CHAPTER IV

TEA WORKERS AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

In the previous chapters, we have examined the historical process of formation of identity among migrant tea workers and their descendants including the ex-tea garden workers through which people belonging to various castes and tribes and drawn from diverse ethnic backgrounds came to be perceived as a single homogenous community known by some common terms such as 'tea garden labour community', and began to seek a position of dignity in the society of the Brahmaputra valley, uniting amongst themselves under the banner of 'tea tribes' or 'adivasis' for the purpose of promoting their common interests. Having its origins in the economic calculations and the imposed logic of the rulers of a bygone era, the tea worker community was compelled to encounter the advent of modernity in its bitter form as manifested in the labour policies of the colonial plantation. The mindset engendered by decades of unwavering obedience to the planters and complete isolation from the outside world remained ingrained in the tea workers for long, and individual freedom as guaranteed by the country's political constitution could not have much of a liberating effect on their minds.

Only in the recent past has some measure of political consciousness become manifest among tea workers in terms of their awareness of issues involved in the act of voting in elections, and in terms of a better understanding of their actual position and of their rightful position in the society around them. They have become aware of the deprivations to which
they had been unjustly subjected to in the past both by the planters and the wider society, and have quietly but resolutely embarked on a political struggle for a more equitable treatment from those constituting the advanced sections of society. In this chapter we shall study the impact of political events on this community in recent years, and the ways in which the community has made its presence felt in the state’s political battleground.

An important type of agency engaged in bringing some type of collective political consciousness among tea workers is the students’ union. Students’ unions such as the ATISA and the AASAA follow the AASU model in their organizational set-up and are not part of any political party. Although these student bodies are pressure groups representing either the tea tribes or the adivasis, and making demands on the state, on the political parties and on the managements of tea gardens, they also serve as centres of apprenticeship for prospective young politicians and trade unionists, from where the trade unions and political parties can recruit trained cadres having popular appeal. The impact of the AASU agitation of the early 1980s can be clearly seen in the rising appeal of these students’ bodies, as the organisational pattern and mobilisational strategies of the AASU inspired many ethnic student movements in the state with varying results. We shall discuss here the trajectories of two influential students’ unions among tea workers, the ATISA and the AASAA, in the context of recent political developments.
Rise of Student Power among 'Tea Tribes':

In recent years, the students' body, Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (ATTSA) representing the ethnic aspirations of the tea and ex-tea garden community has emerged as an important pressure group on issues relating to the well-being of the 'tea community' or 'tea tribes' as a whole. As an organization, ATTSA is not new and traces its roots to the Assam Chotanagpuri Chhatra Sanmelan, the first students' organisation among members of the tea worker community in Assam, founded at Tengakhat near Dibrugarh in 1947 by some of the inmates of the missionary hostels in Jorhat, Dibrugarh and Lakhimpur, with Simon Sing Horo and Sontosh Kumar Topno as its leaders. The influence of this original students' body appears to have been confined largely to the Christian section of the community.

The Chhatra Sanmelan had become nearly defunct in the early 1950s due to organisational difficulties. In 1954, another association of tea tribes' students known as the "Assam Tea Labour Students' Association" was founded in Khumtai Tea Estate near Golaghat under the leadership of Chatragopal Karmakar and Dinanath Choudhury with members drawn mainly from the Hindu population of workers. The two unions united in 1958 at a joint session held at Bamunipahar near Tezpur under the banner of "All Assam Tea Garden Tribes Students' Association". Its change in nomenclature broadened its parameters of inclusion and signified, to an extent, the

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community's change in self-identification. According to Tasa, the decision to use the term 'tea tribes' in place of 'tea labour community' was taken in the eighth annual conference of the Assam Tea Labour Community Students’ Association held at Sepon in 1970²:

As part of their strategy for safeguarding their 'legitimate interest', the ATTSA started to identify the Tea (Labour) community with a novel nomenclature, i.e., 'Tea Tribes' and 'Ex-Tea Tribes'. While justifying the new identity the ATTSA maintained that their ancestors were recognised as the Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the original lands for which they too deserved to be constitutionally recognised as the Scheduled Tribes. Hence there could be no justification, they asserted, for the people belonging to the same stock and the same country being deliberately discriminated and deprived of the constitutional status.³

The ATTSA assumed its present name in 1975.⁴ The period 1958-1979 witnessed the growth of this organisation throughout the Brahmaputra valley, where its branches numbered 32 in 1976, and it also managed to establish its branches in the Barak valley.⁵ However, its activities during this period were confined to the raising of some general demands for the welfare of the tea worker community, and it did not resort to any type of agitational programme for their fulfilment. Its aims and objectives were:

a) To provide a common platform for the Tea and Ex-Tea community students to unite;

b) To inculcate a sense of socio-economic consciousness among them; and

c) To eradicate various social prejudices prevailing within their community⁶.

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In the late seventies, contentious issues regarding ethnicity and domicile came to gain the focus of political attention in the state. The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) along with various outfits representing the Assamese ethnic sentiments launched a campaign in 1978 against 'outsiders' in the state, targeting mainly the Marwari traders, the Bengali middle class and the Bihari labourers in the Brahmaputra valley. This expression of deep anti-outsider feelings that had long been dormant among the Assamese middle class, which saw outsiders as exploiters and as impediments to its progress, was not intended by its proponents to target the tea workers. But it caused violent conflicts between tea workers and their Assamese neighbours in parts of Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts, following which the leaders of the ATTSA and the AASU met at J.B. College in Jorhat in December 1979 and issued a joint declaration on their common goals and objectives in the current situation.\footnote{Dineswar Tasa, "Asamar Rajnitiit 'Chah Janajatir' Bhumika", op. cit., p. 237.}

The student leaders declared that migrant tea workers in Assam had merged into the local society and were therefore an inseparable part of the Assamese community. They jointly resolved to carry on the struggle against foreign nationals in the state, especially migrants from Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) and Nepal, and to save Assamese culture from extinction.\footnote{Ibid.} The ATTSA leaders accused the ACMS and other vested interests of trying to spread misgivings among tea workers regarding the AASU movement and of fomenting hostility towards the Assamese community, and asserted that any conflict with the Assamese would harm the tea worker community grievously in the long run.
During the AASU's anti-foreigner agitation (1979-85), the ATTSA, which had hitherto served as a training ground for future ACMS leaders, took an actively pro-AASU and by implication, anti-Congress and anti-ACMS stand.9 The AASU, which spearheaded the Assam Agitation, managed to gather substantial support in the ex-tea worker settlements, but could not penetrate into the plantations. It was the ATTSA that carried AASU's agitational programme to the garden labour lines, and brought young men and women from there to the AASU rallies held in towns and cities demanding expulsion of foreign nationals from Assam. The AASU Central Executive Committee in 1980 included two of the top office-bearers of the ATTSA, while some other ATTSA leaders were entrusted with the responsibility of being office-bearers of local AASU units in the 'tea tribe' dominated areas.

The ATTSA's support later enabled the AGP to win votes from members of the tea tribes including some of the garden workers belonging to the ACMS, in the 1985 elections. Many ATTSA leaders such as Barki Prasad Telenga and Noren Tanti who had taken active part in the AASU movement contested these elections as AGP candidates and won their respective seats handsomely. During the period of AGP rule from 1986 to 1990, the ATTSA joined hands with organizations like ABSU (All Bodo Students Union) and ATASA (All Tai Ahom Students Union) fighting against 'Assamese caste Hindu chauvinism', which the ruling AGP was seen to symbolize, though its close relationship with the AASU continued. In 1987, the ATTSA started an agitation, with the support of the AASU demanding some benefits for the 'tea

tribe’ community. Three years later, it culminated in the signing of a tripartite agreement, to which the government and the AASU were signatories.

By now ATISSA was no longer just a platform for budding ACMS leaders to emerge, its own image was beginning to overshadow that of ACMS. Just as the AASU Agitation relegated many of Assam’s established politicians to the dust-heap of irrelevance in the eighties, the ATISSA’s propaganda portrayed the tea worker politicians and trade unionists as corrupt betrayers of the people who would easily sacrifice the workers’ interests for their own gains. The student leaders then appeared as saviours who were uncorrupted by the taste of power and money, and would willingly undergo sacrifices for the sake of their people. This image of the ATISSA has not diminished over time but has become enhanced in recent years. However, it is observed that many of the veteran ATISSA leaders who had vehemently criticised the politicians and trade unionists as being hindrances to the tea tribes’ progress, later on joined politics themselves and faced the same criticism from their successors in the ATISSA. In fact, nearly all the politicians and trade unionists belonging to the tea tribe community have emerged from the ATISSA’s ranks.

Today, because of its strength among the community’s youth both within and outside the plantations, ATISSA commands respect from established trade unionists and political leaders. Its intrusion into workers affairs like wage hike and labour-management disputes is resented by trade
union leaders, yet they fear to criticise ATTSA openly.\textsuperscript{10} The situation is reminiscent of the AASU mobilization among the Assamese in the early eighties, when existing politicians were seen as redundant and the people who now looked up to the student leaders for deliverance from their problems. The image of sincerity and dedication, which the student leaders have managed to achieve within the tea community, may be due to their being avowedly 'non-political' and being neither openly associated with any political party nor taking part in elections to public offices as long as they are members of the student body. Their assertive approach in articulation of the socio-economic problems facing the tea tribes is, in the eyes of the people, an evidence of genuine concern for their welfare, unlike the 'double-speak' diplomacy and over-cautious attitude characteristic of the politicians hailing from the community. The ATTSA's statements issued at the time of elections reflect its distrust of politicians:

Irrked by presumptions that the illiterate tea tribals can be taken for a ride by politicians, the educated among them, particularly the students under the banner of ATTSA have decided not to extend support to any political party in the coming election. The ATTSA has issued a blanket ban on political parties from night campaigning in the tea gardens ostensibly to prevent 'vote-hungry' political parties from disrupting the much-needed sleep of the hardworking tea labourers. However, locals point out that the ban has been imposed to create problems for the Congress to which it is opposed, as Congress has a tradition of organising night feasts among the tea garden labourers to win their votes.\textsuperscript{11}

The growing popularity of ATTSA appears to have shaken the political parties out of their complacency, especially the Congress for which the tea

\textsuperscript{10} Interviews with ACMS leaders, M. Khandait, Dibrugarh, and Shashi Tanti, Golaghat, December '99.
\textsuperscript{11} “Promises Galore from Political Parties: Assam Tea Tribes in Limelight during Elections”, \textit{The Assam Tribune}, 1.10.99, p. 6.
workers have been a crucial source of strength. The agitational programmes launched by ATTTSA in tea areas since the eighties have impacted more on the ex-tea garden settlements than on the garden lines, but even so their effect on the latter has grown considerably, penetrating the ACMS strongholds. In 1989, tea workers went on an agitation in response to a call by the ATTTSA demanding implementation of the state government’s announcement of a hike in wages, stopping a day’s work in the peak of the plucking season. The AASU and the non-Congress unions including the ruling AGP’s tea union, the CSP, supported the strike, making it clear to the ACMS that new political forces were making inroads into its territory:\(^{12}\):

> The AASU has been trying to penetrate the student community among the tea garden labour and tribal communities. The All Assam Tea Tribal Students’ Union has come close to the AASU, but... is not strong enough to counter the INTUC.\(^{13}\)

Political parties have been unnerved by ATTTSA’s strident demand that they should put up election candidates belonging to tea tribes only in those Assembly constituencies where tea tribes constitute a majority of the electorate.\(^{14}\) The students’ body has also demanded reservation of at least 45 seats in the 126-member State Assembly for people from this community, who according to them constitute one fourth of the state’s population. The theme focussed upon by the student leaders and reflected in the opinions of workers was the general disenchantment with the politicians who have treated the community as a vote bank without promoting the community’s


\(^{14}\) Press Release, All Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Union (ATTSA), Nagaon, 28.10.2000.
welfare. The ATTSA has accused successive state governments of following “the same age-old Congress legacy of using the tea gardens as vote banks in elections”. The impoverished plight of most of the tea and ex-tea garden people, and their social and educational backwardness lends credence to the view that the contribution of their representatives, who have occupied positions of power, towards their overall welfare has been minimal:

One reason why the ATTSA is aggrieved with the Congress is that though the illiterate tea workers have continuously supported it for the last 50 years, it has done nothing to improve the life of the workers.

