CHAPTER: 1

INTRODUCTION

1: 01: Area and the people of study:

The tea garden community as distinct by the name are the inhabitants of the tea gardens and its adjacent villages stretched throughout both the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys of the present State of Assam between 89° & 96 East longitude and 28° & 26 North latitude\(^1\). The area and the people of this study comprise the whole area of both the valleys in general and the Oriya speaking people in the district of Tinsukia. The district is located in the easternmost part of the State between the longitude of 95° 22 & 95° 38 and 27° 23 & 27° 58 East latitude. Conjugation of the four rivers with the Lohit covers almost 20% of the land area of Sadiya sub-division of this district and from this spot the combined flow towards the south-west takes the name Brahmaputra. The other two sub-divisions; Tinsukia and Margherita are mostly of plain with thick forests covering some 10% of the total area.\(^2\) The Margherita sub-division is rich with coal and oil. The Patkai ranges surround the South-Eastern boundary of this district which was the Eastern entrance of the country for the foreign powers. The great Ahoms entered into this land crossing this ranges in 1228 A.D. and laid the foundation of the present Assamese society.\(^3\)

The district has 114 registered tea gardens of this district. These tea gardens are located on both the sides of the National Highways 37 and 38 from Panitola in the west to Dhola

\(^2\) ibid.
(Saikhowa ghat) on the north-east and Lekhapani in the south-east.\textsuperscript{4} The total population of the district is 11,50,146 out of which some 4 lakhs are the people of the tea garden communities. The overall population of the tea garden community in the State is estimated to about 70 lakhs as claimed by most of their social organizations.\textsuperscript{5} The other population comprise the Moran-Mataks, Kacharis, Ahoms, the tribal groups like the Tai-Fakey, Singphow, Khamti, etc.; Bengalis, Biharis, Nepalis and Marwaris etc. About a thousand or more are the south-Indians who work in the North-Eastern Coal Fields of Margherita, Borgolai, Tikok, Tirap and Tipong Collieries. Besides, there are some outsiders who are temporary inhabitants for their services under the Central Government and other industries.

The population pattern of this district is of mix nature with varieties of cultural differences; not to clash, but sharing an example of co-existence without effect on their individual identity. However, sometime they feel danger of their existence, not for the cultural clash but for the constitutional bargains in relation to the economic development of a particular community. Politics warm up on such issues and the racial emotions take hold with agitation against the government policies. The tea-garden community, Moran-Muttok, Ahoms etc. are demanding for their scheduling, is a burning issue at present.\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{4} Tea Statistics, Tea Board, India (2001), Calcutta.
\textsuperscript{5} Topno, Wilfred, (Ed): Adivashi Awaz: a monthly mouthpiece of AASAA, (1997) Lakhimpur. (The Government Census does not keep the population record, community-wise. So, exact number of population of this community cannot be traced.)
\textsuperscript{6} Bora Chitralekha (Ed): Tisukia Jilar Manuh, Tinsukia Jila Sakitya Sabha, Guahati, p 11
The Moran-Muttoks sometime claim this district belonging to them prior to the British rule. A tributary King Sarbananda Singha was a ruler of this area during the later period of the Ahom rule. Before him, the area was under the Sadiya Khowa Gohain; the governor of the Ahom Swargadeo, Sadiya as its centre of administration. The Ahoms who ruled over the Brahmaputra valley for 600 years (1228-1826) is one of the longest regimes of a single dynasty in the world. The Ahom ruler, though originated from the Shan race of the upper and eastern Burma (now Myanmar), adopted the cultural heritage of Assam and contributed in it’s assimilation with the great Indian tradition. The contribution of Sankardev, with his Vaishnavite philosophy, backed by the great Koch King Naranarayan, perhaps, the greatest landmark of opening this area for western cultural penetration. Sankardev borrowed the Vaishnavite philosophy from Orissa, bringing the people of the two regions closer to know each other. It is not surprising, that some of the social folk-customs of the Oriya people are similar with those of the people of Assam.

