The ex-tea garden labour population in Assam has a singular history and their emergence was due to importation of large number of labourers for the tea plantations from outside the Province. The tea industry was started by the colonial planters in about 1836. As local labour was not available the bulk of the labour force required for the industry had to be imported. Recruitment of labour from outside the Province of Assam began around 1860 and continued till about 1960. During this period about 38.0 lakhs (as roughly estimated) people including men, women and children were brought to Assam. These immigrant labourers were brought under contracts to serve the tea gardens for a period of 3 to 8 years after which they had the option to return to their original places. The communication in and out of the Province was so bad that most of the contract labour could not return to their original places after the expiry of their
term of contract. Most opted (or were compelled to opt) to be reemployed and others moved to the neighbouring villages to settle as independent cultivators, tenants and agricultural labourers. A few also deserted the tea estates due to exploitative and oppressive treatment by the management. Those who settled outside the plantations came to be known as the ex-tea garden labourers. Thus, a distinct section of immigrant people in the rural areas of Assam made its appearance in about 1863 i.e. after the introduction legislations to control recruitment of labour for the Assam plantations. This process of settlement of tea garden labourers in land outside the plantations i.e. in the villages, continued at an increasing rate till sometimes after the abolition of the indenture system in 1925. It had greatly decreased after 1930 as condition of labourers in the tea gardens and the system of recruitment had considerably improved. But, by then, a large number of labourers had settled in the village areas as ex-tea garden labourers.

At present, there are many ex-tea garden labour villages in the tea growing districts of Assam, of varying sizes, usually smaller than the average size of the Assamese villages. These villages, by and large, are situated very near to the tea gardens from which they came out and relatively isolated from the indigenous
Assamese rural population and also from the urban areas. A type of self-segregation had developed due to the settlement pattern and clustering of the households.

No official estimates of the ex-tea garden labour population and the tea garden labour population residing in the villages and the plantations respectively are available. A rough estimate indicates that there are about 15.0 lakhs of ex-tea garden labour population in the villages and about 14.32 lakhs of tea garden labourers (including their dependents) living in the tea estates. Thus, a total population belonging to the stock of originally indentured immigrant labourers was found to be nearly 29.0 lakhs in 1971. This was about one-fifth of the total population in Assam. The total population of the ex-tea garden labour in the villages almost equals the total population of the Scheduled tribes in Assam (16.06 lakhs) in 1971. Thus the ex-tea garden labour constitute a sizable section of the rural population in the State.

Most of the existing labour came to Assam about 3 to 4 generations back (about 60 to 75 years) and in many cases they have been living in rural areas in the vicinity of the tea estates without regular employment in the tea estates for 2 to 3 generations as ex-tea
garden labour. They are a distinct social group composed of many castes and tribal elements.

The ex-tea garden labour population had shown a very unusual trend by coming out of the organised industry and making an attempt at their own rehabilitation (without being compelled to leave the industry because the industry wanted more labour at that time) in the subsistence sector. It was found that the main reasons for their leaving the industry were most unsatisfactory working and living conditions in the tea gardens during the early period of the industry, a faulty recruitment procedure, traditional attachment for land, love of freedom and other similar sociological factors. They sought comparatively an independent life in the rural areas and expected that they would improve their economic and social position by such reversion. The well-knit prosperous social existence of the neighbouring Assamese villages might have been another cause of attraction for settlement in village life.

II

The present study aimed at analysing the social and economic condition of the ex-tea garden labour population living in the villages. An attempt has also been made to examine their adjustment to local situations.
The purpose of undertaking the present research was to see their presently held socio-economic position in general on the basis of field investigations, observations and secondary sources of information.

The study conclusively established that the socio-economic condition of the ex-tea garden labour population living in the rural areas of Assam was not satisfactory. Their economic condition could be compared only to the lowest income group people of the rural areas in Assam constituted by the landless households and agricultural labourers. Their social status was much inferior in relation to the general indigenous rural population. The ex-tea garden labour society was comparatively isolated from the general rural society and was not fully adjusted to the local situations.

The study further revealed that the ex-tea garden labour population could not adequately earn their livelihood from the newly adopted farming occupations and they had to continue farm operations with that of employment in the wage economy offered by the plantations. This dualism is peculiar to them because of their backgrounds. Their attachment to wage economy was evident from the fact that they were found in all types of wage earning occupations that were available to their limited skill and education in
the neighbourhood. It was found that they did not have adequate employment and wages. They had not shown any preference for independent trades, professions and other than agricultural production (arts and crafts etc.). They could not even settle as good farmers.

