensions such group feelings come to the surface, considerable degrees of flexibilities and tolerances within the groups and also in relation to other groups were observed. There were not one but several norms in the society. The society, therefore, could not have particular norms for it to be followed by all the groups. In some cases predominant group norms were the village norms but violations could not be prevented in the absence of unified social authority.

3 The society was without traditional or institutional leaders. It had also no organisation to look after its problems.
It was also observed that social relations among the groups varied considerably. Some groups were socially closer to others. This may be due to their internal caste/tribe relationships or newly developed relations through marriage or religious and social festivals. It was also seen that if in the same ex-tea garden village, people from several tea estates had settled down, there were greater affinities among the people who had come from the same garden unless new relationships through marriage or otherwise had developed. Those groups who considered themselves as superiors tried to keep some distances from supposedly inferior groups. That way, other groups were not affected. Group relations were complex and varied from village to village. Inspite of all these divergences the society lives in harmony. Compared to indigenous plains villages, the harmonious relationship amongst different groups or sub-groups in ex-tea garden labour villages is greater as former caste/tribe taboos were greatly diverged when they lived in the tea estates under the protective wings of the tea garden managers.

ADJUSTMENT WITH TEA GARDEN LABOUR

The tea garden labour society is a sister society of the ex-tea garden labour population. The present population in the ex-tea garden labour villages have had their origin in the tea estates, most usually in the
neighbouring tea estates. As such, the existing wage earning labour society in the tea estates and the newly developed society in the ex-tea garden labour villages are similar in basic characteristics.\textsuperscript{4} The adjustment problem is not very complicated.

It appears from observations that there were no much economic relations between the two sets of similar people excepting the fact that some of the ex-tea garden labour population were engaged as casual labourers in the tea gardens in the neighbourhood of the villages.

Social relations of ex-tea garden labour with tea garden labour were mostly based on kinship and marital links. These relations were not confined to the neighbouring tea estates of the ex-tea garden labour villages. There were relations in tea gardens situated at considerable distance. These relations were mostly based on caste or tribal affinities. Participation in social functions such as marriages and festivals were also observed to be based on family and groups. Other relations or contacts were individualistic in nature. There were no common secondary social institutions between the two societies excepting secondary schools and colleges where only a few among them

\textsuperscript{4} Both the societies are often consider as one and the same by literary and political circles in Assam. Ghatwar(1975) mentioned that tea garden and ex-tea garden labour societies has one and the same culture. Gohain (1974) indicated that influence of Kol culture was seen over them.
had the opportunity to enter. The tea gardens have separate primary schools, hospitals and shops etc. and therefore much contact with outside is not necessary.

It was observed that some among the owner cultivators in the ex-tea garden labour society did not like the idea of their maintaining relations and associations with the tea garden labourers. They considered the status of tea garden labourers below the status of cultivators.

The areas of conflict between the tea garden labour and the ex-tea garden labour were very limited. The existence of surplus section of the tea garden labour is a major source of competition in the labour market and land for leasing in on share cropping basis. These areas of conflict are likely to grow in the future. Further, many of the present ex-tea garden labour envy the position of the tea garden labour because the condition in the plantations had improved. But the ex-tea garden labour had not exhibited any tension about it. But they think that they should get preference to tea garden labour in allotment of land by the Government. If this is done they would not mind for preference given to the tea garden population in employment in the tea estates.
ADJUSTMENT WITH THE ASSAMESE SOCIETY

The adjustment process with the Assamese society needs also to be viewed in the historical perspective which were discussed elsewhere in the study. In Chapter IV, it was indicated that the ex-tea garden labour villages presented a situation of self-segregation and they were not very close to each other. Their location, by and large, determined the social and economic relations with the local Assamese society. In some villages the ex-tea garden labour were quite aloof from the Assamese population. Because, such ex-tea garden labour villages were surrounded by the tea gardens. Thus, degree of contact or for that matter opportunities for contact with indigenous section of the population varied with the neighbourhood pattern of the ex-tea garden labour population. The neighbourhood pattern on the other hand depended on common geographical boundaries with village inhabited by local Assamese population. Thus, degree of adjustment or cultural interactions between the two societies varied from place to place.

The process of interactions and adjustment with the Assamese society had started as soon as the tea garden labour came out of the gardens and settled in occupations outside the plantations as ex-tea garden labour. But these two societies maintained social distances. This, however, does not mean that there were complete absence of interchange.
of cultural elements. The ex-tea garden labour had modified many of their festivals and rituals in line with the Assamese festivals and rituals. This aspect is discussed in a separate note provided in Appendix A. But, it was observed that there were areas of discriminations.

Areas of Discriminations:

Bhuyan (1960:12) reported that the Assamese people, in the past, considered the tea garden labourers as *adha fatakias* meaning half prisoners. This belief, it was said, was due to the bad condition of labourers in the tea gardens and also the methods of recruitment through agents from other places of India. The slave-like condition of tea garden labourers under the colonial planters and relative affluence of the Assamese population in an economy based on village self-sufficiency had helped formation of this discriminatory attitude. This ultimately gave rise to a general consideration that the immigrant tea garden labour belonged to inferior races. This stigma was attached to the ex-tea garden labour population also.

