The term 'ethnic' has much relevance in today's political and academic sciences. It emerged in a very recent decade; it appeared for the first ever time in the Webster’s Third New International Dictionary in 1961. The term seems to carry different meanings in different contexts. In some countries, the term is applied to mean minority group, e.g., in the United States of America, while in others it connotes linguistic, cultural and religious groups for instance in India ethnic groups consist of linguistic, cultural and religious groups. Now the question arises as to what is 'ethnic'? A standard dictionary goes with the meaning, "it is a large group of people classed according to
common traits and customs. Sociologists and social scientists refer to the term 'ethnic' as a social group which consciously shares same aspects of a common culture and is defined primarily by descent. Ethnicity also refers to the sense of united feeling as Panikar said "ethnicity refers to the 'sense of peoplehood or we feeling by members of the groups the group who share this feeling is an ethnic group". A group's identity is governed by a common history, a common language and in many cases a common religion. Over and above, a distinctive culture with distinctive social institutions such as family structure, marriage, manners, attitudes, diet, dress and ways of thinking give a group of people a separate identity from others.

**Ethnic Groups in the Tea Gardens**

Tea garden labourers of the Barak Valley formed a multi-ethnic society. There were several groups speaking distinct languages. Bhuiyan broadly categorised them into three linguistic groups viz., (i) the Kolarian speaking e.g., Munda, Santhal, Ho, Kharia etc., (ii) the Dravidian speaking group such as the Oraon, Kondh, Gond, the Malpaharia and (iii) the group speaking Oriya, Bengali and Hindi. Each broad category consisted of castes and tribes.

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4. B Pakem, *op cit*, p 150
A distinction between the caste and tribes has placed the understanding of 'ethnicity' in a better perspective. Caste is a part of Hindu culture. But how do we define caste now? C H Cooley said,

When a class is somewhat strictly hereditary, we may call it a caste.\(^5\)

According to E A H Blunt,

Caste is an endogamous group or collection of endogenous groups, bearing a common name, membership of which is hereditary imposing on it members certain restrictions in the matter of social intercourse, either following a common traditional occupation or claiming a common origin and generally regarded as forming a single homogeneous community.\(^6\)

There are a few features which are common to all definitions:

1. Membership in the caste is hereditary;
2. There is restriction on touching, dining and mingling;
3. Choice of marriage is endogamous and

The term 'tribe' in generally was used for people who were considered primitive, backward, savage, uncivilised, illiterate and aborigine. Anthropologically, a tribe is a social group, the members of which live in a common territory, have a common dialect, uniform social organisation and possesses cultural homogeneity having a common ancestor, political organisation and religious pattern.\(^7\) D N Majumder defined a tribe as:

\(^6\) Ibid., pp. 158.
a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name, members of which occupy the same territory, speak the same language and observe certain taboos regarding marriage, profession and have developed a well assessed system of reciprocity and mutuality of obligations. A tribe is an endogenous unit, is a political unit in the sense that the tribal society owns a political organisation.\(^8\)

Dalton, a renowned anthropologist of British India, grouped all the non-Aryan tribes under two heads, viz., the Kolarian, i.e., those who speak languages akin to the Kols, Santhals, Mundas etc. and the Dravidian languages allied with the Tamil, Telegu, Oraons, Gond and Kondh. Dalton’s categorisation is, however, challenged in subsequent years with the transformation of society.

With this brief concept of caste and tribe one can examine whether the tea garden labourers of Barak Valley in pre-independent period were ethnic groups. An ‘ethnic’ in a broader sense is “a group of people showing an identity which arises from a collective sense of a distinctive history, culture, customs, norms, beliefs, traditions and a common language”.\(^9\) Again Cohen said,

\[\text{an ethnic group is an informal interest group whose members are distinct from the members of other groups within the same society in that they share.}^{10}\]

The result of the survey shows that the tea garden labourers of a particular caste were distinct from the members of other groups within the same tea garden community. Every caste had its hereditary

\(^8\) D N Majumder, Race and Culture of India, Bombay, 1958, pp. 355.
occupation, endogamy in the marriage system, different norms and beliefs. Members of a particular caste, group identified themselves by their profession, customs and traditions. E Hunter and Phillip Whittley said

\[
\text{any group of people within a larger cultural unit who identify themselves as a distinct entity, separated from that culture is an ethnic group}^{11}
\]

Thus a caste is an ethnic group within a larger Hindu culture. This analogy is not out of place with the tea garden labourers of the Barak Valley.

Similarly, a tribe is no less from being called an ethnic group. An analysis of the definitions of a tribe and ethnicity, will no doubt, put the idea in a better prospect. A tribe has a distinctive history, culture, customs, norms, beliefs, traditions, a common language and territory. On account of this, people from within and without a large cultural community identify that a section of people belonging to a tribe are a separate cultural group. This is being supported by what Hughes observed

\[
\text{...the people in it and the people out of it know that it is one, because both the INs and OUTs talk, feel and act as if it were a separate group}^{12}
\]

It has been expressed that 'ethnicity' is that culture, which had to be taught to the younger generations. When a child is born in a family of a particular caste or tribe he/she is brought up according to

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11 Ibid., p. 27.
the customs and traditions of that group and the child identifies itself accordingly. This is why Isaac said,

...it is composed of what have been called primordial affinities and attachment. It is the identity made up of what a person is born with or acquires at birth.\(^\text{13}\)

It is evident from above that both caste and tribe that constituted the tea labour population of the Barak Valley were ethnic groups. A brief account of each will throw much light on their identity.

**Munda**

Munda was known by other names of Mura and Horo-hon. It was a large tribe of Chotlanagpur classed on linguistic ground as Kolarian. It had a close affinity to the Hos and the Santhals. Their languages are akin to one another. A few of them migrated to Cachar to work in the tea gardens\(^\text{14}\). Mundas were divided into numerous exogamous septs, each sept or killi venerating a distinct totem. A few examples of them are given below\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^{13}\) H R Isaacs, *Basic Group Identity Ethnicity Theory and Experience*, Harvard University, Massachusetts, p. 29-30

\(^{14}\) Ranjit Kumar De, (ed), *op. cit.*, p. ix.

\(^{15}\) *Census of India*, 1901, p. 155
By religion the Mundas were animists. The chief festivals of the tribe were Maghe, Phagun, Ba-parab, Karam praja, Kadleta and Sohrai parab. Marriage among the Mundas took place within the tribe but out of one's own killi or sept. The bride adapted the totem of the husband. Divorce and widow remarriage was permitted. The tribe continued to practise their tribal rituals even after their arrival in the Barak Valley.

**Santhal**

This was a large Dravidian tribe categorised as Kolarian on linguistic ground. The Santhals were found in western Bengal, northern Orissa, Bhagalpur and Santhal Parganas. They were very near to the Mundas in ethnic character and socio-religious lives.


Religion of the Santhals was animism. No Santhal was allowed to marry within his sept nor within any of the sub-septs into which sept is divided. A man was allowed to marry from any other sept including the one that his mother belonged. The chief festival of the Santhals was the Sohrai or harvest festival. Public sacrifice was performed by the priest in the sacred grove, pigs, goats and fowls were offered by different families. Next in importance was the Bahapuja or flower
festival celebrated in Phalgun (February and March). The village duties were venerated amidst drinking, eating and dancing.