At the present juncture, the condition of the ex-tea garden labour population, at least a major section of them, are worse (or no better) than the presently employed tea garden labourers. In fact, many ex-tea garden labourers would now be happy to join the regular labour force in the tea gardens. But that is not possible on account of tight employment situation in the tea gardens. The tea industry now has surplus labourers and the supply of labourers in the tea estates had completely reversed from scarcity to abundance. It may be mentioned here that the surplus labourers in the tea gardens are potent competitors of the ex-tea garden labour population in the labour and land market (i.e. for land on lease on share cropping basis) in the same area.

From the present study it may be concluded that the ex-tea garden labour population had not derived the expected benefits from their reversion from wage-paid employment to self-employment in agriculture. At last it may be stated that they were partially successful in their
attempt to earn their livelihood by their own attempt from the land. But it is also true that the ex-tea garden labour population could not adjust fully with the new situation and had still remained aloof from the mainstream of local culture and economically backward and socially stagnant.

III

Besides this general finding the study sheds light on various aspects of social and economic life of the ex-tea garden labour. Their association (both past and present) with the wage economy had brought about many changes like the preference for nuclear family, greater degree of participation of women in wage employment and of attachment to cash income.

The ex-tea garden labour society presented complex characteristics. The society evolved out of a mixture of numerous castes and tribal elements from different parts of India. They had made many compromises with heterogeneity and the degrees of flexibilities and tolerances were much greater in them. Inspite of their being relatively free from caste prejudices the individual caste and tribal identities were maintained and the society was composed of groups and sub-groups. This did not allow them to have uniform social norms. But in the totality of
the situation in the rural areas the ex-tea garden labour society remained a distinct and different social group.

A process of assimilation with the local Assamese society is being gradually developed. The adoption of the Assamese language by the ex-tea garden labour population has greatly facilitated their absorption into the socio-economic matrix of the region. But in the past they had to suffer discriminatory treatment by the dominant section of the rural society. Traces of such discriminatory attitudes could still be found.

IV

The study also revealed that the ex-tea garden labour in general did not benefit much from the development plans and programmes implemented by the Government from time to time. The Community Development Programme was originally designed as an integrated development programme to improve the overall socio-economic condition of rural people. But subsequently this programme was converted to agricultural development programme with minor emphasis on social education etc. In plains villages inhabited by local people where agriculture is the only occupation around which all other economic pursuits depends such emphasis on agriculture has not affected other
development programme much. But in areas where people have to depend on casual labour and other works apart from agriculture, emphasis on agriculture alone cannot solve the problems faced by the people. It was found that the agricultural development under the Community Development Programme had not made any impact on the level of agricultural enterprises of the cultivating group of the ex-tea garden labour. This was because of their divided attention to cultivation and wage-paid employment.

Some impact of the general extension of primary education in rural areas was noticed on the ex-tea garden labour population also. But special educational assistance (in the form of pre-matriculation scholarships) for backward classes in Assam did not benefit them much because only a few tribes among the tea garden and ex-tea garden labourers were included in the category of other backward classes. As a matter of fact, the ex-tea garden labour population as a whole irrespective of their caste and tribal affiliations is entitled to be included in the category. Because of the very low level of educational standard the ex-tea garden labour population as a whole need special patronage and assistance (from the Government) to improve their educational standard.
Certain assistance in the form of educational facilities, housing and supply of essential commodities etc. needs to be given on priority basis. Although these programmes would certainly ameliorate their condition they cannot by themselves offer a permanent solution to the problems faced by the ex-tea garden labour. The solution to the main problem of economic development lies in investment in employment generating schemes. It is outside the scope and perview of the present study to recommend the type of schemes to be undertaken for the ex-tea garden labour population. Suffice it to say that the ex-tea garden labour needs much more attention than what it had received so far particularly in relation to their opportunities for employment.

It was found that the problems of ex-tea garden labour population are generally considered as part of the problems of the tea garden labourers. This has resulted in some confusion in development policies. The belief that the improvement in the condition of the tea garden labour society would automatically improve the condition of the ex-tea garden labour population is not borne by facts. The economic interest of the ex-tea garden labour population is basically not tagged to the condition of labour in the plantations. This might have also prompted many educated ex-tea garden labour joining trade unions or other political groups concerned with tea labour politics. This deprives
the ex-tea garden labour society of leaders. Because of that there is no organisation among them despite the numerical strength. The problems of ex-tea garden labour has remained relatively quiescent due mainly to lack of leadership. There has been greater emphasis on the problems of tea garden labour than on those of ex-tea garden labour due to collective bargaining practices through trade unions by the tea garden labour.

The present study has brought to light many of the hitherto unknown aspects of the ex-tea garden labour population living in the rural areas of Assam. The findings suggest that concerted efforts are called for the solution of their problems. There are also need for further studies particularly on sociological aspects of this complex society.