The East India Company formally undertook the administration of Upper Assam in 1839 from the last Ahom King Purandhar Singha though they occupied the whole of the Ahom Kingdom in 1826 by the treaty of Yandaboo. But search of tea in the North-Eastern region began back in 1823 at individual level. It was brought into the notice of Lord William Bentinck the Governor General of India by Robert Bruce in 1833 who took special measures to find out the local species which could be commercialized.

7. loc cit., Gait
8 ibid., p 340
9 ibid., p. 412.
Initially, at experimental basis a few gardens were opened and the achievement let it to grow in this area with both indigenous and foreign seeds. At last the foreign seeds saw a failure and the later was successful; so adopted to grow at commercial basis. Two establish more plantations required manual workers to clear jungles and to plant seeds. The local laborers; mostly from the Bodo-Kacharis were engaged but during the plucking of the leaves they retreat for their own cultivations in the fields.¹⁰ Due to this labor problem the Company government advised the tea planters to recruit workers from the other parts of the country. Thus the immigration of the people from other parts of the country into Assam began. The poor people were brought with promises of their repatriation by the cost of the planters itself. But, demand of laborers turned the intention of the planters. They began to apply such policies backed by the government that most of the recruits could not return to their native states.

The early immigrants in to the plantation were the Kol, Santhal and other tribes from the Bengal province under the Chhotanagpur plateau.¹¹ They were the first to work with the native workers for the planters and were instigated by them to open virgin land for cultivation. This was how the first group responsible for creating the of the ex-tea garden laborers. This is because the early plantation; though produce rich tea success was far ahead to market profit. Salaries of the workers were pending for long period; forced the people to see for other mean of livelihood. The planters, unable to pay timely helped them with the excess land to them under the free grant.¹² Some wanted cultivation in their own land. The fertile agricultural land

¹¹. ibid
¹². loc. cit., Gait.
of Assam attracted more and more people and the population of the Ex-tea garden labourers increased. When the plantations began to grow, flow of the new immigrants began to fill up the vacancies. Thus, the two groups; the actual workers in the tea garden called the labourers and at the same time the Ex-tea labourers began to grow in the environment of Assam. At present, the actual tea workers are not more than 15 lakhs engaged in the tea gardens while about thrice or fourth of this number live in the villages called basti. The Oriya people in the plantation mostly belong to the later groups, who, as time bound immigrants, hoped to go back. They had no interest to occupy land in Assam, so did not enter into the villages to become an Ex-tea garden labourer. This is the cause why Oriya people are vary limited among the Ex-tea garden labourers. Immigration of Labour, from outside the State totally banned in 1960.\(^{13}\)

Before discussing about the Oriya origin in the tea plantations of Assam, few words must be added to identify their actual origin. The forefathers of these people who had come to the plantation were from the present State of Orissa. This State during their immigration, comprised of the Eastern part of the Bengal and the North-Western part of the Central Provinces. But during this period the area was divided into a number of principalities in caste basis with their Rajas, who during the British period became either tributary or pensioner. The actual administrator of their principalities was the British. With the pension and no work to do the Rajas became autocrats in those matters which were not of interest of the British.\(^{14}\) Naturally, the social customs of the region fall in this category, which, the

raja began to control to show his authority to the people. As he himself ignorance in this matter; come under the influence of the tribal priests who could invite spirits or devi on him, bringing the whole area under his religious control through the raja.