The dead bodies were cremated near water. This was accompanied by the sacrifice of a fowl. While the body was being consigned to the flames people were shaved off hair. Certain bones were selected and placed in a funeral urn with a hole in the cover to enable the spirit of the man to breathe. The remains were thrown into the water. The urn was carried across the village boundary and brought back to the house of the deceased and hung up.\textsuperscript{16}

There was a marked change among the Santhals after their arrival into the Barak Valley. The language of the tribe was losing its usage. The young generation nearly ceased to use the language as it was convenient for them to converse in the new dialect of the tea garden labourers. Similarly in their religious festivals and sacrificial rituals much of the Hindu rituals made its inroad replacing the old tribal rituals.

Kharia

Kharia was a Dravidian cultivating tribe of Chotanagpur, classified as Kolarian on linguistic grounds. According to a tradition they succeeded the Oraons as settlers in the country between Rohtashgarh and Patna while another legend said that their original home was in Mayurbhanj of which state they and the Paros were the

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 143.
first settlers. They were believed to have been born of the shell of a pea-fowl’s egg. They are currently found in Ranchi district, Manbhum, Feudatory states and Assam.

The tribe was divided into four sub-tribes, viz., (i) Dholk-kharia, (ii) Dud Kharia (iii) Erenga Kharia, (iv) Mund Kharia.

Kharia marriage was of exogamous nature. Girls were married off at the attainment of puberty. Marriages took place in Magh (January/February). Bride price consisted of one to ten heads of cattle. Widow marriage was permitted.

By religion Kharias were animists. They also practised nature worship. They venerated and worshipped Bar Pahar i.e., great mountain spirit.

In festivities the Kharias were same with the Mundas and the Oraons and allowed the same quantum of enjoyment as those of their neighbours. In July Ind Parab was celebrated. The participants danced and drank all through the night.

There was not much dissimilarity with the Mundas and the Kharias except, the Kharias made a distinction between the bodies of unmarried persons and those of married when they disposed of the dead. As the cremation took place, the bones and the ashes of the deceased were put into an earthen jar with some parched rice and threw it into a deep pool. The deceased was ranked as an original cleaner.
The Kharas were one of the smallest ethnic groups to be imported into Barak Valley. It was quite inevitable that in the course of time they lost much of their original traits such as language, rituals pertaining to disposal of dead.

Oraons

Among the purely aboriginal tribes of the Chotanagpur plateau, the Oraons appeared to occupy the foremost stand in the numerical strength and even rank first in intelligence and social progress. The Oraons in their own dialect called themselves Kurukhs. The origin of the name traced back to their mythical hero-king called Karuth. It was also believed that the name Kuruk was derived originally from some Dravidian word as the tribe itself was classified on Dravidian linguistic ground.

The tribe was divided into a number of exogamous septs. All of them were totemistic. Oraon marriage was of adult nature. Bride price system also existed. The bridegroom with a large number of friends both male and female proceeded to the house of the bride.

A peculiar practice of bachelor's dormitory and maiden's dormitory was in vogue in Oraon villages. The Hindi equivalent of the word is Dhumkuria. Its main objective was to train the young men and women in their social, economic and religious objectives and to secure efficiency in their later lives.

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17 Samuel Sareng, an interview conducted by the Researcher on 7 July 2001 at Monagar Tea Estate of Barak Valley.
Oraons celebrated the same festivals as the Mundas.

The Oraons disposed of the dead by burial but they also deposited the bones of the deceased in the family ancestral burial place ceremoniously after some months. The Oraons even claimed that they introduced plough cultivation in Chotanagpur. They became a good tea garden labourers in the Barak Valley.

Kondh

It was a Dravidian tribe found in some of the Orissa feudatory states, in the Berhampur Agency tracts, and the Khond Mahals Sub-division of the Angul district. The country where the Khonds inhabited was wild and mountainous. They were of shy and timid nature and hated contact with outsiders. Like many other wild tribes they also practised jhum cultivation.

The Khonds used to observe a strict custom of exogamy. They were divided into fifty-gachis or septs. Each sept bore the name of a muta or village, instead of totemistic animal or plant. This was the best example of an exogamous tribe. After their arrival into Barak Valley such exogamous custom could not prolong. As they were smaller in number compared to other groups much of their traditional practices became extinct.

Marriage among the Khonds took place at the attainment of puberty of a girl. Free courtship and choice of a partner by a woman

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was permitted. Even pre-marital sex was tacitly recognised. Divorce, widow-remarriage was permitted. A widow was expected to marry her late husband’s younger brother. The father of the bride officiated as a priest. The tribe as a whole were hardy and tardy. They were agriculturists by profession. They made efficient labourers in the tea gardens of Assam including Barak Valley.

Gonds

This was the biggest tribal group of the Dravidian family and perhaps the most numerous of the tribals in India. They inhabited the Satpura plateau comprising the Chhindwara, Betul, Seoni and Mandla districts and the hill ranges extending south of the Chhatishgrah plain and south-west down to the Godavari. Previously, the Gonds were the inhabitants of the central province which was generally known as ‘Gondwana’ or the country of the Gonds. Even in Barak Valley, after they migrated into it formed the greatest of the tribal groups among the labourers. They migrated and were settled mostly in the tea gardens falling under the present Hailakandi, Karimganj and western Cachar. According to the Census 1911, 237 of the labourers in Cachar belonged to the Gonds tribe.

The Gonds proper were of two aristocratic subdivision – the Raj Gonds and Khatolas. The Raj Gonds were the landholding class and

19 T O Crawford, *Handbook of Caste and Tribes Employed on the Tea Estates in North East India*, Calcutta, 1924, p 18
20 *Census of India*, Calcutta, 1911, p 124.
ranked themselves with the Hindu cultivating classes. The Khatolas were of mixed descendants and Gonds proper did not intermarry with them.

The Koya Gonds lived at places bordering the Telegu country. Their name was a corruption of Koior Kaitur. The Gaita were another Chanda-subcaste. Gaita meant priest. The hill Gonds of Chanaa were known as Gattu or Gotta Gonds.

The Gonds of Bastar were divided into two groups – the Maria and the Muria. Maria Gonds were wilder and lived in the hills while the Murias lived on the plains and were more civilised.

The Gonds practised a peculiar marriage system and it was in total contrast to the practice of other tea tribes. Marriage was made possible between a brother’s son and a sister’s daughter. A man was also free to marry his daughter’s daughter or maternal grand father’s sister. However, he was forbidden to marry his son’s daughter because she belonged to the same sept as he did. This practice ceased after they migrated into the Barak Valley. The Gonds of Narainpur Tea Estate of Cachar expressed even a sense of shy when people looked down upon them for the fact that their tradition allowed a grandfather to marry a granddaughter. They completely did away with low-graded practice.

However, the Gonds retained the custom of burying the dead with the feet pointing to the north and the Muria Gonds placed

\[21\text{ Ibid.}\]
towards the setting sun. But of late cremation replaced the burial practice in some tea gardens. The practice of Bastar Gonds setting up memorial stone in memory of the deceased relatives was also non-existent. But the belief that the spirits of the ancestors are incarnated in children or in animals continued till date.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{Kol}

According to a legend, Yajati, the fifth king of the Lunar race divided his empire among his five sons, viz., Turvaru, Pandya, Korala, Chola and Kola. The descendants of Kola are the present Kols. No doubt, it is a derivative of Brahmanical story which put them closer to the Rajputs, but they seemed to carry no memory of their relationship with the Kolarian speakers like the Mundas, Kharias etc.

