The above survey in 5 chapters and for a field of about a century on the social history of the tea gardens labourers in the Barak Valley in perspective of other valleys reveals the fact that the tea society was an inchoate one. It was never an established society from the very beginning like other societies of other people. It was a society created out of the deliberate policy of white capitalists and the desire of the immigrated labourers who came generally from other parts of India. It received its sustenance and characteristics from the original society which they belonged previously. But things did not remain the same in the new society formed here. It was a changed society and change was continuous between 1856 and 1947. The new problems as parts of social history of immigrant labourers were not similar to
other established society. But the change did not become static for a particular period of time. It was an on going process. When necessity arose, the change became inevitable. But the change of the colonial period was not similar to those of the pre-colonial period. There was no foreign master to stagnate the progressive growth of the society after 1947. The study is made about the social aspects of the tea labourers who were living below but much deprived and exploited by the European management from above.

Tea societies of the Barak Valley had their initial problems, difficulties and the European management and the British authority made new recruitment to regulate it. These recruitment legislations created further problems by the way of recruiting through a small class of people called *arkattis* and *sardars*. The process increased the exploitation and torture. There was no social legislation in the modern sense. Even the mass elementary requirements for public health, street cleaning, water supply, removal of refuse were almost entirely neglected in the *coolie* area, but elaborate provision was made in the residential quarters inhabited by the European and the *babus*. The rotting slums brought disease and early deaths of so many labourers besides the deaths on the way towards the Valley.

Everyone was born, not of a collectivity or into a full fledged social system, but of parents into a family. In societies of all types including tea society in the Barak Valley, the family was the fundamental multipurpose organisation for many of the principal life
functions of the individual and society begins in a family. Groups in a particular society became interdependent when some participants did not carry out the kind of interchange that others in the system anticipate, the others responded in regular ways of counterchange to restore some systematic regularity to their relations.¹

There took place acculturation through ethnic or demographic intermixture between caste and tribes and other groups in the tea gardens. Bilingualism, transformation of tribes and castes, adaptation of caste, religion as part of the Hindu tradition, had their effect on the tea labourers. Christian missionaries had also been active in these societies. Kinship of these societies started with the family. In a sense the whole society began with the family because a society was a living organism that must continually be replenished. The imperative of replenishment for each society was met by its small social part – the family. These families of the tea garden labourers of the Barak Valley like other tea valleys produced a kind of common language, which was neither completely different from the languages of original homeland nor completely new. It was a mixed language of all the tribes, castes and other groups such as Bengali Hindus and Muslims living in the neighbourhood of tea gardens and gradually they adopted the name Bagani Bhasa. So this somewhat independent language along with other factors of genres of folklore gave rise to a culture. The question arises: what is Bagani culture? What is its

¹ David, G Mandelbaum, op cit., p 5
theme? The following analyses will give answer to these questions.

In the tea gardens of the Barak Valley and under its climatic influence, the bagani labourers followed a particular way of life, based on the ideas they received for the last several centuries in their former homelands. The process continued in the new place but not in the totality. New experiences helped developing an objective and spiritual mind which one may call it as bagani culture. It had been achieved through a synthesis which always remained the basis of Indian culture. The word folk means people. When the unlettered masses of people get involved in creative activities utilising their leisure time, we get the idea of folk-culture. In chapter 5 we have discussed the main theme of the folk culture. But Baul songs are not included in folk-literature. They were set of wandering mendicants who were dedicated to spiritual self-realisation and practically delinked from society. So this unlettered labouring class of the Barak Valley followed simple ways of life based on old and new ideas evolved by themselves to their own understanding and faith and sense of social value and in this process built up their own culture. The society on the other hand was not free from stress and strain as it was dependent on the foreign management.