The region perpetually worked by blue waters of the Bay of Bengal with the eastern coast of 482 Km., with clad blue hills of the Eastern ghats occasionally broken by ravines and deep valleys and bounded by it's north by the Chhotanagpur plateau of present Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand.¹⁵ The north-east part, as once under the Bengal presidency bears deep cultural influence, while some portion of south, enters under, not only culturally, but a deep impact on it's language. The area fall between 17° 48' and 22° 34' north latitude and 81° 24' and 87° 29' east longitude and can be divided into four distinct regions with distinctive characteristic of its own ¹⁶

Oriya, the regional language, belongs to the great Aryan family of languages, closely related to Assamese, Bengali and Maithili as direct descendants of the eastern Magadhi. It developed into a number of linguistic variations such as the Kondhria, Dongorlia, Sanlia, Kotkia, Chhotisgodia etc. influence by the neighboring regional languages and tribal languages of its surroundings. The script descending from the Brahmi got a roundish finish, probably during the reign of the Ganga dynasty. In writing, the speaker of the regional varieties uses the pure Oriya with its script.¹⁷

¹⁶. ibid.
¹⁷. ibid. p. 5.
The Saoras were the earliest inhabitants of Orissa mentioned in the Mahabharata. The plain Saoras were later known as Sabars. The tribes dominated the regions enumerated as Hindu in the census during the British rule coming into more closer with the more of advanced castes of the plains. The assimilation is the outcome of the present day linguistically varieties and the socio folk customs as well.\textsuperscript{18}

Two types of socio-cultural limits may be noticed in relation to the regional divisions of the state. The particular castes ascribed with traditional occupation, ritual and social status insists on certain social distances as taboos in marriages, food and drinks among themselves also restrictions on accessibility of public facilities and institutions like tank, wells, temple etc. practically had their own cultural world and social milieu with limited social interaction with the members of the other castes.\textsuperscript{19} These group form a mix culture through their day to day inter caste relation to achieve certain ends like cultivation, harvesting, house building, fighting diseases and end in other social necessities.

Ritual kinship and friendship like god-fathers, god-mothers, god-brothers, god-sisters and \textit{phul-bāchhā} through peculiar social intuitions established cementing bond on their relations.\textsuperscript{20} Sometime the tribal communities, though their exclusive settlements in the hills and jungles, come to this process and knowingly or unknowingly adopted each others cultural tradition, both having the traits of their others in their rituals. The second groups are those of the caste and tribes.

\textsuperscript{18} ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} op. cit. Tasa,2002. p. 4.
living in equal numbers either affected by the neighboring cultures or by the people equally living in the same area and with same kind of day to day activities.

The two types of intermix of cultures between castes; tribes and castes and between tribes accelerated in the new Industrial environment to which they become the soul source of workers. The tea communities in the tea plantations of Assam were one step more advance due to their common living in the isolated interiors of the state. The Oriya people, though little more conservative could not save from this rapid cultural assimilation process in the plantation.  

The Oriya speaking people in the tea-garden are about half of the total population of the community in this district. About 90% of them are purely garden workers, while the rests are daily rated workers and a few are in other occupations. Most of the forefathers of these people originally belong to the Kolahandi, Bolangir, Sambalpur, Anugul, Sundergarh, Puri, and Mayurbhanj districts of present State of Orissa. During their immigration, in between the later part of the nineteenth century, their original places were small principalities under the British rule. The rulers were either pensioners or tributary rulers. The districts named at present are named after the regional centers of the Oriya speaking regions, but with some differences in respect of their social folk customs. This study, though trying to find out the differences; it is hardly possible because of the forgotten condition of the people in the common living pattern in the environment of the plantations in Assam. The cause behind this, that very few gardens offer lines according to their origins.

21. ibid., p.12
22 In these tea gardens such 'lines' with Oriya population is about 90%
Most of the social folk customs are of mix nature and the continuous natural assimilation process let them forget their individual identity. During the investigation, a number of such people found, told that, he is Oriya by caste, but know nothing about his socio-cultural system. The few gardens like Tongnagaon, Kumsang, Bordubi, Philobari, Bogpara, Budlabeta, Beesacopie, Daimukhia, Rupai, Baghjan, Hansara, Raidang, Samdang, Panikhowa, Dheodam, Pabhojan, Lonsowal, Powai, Dhaisajan and Dihing are provided lines for Oriya speaking people. In these lines, if the people are from the same region from their forefathers' places, they could somehow, successful to keep and continue the practice of their previous rites and rituals. But, they are also affected by the growing penetration of the missionary activities and the recent development of the electronic media. The different religious sects under Hinduism have not much more effects on their rituals due to the matching rituals behind them. But, the Christian propagation terming the rituals as symbol of barbarism; destroyed their age old practices. A good number of the Oriya people belong to the 'Sanlia' clan; follow the Christian sermons rather than the traditional rituals of their own. They feel them useless and misguiding. The changes also prevail among the other castes and tribes also. The Oraon, Munda and Kharias, who adopted this religion, have already left their old traditions. A few of them, however, still practice their dialects. To revive the tradition in the line of saramon, the churches are in the process of adopting their rituals in the line of the apostle.