In 1998, in the context of the state AGP government’s active role on the issue of wages, the ATTSA demanded a ‘White Paper’ from the ACMS, which on its part had insisted that the prevailing wage agreement between the tea management and the ACMS should not be disturbed till 1999. The ATTSA also called for a general strike in the tea estates demanding payment of wages on holidays. The ACMS leaders, alarmed by the student body’s challenging posture, held a meeting with its leaders and convinced them that the existing wage agreement was legally valid and that the state government was to blame for creating confusion on the issue in order to malign the ACMS. The ACMS General Secretary M. Khandait told the ATTSA leaders that his union had been demanding payment of holiday wages for the last five years

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15 The Assam Tribune, 5.9.93, p. 2.
17 The Assam Tribune, 15.10.98, p. 6.
and that the state government had faltered in holding regular meetings of the Standing Committee on Plantation Labour since 1996.\textsuperscript{18}

Social upliftment of the tea tribes has been the chief aim of the ATTSA since its inception, and its efforts at forging unity among the members of their community belonging to various ethnic groups, its crusade against illiteracy, child labour, drunkenness and gambling amongst tea tribe people, its sensitivity to the attitude of non-tea-tribe people towards the tea tribes, and its animosity towards politicians whom it perceives as \textit{dalal} (agent) of the exploiters of the people are manifestations of its aims. It describes itself as a pressure group aimed at bringing social justice and economic development to the tea community people of Assam\textsuperscript{19}:

\begin{quote}
The unstinted support received by ATTSA from all quarters of the tea community including people of all faiths – Hindu, Muslim and Christian – has bestowed legitimacy on this organization to represent the tea community as a whole so as to secure them relief from their utterly depressed conditions.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

The ATTSA’s ire is directed more at the so-called servants of the people – the politicians, than the big capitalists owning the plantations whose professed aim is to extract profits, because the precious little which the latter have done for their workers by way of welfare amenities far exceeds the measures taken up by the democratic government since Independence for the benefit of the tea community. While the government has totally abdicated the responsibility of the tea workers’ welfare to the garden owners, the non-

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Protibedon}, (in Assamese), Memorandum submitted to the State Government’s Advisory Committee on Welfare of Tea Tribes, All Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Union (ATTSA), Guwahati, 3 October, 1997, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, p. 4-5.
\end{flushleft}
permanent tea workers and ex-tea garden people who constitute about 88 percent of the 'tea community' people in Assam are totally dependent on the government for their welfare, and hence their socio-economic conditions are pitiable.21 Saying that its demands are legitimate and broad-based, the ATTSA claims that the other organizations representing the tea and ex-tea garden workers such as the Assam Chah Janajati Juba Chatra Parishad, the Assam Tea and Ex-Tea Tribes' Youth Association, the Assam Chah Janajati Naba Sanskriti Parishad, the Tea Tribes' Volunteer Force and the trade unions have also raised them separately:

We have not put forward any separatist demands like those for autonomy, or separate state or autonomous state within Assam. We have only demanded facilities that are necessary for decent life.22

The ATTSA's charter of demands include issues relating to the tea tribe community as a whole, e.g., inclusion of all tea tribes in the list of Scheduled Tribes, as well as issues that pertain only to permanent workers in the gardens and are thus the domain of trade unions, e.g., granting of paid holiday to tea workers on Sundays. It has demanded educational facilities, reservation of seats in educational institutions, and reservation of jobs in various government and public sector units and in tea gardens for tea tribe people:

Indeed, the ATTSA leadership became articulate and organised for the cause of tribal identity as a measure of dispelling backwardness as a whole. As a part of their strategy for it, they began demanding the inclusion of Tea and Ex-Tea Tribes into the list of Scheduled Tribes, facilities for and cultivation and development of 'Saadri Bhasa' and other socio-cultural heritage, reservation of seats in educational and government services and eventually

21 Ibid, p. 6.
reservation of seats for Tea and Ex-Tea Tribes candidates in the State Legislature and the Parliament.23

Recently the ATTSA has demanded implementation of various recommendations of the C.P. Mishra Committee report for the welfare of tea tribes. Addressing delegates during its annual conference at Nagaon, the General Secretary of the Association, Mr. K.P. Tasa said that the 70 lakhs people are not well-represented in government or other jobs. He demanded proper rehabilitation for the 370 worker families who would be affected by the mega-gas-cracker-project at Tengakhat in eastern Assam.24 The turmoil in the Bodo areas affecting the adivasi population has also evoked the ATTSA's concern and it has often urged the government to ensure the adivasis' security. In 2001, its Organising Secretary, Bosco Charmaco issued a statement opposing the proposed replacement of the Bodo Accord of 1993 by the establishment of a Bodo Territorial Council on the lines of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, which would make the status of the adivasi population even more uncertain.25

In the cultural sphere, its demands include governmental measures for protection of 'tea tribe' culture, but it stops short of demanding educational instruction in languages belonging to tea tribes. In fact, most of the ATTSA leaders are found to belong to the section of the tea community that is more or less assimilated in the Assamese, and being proficient both in bagan baat and Assamese, they have mostly given up their original dialects. This

23 Rudraman Thapa "Politics of Identity among the Tea Tribes of Assam", op. cit., p. 141.
observation holds especially for those of Oriya, Telegu and Bihari non-tribal
descent, many of who have been able to move up in the social ladder through
their acquisition of written Assamese, that enables them to get government
jobs. Thus, the revival of Adivasi languages among the tea tribes, which is an
important objective of the Christian missionaries, does not appear to be so
central to the ATTSA’s agenda, though it does figure in its charter of
demands.27

The ATTSA’s contributions towards cultural enrichment and educational
advancement of the tea workers since its inception have been commendable.
It periodically organizes educational programmes aimed at spreading
awareness regarding education among the ‘tea tribes’ through meetings,
workshops, posters and wall-writings in tea gardens and tea worker
settlements.28 It has made efforts to educate the tea workers about the
necessity to maintain hygiene and to abstain from the use of intoxicants. It
has taken an active role in organizing coaching classes for ‘tea tribe’ students,
in setting up rural libraries, and in organizing cultural festivals and talent
search competitions to bring out the hidden cultural talents of the ‘tea tribe’
youth. It has held a few seminars on the language, literature and culture of
the tea tribes.29

The other important students’ union among the tea tribes is the All
Adivasi Students’ Association of Assam (AASAA), which represents mainly the

26 Sebastian Karotemprel, “The Future of the Adivasi Community in Assam and the Role of
27 Protibedon, op. cit., p. 36.
28 The Assam Tribune, 6.2.99, p. 6.
29 Ibid.
Chotanagpuri tribals settled in Assam, most of whom happen to belong to the tea and ex-tea garden worker community. It has a close relationship with the Adivasi Council of Assam (ACA) and can be said to be the latter’s student wing. It developed as a parallel organization of the ATTSA in the aftermath of the ethnic riots in Kokrajhar district in 1996:

However, a new development took place in the history of the Tea Tribes movement when the AASAA made its appearance among the Tea and Ex-Tea Tribes with a new identity, i.e., Adivasi. Indeed, being influenced by their Adivasi counterparts of Bihar the AASAA was vehemently opposed to a mere professional identity viz. ‘Tea and Ex-Tea Tribes’; rather they preferred to identify themselves as the Adivasis.30

Ideologically the AASAA aims at forging unity among the adivasis in Assam, instilling in them a sense of pride in adivasi culture, reviving the adivasi languages and cultures and protecting them from the onslaught of degenerating tendencies, and thus strengthening the adivasi identity. It sees the preponderance of Assamese language and culture in the Brahmaputra valley as a threat to adivasi culture; despite such feelings, many of its leaders are well-versed in Assamese language, literature and cultural attributes. Recently the AASAA is said to have raised the demand for creation of a separate state of ‘Adivasiland’ on the plea that the lives and property as well as the ethnic identity of the Adivasis were no longer safe in the state of Assam31:

It is, of course, difficult to ascertain whether the AASAA really wanted a separate state or used it as a political tactic to realize their aims.32

30 Rudraman Thapa “Politics of Identity among the Tea Tribes of Assam”, op. cit., p. 141.
32 Rudraman Thapa “Politics of Identity among the Tea Tribes of Assam”, op. cit., p. 140.
The AASAA is strongest in the Kokrajhar district where a large number of adivasis, especially Santhals reside both within and outside the plantations. It also commands support in many areas on the North Bank, such as Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur and Darrang districts. In recent times, the AASAA has been observed to make inroads into Upper Assam where it had set up its district units, and it organized a mammoth gathering, the Adivasi Mahasabha at Dibrugarh in March 2000. The AASAA has often been accused of fostering adivasi militancy in Assam, a charge that is vehemently refuted by its leadership. The AASAA president Raphael Kujur issued a strong statement in 1999 condemning the ACMS General Secretary’s comment that the student body was involved in militancy.33

Political leaders take care to placate both the students’ unions in terms of rendering lip-support to their demands, and even conceding them when the pressure threatens their political fortunes. In late 2001, despite reports that some AASAA activists were actively involved with Adivasi militants in Lower Assam, the state Chief Minister graced an AASAA meeting at Majbat in Darrang district and assured the 7.5 lakh-strong Adivasi community in Assam that their interests would be protected before any final settlement was made regarding the setting up of a Bodo territorial council.34 The plight of adivasi victims who have been rendered homeless by the ethnic violence unleashed by Bodo militant groups has been a major issue of concern for the AASAA.

33 *The Assam Tribune,* 5.2.99, p. 6.
34 *The Telegraph,* (Guwahati edition), 12.12.01, p. 15.
The relationship between AASAA and ATTSA appears to be neither close nor antagonistic, and while it borders on hostility, there is no open conflict as the leaders mutually maintain a safe distance. While ATTSA leaders accuse the proponents of adivasi identity of dividing the tea tribes on ethnic lines in order to serve the vested interests of a few leaders, AASAA leaders assert that adivasi identity does not hamper unity among the various ethnic components of the tea worker community on issues affecting their common interests. Some scholars have termed the adivasi bodies as parochial because of their insistence on special treatment for certain sections within the tea worker community:

Parochialism is however not completely absent. In the recent period two new organizations viz. Adivasi Students' Association of Assam (AASAA) and Adivasi Sewa Samiti (ASS) have emerged in certain areas. As the name indicates they prefer the identity of 'Adivasi' to the 'tea tribe'. As against the demand launched by organizations like the ATTSA, the Assam Chah Mozdur Sangha (ACMS) etc. for Scheduled Tribe status for the whole group, the ASS demands it only for nine tribes, leaving a number of others aside.

There are instances of the proponents of tea tribe and adivasi identities engaging in joint action on issues affecting the tea and ex-tea garden workers as a whole, such as the issue of hostels for tea tribe students. However, one major area of difference of opinion is on the question of demand for SC/ST status, on which the ATTSA holds that all tea tribe people are entitled to 'scheduled' status, while the AASAA believes that only those communities that are entitled to such status in their places of origin should be granted it in Assam. So far as the Adivasis of non-tea garden origin settled in Lower Assam

35 Kamakhya Prasad Tasa, "Aami ki Bisaro", (in Assamese), in Rajen Gogol, op. cit., p. 349
36 Bolin Hazarika, "In Search of an Identity for an Ethnic Group: The Case of Tea and Ex-Tea Labourers of Assam", in K.M. Deka & K.N. Phukan, op. cit., p. 128
(especially in Kokrajhar district) are concerned, the AASAA regards them as an important component of its support base, from which many of its leaders hail, while the ATTSA prefers to remain ambivalent on the question of their representation, as by definition, they are not part and parcel of the ‘tea tribes’ in Assam, but are closely linked to them in terms of ethnicity and social interaction.