Assamese people also considered the tea garden labour as aliens. They used the term *bongali* which was used to mean all people from outside the province (the word *bongali* actually means people from Bengal). This term is still being used to mean the ex-tea garden labour population.
The ex-tea garden labour villages are called *mogali* villages (*mogali*gaon). Mention may be made of the fact that the prefix *mogali* also appear in the official names of villages inhabited by the ex-tea garden labour population. They also appear as such in village directories of Census of India.

Another term, which is now formally obsolete, was commonly used to mean both the ex-tea garden and the tea garden labour population. This was the word *noolia*. The planters and the *habas* (the ministerial or clerical staff in the tea gardens) used the word to mean the tea garden labourers (this word was used in other senses elsewhere in India mainly to mean the railway porters). This term carried the stigma of inferiority and was now formally replaced by the Hindi word *mandoor* and the Assamese word *boma*. But it was observed that in informal situations this word is still being used even by educated Assamese people.

These point to the fact that there were superiority feelings in the Assamese society in general and inferiority feelings in the ex-tea garden labour population. It was observed that higher caste groups in Assamese society had greater degree of superiority feelings in relation to the ex-tea garden labour population. The relations between 'backward classes' in the Assamese society
and the ex-tea garden labour society were not free from this superiority/inferiority feelings. But there is one instance in a sample village where people in similar socio-economic standing looked down upon the others. The Kents in the ex-tea garden labour population claimed that Kaivorta in the Assamese society were inferior to them. Mention may be made that both of them belong to fishing caste.

The ex-tea garden labour came in contact with the Assamese population in the rural areas in inferior terms. It is obvious that they were mostly tenants and agricultural labourers to the Assamese people. These relations are also exploitative in nature. Thus, the sense of inferiority in the ex-tea garden labour was fixed. Inequality in the ownership of land, lower educational standard and separate cultural and historical backgrounds gave them the inferior status. On the other hand, the superiority feeling in the Assamese section of the population had continued. Social relations were established on the basis of these status.

When the ex-tea garden labour visits an Assamese household he is usually given a seat outside the living room. The food is served in a separate place. This situation however depends on various other factors. If the ex-tea garden labour is educated and comparatively better dressed (i.e. in corresponding standard of the Assamese household)
the relationship becomes better. These personal relations in informal situations varied considerably from place to place and person to person but the fact was evident that the ex-tea garden labour in general had a lower social status. This however, related to the economic status of the ex-tea garden labour. There were no formal social situation in which ex-tea garden labour and the Assamese society had occasion to meet excepting in limited cases.

Instances of Assamese people visiting the ex-tea garden labour villages and households were restricted to acculturated section only (i.e. in case of households which were comparatively in better standard of living and educated). When the author visited the sample villages some households reported that they saw visitors in their villages only at the time of the general elections. But it was gathered that some lower Government officials and Panchayat Secretaries often visited the villages. But it is a fact that the officials visiting the villages do not visit most of the households. They usually go to the village headman or affluent households only and call other villagers to the place. It was also observed that even the moneylenders (kabliwallas) and mahajans operated in the market places and did not visit the villages. The villagers came to the places of business or residence of the mahajans.
It was evident that the ex-tea garden labour had practically no visitors from outside their society. Further, they had no arrangements to receive visitors from outside as most of them lived in one roomed houses. The outsiders had to sit in the open and during rainy days it was difficult to make a visit to the households. The author, was however, allowed to see the inside of the houses. Some households offered tea, pan-tamul and even haria. But, investigation had to be made by sitting outside on empty gunny bags and paddy straws.

Haria was one source of attraction to a sample village where one household used to prepare it for sale. Such instances might not be many but illicit distillation of liquor in some ex-tea garden labour villages was reported. There were also raids in one of the sample villages by the State Excise staff.

Thus, it appears that Assamese people in rural areas, at least a larger section of them, maintain social distances from the ex-tea garden labour population. This discriminatory attitude is both conscious and unconscious. But it must be said that this in no case can be compared to the 'untouchability' problem in other parts of India. The ex-tea garden labour, subject to equal economic standard does not suffer from social disabilities of the
Harijan. In fact, the untouchability problem is not much in evidence in Assam. Caste structure in Assamese society does not contain much elements of social disabilities.

Areas of Conflicts:

In the rural areas the major area of conflict is land. This problem was already indicated in Chapter V. The ex-tea garden labour population is gradually finding it hard to retain their ancestral land. The land acquired by their fathers and grandfathers from the Government has become inadequate. Yet, there were hardly any organized attempt at acquiring land from the Government.