The Kols had a tribal council before their immigration into Barak Valley, where only the heads of the families had seat. They decided questions relating to marriage and morality and met on the occasions of marriage and funeral feasts.

The Kols lost their original festivals. They observed the usual Hindu festivals. The tribe practised endogamy. Marriages took place in the months of Magh, Phalgun, Baishaks and Jeth. The Kols, unlike the general Hindus did not marry in the dark fortnight of the month.

\textsuperscript{22} Rajesh Gond, an old man of Narainpur Tea Estate of Cachar interviewed on 27 June 2001.
Widow remarriage and polygamy were permitted.\textsuperscript{23} Marriage by capture, the Udhar survived even after their migration to the valley.

The Kols did not allow a person to die inside a house. They usually took out a dying person out of a house and laid on the ground. They threw the body of the deceased into the river if the death was of cholera, or small pox. This practice ceased to continue among those Kols who migrated to Barak Valley. They like others accepted to practise cremation instead.

\textbf{Bhumij}

It was a non-Aryan tribe of Manbhum and West Bengal. Dalton classed the tribe on linguistic ground as Kolarian. They were closely allied to the Mudas. They were cultivators by occupation. The Bhumij originally migrated to Barak Valley from the south and south western parganas of Manbhum. They even spoke Mundari language and called themselves Mudas.

Marriages among the Bhumij took place when both parties were of mature age. Like the Mudas divorce and remarriage was permitted. They like the Mudas buried the dead first and buried the remains under the grave stones of the ancestors.\textsuperscript{24} After their immigration into Barak Valley they were becoming fast Hindus. They adopted many of the local customs after their years of mingling with

\textsuperscript{23} Ratan Kol, an interview conducted on 27 June 2001 at the Narianpur Tea Estate of Cachar.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.,
the local population. Many gardens had labourers of Bhumij community who no longer spoke their language. A survey in the gardens of Labac, Narainpur, Arcuttipur, Binakandi showed that they used their language in the initial stage of migration and gradually gave in for the use of distorted Bengali or Bagani Bhasa.*

Porja

This was comparatively a small tribe that migrated to Barak Valley in the early 70s of 19th century from the zamindari of Jeypore in the Madras presidency and in the central provinces. They were said to be an offshoot of the Gond tribe. In their own country, they were considered the sole experts on land matters. In case of any dispute on land the Porja was called upon to point out the ancient land marks. They were rather thrifty by nature.

The number of septs among the Porja were rather small. Therefore, though there was prohibition of marriage between the member of the same sept, the degree of restriction subsided as the members faced difficulty in finding enough choices for marriages. They were also not conscious of socio-economic problem unlike the major groups such as the Santhals, the Oraons etc. who were quite advanced politically and socially.

* The researcher during his survey of different villages found that most of the new generations of the labourer prefer speaking in Bagani Bhasa to their mother tongue.
By religion the Porjas were animists and they continued to be so even after their immigration. They worshiped the divinities of the hills and forests. Most villages had a man who was possessed by the deity and his advice was taken in religious matters.

The Porjas were very superstitious. A sight of a jackal, or a hare, or a dog wagging its ears, dust devil blowing in front were bad signs before starting a journey sowing, reaping and thrashing. A house when constructed should face east and west and north and south. The Porjas of Barak Valley were no doubt superstitious but had to give away as compelled under the company rules.

Korku

This was a Dravidian tribe of Central Provinces and Bihar who migrated to Assam, Cachar and Sylhet as tea garden labourers. They claimed their origin to Mahadeo, the creator. According to a tradition, Mahadeo made an image of a man and a woman and breathed life in them. He named them Mula and Mulai with the surname of Pothse and they became the ancestors of the Korku tribe.

Originally the Korkus were totemistic. Marriage among the Korkus took place when a girl obtained her puberty. Members of the same sept and the first cousins could not marry. Bride price was prevalent then.

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25 Rajan Parja, an interview conducted by the researcher on 28 June 2001 at Arcuttipore Tea Estate of Cachar.
By religion the Korkus claimed themselves to be Hindus. They worshipped Mahadeo. They had a very strong belief in black magic and witchcraft. Their superstitious mind stood in the way of progress and they lagged behind other garden labourers.

The tribe disposed off their dead by burial. The members of the deceased used to buy a grave by throwing two pie first and performed a ceremony, symbolising admission of the deceased to the community of the ancestors. These practices were no longer possible after immigration and they assimilated themselves with the greater groups in the gardens.

Bedia

This was a small Dravidian agricultural tribe of Chotanagpur. According to a Santhal legend, the Bedias were left behind in Champa in their sojourn. Sir Herbert Risely supported this and opined that the Bedias might have been a branch of the Santhal who did not follow the main tribe in eastward trek. The septs of the Bedias were totemistic. The religion and other customs of the Bedias were akin to those of the partially Hinduised aborigines.

Bhar

They were a small Dravidian tribe of Chotanagpur and United Province. They were divided into two sub-castes – the Maghaya and

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26 Sushil Korku, an interview conducted on May 6, 2001 at Laboc Tea Estate of Cachar
27 Ibid.
Bangali. They did not intermarry. After their migration, they were in the process of conversion into Hinduism. They professed Hinduism, burnt their dead, performed shrada. The tribe numbered a small quantum spread in a few gardens such as Arcuttipore, Binnakandi, Laboc, Dewan etc.

**Chassa**

This was a cultivating tribe of Orissa. The whole tribe was divided into several sub-tribes which were further sub-divided into several exogamous groups.

The Chassas became orthodox Hindus. They employed Brahmins for religious functions. The marriage and other rituals assumed Hindu character. Chassas were rough and tough people and they made a good tea garden labourers.

**CASTES IN TEA GARDENS**

The vast ethnic group of tea garden labourers in Barak Valley belonged to caste. As in the case of the tribes the castes have also been given a brief description of each

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29 Bankim Chassa, an ex-tea garden worker, an interview conducted on 1 June 2001 at Laboc Tea Estate of Cachar.
Bhuiya

The title 'Bhuiya' is found over a wide area from Assam to Rajputana and from Bihar to Madras. Literally, it means children of the soil. Risely distinguished 'Bhuiyas' by tribe and title. My concern was with the former. Bhuiyas as tribes were found in Palamou district, the Feudatory states of Gangapur, Keonjhar and Bamra. In southern part of Bihar Bhuiyas were then known as 'Musahar' or rate eaters. Uptil date, it has been maintained that the Bhuiyas of the Feudatory states are the original nucleus of the tribe. They present a compact body, maintaining strict endogamy in matters of marriage and believed to possess the ancestral land.30

Emigrating to Assam, Cachar and Sylhet as tea garden labourers many changes took place in their socio-cultural life. By religion, the Bhuiyas varied from Animism to Hinduism. They lost their mother tongue and spoke the Bagani Bhasa. The marriage and other religious ceremonies and festivals bore the Hindu character. However, polygamy in exceptional case, divorce and widow-remarriage continued to exist among themselves as excellent labourers.