**Tea Workers and Electoral Politics:**

Members of the tea worker community have graced the state legislature since the colonial days. The allotment of four seats in the 108-member Assam Legislative Assembly that started functioning in 1937 to representatives of the tea garden labour force in the province numbering over a million under the Government of India Act of 1935 marked the beginnings of their political representation. The formation of these constituencies was problematic as the gardens were scattered and even the areas with a dense garden population had people living outside the gardens who would be deprived of franchise in the general constituencies if an area-wise delimitation was done for the tea labour constituencies. Finally it was decided to give representation to various areas by a simple system of rotation. The labour representatives from the Brahmaputra valley in the 1937 elections were B. Pantani from Dumduma constituency, B. C. Das from Jorhat, and B. K. Sarwan from Thakurbari.37

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In the post-colonial period, the principle of universal adult franchise made the votes of tea and ex-tea garden workers quite important for the parties contesting elections. In many Assembly constituencies, the tea workers' votes decided the outcome of the elections. In the Brahmaputra valley, there are about 35 Legislative Assembly Constituencies where tea workers are numerically in a position to exercise a decisive role in elections. These include 8 Assembly constituencies within Dibrugarh Lok Sabha constituency (viz., Margherita, Digboi, Tinsukia, Dullajan, Nahorkotiya, Tingkhong, Lahoal and Moran), 9 in Jorhat (Sonari, Mahmora, Thowra, Nazira, Amguri, Teok, Mariani, Titabor and Jorhat), 3 in Lakhimpur (Dumduma, Chabua and Naoboisa), 5 in Koliabor (Dergaon, Bokakhat, Khumtai, Sarupathar, Koliabor), 6 in Tezpur (Gohpur, Bihali, Biswanath, Rangapara, Dhekiajuli, Borsola), 2 in Mangaldai (Mazbat and Paneri), and 1 each in Guwahati (Dispur) and Kokrajhar (Gossaigaon). Among the Lok Sabha constituencies in the Brahmaputra valley, tea workers' votes are the deciding factor in four of them, namely Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Koliabor and Tezpur, while they play a significant role in two others, viz., Lakhimpur, Nagaon and Mangaldai:

The tea garden labourers... are the key constituents of the upper and central Assam constituencies of Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Koliabor, Tezpur, parts of Nagaon and Lakhimpur as well as the Barak Valley constituency of Silchar.\(^{38}\)

After Independence, in the first general election of 1952, Chanu Kheria, the first matriculate from the tea worker community, won the

Sarupathar assembly seat in Golaghat, while Malia Tanti, a garden sardar, won the Doomdooma seat in Tinsukia and Mathias Tudu won the Gossaigaon seat in Kokrajhar. In the later period, Upen Sonaton gained the Boggodu seat (present Chabua) in Dibrugarh, Chatragopal Karmakar won from Sarupathar, and Satya Tanti from Mahmora in Jorhat. In 1971, Chatragopal Karmakar became the first minister from the state’s tea worker community, when he was appointed as minister of state in M.M. Choudhury’s government (1971-72). In the subsequent S.C. Sinha ministry (1972-78), Gojen Tanti, the Mariani M.L.A. became a cabinet minister, entrusted with the portfolio of Labour, Supplies and Cooperatives. Thus, within the period of uninterrupted Congress rule in the state for over three decades since 1946, members of the tea worker community in the Brahmaputra valley could make significant headway in securing political representation in the state.

The Assembly elections of 1978 heralded the end of Congress dominance in the state and brought a newly-formed coalition led by the Janata Party to power:

The Sixth Assembly election brought an end to the Congress dominant system that had characterized the politics in the state during the past three decades since Independence, and the election politics in Assam for the first time acquired a competitive character. The monopolistic hold of the INC over the state’s electorate, particularly over the Muslim, Scheduled Caste and Tea Mazdoor voters had been challenged and it was overthrown by the opposition parties in this election.39

In the Janata ministry headed by Golap Borbora that assumed office in 1978, Silvius Condpan, the MLA from Mazbat belonging to the tea worker

community became the Parliamentary Secretary, and subsequently joined the Jogendra Nath Hazarika ministry (Asom Janata Dal) in 1979 as a minister. In 1980, amidst the turmoil of the Assam Agitation, an eight-member Congress ministry headed by Syeda Anwara Taimur assumed office, in which Jai Chandra Nagbongshi became a minister of state. Six months later, another Congress ministry headed by Keshab Chandra Gogoi was constituted, and Arklius Tirkey was declared as one of its ministers; however, the ministry could not take oath due to political disturbances, and President's Rule was imposed for the first time in the state.

The elections of 1983 were marred by large-scale ethnic violence in the Brahmaputra valley and the voter turnout was ridiculously low in most constituencies, excepting those dominated by religious and linguistic minorities and tea workers. The leaders of the 'anti-foreigners' agitation gave a call for boycott of the elections as they felt that the electoral rolls contained the names of Bangladeshi and Nepali immigrants on a large scale, while the Central Government was determined to conduct the elections at any cost, leading to a situation of ethnic conflict. The complete polarization between the Congress and anti-Congress forces during the agitation meant that tea workers either voted for the Congress as advised by their ACMS leaders, or boycotted the elections under the influence of the ATTSA youths; hence the non-Congress parties taking part in the polls appeared to be irrelevant in the given situation and lost miserably. The Hiteswar Saikia ministry that subsequently came to power and lasted till 1985 had three representatives of
the tea worker community including Rameshwar Dhanowar, the M.L.A. from Digboi, Dipak Murmu from Lahoal, and Condpan from Mazbat constituency.

The Assam Accord signed between the Central Government and the leaders of the Assam Agitation brought about a sea change in the state’s political situation. A new regional party, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) was formed by the erstwhile leaders of the Assam Movement with the slogan “Unity, Peace, Progress” and it came to power riding on a huge wave of popular support from diverse ethnic groups that strove to identify with the ‘greater Assamese community’. The AGP was seen in the public eye as the underdog in its battle for power against the Congress, which was seen as representing the privileged communities that had monopolized all the institutions of power in the country, and the AGP leaders carried the image of self-sacrificing heroes who had suffered much at the hands of the security forces for daring to challenge those entrenched in power. On the other hand, many of the Congress leaders, and Hiteswar Saikia in particular enjoyed immense popularity among tea workers in their respective constituencies for their political patronage of the tea workers' community interests and their grooming of union leaders at the grass-root level over an extended period. As one tea worker commented,

Politicians are sinners rather than saints, and as a known thief is better than an unknown one, we vote always for Congress.  

While the tea workers in 1985 mostly remained with the Congress due to the unchallenged supremacy of the ACMS on the trade union front, a good

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40 Interview with Ramlal, worker, Suntok T.E., Sivasagar district, 22.2.99.
number of them saw the AGP as a novel political phenomenon that could bring hope for the hitherto deprived sections of people. The influence of the Assam Movement and the AGP upon the ex-tea garden worker community was tremendous in some parts of the Brahmaputra valley, especially in Upper Assam, and because of this community's close links with the tea workers inside the gardens, the age-old isolation of the tea workers from the political happenings in the state was gradually fading away. Our field survey revealed that many tea workers in Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur and Darrang districts had voted for the AGP in the 1985 elections under the influence of friends and relatives residing outside the gardens. Though their proportion was minimal in relation to the total number of tea workers in these districts, the very act of tea workers voting against the directions of their union leaders was unusual in the apparently unchanging history of political behaviour of tea workers in the state since Independence. The AGP in its election manifesto promised various benefits for the tea workers if they came to power:

For the welfare of the tea garden labourers, the government will ensure that

(a) The tea labourers get their due bonus;
(b) They get free medical facilities;
(c) They get regular supply of essential commodities; and
(d) Their children get all necessary educational facilities.

The government will take over all schools in the tea gardens and improve their standard.
The government will fix the minimum number of labourers to be employed per acre of garden land to prevent retrenchment of tea workers.
The government will acquire excess lands held by the gardens and redistribute them among landless ex-tea garden labourers.\(^{41}\)

\(^{41}\) Nirbachani Istahar, Election Manifesto of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), Guwahati, 1985.
In the 1985 elections, AGP candidates won from assembly constituencies heavily populated by tea workers, including all the seats in Jorhat and Lakhimpur districts, all but one in Sibsagar district (the exception here being Nazira, won by Hiteswar Saikia of the Congress), and half of the seats in Dibrugarh, Sonitpur and Nowgong districts. Among those belonging to the 'tea tribes' who won on AGP tickets were Naren Tanti from Mariani constituency, Binod Goala from Sarupathar, Dipen Tanti from Lahoal and B.P. Telenga from Thowra, while 'tea tribe' candidates who won with Congress tickets were S. Condpan (Mazbat constituency), Mathias Tudu (Gossaigaon), R. Dhanower (Digboi) and Dileswar Tanti (Doomdooma). Prominent losers belonging to the 'tea tribes' were P.S. Ghatowar, the state INTUC General Secretary from Tinkhong constituency, J.C. Nagbangshi from Moran, U.N. Sonaton from Chabua, Dipak Murmu from Lahoal, Arklius Tirkey from Sarupathar, Satya Tanti from Sonari and Malia Tanti from Digboi, all of whom had earlier brought glory to the Congress, and were contesting from constituencies dominated by tea workers. Joseph Toppo, the AGP candidate belonging to the 'tea tribes' who lost in 1985 from Dhekiajuli constituency, was later to become a minister in the AGP government, winning that seat in the 1996 elections. Haren Bhumij, a 'tea tribe' candidate won the Dibrugarh Lok Sabha seat for the Congress, while Bhadreswar Tanti, another 'tea tribe' candidate won the Koliabor Lok Sabha seat as an independent with AGP support defeating the Congress leader Tarun Gogol.

Tea workers in 1985 contributed decisively to the victories of Congress candidates in the Lok Sabha constituencies of Dibrugarh and Tezpur, and in
the Assembly constituencies of Nazira, Duliajan, Margherita, Doomdooma, Digboi, Mazbat and Gossaigaon, in many of which the winners themselves did not belong to the 'tea tribes'. Here the ACMS 'magic' worked in the face of strong opposition from the Assamese voters, who mostly voted for the AGP. Many Assamese members of the Congress-I appeared to have become alienated from their own kith and kin, due to the 'anti-Assamese' image acquired by their party during the 'anti-foreigner' movement that had just ended. Seasoned Congressmen like Keshab Gogoi, Hiteswar Saikia and Bipin Pal Das could win because of the votes of tea workers rather than those of their relatives or caste members who, in most cases, sided with the AGP. Saikia admitted as much when he said that the tea garden votes did not split and went intact to the Congress; he attributed the Congress defeat to the unusually heavy polling by the Assamese voters. In a state where Congress dominance lasted uninterrupted till 1978, the erosion of its support among various ethnic groups meant that the party increasingly came to rely for votes on the tea workers who have by and large remained loyal supporters:

Tea and Ex-Tea tribes community known as Tea and Ex-Tea Labour community ... are now part and parcel of Assam and the Assamese society and are traditional supporters of Indian National Congress. It is needless to say that the Tea and Ex-Tea garden labour votes are continuously supporting the Congress Party in the state. There are a number of instances when other people left the Congress party, this population remained intact in support of the Congress Party. The whole tea population cannot think of any other ideology than the Congress.