The conditions of the tea garden labourers reached the lowest level. In the Assam Valley tea gardens (Assam and Bengal produced by far the greater bulk of the tea in India) the average monthly earnings of men workers settled in the gardens were about Rs. 7.13
annas a month and of women and children about Rs. 5.14 annas and Rs. 4.4 annas respectively. The Rege Committee gave the level of monthly wages in the Surma Valley (Karimganj was then a subdivision of that valley) at about Rs. 2 lower than that in the Assam Valley. Under the circumstances, the tea labourers could not remain silent for a long time. Although they had no other alternative but to remain so before 1889s, the treatment of coolies in Assam tea plantations figured prominently in the work of the Indian Association in the late 1880s. Racial discrimination and brutality were indeed issues which could occasionally unite the highest in native society with the lowest in a common sense of deprivation and injustice.

Though the European management viewed the tea labourers as slaves, but they were not so. Rather they were the newly emerged working class having common interest against capitalism. They were weak against the planters who were well-organised in the Indian Tea Association founded in 1881. They took part in studies and violent mass attacks at the individual garden level between the years 1884-93 in various parts of the Barak Valley. Remembering his experience as the administrator of Assam during the years 1902-06, Fuller writes that there was bound to be some revolt, and on badly managed gardens riots were not very infrequent.²

In this struggle against colonial exploitation, the tea workers were no longer isolated and had the involvement and sympathy of the

² Amalendu Guha, op cit., p. 47.
wider society. Thus economic factor provided scope for further political action by the labourers of the Barak Valley from 1905 to 1922, like other tea districts of the Brahmaputra. The growth of population, the First World War and the post-war inflation can be related to the distress and discontent of the labouring class of the valley.³

Their low wages, rising prices, long working hours, unhealthy environment and exploitation and torture by the planters worsened their living in the garden. As a fitting reply to this, they took part both in rural hat looting in 1918 and in the Chorgola exodus in 1921, creating storm in the tea pot under the background of the Gandhian Non-cooperation Movement. Having started in Bengal, the wave of hat looting spread eastward, reached Sylhet and finally, the western border of Hailakandi in Cachar. Various meetings were organised by the non-cooperation activists from April to May 1921 at Adampur of Dholai valley, at Ratabari of Chorgola valley, at Lakhipur of Cachar. The tea garden labourers also attended the meetings where not only the cause of Swaraj was preached but also the wage increase was discussed against the Planter Raj. On May 3, 1921, after the denial of wage increase by the planters, the labourers of 13 tea gardens of the Longai-Chorgola valleys had started exodus towards Chandpur via Karimganj so that they could reach their original places of residence from Chandpur by steamer. They raised the slogan Gandhi Maharaj

³ R K De, op. cit., p cxvi
"Ki Jai" as Gandhi would now lead the way of emancipation from the bondage of planters. The Gandhian call also generated fearlessness among the labourers.\(^4\) * During this historic Chorgola exodus of 1921, Arun Kumar Chanda of Silchar and Chittaranjan Das of Calcutta appeared as emancipators of the much exploited coolies. The Brahmo people like Dwarkanath Ganguly and Bipin Chandra Pal also championed the cause of these downtrodden labourers of the valley.\(^5\)

So the newly emerged working class was no longer unorganised or isolated. In association with the newly found allies they began to participate in strikes. In the month of September 1938, five tea gardens of Silchar and Hailakandi were on strike. The same type of strike was organised in the Surma Valley tea gardens at the same time for the ventilation of economic and other grievances. In the same year, the Sylhet-Cachar Cha Mazdur Sangathan was formed. It was renamed as Sylhet-Cachar Cha Bagan Mazdur Union on 27 April 1939. Its president and vice-president were Arun Kumar Chanda and Sanat Kumar Ahir respectively.\(^6\) Strikes in the tea gardens of the Surma and the Brahmaputra Valleys went on unabated during the second world war and later period with the influences of the Congress and the leftist parties. The Indian Tea Association had to constitute a definite procedure and emergency committees to solve

\(^4\) R.\(\text{De.}, \) op. cit., p. 10.
\(^*\) Out of 20250 labour population 8799 (43%) left their gardens. In Chargola alone 52\% (8112 out of 15618) joined the exodus.
the pressing problems like labour grievances pacify the labouring class.

As the social history cannot really have a separate domain, marked off from economic or political, so also the social history of the tea workers has not only taken into account the subjects of social contents but also the study has included the matters of economic and political importance to make it a total history from below. Difference probably would be in approach and methods but not on the point of theme.