Bind

This was a non-Aryan caste found in Shahabad, Monghyr and Tirhut division. They engaged themselves in agriculture, earthwork, fishing.

30 Hari Prasad Dhobi, a teacher interview conducted on 26 June 2001 at Dewar T.E., Cachar.
hunting and making salt petre. The religion of the Bind was orthodox Hinduism and continue to be so among the migrants of the community to the Barak Valley tea gardens. They were settled in gardens of Lakhhipur subdivision of Cachar and those of Karimganj district.

**Bauri**

Before emigrating into Cachar the Bauris belonged to cultivating, earthworking and palanquin bearing caste of Bihar, Burdwan of West Bengal, Orissa. They were said to have been disgraced for trying to steal food from the banquet of the gods and for selling the palanquin, they had been hired to carry in the drunken state for beating up their guru. The guru in turn condemned and cursed them to the lowest caste.

There were nine-subcastes among the Bauris. They were Mullabhumin, Sikharia or Goharia, Panchakoti, Mola or Mule, Dhulia or Dhulo, Mallua, Jhaha, Kathuria and Pathuria. Marriages were possible among the members of the same gotra but there was a bar between the relatives.

Marriage was either infant or adult among the Bauris. Widows were expected to marry the brother of the deceased if any. Divorce was accepted and it consisted of the husband taking away the iron

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31 Bind, Manoj, an interview conducted by the researcher on 26 June 2001 at Pailapool, Cachar.
ring which every married woman wore and proclaimed to the panchayat that he divorced his wife. Divorcee was free to remarry.

Bauris practised Hinduism of Sakta sect. They also worshipped Monosa, Bhadu, Barpahari and a few other local deities.

Bauris had their own priest to officiate all public worship and he is usually called Laya or Deghana.

Disposal of the dead varied from place to place. In most places they cremated their dead while in Bankura they buried.32

In Barak Valley of late, the Bauris instituted the Bauri caste panchayat. Its function is to preserve and safeguard their culture and settle disputes among their fellow Bauris. The community as a whole made an excellent labour force in the gardens such as Dewan, Laboc, Tarapore, Kasipur etc. of the Barak Valley.

Brahmans

They were the highest cast among the Hindus. Compelled under the economic circumstances a fraction of the caste migrated to different tea gardens of the North East including Cachar. Among the Brahmins emigrated into Cachar were Pandey, Chaube, Misra, Upadhyya, Tiwari and Trivedi. They were strictly endogamous in marriage, and dining. After immigration several of their kith and kins joined them to work as pandits in various religious and social functions. Even to this day a large section of the community serve as labourers though a small

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32 Sidam Ree, an employee of Nehru College, Pailapool, and also a social worker interviewed on 26 June 2001 at Dewan Tea Estate, Cachar.
section of it have taken up other jobs like teaching, office work etc. All the temples in tea gardens were entrusted to their care. In the later years of their migration and perpetual stay in Cachar correspondence among the caste was effected. They numbered a small fraction in all tea gardens of Barak Valley.

**Chamar**

This was a tanner caste of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Their name had been derived from the Sanskrit charmakara, a ‘worker in leather’. By tradition, the Chamar was the son of a chandela woman and a fisherman. The Karavara of Manu "who cuts leather" was descended from Nishada father and Vaideha mother. The Nishada is said to be the child of a Brahman and a Sudra woman and the Vaideha of a Vaisya father and a Brahman mother.

Like all large castes, the Chamars were broken up into a number of endogamous sub-divisions.

Marriage among the Chamars was of infant character. A marriage was officiated by an elder of the caste, consultation with a Brahman to fix an auspicious day for the event. Like other major castes the widow remarriage, polygamy and divorce were accepted among the Chamars.33

After their migration, the practice of child marriage died away.

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33 Census of India, 1911, p. 167.
According to the census of India 1911, they totalled a big size in the tea population of Barak Valley.

**Dhubi**

This was the washerman caste of Bihar, United Province and Orissa. The caste were divided into sub-castes such as Mighaiya, and Kananjia. Meghaiya Dhubis were exogamous which was absent in other castes. Marriage ceremony, religion and disposal of the dead were same as those of other social status. Of late Dhubis have taken to agriculture and other occupations. A good number of them emigrated to Barak Valley as tea garden labourers.

**Dom**

They were a Dravidian menial caste of Bengal, Bihar and the United Provinces. Several considered them to be pre-Dravidian while classed them as Dravidian.

Doms were divided into several sub-castes which were endogamous. These sub-castes were further split into a large number of exogamous groups. The caste permitted polygamy, widow remarriage and divorce. As to their religion Risely observed a mixture of animism and an influence of Hinduism. But their migration into the Valley completely changed them to Hinduism. Their festivals also

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34 Hari Prasad Dhubi, an interview conducted on 26 June 2001 at Dewan Tea Estate, Cachar.
35 Ibid.
assumed the characteristics of the Hindus. The caste was settled in the gardens of Dullabcherra, Patherkandi, Rosekandi, Arcuttipore etc.

**Dosadh**

This was a degraded Aryan cultivating caste of North Bihar, Bhagalpur, Chotanagpur and Orissa. They claimed to have their descent from the Pandava prince Bhima or Bhimsen.

The caste was divided into eight sub-castes – Kanaujia, Magahia, Pailwar, Kamar or Kanwar, Kuri or Kurin, Dhari, Silhotia or Sirotia and Behelia. There was inter-dining among them but not inter-marriage. The marriage age varied from group to group.

Some considered the infant marriage unnecessary while a few others did and held the opinion that an adult girl was not entitled to the full marriage service.

Dosadhvs stood very low by profession. Their main occupation was to act as watchmen, village messengers, elephant drivers, grass and wood cutters and porters. But after the migration into Barak Valley they stood on equal footing with other ethnic groups who previously claimed themselves to be higher than them.36

**Ghasi**

They were a Dravidian fishing and cultivating caste of Chotanagpur, Central India and Orissa. They used to be hired at weddings and

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36 Anil Kr Dosadh, an interview conducted on 26 June 2001 at Pailapool, Cachar.
festivals for playing music. Dalton regarded Ghasis as Aryan serfs. He also observed that whenever there were Kols, there were Ghasis.

The Ghasis of Chotanagpur were divided into three sub-castes: Sonati, Simuloka and Hari. Infant marriage was also in existence. Polygamy, widow remarriage and divorce were allowed. The migration to Barak Valley reduced them to good and efficient labourers.

Goala (Ahirs)

This was a large caste of herdmen and agriculturists. According to a Hindu mythology, the caste had its origin from Krishna himself. They were said to be the offsprings of his relatives with the milkmaids of Brindavan. There was another story that attributed Goalas to be descendants of Vaisya caste. They were punished by degradation for contrasting their herds.

By religion, the Goalas were orthodox Hindus. Janmastham, i.e., the birthday of Krishna was celebrated with much pomp and show. Their occupation, though was looking after the village herd, after their migration they were reduced to tea garden labourers. However, with the passage of time, many among them took up their

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37 Premtal Goala, an office employee, an interview conducted on 27 June 2001 at Pailapool, Cachar.
38 Ibid.
ancestral profession after the expiry of their contract in the garden. They were spread almost all over the gardens of the Barak Valley.