The AGP ministry led by P.K. Mahanta that was formed in 1985 and lasted till 1990 included two members from the 'tea community', namely Barki

43 Memorandum presented to Sonia Gandhi, President, All India Congress Committee, by Tea Tribes' MLAs led by P.S. Ghatowar, President, ACMS, 2000.
Prasad Telenga, the M.L.A. from Thowra, who got cabinet rank, and Dipen Tanti, the Lahoal M.L.A., who was made a Minister of State. Despite making its mark on the national political scene as a 'regional party with a national outlook' and becoming a part of the 'National Front' coalition government at the Centre in early 1990, the AGP did not seem to satisfy the high expectations of the multitude that had voted it to power. The AASU and the ATTSA that had played major roles in the AGP's election campaign in 1985 expressed total disappointment over the performance of the AGP government for reneging on its promises. The multifarious constituents of the 'greater Assamese community' now began to perceive the AGP as a party representing Assamese caste Hindu interests, and this created unrest among members of various tribes and backward castes, including the 'tea tribes', who saw their respective community interests as being threatened by an assimilative tendency of the ruling group.\(^4\)

The period of AGP rule witnessed the rise of ethnic agitations and insurgency on an unprecedented scale in the state, and in late 1990, the ministry was dismissed and President's Rule imposed on the state in order to curb militancy.

Within a year, elections were held in the state and the Congress returned to power following a pre-poll split in the AGP that had left the regional party in a severely battered condition. The non-Congress parties, especially the AGP made an issue of human rights violations during the military anti-insurgency operations in the 1991 elections, and managed to get some sympathy on this count in many constituencies. But this could not cut

\(^4\) Rudraman Thapa, "Samprati Asamat Chah Janagosthir Rajnoitik Bhumika", op. cit.
much ice with the tea workers, who voted heavily for Congress, contributing to Congress victories in constituencies like Bihali, Biswanath, Bokakhat, Nazira, Gohpur, Khumtai, Golaghat, Mazbat, Amguri, Thowra, Dibrugarh, Titabor, Morion, Koliabor, Moran, Mahmora, Dergaon, Sadiya, Doomdooma, Chabua, Lakhimpur, Sootea, Naoboisa, Margherita, Tinkhong, Digboi, Duliajan, Lahoal, Sonari, Tezpur, Dhekiajuli and Borchala. Prominent ‘tea tribe’ winners belonging to the Congress included Barnabash Tanti from Bihali, S. Condpan from Mazbat, Dileswar Tanti from Doomdooma, U.N. Sanatan from Chabua, P. Majhi from Tinkhong, H. Bhumij from Lahoal, R. Dhanowar from Digboi, Rupam Kurmi from Mariani, Boloram Nag from Koliabor, and J.C. Nagbongshi from Moran.

In 1991, tea workers contributed decisively to Congress victories in all the nine assembly seats within Dibrugarh Lok Sabha constituency and in 6 out of the 7 Assembly seats in Dibrugarh district, the lone exception being Naharkatia, which the CPI-M won in a repeat of its performance of 1978. Significantly, the combined votes of the AGP and its break-away faction, the NAGP proved to be much less than the Congress votes in all the 6 seats in Dibrugarh district that the Congress won; thus the rout of the regional parties in the district cannot simply be attributed to the split in the AGP. In the tea worker dominated Rangapara constituency of Sonitpur district, the Congress leader Golok Rajbongshi, an Assamese, defeated the CPI-M leader Dhaniram Khosla, a member of the tea worker community who had contributed much to the growth of the CITU in many gardens of Sonitpur district.
A few AGP candidates in 1991 managed to retain their Assembly seats in the tea areas such as Sarupathar, Jorhat and Teok, mainly on account of their personal popularity despite their party's miserable image. Similarly, the state's topmost CPI leader managed to wrest the Sibsagar seat from the AGP while the CPI-M candidate won the Naharkatiya seat, although both parties performed poorly in general. In the Bodo-dominated areas of Lower Assam, the tea workers' votes that went mostly to the Congress could not put a stop to the victory run of the independents put up by the proponents of the 'Bodoland' movement, the ABSU-BPAC combine, for whom no tea worker would have voted. This happened even in a constituency like Gossaigaon, considered as the stronghold of the Adivasi leader Mathias Tudu, where Adivasi voters constituted the largest ethnic category numbering 30,515, i.e. six thousands more than the number of Bodo voters. The threats issued by Bodo militant groups appear to have influenced the voting pattern in the 'Bodoland' areas.

Among the Lok Sabha constituencies in the tea belt, the Congress in 1991 won in Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Koliabor, Mangaldai, Tezpur and Lakhimpur, with P.S. Ghatowar's victory in the tea worker-dominated Dibrugarh constituency being significant as he defeated the AGP's Dipen Tanti, also a 'tea tribe' candidate by a margin of 1,37,920 votes: while Ghatowar polled 50.53% of the valid votes, Tanti got 29% and the NAGP's Israil Nanda, another 'tea tribe' candidate polled 7.25% votes, which presumably would have gone to the AGP, had it not split. In Koliabor, the Congress convincingly

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45 *The Assam Tribune*, 7.6.91, p. 3
defeated the AGP by a margin of 1,24,719 votes, while the 'tea tribe' candidate B. Tanti, who had won the seat for the AGP in 1985, got only 60,469 votes on an NAGP ticket:

The Congress banks heavily on the tea tribals who have always bailed them out amidst allegations from the opposition that labourers are provided with unlimited liquor and they then vote for the party.46

The Congress government in the state led by Hiteswar Saikia that came to power in 1991 and lasted its full term included four 'tea tribe' ministers with cabinet rank, namely Silvius Condpan, Dileswar Tanti, Haren Bhumij, and Dinesh Prasad Goala (from the Barak valley), while Prithvi Majhi became the Deputy Speaker of the State Assembly. An achievement for the members of the 'tea tribe' community of Assam in terms of their political representation was the inclusion in 1991 of Paban Singh Ghatowar, the MP from Dibrugarh in the Union Cabinet led by P.V. Narasimha Rao, first as Deputy Minister and then as Minister of State:

Ghatowar, a prominent tea tribe leader who grew up in the gardens with his mother retiring only recently as a head labourer, symbolizes the community's hopes and aspirations.47

The 1996 elections witnessed the victory of an AGP led alliance that included the CPI and the CPI-M, and the new ministry that took office included one member from the 'tea tribes' namely Joseph Toppo, the MLA from Dhekiajuli, as a minister of state, and later on Binod Goala, the MLA from Sarupathar, was made a minister with cabinet rank. S. Condpan, the 'tea

47 Ibid.
tribe' leader from Mazbat who had been the PWD Minister (1991-96) was elected leader of the Congress Legislative Party. The AGP managed to recover much of what it had lost in 1991, but the Congress retained most of its holdings in the tea worker-dominated areas, including the Assembly seats of Mazbat, Rangapara, Behali, Bokakhat, Mariani, Sonari, Thowra, Moran, Lahoal, Duliajan, Tinkhong, Tinsukia, Digboi, Naoboisa, Doomdooma and Naharkatia, and the Lok Sabha seats of Dibrugarh, Jorhat and Tezpur. In Digboi and Doomdooma constituencies, heavily populated by tea workers, more than 65% of the valid votes went to the 'tea tribe' candidates fielded by the Congress, while P.S. Ghatowar retained the Dibrugarh Lok Sabha seat by a less spectacular margin (1,07,355 votes) than in 1991. Out of 36 Congress MLAs in the Legislative Assembly, 8 belonged to the 'tea tribes', revealing the extent to which the party's state unit was dependent on the support of this backward community:

Community-wise analysis of the Congress legislators in the State Assembly shows that among them, the MLAs from the tea worker community constitute the largest unit.\textsuperscript{48}

In 1996, the newly formed Congress (T) party led at the national level by Arjun Singh and N.D. Tiwari attracted many Congress dissidents and managed to gain some of the 'tea tribe' votes that would otherwise probably have gone to the INC. For example, the Congress (T) candidates belonging to the 'tea tribes' received 10,661 votes in Gohpur, 3684 votes in Rangapara, 2936 votes in Lahoal, 2776 votes in Kaliabar and 2562 votes in Khumtai; the party also put up 'tea tribe' candidates in Moran, Sonari, Mariani, Tingkhong, 

\textsuperscript{48} Rudraman Thapa, "Samprati Asamat Chah Janagosthir Rajnoitik Bhumika", op. cit.
Naharkatia and Borsola. The BJP put up 'tea tribe' candidates in 6 Assembly constituencies and gained 7577 votes in Duliajan, 6788 in Gossaigaon and 5769 in Rangapara. The 'tea tribe' candidates put up by the ultra-left URMCA got 3991 votes in Sonari and 3106 votes in Gossiagaon. The main left parties in 1996 in alliance with the AGP made significant gains in terms of votes in certain tea worker dominated constituencies; the CPI-M got 27% of votes polled in Rangapara and 35.3% in Naharkatia, though both these seats went to Congress, while the CPI got 47.9% of votes polled in Sibsagar, where it won, and 25.7% in Tingkhong, 13.2% in Digboi and 11.5% in Thowra. The AGP won in the tea worker dominated constituencies of Dhekiajuli (got 46.4% of votes polled), Borsola (39.3%), Tezpur (44.7%), Sootea (40.9%), Biswanath (42.7%), Gohpur (36.8%), Lakhimpur (36.8%), Koliabor (47.2%), Golaghat (48.7%), Khumtai (26.9%), Chabua (39.4%) and Sadiya (40%).

It has often been held that the tea belt has been a preserve of the Congress and during the last decade the Congress party had been able to retain its hold over the main component of the voters of this region, i.e., the tea labour community. Even during the AGP's wave in 1985, these voters helped the Congress to win the Dibrugarh seat comfortably. In the 1996 assembly elections, of the total of 30 such tea labour community dominant constituencies, the Congress won 16, the AGP won 13 and CPI won one seat. The AGP thus seems to have made inroads into the Congress bastion.

The Lok Sabha elections of 1998 and 1999 led to the victory of Congress candidates in most of the seats in the Brahmaputra valley and weakened the AGP's hold. A significant feature of these elections was the emergence of the BJP as a major party in Assam, and even among the

49 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
workers its impact was felt. In 1998, the 'tea tribe' leader P.S. Ghatowar of the Congress retained his Dibrugarh L.S. seat by a larger margin (1,41,122 votes) than in 1991 or 1996, but it declined considerably in 1999 to 67,116 votes, and both times his nearest rival was the BJP candidate Ajit Chaliha, who managed to improve his vote share from 93,073 in 1998 to 203,474 in 1999 in this 'tea tribe' dominated constituency:

The BJP is hoping to get a significant chunk of the garden votes since the party's local leadership claims to have made deep inroads in this segment in the last two years. The BJP camp is trying to split the "garden votes" by indoctrinating them into the saffron brigade.52

The ULFA's call for poll boycott on both occasions had its effect on the Assamese voters but not on the tea workers or on the immigrant Muslims who voted in large numbers as usual. In 1998, for example, polling was low (35%) in the Assamese-majority Jorhat L.S. constituency, but within it the five Assembly segments dominated by tea workers showed much higher percentages of voting, and in these segments the Congress candidates led by wide margins over their nearest rivals: 38,389 in Sonari, 25,494 in Nazira, 20,105 in Mariani, 13,692 in Titabor and 8640 in Amguri53:

Low polling in this constituency, where tea tribes comprise about 30% of total voters of over 10 lakh, puts Congress in an advantageous position over the rival parties. The reason is that even if the polling is low, majority of the tea workers exercise their franchise. As tea workers are the traditional support base in this tea heartland of Upper Assam, mass voting by them in case of low poll turnout gives Congress candidates an edge over their rivals. That is why Congress never leaves any stone unturned to ensure mass voting by tea garden workers.54