In recent years the Government had acquired many surplus land from the tea gardens. This land was distributed to people according to Government land distribution policy from time to time. The ex-tea garden labour felt that they should have the first priority to such land. But they had not voiced any demand. It was gathered that they were afraid that such demands might incur the displeasure of the local Assamese landless section. For similar reasons, many ex-tea garden tenants of Assamese land owners did not venture to ask for reduced rates of rent (or share of the produce) as per legislation in force. Some of their counterpart in the Assamese section had already started paying reduced rates of rent.
Another major area of conflict is the competition for white collared jobs. But, the ex-tea garden labour population had not produced enough competitors in the employment market for the educated. Thus, there is no conflict or competition for such jobs between the Assamese and the ex-tea garden labour population. But with the spread of education such conflict may arise in future.

Area of Integration:

The language is a potent factor of integration. It may be said that in matters of language the ex-tea garden labour population has identified themselves with the local language i.e. Assamese.

The tea garden labour originally belonged to different linguistic groups like Hindi, Oriya, Bengali, Bhojpuri, Santali, Mundari, Sadan etc. In course of time they developed a common dialect which was known as Hagan-beat (meaning dialect of the tea gardens). This dialect was a mixture of all the dialects spoken by them taking the Assamese language as the main link language. This dialect gradually got modified with more words of the Assamese language (in Cachar district it conformed to Bengali language). Khound(1968) opined that this language was as good as the Assamese language. The ex-tea garden labour mostly spoke
this mixed language but now all of them have adopted Assamese language as their own. They educate their children in the Assamese medium. As such the use of their own dialect has gradually declined.

Cultural transmissions and modifications of festivals etc. of the ex-tea garden labour population are discussed in a separate note given in the Appendix. This also indicates that there is a gradual process of integration of the society with the general socio-economic matrix. But it may be pointed out that the process of integration is very slow and it was slower in the post-independence period. But, it had gained certain speed due to removal of much of the discriminatory outlooks of the dominant section of the population. But they remained still not fully adjusted to local Assamese rural society. The present adjustments are achieved because of the fact that the ex-tea garden labour population had learned to make compromises.

A separate culture of the tea garden labour class (i.e. tea garden and ex-tea garden labour population taken together) has now been recognised. This was revealed by a number of publications under the patronage of the Assam Sahitya Sabha - an organisation in Assam for the promotion of Assamese language, literature and culture. The Assam Sahitya Sabha had started taking interest in the tea garden labour society so as to bring them into the mainstream of
socio-cultural life of the area. It is implicit that the ex-tea garden labour population and also the tea garden labour population are not yet integrated in the socio-cultural life of Assam. Integrating them into the greater society means recognition of the culture of the tea garden labour class as a part of the Assamese culture. Thus the identification as a separate culture known as the Chah Mandooor Samaj Sanskriti (culture of the tea garden labour society) is a process of integration. The integration of different elements of tea garden labour through the medium of the Assamese language in itself has made it easier to integrate the tea garden societies with the local Assamese society.

ADJUSTMENTS TO GENERAL CHANGES

The discussions in the preceding chapters on economic and social situations in the ex-tea garden labour population had revealed that there were relative economic stagnation specially in regards to agricultural production. Those who were engaged as cultivators did not adopt improved technology in the general pattern of agricultural development in the State. For that matter, the adoption of improved technology in the general pattern of agriculture was however slow. The level of agricultural enterprises in the ex-tea garden labour households was lower. This was examined in Chapter V.
The stagnation in the economy and low level of agricultural technology in the ex-tea garden labour households may be attributed to their backgrounds. It might be possible that only particular groups like the Kurmis, who had comparatively a better agricultural backgrounds, had settled as good cultivators. Their experience in the tea gardens i.e. in the wage economy was not helpful for their rehabilitation in agriculture. They could neither adjust to the wage economy in the plantations nor to the rural economy as cultivators. Reference may be made to the Muslim immigrants from East Pakistan who came to Assam much later to the Province than the tea garden labourers but they are now settled as good cultivators in different parts of Assam. No doubt that some of them are now prosperous cultivators. They had good agricultural backgrounds and had no experience in the wage economy like the ex-tea garden labourers. The ex-tea garden labour, it was observed, had imbibed more liking for cash earnings and holidays on Sundays. Their past experiences in the tea gardens were not helpful in many wage. They also remain unadjusted to the changes in the rural economy and improvement in the agricultural technology. They have shown adjustments with wage earning occupations.

The situation in the plantations had greatly improved and many of the ex-tea garden labour being unable to adjust in the rural economy would prefer to enter the
plantations as regular labour. But the situation in the plantation is such that there are a surplus labour force in almost all the gardens. It is not possible for them to reenter the plantations.

The ex-tea garden labour population had shown greater flexibility in entering wage-paid employment and they had moved to various types of employment opportunities as labourers offered by the construction works, factories, workshops and the like. It is likely that they could adjust to any type of employment. In many places, ex-tea garden labour population have come forward to work as labourers in road construction and improvements etc. which they used to get. These types of works were earlier undertaken by labour from Bihar and U.P. only. Evidences and observations point that they have less traditional inhibitions and non-resistant attitudes to change. They did not also exhibit lack of acquisitiveness so as not to respond to incentives. But they are at present in a state of acute economic hardship. Lack of leadership and external assistance are some of the factors for their present state.