**Hari**

This was a scavenger caste of Bengal and Orissa. Some anthropologists treated the Ghasi as a sub-caste of the Haris. But considered them as a separate caste. The caste had several sub-castes. They practise crude form of Hinduism. They practiced both infant and adult marriage. They were placed socially quite low. All those who migrated to Barak Valley, stood on equal footing with other castes.

**Kahar**

This was a large caste spread over Bihar, Chotanagpur, the Santal Parganas and the United Provinces. They were said to have a mixed descendants – a Brahman father and a Chandela mother. But said, that Kahars were a primitive race who inhabited the Gangetic Valley before the advent of the Aryans.

The caste was divided into several sub-castes: Rawani, Kharwara, Magohiya, Dhimar and others. They were exogamous. But no marriage took place between persons whose relationship could be traced. Polygamy, widow remarriage and divorce were permitted.\(^{39}\)

\(^{39}\) Jagadish Hari, an interview conducted on 1 June 2001 at Pailapool.

\(^{40}\) Ratan Kahar, an interview conducted on 1 June 2001 at Dewan Tea Estate of Cachar.
After their migration to the Valley as tea garden labourers they lost their caste profession, such as employment in agriculture, palanquin bearing on occasions of marriage and as household servants of higher castes. However, their language and other customary rituals continued as they numbered more than other castes in several gardens.

Kurmi
This was a large and widely spread caste, over Central Provinces, United Provinces, Bihar, Orissa and Bengal. They were of diverse constitution. In Bihar and Orissa they were of Aryan blood and bore a fine look. In Chotanagpur, they looked short, sturdy and of very dark complexion. In Central Provinces too, they appeared to be dark in complexion and of moderate height and also of mixed blood.

In his Tribes and Castes of the United Provinces, Crooke gave the names of sub-castes showing the diverse constitution of the Kurmis. The Gaharwar, Jadon and Chandal were names of the Rajput clans, the sub-caste like Karia – a weaver caste, Agaria – the iron workers, Lonhare – the salt refiners, Khaira – catechu collectors indicated that they belonged to Hindu castes. All these castes were strictly endogamous.

Russel observed that Kurmi marriage consisted of walking seven times round the marriage post in the direction of the sun.
The festivals, religion, funeral rites of the Kurmis were the same as those of the orthodox Hindus.\footnote{T O Crewford, \textit{op cit} p 20}

A large number of the Kurmis emigrated to Cachar and Assam to work as labourers in the tea gardens.

\textbf{Kumar (Kumbar, Kumbhakar)}

This was a pot making caste of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Central Provinces and United Provinces. In the second half of the nineteenth century a large number of them migrated to Assam and Barak Valley as tea garden labourers.

A legend goes to explain their origin. At the marriage of Siva a water jar was required but none knew how to procure it. This necessitated the God to take a bead from his necklace and he created a potter and from another lead he made a woman who became the potter’s wife. Thus, all the potter caste were said to have their descendants from him. Like in other castes, there were several sub-castes which were endogamous in characteristics. A particular caste made black utensils while others red. It had also been observed that Kumars varied racially from place to place. In some districts the sub-castes were named after large tracts of the country, e.g., Maghaiya, Kanaiya, Tirthuta, Ayodha basi, Bangali etc.

Marriage among the Kumars was of both infant and adult. Bride price was in vogue. A limited polygamy i.e., if the first wife bore no
son or was barren second wife was permitted. Divorce, with the approval of the panchayat and widow remarriage were allowed.

Vaishnavism was the dominant religion of the caste. Brahmans were employed at every religious functions. Their festivals were also similar to those of other caste Hindus.

Kaur

This was a cultivating caste found in Joshpur, Udaipur, Sirguya and other tributary states who claimed to have their origin from the Kamvas. He was a figure in the Mahabharata. They appeared dark, coarse featured, broad nosed, wide mouthed and thick lipped.

The caste was divided into five sub-castes. Marriage was restricted in the same sect. Divorce and widow remarriage were free to be practised.

By religion, they were orthodox Hindus but they buried their dead and on the eleventh day after the death performed Sraddha ceremony.

Kewat

A traditionally fishing and cultivating caste of Bihar. They were also found in Chotanagpur in United Provinces and Central Provinces.

\[42\] Ibid., p. 124.

\[43\] Rajen Kaur, an old man in an interview conducted on 28 June 2001 at Kashipur Tea Estate, Cachar.
There were five sub-castes which performed different occupations. For example, the Gaibhait were cultivators, machua were boatmen and caught fish, the Bahiawat served as personal household servants.

By religion the Kewats were orthodox Hindus. Bhagavati was their most revered goddess. They also worshipped the snake goddess Bisahari and few other minor gods.

Their festivals and rituals, the marriage ceremonies and the funeral rites were similar to that of the usual Hindu system.\textsuperscript{44}

\textbf{Koiri}

This was a cultivating caste spread over Chotanagpur, Bhagalpur, Tishut, Patna and Orissa. Some opined that they were close to the Kurmis but others supposed that they were a branch of semi-savage Kol tribe of Chotanagpur.

There were thirteen sub-castes. All of them were divided into sections which were endogamous. The characteristics differed from territorial type to totemistic in nature. The marriage customs of the Koiri was of the low caste Hindu type. Widow marriage, divorce were permitted.

The disposal of the dead was by burial. They also performed the sraddha ceremony on the eleventh day after the death.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{44} Jagadish Koiri, a teacher an interview conducted on 27 July, 2001 at Pailapool, Cachar.

\textsuperscript{45} Chalchal Keot, an old man, an interview conducted on 27 July 2001 at Labec Tea Estate, Cachar.
Kora

This was a Dravidian caste of earth workers residing in the districts of Manbhum, Santal Parganas, Sambalpur, Monghyr and Orissa states. The Koras of Manbhum and Bankura were totemistic like the Mundas. The caste was divided into four sub-castes viz., Dhalo, Molo, Sikharia and Badamia. In Bankura the four sub-castes were endogamous. But in the eastern part of the district Molos and Sikharias inter-married. Even among the exogamous groups a man was not permitted to marry a woman of the same totems.45

Marriage age differed from place to place. The caste engaged in tank-digging, road making and earthwork. They made a good tea garden labourers in Barak Valley.

Lohar

This was the blacksmith caste of Bihar, Orissa, Central Provinces and United Provinces. The local names gave some hints of their mixed origin, e.g., the Lohar Manjhi, Danda Manjhi, Bagdi Lohar or Manbhum, the Sad Lohar and Munda Lohars of Ranchi district. Customs, beliefs and festivals varied from locality to locality. In Ranchi district they were inclined to animistic worship, while elsewhere they were orthodox Hindus.47

45 Hari Prasad Dhobi, a teacher in an interview conducted on 26 June 2001, at Dewan Tea Estate, Cachar.
47 Ajit Lohar, an interview conducted by the researcher on 7 August 2001 at Binnakandi Tea Estate.
Though traditionally, they were engaged in iron working. A large number of them migrated to other places as agricultural labourers. In search of better economic status, the community migrated to different places and of them, many reached Assam as tea garden labourers.