52 "AGP, BJP Hope for Last Minute Surprise in Dibrugarh", The Assam Tribune, 1.10.99, p. 1.
54 Ibid
The Assembly elections in 2001 resulted in another change of the state’s ruling party and the Congress was back in power, with Tarun Gogoi as the Chief Minister. The collapse of the alliance between the AGP and the left parties, and the hastily patched AGP-BJP combine on the eve of the 2001 Assembly elections proved to be a godsend for the Congress, as the electorate rejected the non-Congress parties for their perceived opportunism and shifting stances, and voted overwhelmingly for the Congress. So far as the tea workers were concerned, the ACMS was able to utilize its traditional support base among them to highlight the failures of the AGP-led alliance government, which had not only betrayed its earlier promises made to the tea workers, but also failed to remain united. In the Brahmaputra valley, 11 'tea tribe' candidates were elected, including 9 from the Congress, viz. Dileswar Tanti (Doomdooma constituency), R. Dhanowar (Digboi), Raju Sahu (Chabua), Prithvi Majhi (Lahoal), Etuwa Munda (Tinkhong), Rupam Kurmi (Mariani), Arklias Tirkey (Sarupathar), Bhimananda Tanti (Rangapara) and M. Tudu (Gossaigaon); and one each from the AGP and the BJP, viz., Joseph Toppo (Dhekiajuli) and Rameshwar Teli (Duliajan) respectively. The ATTSA claimed that it’s support had enabled Dileswar Tanti, Prithvi Majhi, Etowa Munda and Arklius Tirkey of the Congress, and Phani Bhusan Choudhury and Joseph Toppo of the AGP to win their seats in the elections. 55

Prithvi Majhi of the Congress, who won the Lahoal seat in 2001 as in 1996, became the Speaker of the Assembly, adding another milestone in the political history of the 'tea tribes’. He had won the Tinkhong seat in 1991, and

55 *The Sentinel*, 18.5.2001, p. 1
had represented the state in the Rajya Sabha also. In the six Assembly seats of the tea worker-dominated Jorhat district, the Congress in 2001 improved its performance by securing 11% more votes than in the 1996 elections, at the expense of the AGP, which lost four of its sitting MLAs. The Congress lost in its stronghold Moran, where it had fielded the ACMS President's wife, Jibantara Ghatowar as its candidate, in the face of opposition from the veteran 'tea tribe' leader Joy Chandra Nagbongshi. Surprisingly, one of the state's leading 'tea tribe' Congressmen, Silvius Condpan lost his Mazbat seat, while in other constituencies the new generation of 'tea tribe' leaders belonging to various parties were making their mark on the political scene. The BJP made major inroads among the Hindu section of the tea workers in some constituencies, notably in the tea worker-dominated Duliajan constituency, where its candidate, the ex-ATTSA leader Rameshwar Teli won. Earlier, both in 1998 and 1999, the ATTSA had been perceived to be supportive of the BJP, and Teli's victory made it clear that student leaders from the community would no longer depend only on the Congress or the AGP to launch their political careers:

The BJP... has been buoyed to some extent following the ATTSA's moral support to it though officially the students' body is not supporting any party.56

There is scope to assume that both the BJP and the AGP-left parties' alliance would have gained higher proportions of the tea workers' votes than they actually did in the 2001 elections, had the last-minute political re-

alignments among the non-Congress parties not taken place. On the eve of the 2001 elections the senior ‘tea tribe’ member of the BJP, Dineswar Tasa justifiably regretted the formation of the AGP-BJP alliance and the non-allotment of BJP tickets to ‘tea tribe’ leaders in constituencies dominated by tea workers, as the tea workers were increasingly searching for an alternative to the AGP and the Congress, and there had been a phenomenal surge in support for the BJP among them. The two factors as mentioned by Tasa proved to be responsible for the BJP’s performance in the tea belt, which was relatively poor in terms of earlier expectations. Moreover, the AGP-BJP alliance turned out to be ill-coordinated, as seen in the tea worker dominated constituency of Teok, where there was a ‘friendly contest’ between the alliance partners that was all but friendly, and cost them both dearly.

**Unions and Politics:**

In the context of the tea workers, the unions play a decisive role in shaping their political preferences:

> With independence and the impending democratization of political process, the various political parties began organizing the tea workers which culminated in the formation of a number of Tea trade unions in order to improve their working conditions and emancipate them from, what they called, ‘exploitation’ by the tea planters.

Some of the tea worker unions affiliated to different political parties are the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha which supports the Indian National Congress, the Bharatiya Chah Mazdoor Sangha, Assam belonging to the Bharatiya Janata Party), the Assam Bagicha Mazdoor Union belonging to the

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57 *The Assam Tribune*, 22.4.2001
58 Rudraman Thapa, “Politics of Identity among the Tea Tribes of Assam”, op. cit., p. 132.
Communist Party of India, the Akhil Bharatiya Chah Mazdoor Sangha, Assam belonging to the CPI-M, the Asom Sangrami Chah Shramik Sangha belonging to the CPI-ML the Assam Chah Shramik Union belonging to the Samajbadi Dal, the Assam Tea Workers Union belonging to the Assam Labour Party, and the Assam Chah Shramik Parishad belonging to the Asom Gana Parishad. It has been the Congress party that reaped the harvest of its trade union base among the tea workers in all the elections till the present period:

One traditional vote bank of the Congress in Assam...has been the immigrant tea garden workers, mostly under the sway of the INTUC, though a few unions in the districts of Sibsagar and Dibrugarh have been controlled by the Communist Party and the Socialist Party.

Compared to the ACMS, which has a membership of over three lakhs, the CITU has around 25-26 thousands and the AITUC has nearly 1500 members. The vicissitudes faced by the Congress Party at the Centre since 1977, and in the State since 1985 have done little to adversely affect its hold among the tea workers. As Chaube points out, the gains made by the Janata Party in the state in 1977 were due to the Assamese middle class concerns about the Emergency, and the tea workers by and large remained with the Congress, enabling the party to win over 50% of the valid votes. In Tezpur Lok Sabha constituency, the tea workers voted against the official Congress candidate due to the internal politics within the INTUC and not because of the anti-Emergency wave. In any case, most tea workers in Assam neither knew

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59 Ibid.
61 Interview with Amal Ghosh Dastidar, president, CITU, Assam unit, 12.12.98.
62 S.K. Chaube, op. cit.
63 Ibid
about the ongoing Emergency of the mid-1970s nor had reason to resent it in 1977.

The organizational supremacy of the ACMS and the legacy of its initial decades of leadership have helped sustain its dominance over other unions in almost the entire Brahmaputra valley. The AITUC, which had made the initial headway in unionizing the tea workers, attributed the success of the INTUC to the patronage it gained from the planters and the suppression of the communists by the new Congress government in the post-independence period. It alleged that Congress ministers and their departments were hostile to the AITUC and most of the AITUC activists were jailed, often without trial, by the new government. The state Labour Department extended material help to the INTUC in its formative years. However, despite similar patronage being received by the INTUC in West Bengal, it failed to consolidate on its gains and since the fifties the communists came to dominate in many tea gardens there. Perhaps, the differing political situation in the two states explains the relative contrast in the scenario. Political activity inside the gardens developed as a result of political change in the world around them. In the Brahmaputra valley, Congress was already entrenched in the countryside and communists were relatively few in number, whereas in Bengal, communism had made enough headway in the pre-independence period itself and became stronger subsequently.

64 AITUC 1947-48, p. 31
Other unions put forward the charge that ACMS leadership is hand in glove with the managements of tea gardens. The ACMS in reply says that it has always acted in a responsible manner while defending labour rights and that it does not indulge in unnecessary strikes, which jeopardize labour-management relations. The aims of the ACMS as per its constitution as amended in 1989 are:

1) To organize and unite all the tea workers of 15 years of age or above working in the tea gardens either as daily wage labourer or monthly salaried employees;
2) To protect the collective interest of tea labourers such as wage hike, bonus, provident fund, abolition of child labour, medical facilities, etc.;
3) To publish newspapers, produce films, and organize symposia reflecting the pathetic plight of the workers and thereby arouse consciousness;
4) To maintain a mutual understanding and goodwill between the employers and employees;
5) To undertake measures for popularizing education among the tea community;
6) To raise political funds to meet election campaign expense on behalf of the ACMS sponsored candidates;
7) To pressurize the assembly or parliament for making legislation pertaining to the labourers' security and development and so on.

The practice of involving only the ACMS to represent tea workers in bipartite and tripartite negotiations concerning important issues affecting labour interests has come in for sharp criticism in recent times. Mr. P. Rai of the BMS said that while the wages of all other industries were fixed as per the Minimum Wages Act, the wages of tea labourers were fixed by the industry with the approval of only the ACMS, flouting the norms of the Act. Similar feelings were voiced by a senior CITU leader, who said that the tea industry has a vested interest in retaining the ACMS as the sole spokesman of the

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66 Interview with M. Khandait, ACMS, Dibrugarh, 20 Dec. '99.
67 Rudraman Thapa "Politics of Identity among the Tea Tribes of Assam", op. cit., p. 132.
68 The Sentinel, 13.9.2000, p. 1
workers, a practice untenable with modern labour norms, especially as ACMS cannot at present claim to be the single union enjoying substantial support among tea workers.  

The left parties have established strong bases in tea gardens in parts of Brahmaputra valley. While the CITU is strongest in the Sonitpur and Kokrajhar areas, the CPI-ML (Liberation) has support among tea workers in places like Bihali, Borgang, Buroi, Kalapani, Halem, Borbeel in the Biswanath area of Sonitpur and in Tinsukia. Non-ACMS trade unionists say that it is very difficult for them to organize tea workers due to the planters' patronage of ACMS. Lakshmikant Kurmi of ASCSS alleged that ACMS activists attacked him in front of Monabari tea estate during the 1998 parliamentary elections. Ramu Naik and Haren Gamang were workers in Baishahabi tea estate, who were forced to leave work on their becoming activists of Bagicha Shramik Santha. Subhas Sen of AICCTU said that they cannot enter certain gardens at all. The CITU leaders have also reported about such resistance being faced by their workers. According to Amal Ghosh Dastidar, President of the CITU’s Assam unit, the nexus between the planters and the ACMS has succeeded in establishing a stranglehold over the tea workers. The ACMS, he said, would initially try to ignore and resist all progressive demands raised by the Left unions for the tea workers’ welfare, and once the demands gained strength and became popular, would appropriate them, if possible in a diluted form, and forward them as its own demands.