23 The 'Satsangh', 'Gaytri Parivar', etc., are making spaces among the Oriya origin in Baghjan T.E., Koomsang T.E., Dheodam T.E
24 Line No. 6 of Baghjan T.E. is such line of Sanlia Oriya following Baptist Church.
25 Some of the churches like Tongla in the district of Darang started observing the 'Karma' festival in the church environment.
1:02: Problem:

This study is concentrated with the social folk customs of the Oriya origin of the tea gardens of Tinsukia district. The Oriya people are mostly concentrated with the tea garden occupation and very few found in the neighboring villages of this district engaged in cultivation.

The district is comprises with the majority of the Oriya origin in almost all the tea gardens. Other tribes and castes of the tea community are also found in the tea gardens and the adjacent areas. The district has three sub-divisions, namely, Tinsukia, Margherita and Sadiya. In the three sub-divisions, the Tinsukia sub-division comprises the majority of the tea garden Oriya people, the Margherita sub-division, in its Powai, Dehing, Mrgherita and Ledo Tea Estates comprise with majority of them; about 60% to 70%. The Dirok, Namdang, Pengeri, Khatangpani T.E. Estates comprising less than 30%. Other castes and tribes, mostly the Oraon and Munda people are majority in Bogapani, Dirok and Namdang T.E. but they also claim to be originated from the State of Orissa. Most of them however, are Christians. In this district no Mohammedans among the tea community are found. Among the Oriya people a small number are Christians and followers of the Lutherans, Baptists, CNI, etc.

The Oriya origin in this district are originated from the few districts of the western parts, i.e. the districts of Kolahandi, Bolangir, Sambalpur etc, Avery small numbers are also found belong to the districts of Dhenkianal, Sundargarh, Anugul and Puri. Originally these people were follower of their regional traditions which are no doubt Oriya but regional impacts on them are very distinct. Each districts having their own version of Oriya which reflects in their social folk customs. In the
situation of the plantation these differences are rarely found but the traces of their origin sometime distinct in their Oriya versions. A person only could be identified through his conversation. There is the problem to study them separately. The resembling life style in the plantation forced them to intermix with each other. The changing situations may be also responsible for their negligence of individual traditional behaviour. My study is trying to find out some of their original traits and to show it separately.

1.03: Significance:

Prior to the advent of the tea plantation, the plain tribes, like Borahi, Matak, Mishing, Singpho, Khamti and the few Hinduised groups like the Ahoms, Chutia, Kochari and Koch were the inhabitants of this district. The area was under the Ahom rule prior to the taking over of the administration of Upper Assam by the East India Company in 1838. The Mataks, however signed to remain as tributary under the East India Company. The present districts of Tinsukia and Dibrugarh were the territory under the Muttacks.

After occupation of the Matak country, the Company was attracted for tea cultivation in this area. In these new plantations the Bodo-Kachari Singpho, Mishings etc. were the first to come to work. But they left gardens during the high seasons for their paddy cultivation in the field. This resulted huge loss for the tea gardens of Government initiative which ultimately sold to the “Assam Company”, a newly established enterprise for tea plantation in Assam. The “Assam Company”

was initially responsible to bring peoples from outside Assam to work in their gardens. Actually the Company foresaw expect of the tea cultivation which become true in later years.28