**Muchi**

This was a leather dressing and cobbler caste of northern India. Originally, they were a branch of the Chamars later they claimed to be a distant caste and higher than the Chamars. This was being supported by the grading of the profession. There is a Hindu proverb "dried or prepared hide is the same thing as cloth". Hence, we wear leather shoes. Therefore, the Hindus considered the Muchis as higher than the Chamars. The Muchis also did not eat carrion as done by the Chamars. They did not touch pork either.

The caste was divided into several sub-divisions, such as Barabhagiya, who practised cultivation, the Chassa Kinur who were agriculturists and the Betna who made cane baskets. Muchis of this group freely migrated to other places. Those in Assam belonged to this group.

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48 Census of India, 1911, p. 125.
**Musahar**

This was a non-Aryan cultivating caste residing in Bihar, and United Provinces. According to Bhuiya, they were akin to the Savaras and Cheras. Musahar means rat-taker.

The caste was divided into several sub-castes and each sub-caste was split up into a number of exogamous sections. The marriage customs resembled those of the Bhuiyas. Widow remarriage was possible by a form called Sagai. Divorce was permitted with the sanction of the caste panchayat.

The religion of the Musahar was of debased Hinduism. The funeral ceremonies were same as those of the Hindus and the sraddha ceremony was performed on the tenth day after death. They also worshipped the dead ancestors on a fixed day in October.  

A small number of the caste migrated to Assam as tea garden labourers. In Barak Valley they were found in the tea gardens of Lakhipur sub-division. They made efficient labour force.

**Mohars**

This was a large caste of weaver minials, labourers and village watchmen in the Central Provinces of India. There is a legend ascribed to their origin. They claimed to have their origin from Mahamuni. There was a time when beef was allowed to be taken as food. One day the divine cow, Tropad Goyatri, died and all the gods

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49Hari Prasad Dhobi, a teacher, in an interview conducted on 27 June 2001, at Dewan Tea Estate, Cachar.
wanted to cook and eat her body. Mahamuni was entrusted to watch the pot boiling, while in a state of boiling, a piece fell off a pot, which he ate. It was discovered by the gods and they doomed him and his offspring to live on the flesh of dead cows.

The caste was divided into several sub-castes of a local or territorial type, for instance, the Daharia from Dahar, Namdya from Nimar, Khandeshi from Khandesh.

Marriage between persons of same sept was not permitted. Marriage by service was also found among the Mohars. The ceremony was of the usual Hindu type. The marriages were officiated by the same caste priests.\(^5^0\)

By religion, Mohars were Hindus. A large number of them emigrated to Assam as tea garden labourers.

**Nunia**

This was a non-Aryan caste of Bihar and the United Province traditionally engaged in cultivation, the extraction of salt, petre and various other earthwork.

There were seven sub-castes, e.g., Bhajuria, Meghaya etc. A man was not bound to marry from his own sub-caste. He was permitted to marry from any other sections. Both infant and adult marriages were in practice. Polygamy and widow remarriage were freely practised. The Tirhutin Brahmans officiated the marriage of the

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\(^5^0\)Prodip Mohra, *an interview conducted on 28 July* at Burtol Tea Estate, Cachar
Nunias. The caste formed a large labour force in Barak Valley tea gardens.

Paigha

This was also a small cultivating and labouring caste found in Monghyr, Bhagalpur and the Santal Parganas. There were two sub-castes – the Supa and Paliyar Paighas each of which was subdivided into several exogamous sections. Their religious practice, and other rituals resembled other Hindus. In the Hindu social standing they were placed quite low. They were found in a few tea gardens of Barak Valley.

Pano

This was a weaving caste of present Andhra Pradesh residing in the agency tracts and Ganjam. There were certain sections of the Panos who were brass beaters by profession, while other sections engaged themselves as musicians and dancers at the wedding ceremonies.

The caste was divided into two distinct sections, the Khanda Panos and the Desa Panos. The marriage custom of the Panos were akin to those of the Khanda.

The Panos revered their ancestors, when a child was born. The village priest ascertained whether the spirit of great grand father had

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51 Udal Nunia, an interview conducted on 7 August 2001 at Binnakandi Tea Estate, Cachar.
52 Jiten Paigha, an interview conducted on 20 August 2001 at Laboc Tea Estate of Cachar.
been reborn in the child. If he was convinced that it was, a pig was sacrificed. They also made animal sacrifices in homes of the long departed souls.\textsuperscript{53}

\textbf{Pasi}

This was a Dravidian caste of northern Indian whose hereditary employment was the tapping of the Palmyra date and other palm trees for their sap. They were an occupational offshoot of the Bhars. But as was of post migration period the composition of the caste was of mixed origin. The sub-caste of Pasis were named after other castes, e.g., Gujar, Ahor, Bahela, Banin etc. They were all of endogamous character. Their marriage was of the low caste type. Sindurdan was a binding part of the ceremony. The festivals and rituals were of the Hindus e.g., Phagua or Holi, Dasarni, Diwali etc.\textsuperscript{54} They proved to be efficient labourers.

\textbf{Pan}

This was a low caste engaged in weaving and basket making residing in the northern Orissa and the Southern and Western parts of Chotanagpur. There was a tradition according to which the Pans were said to be the descendants of the snake king. The community was in possession of numerous totems including the tiger, buffalo,

\textsuperscript{53} Akhil Pano, \textit{an interview conducted on 20 August 2001 at Laboc Tea Estate of Cachar.}

\textsuperscript{54} Census of India, 1911, p. 125.
monkey, tortoise, cobra, owl, king crow etc. Their totem followed the line of the male descent.

Adult marriage was followed among the Pans. A bride price of Rs. 2 in cash, a mound and a half of husked rice, a goat, and two saris made an essential part of marriage. Application of Sindur on the forehead of the bride and the tying of the hands of the bridegroom and bride were inseparable part of Pan marriage.

The Pans by religion were of crude Hinduism. There were also traces of the primitive animism common to all Dravidian tribes. The caste worshipped the snake as the ancestor of the caste.55

Rajwar

A non-Aryan cultivating caste found in Gaya, Shahabad, Ranchi, Palamau, Manbhum and the Santal Parganas. The caste connected themselves with the Bhuiyas while in Sirguiya and adjoining states they declared themselves Khatriyas of lower rank. However, their religious festivals and marriage systems were similar to the Bhuiyas.56 The caste was socially placed low as most of them were landless day labourers.

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55 Ibid. p. 126
56 Hari Prasad Dhobi, a teacher, an interview conducted on 26 June 2001 at Dewan Tea Estate, Cachar.
Tanti
This was a weaver caste of Bengal and Bihar. A tradition was ascribed to their origin. According to it, they were said to be born of Siva Das or Gham Das meaning sweat of Siva, which fell from Siva while he was dancing. His wife was also created by Siva himself from a blade of Kusa grass. Four sons were born to Siva and Kusbari viz., Balaram, Udhab, Purandhan and Madhukar. They became the ancestors of the four sub-castes each sub-caste being divided into a large number of exogamous septs.

They practised mixed religion. Some practised animism while others Hinduism. Marriage and funeral customs resembled other low caste Hindus.57

Turi
This was a multi-occupational caste of Chotanagpur who engaged themselves in cultivation, basket making and bamboo working. The caste was divided into four sub-castes, which again were split up into a large number of septs. The septs had a close resemblance with the Mundas in respect of religion, language and physical appearance.58 The group migrated to Barak Valley in a small number.