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69 Interview with Amal Ghosh Dastidar, CITU, Guwahati, December ’98.
70 Interview with Amal Ghosh Dastidar, President, Assam Unit, CITU, Guwahati, December 1998.
Clashes between ACMS and non-ACMS activists are reported to have resulted in a few deaths in recent times. Even women workers have not been spared.\textsuperscript{71} In September 1996, Sagorika Soren, a leader of Namoni Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha was murdered in Mornoi TE in Kokrajhar district. In 1998, two more women activists of the same union were brutally killed.\textsuperscript{72} Sita Marandi, a State Committee member of the CITU, and two others were shot dead near the same estate on May 16, 1999. The CITU has alleged that these murders were carried out by killers hired by the management in connivance with the ACMS.\textsuperscript{73} Biswajit Chakraborti of the CPI-ML alleges that the CPI-M legislator Hemen Das failed to raise this grave issue of the murder of his own party workers in the State Assembly, as the CPI-M was more interested in maintaining its alliance with the ruling AGP than with raising uncomfortable questions on the worsening law and order situation.\textsuperscript{74}

The ACMS' hold over the tea workers in the state cannot simply be explained in terms of the patronage it received from the Government during the extended period of Congress rule in the state, or from the planters, though these were important. The ACMS continued to be strong even when the Congress was not in power either in the state or at the Centre. A prominent cultural personality of the tea tribes remarks:

\begin{quote}
ACMS is like a religion for most of the Assam tea workers. Just as we unquestioningly accept and follow the religion into which we are born, the tea workers have come to follow the ACMS tradition over generations. And the ACMS leaders invoke the names of Gandhiji and other revered leaders
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{73} 'CITU observes Martyrs' Day', \textit{The Sentinel}, 22.5.2000.
\textsuperscript{74} Interview with Biswajit Chakraborti, July 2001.
like Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi, Omeo Kumar Das, Bijoy Chandra Bhagowati, Meghraj Karmakar and others at the time of election while pleading for tea workers' votes and exhorting them not to be led astray by disruptive forces like the communists.75

Many of the tea workers do not seem to know whether these revered leaders like Gandhiji are alive or not, nor are they aware whether any of the issues concerning the tea workers find a place in the election manifestos of the Congress, or for that matter, of any other party. It was the ignorance of the tea workers that rendered them liable to be used by political parties as 'vote banks':

One can feel that the labourers engaged in the same type of job with almost identical socioeconomic background and an attitude towards life so peculiarly associated with the lowly placed in the country, provide a typical case of continued political ignorance and high degree of political apathy and a consequent surrender to the political parties and their vested interests as far as political choices are concerned.76

Relations between the Congress party and the ACMS have varied over time, but have increasingly been subject to electoral compulsions, which are blamed for the alleged decline in the ACMS' quality of leadership. Till the late seventies, Congress enjoyed mass support in the state and because it was entrenched in power, its affiliate, the ACMS could function autonomously and even assert its will upon the Congress government at times. Such an assertion was evident in the Mangaldai strike of 1954.77 As the Congress dominance in Assam became threatened in the mid-seventies, it started relying increasingly

75 Interview with Shri Ram Chandra Sasoni, December '99.
on the ACMS for electoral gains. The then AICC President, D.K. Barua’s notorious statement preceding the 1977 polls that as long as the ‘Alis’ and ‘Kulis’ (implying the Muslims and tea workers respectively) were with the Congress, the party need not worry about elections, symbolized the trend of vote bank politics.\(^78\) At present the ACMS, well aware of its crucial importance for the Congress, displays its clout in the selection of the party’s candidates in elections, as it did on the eve of the 1999 L.S. election:

The ACMS... would as before extend all support to the Congress candidates in the state. An ACMS spokesman pointed out that though the organization has been extending support to the Congress all these years and it has still not lost hopes in it, the party should put up more candidates for the elections as the community has a huge population of nearly 70 lakh. The ACMS also agreed that the Congress has failed to reciprocate the unrelenting support of the tea tribes and warned that if this continued, the trade union would be forced to consider an alternative political platform.\(^79\)

In recent times, with the rise in the tea workers’ aspirations and the erosion of Congress hegemony that had prevailed in the state till the late seventies, various political parties, realizing the potential value of the tea worker community’s support in the elections, have begun to focus attention on issues that could influence these voters who hold an important key to state power:

Constituting nearly 35 percent of Assam’s total electorate, the tea tribals of this tea heartland are always in the limelight during elections as different parties go out of their way to woo them. Living and working in enclaves far removed from the surrounding local population, the tea tribes are usually a marginalized community, but come any election, political parties descend on them with promises galore.\(^80\)

\(^80\) Ibid.
The AGP, which came to power in the state after the 1985 elections set about establishing its base among the tea workers who had traditionally been Congress supporters. An official text published by the first AGP government says:

The Chah Mazdoors constitute an important segment of the people of our state and their all-round development is of vital importance for the general advancement of the state as a whole. We have laid special stress on expansion of education, health and communication facilities for these unsophisticated but hardworking people. We are also equally concerned about opening up of new employment opportunities for the unemployed youths of the Chah Mazdoor community.81

Although in the 1985 elections, the newly formed AGP had managed to garner some support from the tea workers, its base among them was ephemeral and disappeared along with the AGP wave. But it did set up its tea workers’ unit known as Chah Shramik Parishad which lent full support to the demand for wage hike raised by the left unions and the tea tribes’ students union.82 In the 1991 elections, the AGP lost most of what it had gained earlier, but came back to power in 1996 in alliance with left parties, at a time when the state Congress unit was in disarray due to dissensions. In the Chabua area, about 15000 tea workers were reported to have switched over from the ACMS to the CSP in 1996.83 In the mid-nineties, Congress dominance among tea workers in Assam came under threat from political events linked to the emergence of non-Congress governments both in the Centre and the state. The 1996 Lok Sabha elections also marked the end of Congress rule at the Centre. The efforts of non-Congress parties to dislodge

81 Janasanjog 1989
83 *The Assam Tribune*, 17.4.96.
the Congress hold over tea workers have begun to show results in the form of emergence of units of smaller unions in gardens where ACMS was hitherto the sole union. 84

As long as Congress was in power, the demands for drastically higher wages and better amenities for workers put forward by Left unions were termed by the ACMS as impractical and unrealistic, but with the coming of the AGP-led alliance to power, these issues gained importance. The state government supported the demands of various non-ACMS bodies including trade unions and students' unions for raising daily wage to Rs. 49 per day and for declaring Sunday as a paid holiday. The ACMS was left with no alternative than to lend cautious approval to these demands. Privately, its leaders concede that such demands put undue financial pressure on managements and may prove to be anti-worker as managements can reduce workforce by enhancing mechanization. 85 The AGP-led alliance had thus succeeded in putting ACMS on the defensive, making it appear like an apologist of the tea companies. Besides the left unions, the AGP and the BJP have gained from the slight erosion of ACMS' base, in terms of increasing membership of their respective labour unions (CSP and BMS), which had virtually been non-existent among tea workers earlier. At present the demands for raising the minimum daily wage to Rs. 49 and declaring of Sunday as a paid holiday have been stressed upon, especially by the leftist unions and the tea tribes' student

84 'Over 300 workers join CSP', The Sentinel, 30.11.99, p. 3.
85 Interview with Shashi Tanti, ACMS, Golaghat, December '99.
unions, but the managements have steadfastly refused to give in to such demands over the past few years.

Since the mid-nineties, the BJP has also been observed to gather support in some tea gardens. With its experience of combining trade unionism and Hindu nationalism elsewhere in the country, and with its enhanced position in the national political scene in the 1990s, the BJP is a recent entrant into the field of organizing trade unions among plantation workers in Assam. Its presence among tea workers is marginal, but among its few followers there seems to be a commitment and motivation towards the party that is hardly evident among the AGP workers belonging to the 'tea tribes'. In the context of attempts by other parties, especially the BJP to garner the tea workers' votes, the Convenor of the Congress Party's newly formed 'Tea Cell', Mr. Ramani Tanti said,

> It is only the Congress Party which has played the main role in improving the tea workers' conditions. Other parties have very recently started showing some activity in this regard in the hope of getting tea workers' votes. 86

While explaining the purpose of the Tea Cell, he said that the Cell would create political, educational and health consciousness among the tea tribes, the lack of which has kept them backward and liable to exploitation by unscrupulous politicians and by the tea companies. Mr. Tanti said that the Congress Tea Cell would consist of tea tribe people, unlike the BJP's Tea Cell.

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86 *The Sentinel*, 9.10.2000, p. 3
which was headed by Shiv Sambhu Ojha, a non-tea-tribe person. He also said that the BJP was spreading communalism in the tea gardens.\footnote{Ibid.}

The BJP, on the other hand accused the Congress and the AGP of neglecting the tea workers' interests and of using the community as a vote bank, paying just lip service to the tea workers' long-standing socio-economic grievances.\footnote{The Sentinel, 25.12.1999, p. 3} Replying to the charges leveled by the Congress Tea Cell Convenor, the BJP Tea Cell Coordinator, Mr. Rama Krishna said that the Congress and its 'stooges' like ACMS had failed to uplift the tea workers from a sub-human existence, and had created their 'Tea Cell' to cover up their lapses.\footnote{The Sentinel, 14.10.2000, p. 7} The BJP workers are often found to raise the issue of conversion of Adivasi tea workers to Christianity, saying that the gullible tea workers have been converted through various inducements. In fact, the BJP succeeded in fielding 'tea tribe' candidates in a few constituencies, who could manage to get substantial numbers of votes in the Lok Sabha elections of 1998 and 1999.

So far as the experience and ability of political parties in organizing trade unions among tea workers is concerned, it is observed that the Congress and the left parties have traditionally been ahead of others in this regard. The success of the ACMS in maintaining its superiority over other unions can be attributed to the tremendous amount of groundwork done by its leaders during its early period, and to the vested interests of various quarters including that of the planters and the politicians, which became
entrenched within the ACMS in the later period. Commitment towards the union among the ACMS leaders is conditional upon their getting good party positions and governmental offices whenever the Congress happens to be in power in the state. Till now the position has been that due to the advantageous organizational strength of the ACMS in most plantations over an extended period, an adverse change of the party in power at the state or central level does little to erode the power and influence of the ACMS leaders over tea workers at the local level. The continued dominance of the ACMS proves to be an important factor in attracting young leaders among the tea workers to its fold:

The tea garden labourers have always been a source of support for the Congress (I) in Assam. The opposition has not been able to make a real dent in the tea garden-dominated (Lok Sabha) constituencies of Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur and Koliabor. These have remained Congress strongholds because of the strong presence of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC). 90

The leaders of the left parties are found to have a sound understanding of the economic issues concerning tea workers, but are handicapped by their lack of numbers of able cadres who can effectively penetrate the ACMS strongholds and mobilize the workers. This can partly be attributed to the weakness of the left parties in the state as a whole in terms of organizational strength. The same reason accounts for the demise of socialist trade unions affiliated to the PSP, the HMS and the other socialist parties that had good standing among tea workers in parts of the Brahmaputra valley, but had become irrelevant as these parties gradually lost

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their political existence in the state. The leftist trade unions seem to be active in organizing women workers and to develop leaders among them. Asha Sabor, Sonamoni Gaur, Sastami Soren, Bishaka Tanti, Sita Mura are some of the few women in the male-dominated labour movement. Bishakha Tanti of Hapjan TE is a central committee member of ASCSS. Asha Sabor is the branch secretary of the Monabari unit of ASCSS. Sonamoni Gaur of Betjan is a member of the State Women’s Commission and Sastami Soren of Hookanpukhri T.E. in Tinsukia.

The AGP’s relative ineptitude in organizing trade unions among plantation labour is apparently due to its lack of understanding of the need for unions in the first place, and of the unions’ functions. Ethnic mobilization with an emphasis on the construction of a harmonious and all-inclusive ‘Greater Assamese’ identity has been the forte of this party’s existence, and trade unions were not part of its initial agenda. The main reason for its setting up of a tea workers’ union, namely the CSP, seems to be that unions have proved to be an effective device for garnering votes in the case of other parties in Assam. In fact, the AGP has never been able to completely free itself from traditional Assamese notions regarding the tea worker community, yet it has managed to get votes from tea workers in elections due to a variety of factors, including its willingness to patronize and accommodate the new generation of leaders among tea workers, especially the ‘tea tribe’ student leaders, and disgruntled ACMS activists within its fold, and to field them as candidates in elections.
The winning strategy for the AGP-Left alliance in the 1996 elections among tea workers was provided by a combination of the AGP's resurgent popular image and the left parties' understanding of the socio-economic grievances and issues affecting the workers. One leader belonging to the tribal component of the tea worker community who managed to win in the 1996 Assembly elections as an AGP candidate was Joseph Toppo, in a 'tea tribe' dominated constituency where most of the tea and ex-tea workers happen to be of tribal origin. Among the non-tribal workers, especially the Oriyas in Upper Assam, the AGP managed to gather some following, as a good number of them are found to associate closely with the local population among whom the party is based. Prominent among the AGP's trade unionists was Israil Nanda, Secretary of the CSP, who however defected to the NCP and became its candidate in the 2001 elections for the Chabua Assembly constituency. Many tea workers who had gone over to the AGP during the heady AGP wave of the mid-eighties gradually returned to the ACMS by the 1991 elections, indicating that the foothold the AGP has periodically managed to gain among tea workers has been of a transient and shifting nature.