The tea cultivation in this area led to exploit other natural resources. Plywood was one of the most important materials without which tea plantation was impossible. The age old valuable trees were cut to build the factories, bungalows, quarters and also the innumerable bridges on the rivers and springs so as to make way for transportation of the tea. The other necessary material required out of plywood was the tea chests, which technically prepared to last the made tea for long period without being damaged. The made tea were exported in the tea chests to foreign countries. The Margherita area; the name of which was Makum, during this period became famous for plywood and plywood factories. The Assam Railway & Trading Company, established in 1883 was the pioneer of the plywood factory in Margherita and the Railway from Dibru to Margherita which was established in the same year.24 The railway stations of Margherita, Ledo, Powai, and Digboi are connected with motorable roads from interior tea gardens. Pengaree T.E., in this Sub-division is about 25 Km from Digboi Railway Station, is one of such instances. The roads were used not only for tea transportation but for the exploitation of the valuable plywood.29

After settlement of the tea labourers and the Ex-tea garden people in this district, the structure of the population pattern changed. The tea community population by passed the population of the indigenous communities. This is because the tea and plywood exploitation became possible only by the hired

28 ibid, p 409
labourers. The demography of this district changed and resulted with the new socio-political situations. The advent of Oil in Digboi, and mining of Coal in Makum (present Margherita) area further changed the situation in various ways. New employment opportunities for educated people emerged, which were occupied by the newly educated Bengali speaking people from then Bengal.  

The Bengali speaking people filled up the newly emerged employments, not only in the Oil Division but also in the Railway, Plywood factories and tea gardens in the posts of bābus. This is because the indigenous Assamese people were either not educated in English or they were not interested to work under foreign companies. When the manual works filled by the immigrant labourers; the offices of literary works were filled by the migrated Bengali babu. These migrated bābus were fully aware of their language and culture and so established themselves in this district, by establishing Bengali Schools, and second, by public celebration of Durga Puja, Kali Puja etc. with colorful and festivity; instigating the tea labourers to participate and enjoy them, convincing the tea garden Managers to provide holidays for these days. They had also convinced the Garden Manager to provide bonus before the Durga Puja, so that the access balances in the hand of labourer make the Puja more festivity.  

Therefore, the socio-cultural position of the tea community; specially, the Oriya origins in this district, though intact in some aspects; widely influenced by the new situations appeared as a result of the industrialization of this area.

30 ibid.
*(The "Bengal" included the present 'Bangladesh' prior to independence).*
1.04: Objective:

The Oriya origin of this district gradually being assimilated with the local people, specially, with the neighboring Assamese society. As mentioned earlier the Oriya people are those whose cultural background is far more similar to the Assamese people and it seems more rapid than the other people in the plantation. But their old tradition gradually either getting intermix or being foregotten. The objective of this study is to identify the present situation of their social folk customs which may provide sources of their study in future. The main objective of this study will be:

(i) the immigration and distribution of the population in the plantation areas;

(ii) their original cultural trend borrowed by them from their forefathers that belong to their previous home States;

(iii) to identify the social folk customs with detail explanation of the major sections found in Tinsukia district; and

(iv) the traits that help assimilation with local situation with the changing trends in the new socio-cultural situation and its importance.

1.05: Scope:

Folklore is the study of the oral tradition of the people first brought into formal study by Grimms brothers in Germany during the early part of the nineteenth century. The antiquarians of England and the philologists of Germany began
to look it as the activities of the lower classes and began to study it. The subject later emerged as a new field of study and R.M. Dorson classified the subject in four different categories. He classified them the field of folklore as oral folklore, social folk custom, material culture and performing arts in his book 'Folklore and Folklife: an Introduction'.

My subject of study is the Social Folk Customs of the Oriya people of the tea garden of Assam. The area of my study is the district of Tinsukia with special traces on the Oriya origin of the tea garden in the State. There are 114 registered tea gardens and all the tea garden Oriya people are the subject of my investigation. It is also a sample study representing the whole situation of the State. The tea garden populations are nearly 4 lakhs which includes the villages and nearly the Oriya people among them number more than 70% in this district.