57 Asu Tanti, an interview conducted on 20 August 2001 at Laboc Tea Estate, Cachar.
56 Hari Prasad Dhobi, a teacher an interview conducted on 27 June, 2001 at Dewan Tea Estate, Cachar.
Tellis

This was a large oil-pressing and trading caste of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. There was a myth which was ascribed to their origin. It was said that God Siva wanted to rub himself after bathing with oil instead of with the wood ashes which he generally used and from the sweat of his arm, he made a name Rupnarayan Teli and gave him an idea of an oil mill.

Tellis followed the Vaishnavism sect of Hinduism. The marriage custom of the Tellis who migrated from Bengal was of the orthodox Hindu type. Infant marriage was also practised. Widow remarriage and divorce were also permitted.\(^{59}\)

Social rank of the Tellis differed from place to place. In Bengal, the higher sub-castes of Tellis who had given up oil trade and took up jobs of banking, money-lending, cloth-dealing etc had been upgraded to those castes from whom the Brahmins took water. In Bihar the whole caste was considered low.

They became a useful assets in the tea gardens of Barak Valley.

INTERACTION AND CHANGE

A general review is made of the tribes, caste and their relationship along with the neighbouring Bengalis. It seems that the traditional ways of life of the migrants were no longer suitable at the present

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\(^{59}\) Dilip Teli, an employee in the LIC, in an interview conducted on 27 June 2001 at Narainpur Tea Estate, Cachar.
settlement and migration to the Barak Valley. So necessity required some changes which were discussed above. But some details of this interaction can be seen below. We are to take into account the debate on tradition, change and modernity. Modernisation is a composite concept. It is also an ideological concept. Marxism and Capitalism are two ends of a continuum on which a multitude of variations on ideological themes of modernisation have been formulated. The composite nature evokes its kinship with concepts like 'development', 'growth', 'evolution' and 'progress' etc.

Since the immigration and settlement of the labourers in the tea gardens of the Barak Valley, there existed a constant interaction among the labourers which led to extensive changes in different spheres of life among themselves. Their migration to the gardens exposed their varied ethnicities into co-sharing and co-existing type situations. There were several factors that worked among the immigrants giving way to changes from pre-migration period to post-migration period. Some of the important factors are the following.  

1. Contact with numerous other ethnic groups (tribes/castes) who worked in the same industry.

2. Contact with the garden officials with varied cultural and urban backgrounds.

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3. Contact with the heterogeneous local people living in the neighbourhood.

4. Urban contacts

5. Influence of modern education

6. Welfare activities carried out by the garden authorities.

These factors mentioned above were not at work at a time or immediately after their migration to Barak Valley. It was a slow and gradual transition in different stages. The present researcher inquired into the areas where the changes were more pronounced. Some of the major areas where the changes took place are pinpointed below while taking into account of the general short overview of all the above tribes.

**Family**

To take up first, the familial change it can be mentioned that the plantation workers, whether tribe or caste irrespective of the places they were brought from, preferred joint family system to nuclear family prior to their migration to Barak Valley. So in this valley, family solidarity, cohesion, intra-family relation and kinship status were traditionally given importance. Family is the basic and universal social structure of human society. It fulfils needs and performs functions which are indispensable for the continuity, integration and
change in the social system. Family here became like nuclear societies and was not patrilocal and patriarchal generally. Sometime both the characteristics extended and nuclear families type could be seen in the gardens of the Valley between 1856-1947. But nuclearity was often due to negative rather than positive causes. These negative factors were absence of landed property, lack of stable means of livelihood and shifting mode of occupation.

In some joint families married sons and married daughters were living in the parents' house. Among the Ghasis and Baraiks a system called *Ghardamad* was in existence. The system consisted of the married daughter's husband living with his parents-in-law. The status of women in the family was also inferior to that of men as the former solely depended on the latter for economic sustenance.

This type of family structure underwent a change when the labourers migrated to Barak Valley to work in tea gardens. They found a new land, new environment and new people and new masters to serve. The once independent family life they enjoyed was no longer possible under the plantation rules. The company rulers provided residential quarters suitable for a small family. There were other factors which required the workers to adopt a nuclear family system.

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The tea industry made provision for employment of both male and female. Both husband and wife earned sufficiently, convenient for maintenance of a nuclear family. The industry also provided certain facilities on the basis of family but not on the basis of the number of members in the family. For example, raw materials for construction of houses, firewood etc. were given on the basis of the family. It was immaterial for the management whether the household was small or big as facilities to be given were concerned. Again, beside the parents, if a son or a daughter worked in the same garden and lived under the same roof where the parents lived, they were entitled to get facilities of a single family. This also motivated the workers to have a nuclear family.

In a family the importance of a boy and a girl was equal. Unlike the previous custom, the craze for a boy child was not much relevant among the labourers community because the daughter was not an economic liability to the parents. The girls also earned and supported the family. In fact, together with the mother the daughter had a big share in maintenance expenditure as the father/husband spent major part of the income in drinking and other intoxicants. A family in a tea garden was in some way, a model of equality.

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63 Ibid.
Language

The plantation labour population was a heterogeneous society consisting of multilanguage, multi-caste, tribe, and ethnicity. It appeared that in 1884-89, 44.7% of the labourers were from Chotanagpur region, 27.2% from Bengal, 21.6% from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, 0.2% from Bombay, 0.77% from Madras and 5.5% from within Assam. Of the 21.6% from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and 27.2% from Bengal more than half the labourers were despatched to Barak Valley.

Illiterate, ignorant, isolated and accommodated in gardens where their employers thought best, in the course of time, as they interacted daily in their activities, gradually lost their mother tongue. There were many small ethnic groups such as the Oraons, the Mundas, the Kharias, the Kols, the Santals etc. being displaced and isolated in different gardens gradually lost the importance of their own languages and when a new generation came into being, the communication gap made it possible to forget their original languages and adopted a new language common to all tribes and castes. The younger generation became completely ignorant of their mother tongues. During the survey of the researcher, it was discovered that the older generation who retired from the work continued to speak in their mother tongue with their wives and fellow tribal elders. But their

64 Amalendu Guha, op. cit., p. 45.
65 Gopi Murmur, an ex-tea garden labourer in an interview on 22 August 2002 at Railbasti near Narainpur Tea Estate in Cachar.
communication with their own grandchildren and other linguistic groups took place in the Bagani Bhasa or a new distorted Hindi. It may be recalled that the language of Hindi was used as the lingua franca among the labourers who migrated from Chotanagpur, Bihar, United Province and Central Province. But with the passage of time, and the need to interact with the local people, they picked up local terms and thus the importance of Bagani Bhasa gained prominence at the cost of their mother tongues.

It was also noticed that the gardens situated in the western Cachar (now Karimganj and Hailakandi districts) were settled with labourers mainly from United Province, Bihar and Central Province who spoke Bhojpuri language. Even after their immigration as labourers, the labourers of Karimganj district and a few others in Hailakandi district used Bhojpuri as the lingua franca. In fact, the commonality of the language was a binding force among the labourers of Chargola Movement in 1919-20.