Among recent political formations among the tea workers is the newly formed Assam Labour Party, which has set up its units in various parts of the Brahmaputra valley. Blaming the larger parties, especially the Congress for the poor socio-economic conditions of the tea workers, it aims at pursuing the ethnic-political aspirations of the tea worker community. Although it is yet to make its presence felt in the electoral arena in terms of winning elections, its meetings held in the garden areas are found to be well attended. Its tea
labour union is named ‘Assam Tea Workers’ Union’. It had reportedly tied up with the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), the ruling party in Bihar, but its electoral performances have been decidedly poor. More such parties based among tea workers are likely to emerge in future with some impact on the state’s polity. At present, the Congress still has the upper hand in the tea areas despite the efforts of various parties to win over the tea workers’ votes.

We found in the course of our field survey, covering three estates, that party-wise the majority of tea workers are Congress supporters, by virtue of their membership of ACMS. However, a significant number of ACMS members were found to be ignorant of their union’s party affiliation, though in the elections they may have voted for the Congress symbol (‘the hand’) as directed by their union leaders. Many workers said that they voted for ‘the hand’ but were not sure as to which party the symbol belonged to. Among the non-Congress unions, the CITU is found to be strongest in Mornoi followed by Monabari, while the CSP has gained some ground in Duklungia. The BMS has a presence in Duklungia only, while the JASP and the ASCSS are present in all three estates. Both in Duklungia and Monabari, the non-ACMS unions appear to exist on the fringes in relation to the ACMS, while in Mornai, the CITU’s presence is significant with a firm following, but the Congress enjoys majority support due to the charismatic popularity of its leader, Mathias Tudu, who hails from this garden.

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91 Rudraman Thapa "Politics of Identity among the Tea Tribes of Assam", op. cit., p. 132.
Political trends among tea workers have been dependent upon the prevailing situation in the state, rather than their providing direction to the latter. Tea workers often display a marked preference for any party that manages to come to power in the state and to remain in power for some length of time, as it gives them a sense of power to be associated in some way with the ruling party. Yet the hold of tradition is strong both in the social and political spheres, and most tea workers loathe changing their age-old political or union affiliations, which in a way explains their attachment to the ACMS. Moreover, a good number of them do not seem to know that ACMS is a part of the INTUC that bears affiliation to the Congress and not to the AGP, and that the ACMS is in the opposition camp when the AGP happens to be ruling the state.

Regarding their knowledge about the candidates in an election, it appears that very few tea workers are personally acquainted with them, except when a candidate happens to be from their own garden or neighbouring village. A study on the 1978 Assembly elections found that “the vast majority of the tea garden Mazdoor voters did not even know the names of the candidates in their constituency” and that only 2.3% of the sample electorate of tea workers in Dibrugarh constituency voted for the ‘candidate’ rather than for the ‘party’.92 Our study found that knowledge about the candidates has improved since that period.

Issues on which tea workers have expectations from politicians are those of immediate concern to their lives, e.g., supply of water and electricity to labour lines, better housing, wages, etc. The issue of SC/ST reservation has recently become very important for them. All the political parties which conduct campaigning among them at election time harp on these issues, and there is not much difference in their positions on such issues. Each party promises to work for better facilities for tea workers and to secure SC/ST reservation for them. These issues may or may not appear in the actual manifestos of all the political parties, but written manifestos have little relevance for tea workers, as most do not read them. In the absence of ideological or issue-based differences among political parties as far as tea workers are concerned, they prefer to vote mostly according to the advice of their local union leaders. Issues affecting the state as a whole, e.g., militancy and corruption have very little relevance for tea workers. Their awareness of wider socio-political issues appears to be limited. A few men and women admitted that they had voted in earlier elections under the influence of liquor, which the local leaders freely distributed on election day. This trend, which was universal earlier in the tea gardens, appears to have decreased considerably in recent years, mainly due to anti-liquor campaigns by student bodies.

**Ethnicity and Politics:**

Due to historical reasons, the task of providing political leadership and representation to the tea workers was initially carried out by their trade union
leaders, many of whom happened to belong to communities other than that of the tea workers. Their main concern therefore was to strive for the betterment of the working and living conditions of the tea workers, rather than to promote the tea workers’ ethnic identity. However, gradually the leadership of the unions passed into the hands of the tea workers and their descendants, and under pressure from the younger members of the community who as members of the ATTSA played an active role in affairs concerning the community’s welfare, the ACMS leaders began to patronize certain demands based on the tea workers’ ethnic identity, such as that of inclusion of the tea workers in the list of Scheduled Tribes. As early as in 1970, the ACMS in its plenary session held at Golaghat unanimously resolved to request the Government to treat all the tea and ex-tea garden workers as Scheduled Tribes regardless of their caste and creed. The ACMS reiterated this demand in later times, and in its triennial conference at Dibrugarh in 1999 a similar resolution was passed with overwhelming support from all its members.

The salience of ethnic mobilisation among the tea workers was realised by Congress leaders soon after the initiation of electoral politics on a mass scale, and they explored the possibility of building up a caste-based alliance between certain local castes and the tea workers under the banner of a united alliance against upper caste dominance. An OBC movement, demanding rights and reservations for the Other Backward Castes, including

93 Rudraman Thapa "Politics of Identity among the Tea Tribes of Assam", op. cit., p. 135.
94 Ibid
the Ahoms, the Koch-Rajbonshis and the tea workers, had come into existence in 1959 under Congress patronage. During 1972-77, the OBCs led by D.K. Barooah and Hiteswar Saikia played the role of an important pressure group in the Brahmaputra valley, especially in Upper Assam. Commenting upon Barooah's role in this respect, a senior INTUC leader commented:

Sri Barooah contributed two things to the Congress – coterie rule and a tirade against the caste Hindus. He said that in Indian conditions socialism meant displacement of caste Hindu leadership by the backward castes. By these measures he spread caste consciousness which he was expected to counter.

However, the social distance between the tea workers and the indigenous OBC population, the socio-political changes wrought by the Assam Movement of the early eighties, and the growing demands of the representatives of various OBC groups in Assam for inclusion of their respective castes in the ST category effectively led to disappearance of unity among them and the decline of the OBC movement in the post-1985 period. Under pressure from these groups, the state government in the early nineties recommended the Centre to include the Koch-Rajbongshis, Ahoms, Chutias, Moran, Motoks, and tea tribes in the list of Scheduled Tribes. In 1996, an ordinance granting ST status to the Koch-Rajbongshi community was approved by the Union Cabinet, following which the state Chief Minister pressed for the inclusion of the other five groups in the list.

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96 Ibid.
98 The Assam Tribune, 13.1.96, p. 1; The Assam Tribune, 14.1.96, p. 1
The demand of tea workers for inclusion in the SC/ST lists, and the ethnic riots since 1996 between the Bodos and the Adivasis in Lower Assam have tended to sharpen ethnic divisions between tea workers and other sections of population, as well as within the tea worker community. When the Adivasis in the Bodo areas suffered the first attacks by Bodo militants after the 1996 elections, they were caught unawares and could neither protect themselves nor respond effectively in terms of retaliation. But soon enough, their own militant groups developed and engaged in violent activities, pushing the adivasi community of Lower Assam into the state’s growing list of communities with a militancy-related record. Meanwhile, the socio-cultural and political organisations representing the Adivasis including the tea worker unions and the tea tribe bodies voiced serious concern over the plight of Adivasis in the districts of Western Assam and demanded adequate governmental measures for the relief, rehabilitation and security of the violence-affected population. The government, on its part, does not appear to have done much either to control the communal violence or to provide relief to the victims, but it did send security forces to all villages where incidents of violence had occurred, and converted some government compounds and schools into relief camps.

In the autumn of 1998, clashes broke out once again between the Bodos and the Adivasis, taking a heavy toll of life and causing a large portion of the Adivasi population of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts to be housed in makeshift relief camps for an extended period. The Adivasi organisations, especially the ACA and the AASAA flayed the state government for failing to
protect the Adivasis and demanded that the government should arm them for self-defence.99 At an Adivasi rally in Guwahati, the Congress leader and ACMS President P.S. Ghatowar sharing the dais with the ACA President, Simon Soren and the AASAA Publicity Secretary, Wilfred Topno lent support to their demands and condemned the killing of Satindra Soren, the General Secretary of an important social organisation (Adivasi Sewa Samity) by Bodo extremists.100 Explaining the Bodo standpoint on the ethnic conflict, the ABSU alleged that the Adivasi militants, backed by the CPI (ML) had attacked the Bodos and had tried to acquire lands in Bodoland areas with the aim to control the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC), leading to the riots.101 Relations of the ABSU and other Bodo organisations with the CPI (ML), which had supported them during the Bodo movement (1987-1993), have soured over the Adivasi issue. The CPI (ML)’s frontal organisation URMCA put up its candidate Theodore Kisku Rapaz for the Kokrajhar Lok Sabha seat in the 1998 and 1999 elections, who managed to get 172,234 votes in 1998 and 246,949 votes in 1999, and was defeated both times by the ABSU-supported Bodo candidate.

Some of the left organizations crusading for the tea workers’ rights have highlighted the ethnic aspect to the class formation process in the tea gardens. The United Reservation Minorities’ Council of Assam (URMCA) and its constituent, the Jharkhand Adivasi Sangram Parishad (JASP), which are part of the CPI (ML) led by Bhaskar Nandi, have actively taken up the issue of

100 Ibid.
101 *The Assam Tribune*, 6.10.98, p. 6; *The Assam Tribune*, 7.10.98, p. 6.
liberation of backward castes and tribes through measures such as reservations for jobs and reduction of upper-caste dominance in society and government:

What we see now is an upsurge of movements wherein the ethnic dimension has come to the forefront in the determination of the class struggle. The Gorkhaland movement is a good example of how the tea workers of the Darjeeling hills, who were staunchly with the CPI and the CPI(M) till the early eighties, virtually overnight were ready to lay down their lives for the cause of Gorkhaland. Even the Jharkhandi tea workers of North Bengal are being stirred by the assertion of Jharkhandi nationality... We are using the term "Jharkhandi" for the tribes and castes originating from the Chhotanagpur plateau and the Santhal Paraganas because this is a conscious political assertion of identity. Even in Assam, an organisation called the Jharkhandi Sangram Parishad has come into existence.102

The cultural orientation of such consciousness of adivasi identity differs from that espoused by the Christian church in that it does not regard the religious missionaries as agents of progressive change, nor views the acceptance of Assamese language and culture as antithetical to the adivasis' Jharkhandi identity. Like that of the church, its ire is directed at the dominance of Brahminical forces, which have relegated tribals and backward castes to social degradation and abject poverty. It has raised the issue of ethnic suppression of tribal workers and the demand for en-scheduling of SC/ST people among the tea workers, along with economic issues affecting the workers. Devabrata Sarma, a teacher of Jorhat College and an URMCA activist, said that 85% of tea workers originate from Jharkhand region.103

Their marginalized conditions, their abominably low wages, their induced isolation from the mainstream are all possible because of the extra-economic

coercion practiced by planters since the colonial period: "There exists an element of ethnic suppression". 104

As far as choice of candidates in an election is concerned, tea workers would prefer to vote for a 'tea tribe' candidate irrespective of whether he is from a tea worker family or ex-tea garden background, but not irrespective of his party. Which means that they would prefer the party, to which their union is affiliated, to put up a candidate from the tea tribes, but if this does not happen and a non-tea tribe candidate is put up, the tea workers would not usually defy their union leaders by voting for some other candidate who happens to belong to 'tea tribe', or by abstaining from voting. In fact, union leaders not belonging to tea tribes have a long history of winning elections by banking on the tea worker votes. Even in recent times when ethnic feelings have sharpened, non-tea tribe candidates with trade union background have been able to garner large numbers of votes from tea workers on the basis of the workers' union affiliations, as in case of B.N. Bhuyan, the Congress MLA representing the tea worker-dominated Bokakhat Assembly constituency in the 1991-2001 period, who had been serving as the secretary of the local ACMS unit. Caste/tribe and religion do not appear to influence their voting choice, and definitely not in the case of non-tea tribe candidates. For example, Christian tea workers belonging to ACMS may vote for a Christian Bodo tribal candidate put up by the INC, not because he happens to be a Christian or a tribal, but because he belongs to the Congress, to which their union is affiliated.