The study includes some of the facts of the socio cultural and socio-economic trends in the plantation situation and the difficulties which force them to give up their age old traditions related to survival. They are, however, trying to adjust with the new situation by coming more close to the people of their neighbor. The new situations help them to match with the new condition against the price of their age old tradition.

1.06: Methodology:

The study is purely folkloristic and I had to follow the methods applied for the subject. I have followed the guidance provided by Kenneth Goldstan. This study has been carried out through inductive, deductive and empirical approaches. In most cases relevant sequential data are not found even in the secondary sources, the inductive method applied to arrive at the definite conclusion. Likewise situation made to apply
deductive method in respect of some data which are found extravagant.

The works includes:-

(i) Library work for the secondary data collection;
(ii) Observation and interview in the field for the primary data; and
(iii) Present in the original contexts of the social folk customs as much as possible with full participation and in some cases artificial contexts are to be arranged to clearly understand some of the rituals.

This study, as said earlier, is possible only by full participation in the original contexts of the social folk customs of the Oriya people in the tea plantation and this only possible with the availability of the contexts. Being come from the community I got the opportunity to stay with the people in the Oriya line of few of the tea gardens I am also originally Oriya by caste which helped me to understand the most critical matters in the field. My own parents directly related to their original place and their experiences shared with me during my teenage helped me very much to understand the household rituals of the Oriya people. Baghjan T.E., where I brought up was an Oriya populated tea garden and one of its line populated only by the Kondhria Oriya people, who are also my relatives inspired me very much to record the rituals that I experienced during my teenage. Besides, Powai T.E., where few of my relatives live in the natun-line was also great help for my study. My father was a literate in Oriya and had inspired me to learn the language was also great help in my study. Due to all these facilities I did not face much difficulty in the field.
The tools for primary data collection are; note books, pens, recorders, audio-visual help etc., Beside attending program, observations of some of the original context falling on hand relating to their other socio-cultural activities.

For the secondary data; the books so far published, related to the socio-cultural matters and the few research work available related to the tea garden people in this respect are taken for help to understand the overall situation of this community.

1.07: Review of literature:

There are a number of research works are going on for the study of the socio-cultural life of the tea garden community of Assam. These few works however, reflect on the over all situation of this community as a whole. No research work so far has been done to study about the individual castes or tribes of this community. However some works are already done on the individual castes or tribes in their previous places. These works provide light to understand their origin rather than the present situation in which they live. Some books written by the writers of this community are not research works but explanations of their experiences. These works also lack individual matters and thus representing the whole community. There are few articles related to individual caste or tribe sometime appears in their socio-cultural magazines. Such articles are mostly on the major tribes and are written by their own writers. Unfortunately no writing so far have been found on the Oriya people. The few article appear sometime in the news paper are also inadequate. Thus, the research works on different subjects scattered related to my subject are taken as secondary sources. The writings of the community's writers, though not systematic, are also taken for secondary data. Besides, there are souvenirs and
magazines related to the socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political subjects found in Assamese, were great help for this study.

Among the research papers, "Planters Raj to Swaraj" – an electoral politics in Assam, by A. Guha published in 1978; Dr. Umesh Chandra Saharia’s "Tea Labour of Assam" (2005), N.C. Bhuyan’s, "Chah Bagichar Banua" (Assamese), (1960); H.K.Borpujari’s "Assam in the Days of Company 1828-1858 (1963); E.A. Gaits, "A History of Assam" (1984); etc. and the works done by some writers of this society like “Seujia Patar Maje Maje” (Assamese), 1974; “Jhumur Gitor Majedi Banua Jiwanat Abhumuki” (1974) both by N. Ghatwar, "Deoram Tasa Rasaboli" (Assamese) 2001, ed. Ganesh Ch. Kurmi; anumber of articles in the Assamese periodicals and the souvenirs and magazines of the socio-cultural activities were used to find out the related materials for my study.
List of the tea garden tribes

A tea garden line

A male plucker of green tea