The labourers who immigrated from Bengal and Orissa spoke languages somewhat akin to Bengali. These linguistic groups of labourers were vastly settled in the gardens situated in the eastern part of Cachar the present Lakhimpur subdivision. However, there was no single garden with a single linguistic ethnic group of labourers. In some gardens one group happened to be in a larger number than the others.
The sentence “Shab chola golo go, Hami nai jaibo”. Here ‘shab’ is a Hindi word meaning ‘all’, ‘chola gelo’ are Bengali words meaning ‘went away’, ‘go’ is a Santali word meaning ‘mother’. ‘Ham’ again is of Santali meaning ‘we’, ‘nai jaibo’ of Bhojpuri meaning ‘won’t go’. This sentence is a mixture of Santali, Hindi, Bengali and Bhojpuri. Thus, the Bagani Bhasa was the outcome of Bengali, Hindi, Bhojpuri, Oriya, Santali and other languages.\(^6^6\)

Another noticeable difference of languages of the labourers was the dialect. For example, the sentence “I have come here” was spoken in Dewan Tea Garden in Lakhipur subdivision as ‘Ham aily’ while in Bhandao, a nearby tea garden it was said ‘Ham aaigai’.

These differences of dialects continues even to this day, from garden to garden. There was a great change in the linguistic aspect of the tea garden labourers. However, the Bhojpuri language survived amidst storms of changes, the reason being that it formed a dominant size of labour population. Till the independence of the country, the Bhojpuri language retained its purity despite the Bengali being spoken in and around tea gardens. All other languages underwent a tremendous change which was also a factor for the loss of their mother tongue.\(^6^7\)

Thus, new situation, new need, socio-economic transformation brought the change for common language in a flexible manner.

\(^{66}\) Ratan Kahar, an interview conducted on 22 August 2001 at Dewan Tea Estate, Cachar.

\(^{67}\) Sanatan Mishra, a social worker in an interview conducted on 3 August 2001 at Pallapool.
Economy

Prior to immigration to plantation industry in the Barak Valley the labourers practised traditional occupation. Most of the tribals were agriculturists. There were also a few other tribals who were non agriculturists. The caste Hindus also practised their own profession as per their castes. The Brahmins did the work of religious ceremonies, the Turis, the Mohalis, the Doms engaged in basket makings, the Baraiks wove clothes, the Dosadhs acted as watchmen, the Goalas looked after the village herd, the Kahars acted as Palanquin bearers and the Kewats did fishing and sold them in the market.\footnote{T O Crawford, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 76.}

These castes and tribes with varied traditional occupational background were absorbed in the organised industrial work and way of life. Equality in professional field became the general way of life after immigration to the Barak Valley. The Brahmins, the Rajputs who enjoyed higher status in the Hindu society were reduced to equality of work with all castes and tribes. The shift of hierarchy of profession from high to low and from low to high was not an easy task of adjustment. For those previously engaged in agricultural work, the new work in the industry was easy but for those with non-agrarian background it was time taking adaptation. However, the new work gave the labour community a permanent source of income and economic stability. Being exploited by the rich peasants, landlords,
and money lenders they seemed to have found better economic prospect. There were also other amenities such as the education, health, crèche, quarters, recreation, ration etc. which motivated the labourers to be optimistic towards employment. Although the wages of the plantation workers were far from better than those of the neighbouring peasants, it was better than those in their native villages. To improve their economic condition the labourers even cultivated on the wasteland provided to them by the tea authorities. Migration for many labourers was a blessing in disguise in the new land.

**Material Change**

In material culture there were significant changes. To begin with, there was a great change in the mode of construction of homes. The labourers were provided with thatched houses which were clustered together without any independent campuses. Construction of *pucca* houses took place only after decades of their migration. The houses in the labour lines looked alike from outside no special symbol of the tribe or caste was found to distinguish one ethnic group from another.

The food habit of the people also underwent change. The labourers used to be supplied with essential commodities like rice,

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69 Viswanath Upadhyay, Cachar Cha Sramik Union, Silchar interviewed on 24 August 2000.
atta, sugar, tea etc. called weekly ration. Even the people who were not used to wheat taking cultivated the roti taking habit. Previously the tribals used to boil almost all the edibles. But the post-migration period taught them to use oil and spices and the art of frying. Tea taking habit also developed among the labourers as they used to be supplied with tea free of cost. The habit of pan taking also developed among the labourers. However, the intake of rice beer continued even after their settlement in the tea plantation.

The dress and ornaments of the people did not undergo much change. The old rural style continued for decades. But gradually new styles made its inroads in imitation of the urban style. Dhoti was used on customary ritualistic occasions like marriage and pujas. The western style shirts with collars replaced the upper men garments. With the introduction of western model education, the dresses of the children changed to complete western style. Even the aged labourers used short pants instead of dhoti and used collared shirts.

Among women, brightly coloured and gaudily printed cloths became common. The metal bangles formerly used by them were replaced by factory made bangles. The girls even wore meriticious blouse and used lipsticks and phoney trinkets in their hair.

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70 Sanaton Mishra, a teacher and social worker in an interview on 23 August 2001 at Pallapool.
The articles of daily use also changed in some way. Traditional use of utensils made of bell-metals gave way for aluminium and German silver utensils among many families.\footnote{Bidyandhar Tripathi, an elderly social worker among the tea garden labourers, interviewed on 6 August 2001 at Katimganj}

The homogeneity in all aspects of life of the labourers probably worked as one unifying force among the labourers and had contributed much to bind together despite the heterogeneous social compositions.

Though there was no serious breakdown of structural characteristics of the tea garden societies like other Indian societies there appeared certain changes in social life as enumerated above. A segmental nature of modernisation became encompassing in this case. Micro-structures like caste, tribe, family, community, had retained more or less old character with little change. Macro-structure like foreign industry, economy etc. had magnified the contractions further. But as Gunner Myrdal thinks 'it is not more difficult, but easier, to cause a big change rapidly than a small change gradually'.\footnote{Lambeit, Richard D. \textit{Workers, Factories and Social Change in India}, Princeton, New Jersey, 1963, pp 16-17.}

**IDENTITY CRISIS**

The multi-lingual ethnic groups of the tea gardens in the Barak Valley are passing through a period of identity crisis. A kind of inter-ethnic integration or homogenisation has found its way. A process of new
ethnos coming into being from various ethno-linguistic communities is afoot. There is a continuous interaction among the multiethnic groups with the larger ones. In the process, they have lost their cultural identity while giving rise to somewhat new entities. In Assam, we have the example of the Ahoms, the Morans, the Chutias homogenising with the greater Assamese fold losing their distinct entity.

In the tea gardens of the Barak Valley smaller ethnic groups such as the Oraons, the Kharias, the Mundas, the Santals etc. had lost their mother tongues. Their very existence as a distinct caste or tribe was nearing extinction.

Similarly several castes, speaking languages such as Hindi, Oriya, Bengali, Telegu etc. assimilated themselves with greater groups inhabiting the gardens. In fact all younger generation, irrespective of caste affiliations spoke the Bagani Bhasa. Besides, the religion, festivals, food habit, dress etc assumed a common characteristics. Though there were many caste and tribal beliefs they were overshadowed by the major Hindu myths and preferred to be called Hindus. Major Hindu festivals such as the Durga Puja, Dewali, Holy etc. found greater importance than any tribal festivals.

Thus, due to continued interaction, essentials of an identification of a group gave way for attributes to greater entity.