104 Ibid.
The open expression of preference for tea tribe candidates is a relatively recent phenomenon, which is encouraged by ethnic organizations representing the 'tea tribes', like the ATTSA. At a subdued level, such tendencies have been there for long, and political parties have been aware of them, as illustrated by the selection of Haren Bhumij, an educationist belonging to the tea tribes and having no trade union background, as the Congress candidate for the Dibrugarh Lok Sabha seat in the 1977 elections ignoring the claim of a senior non-tea tribe trade union leader:

In 1977, when the Congress was unsure of its trade union front, it seemed convenient to appeal to ethnic aspirations of tea labourers. The Congress ticket for Dibrugarh L.S. constituency containing about 35% of the labour vote was denied to the sitting M.P., an INTUC veteran of Assamese caste Hindu community, and was given to an educated ex-tea garden tribal without any trade union background...¹⁰⁵

The ethnic aspect gained prominence in the selection of candidates in the 1978 state assembly elections, and the Congress policy was to offer more seats to members of "dominant minority groups like the Muslims, Other Backward Classes and Tea Garden Mazdoors", reflecting the state's population pattern.¹⁰⁶ The newly formed Janata Party too allotted its tickets to candidates on similar considerations:

The Tea Mazdoor youths and students in a meeting held at Jorhat and presided over by the general secretary of the Tea Garden Mazdoor Students' Union urged upon the (Janata) party to nominate Mazdoor candidates in the INTUC seats. They also submitted a list of seven candidates for nomination in Mariani, Sarupathar, Lahowal, Thowra, Chabua, Doom Dooma and Gossaigaon... the Hind Mazdoor Sabha also demanded nomination of tea mazdoor candidates in the INTUC seats, numbering fourteen.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ S.K. Chaube, op. cit., p. 30
¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 40
The President of the HMS advocated that as in the case of the Muslim community, proportionate representation should be given to the tea garden labour community also.\textsuperscript{108} Notably, in the 1978 elections, the Congress entrusted three senior leaders from the tea worker community with the responsibility of overseeing the party’s electioneering activities in their respective districts (H. Bhumij, MP and Dipak Murmoo, MLA in Dibrugarh and Gajen Tanti, state cabinet minister in Jorhat) with the aim of mobilising the tea worker votes that constituted the party’s major support base in these districts.\textsuperscript{109} A study conducted on the 1978 elections found:

The main criterion followed by the major political parties in the selection of their candidates as well as Independents smacked of casteism and communalism which cut across all ideological considerations... It is worth mentioning that some of these parties kept up-to-date record of “the population pattern” of each constituency – i.e. the community, caste, language and religion-wise break up of the electorate.\textsuperscript{110}

Certain constituencies such as Doom Dooma, which has about 60 percent voters from the tea worker community, have established a tradition of sending only ‘tea tribe’ candidates as elected representatives to the State Assembly. While many of the ‘tea tribe’ politicians belonged to the ex-tea garden community as their forefathers had left garden employment one or two generations back, their links with the tea workers remained close, mainly on ethnic grounds and also because many ex-tea garden workers continued to work in the gardens on temporary or seasonal basis. So the tea workers refer to ex-tea garden people as ‘our people’ and display a sense of pride and affinity for those ex-tea garden people who have gained prominence in

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid, p. 57
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid, p. 88
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid, p. 50
society. The ACMS in its Executive Committee meeting held on 27.8.2000 passed a resolution pleading the Congress leadership to put up candidates belonging to the 'tea tribes' for election to at least thirty-five seats in the Assam Legislative Assembly:

Tea and Ex-tea Tribes population dominated as many as 35 Assembly seats directly and 15 Assembly seats indirectly as deciding factor. Secondly, at the time of Lok Sabha election, the Tea and Ex-tea Tribes community are the determining factor for the Congress candidates in as many as seven Lok Sabha seats. They are Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Koliabor, Tezpur, Mongoldoi, Silchar and Karimganj. But according to the population of Tea and Ex-tea Tribes community, the representation is not sufficient in Legislative Assembly, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. With the growing political awareness in this community, a feeling has already developed among them that they are not adequately given representation at the time of finalisation of party nominations. We are under heavy pressure from our community to apprise you of their feeling and request you to examine this matter and take corrective steps to improve the situation and this makes our people feel that AICC under your leadership is sympathetic to our cause.111

Contradictions emerging from their self-identification as tea tribes and a growing sense of pride and affinity in relation to their caste/tribe identifications are evident at various levels. In fact, the rift at the level of leaders representing these diverse trends appears to be widening, as could be observed in the pronouncements of leaders representing the ‘tea tribes’ and the ‘adivasi’ tea workers challenging the legitimacy of each other’s community identifications. ‘Tea tribe’ leaders say that while ‘adivasi’ as a general term should include all the indigenous people of India including the non-Aryan lower castes and cannot therefore be confined to include only the tribes, the term ‘tea tribe’ refers specifically to the tea and ex-tea garden labour community in Assam who have a distinct social identity, and for whom the ‘tea tribe’ identity not only expresses a historical truth, but is also a source of

111 Memorandum presented to Sonia Gandhi, President, All India Congress Committee, by Tea Tribes’ MLAs led by P.S. Ghatowar, President, ACMS, 2000.
strength as it signifies the unity among all sections of this community. The ACMS leader M. Khandait said that certain disgruntled Congress leaders of Kokrajhar are behind the rise of adivasi organisations in Assam.\textsuperscript{112} He appears to have been referring to Mathias Tudu, the most prominent representative of the adivasis in western Assam. A top ATTSA leader makes a similar charge:

A section of our students have been misled by certain vested interests and have formed a separate 'adivasi' students' union, weakening our organisation and dealing a blow to unity among the 'tea tribes', which will cause irreparable harm to all of us in the long run.\textsuperscript{113}

Politically, it is the 'tea tribe' appellation that carries more salience because of its wider coverage, as it does not exclude any caste or tribe from its purview. Non-tribal members of the tea community are found to view the proponents of adivasi identity as divisive elements wanting to separate the \textit{jharkhandis} from the non-\textit{jharkhandis} and to secure the benefits of scheduled tribe reservation only for the tribal component of the tea community.\textsuperscript{114} A prominent non-tribal member of the tea community says,

The tea tribes drawn from heterogeneous backgrounds have come to acquire a common identity through their association with the plantations. In the traditional Indian society, as Senart points out, caste identity is acquired through one's occupation. In case of the tea and ex-tea garden people, such an identity is provided by their present or past linkage with garden work. Hence tea tribe identity is more appropriate for this section of Assam's population. Moreover, the word adivasi means aboriginal, but during the British period, it came to be applied specifically to the tribes and its meaning became restricted, leaving out the other aboriginal sections of Indian society such as the Hindu lower castes.\textsuperscript{115}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{112} Interview with M. Khandait, ACMS, Dibrugarh, 20 Dec. '99.  \\
\textsuperscript{113} Kamakiya Prasad Tasa, "Aami ki Bisaro", \textit{op. cit.}, p. 346.  \\
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid, p. 348-49.  \\
\textsuperscript{115} Interview with Sanjay Kumar Tanti, eminent poet, December '99.
\end{flushleft}
The 'adivasi' leaders, on the other hand, argue that the tribal people among tea workers are culturally distinct from the caste people, who have become Hinduised by adopting the Aryan culture. The 'adivasi' leaders also say that the term 'tea tribe' cannot serve as an ethnic category as it simply implies the descendants of those who migrated to the plantations as labourers, some of whom happen to be tea workers even today. For this reason, they do not consider the term tea tribe as a respectable one by which one should identify oneself in society, rather they say that it is a polite form of the despicable term coolie, and therefore deserves to be rejected. They say that rather than the term 'tea tribe', it is the term adivasi that bestows the strength of unity to the tribal tea workers in Assam as it helps their identification with the other adivasis, who are well spread out in India and have a distinct community-feeling irrespective of their occupations, i.e., whether they work as tea labourers or as miners, or do other types of work.\footnote{J.R. Kindo, "Adivasis in Assam", The Assam Tribune, 6th October 1998, p. 4.} They hold that unity among the adivasis of North-east India is essential for the welfare and security of these deprived people.\footnote{Ibid.}

**Conclusion:**

Political consciousness among tea workers in the Brahmaputra valley is integrally linked to the situation in the plantations as well as with the prevailing social and political circumstances in the state, which has been turbulent since the early eighties due to ethnic agitations and insurgency. As the isolation imposed by the plantation system is gradually breaking down...
and the workers are gaining in class-consciousness and taking part in the labour movement, a restructuring of relationships in the community is taking place, which subsumes their caste and tribal identities and highlights their tea labour identity:

As a matter of fact, it is clear that the Tea Community (which includes Tea Tribes, Ex-Tea Tribes and Adivasis) have increasingly emerged as a conscious political force in the state on the basis of a distinct ethnic identity and numerical strength for the cause of their all round development.118

The question of leadership among the tea workers is crucial due to the workers’ lack of awareness of complex problems they are faced with. A popular, capable and sincere leader can do much for the tea workers, who despite their social and educational backwardness possess the urge to stand united for their common cause. The main grievance of the tea workers is that their leaders upon whom they put their trust to improve their conditions have betrayed them, by using the trade unions and student unions as stepping stones for climbing to power and then forgetting those very demands that they had articulated earlier for their welfare. Thus the tea worker community is in search of new leaders who do not prove to be opportunists like the present ones:

The Adivasis are a tremendous force and the politicians as well as the political parties are aware of it and they have made full use of them. In fact the Adivasis are responsible and have given political stability to Assam. As such they have a tremendous bargaining power. But they should be made aware of it and some leaders should take the initiative of joining politics and lead the men to the right direction.119

118 Rudraman Thapa “Politics of Identity among the Tea Tribes of Assam”, op. cit., p. 141.
Political preferences of tea workers are largely determined by their union affiliations, which in turn depend on the traditional influence that particular unions have wielded in a garden or group of gardens, rather than on the individual choice of workers among different unions. So within any garden, a situation of single union dominance generally prevails, with other unions playing minor roles or being non-existent. It is observed that in many gardens, the word union is synonymous with ACMS, as the workers have never known any other union. Even in a situation of one-union dominance (and consequently one-party dominance in terms of political affiliation) among tea workers in a garden, the candidate of the dominant party in an election often has to give a feast or to distribute gifts or other incentives to the garden workers in order to secure their votes. Otherwise the workers may see no justification to waste their time on a holiday by going to the polling booth.

The average tea worker sees little possibility of his influencing or changing the existing social or political system and therefore sees himself as a passive actor having very little role to play in the political process. He does not see his act of voting in an election as having the potential to change the state of affairs in the country in any way. Issues like political corruption and violation of human rights during anti-insurgency operations that often capture the attention of the state’s middle class population do not concern the tea workers, partly due to their ignorance of matters outside the plantation, and also because of the seeming irrelevance of these issues for their daily lives. Neither do tea workers attach much importance to voting in elections as a means of bettering their own existential situation, mainly because elections
have come and gone but their conditions have remained unchanged. Importantly, for tea workers it is the garden management which actually takes the major decisions on issues affecting their livelihood and living conditions, and government's role is limited to that of passing laws on the various aspects of tea workers' welfare, which the tea managements are required to implement, and of supervising their implementation. In practice, this means that gardens carry out the laws according to their convenience, and manage to keep the governmental inspectors satisfied to the extent that they can escape punitive action from the government's side for any breach of law. This minimal role of government in their welfare contributes to the tea workers' perceived apathy towards the political process.