INTRODUCTION

Democracy creates the most favourable conditions for the formulation and expression of political identity. The electoral process encourages groups to identify themselves politically so that they may exert a greater influence both within constituencies and in the legislature. The emphasis on numbers in democracies bestows real political meaning to the concepts of majority and minority and this reinforces the existing cleavages in society.

The North-east Indian state of Assam provides a good example of politics being influenced largely by issues concerning ethnic identity. The unusually large rate of migration into the state during the British rule and thereafter, and the varied array of ethnic groups, each striving to preserve its identity and its interests through the political process, has resulted in a situation of ethnic conflict. The pattern of politics as it developed in the Brahmaputra Valley in the twentieth century came to be centred on issues of immigration and of linguistic identity. The postures adopted by various ethnic groups towards these issues, manifested in different types of political action including electoral behaviour, illustrate their perceptions regarding their social standing and their political interests in an ethnically divided milieu.

One of the early migrant groups of the colonial period to Assam's Brahmaputra valley was that of the tea plantation (or tea garden) workers, who constitute a sizeable chunk of the valley's population today. The inherent peculiarities of the plantation system as it developed in the Brahmaputra
valley since the mid-nineteenth century, ensured that plantation labour constituted a social category having limited interaction with the outside world, or for that matter even with the peasantry in the surrounding countryside. This division was sharpened by the fact that the migrant workers were deliberately insulated from the local population by the plantation management during the colonial period. The lack of communication facilities in the garden areas also meant that the workers lost almost all contact with their native places which were far away from the Brahmaputra valley, so that their descendants became permanent residents of the region.

In the post-colonial period, social interaction between the garden workers and the outside world increased steadily, owing largely to the breakdown of the old oppressive 'Planter Raj' and the advent of the democratic process, followed by a gradual improvement in the quality of life of the workers, which hitherto had provided only for a hand-to-mouth existence. Legislation passed both at the Central and State levels brought in some measure of social security to the workers, and in time a small section of educated people also appeared from amongst the newer generation of the workers' community, who could provide them political leadership in the democratic set-up:

After independence, gradually there emerged an educated elite among the tea community who became articulate and organized to remove their backwardness. In this connection the movements carried out by the various ethnic groups of the state obviously induced the tea community elite to assert their constitutional rights including political ones for the cause of safeguarding their homogeneous distinct identity. Furthermore, such inducement has eventually led a section of them to the extent of launching a movement demanding autonomy as well as separate state as a measure of protecting their interests. Thus the Tea Community (later called the Tea
Tribes) made a considerable degree of influence on the contemporary politics of the state.¹

Our study shall be confined to the Brahmaputra Valley in the state of Assam, which is also sometimes referred to as the Assam valley or Assam proper, and is the traditional homeland of the Assamese-speaking people along with many indigenous tribes such as the Bodos and the Mishings, who refer to themselves as the Plains’ Tribes of Assam. The study therefore excludes from its purview the predominantly Bengali-speaking Barak Valley in southern Assam and the two hill districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar in central Assam which are dominated by hill tribes and are governed by Autonomous District Councils. Though the Brahmaputra valley is by far the most important tea-growing region of the state, tea gardens also abound in the Barak Valley and parts of the hill districts.

The Brahmaputra valley, an alluvial plain with an area of 22,000 square miles and with an average breadth of about 50 miles from north to south, constitutes the largest geographical portion of the state, through which the river Brahmaputra runs lengthwise from the northeast to the southwest. The valley runs about 450 miles in length from east to west and covers the old districts of Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Darrang, Kamrup and Goalpara, of which the first five constitute the main tea growing areas, with Dibrugarh and Sibsagar accounting for the highest concentration of tea

gardens.\textsuperscript{2} Tea workers, the subjects of our study can therefore be found in great numbers in these tea-growing districts.

Geographically and culturally, the valley may be seen as being divided into two sub-regions—Upper Assam in the East and Lower Assam in the west.\textsuperscript{3} Historically, the two sub-regions had undergone dissimilar conditions. The western part of Lower Assam was never under the political control of the mongoloid Tai Ahoms who entered the valley as migrants from Upper Burma and ruled over most of Upper Assam for the greater part of six hundred years till the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The Koch-Rajbanshis belonging to the mongoloid Bodo-Kachari ethnic group held sway over Lower Assam and North Bengal since the beginning of the sixteenth century till the seventeenth century when the Mughals took control of North Bengal and the western part of Lower Assam. The Koch power reached its zenith in 1562 when its army sacked the Ahom capital at Garhgaon, but declined later due to pressure from the Ahoms on the east and the Mughals on the west. The Mughal army penetrated into the Ahom kingdom and briefly held control over it’s capital but was forced to retreat due to fierce resistance from local tribes and inclement natural conditions. The differences in ethnic composition of the two

\textsuperscript{2} All the old districts have been now subdivided into smaller districts. The present Brahmaputra valley districts (as in December 2002) from east to west are Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Nagaon, Morigaon, Guwahati, Kamrup, Goalpara and Dhubri on the south bank (except Kamrup which spreads over north and south banks), and Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Darrang, Nalbari, Barpeta, Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar districts on the north bank.

\textsuperscript{3} The present districts of Darrang, Kamrup, Nalbari, Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar, Goalpara and Dhubri are regarded as the Lower Assam districts and the rest of the valley is referred to as Upper Assam. However, the districts of Sonitpur, Morigaon and Nagaon are sometimes separately referred to as Central Assam and not regarded as part of Upper Assam.
sub-regions have become somewhat blurred through centuries of intermingling.

Ethnically, it is found that mongoloid tribes belonging to the Bodo-Kachari stock are scattered throughout the valley and are known by different names like Bodo, Kachari, Chutiya, Moran, Thengal-Kochari, Sonowal-Kachari, Mech, Rabha, Dimasa, Hojai, Hajong, Lalung, and Garo, among whom the Chutiya, Moran, Thengal-Kochari and Sonowal-Kachari are found mainly in Upper Assam, the Lalung in Morigaon district, the Bodos and Kacharlis predominantly in the northern part of Lower Assam with major concentrations in Kokrajhar and Darrang districts, and the Rabhas and Garos in the southwestern part of Lower Assam. The Ahoms who are of Tai/Shan origin predominate in most parts of Upper Assam while the Mishing tribe which is believed to be of a similar ethnic stock has significant concentrations of population in the Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts.

Among the Hindu castes including Kalitas, Kayasthas, Kaivartas, Brahmans and Daivajnas who are spread throughout the valley, the Kalitas in 1881 comprised the largest group with more than half of their population concentrated in the old Lower Assam district of Kamrup. The 1881 census figures for the Brahmaputra valley show that in comparison to the total population of 875,233 belonging to the Bodo stock (including Koch-Rajbanshi numbering 336,739), the Kalitas numbered only 241,589, the Ahoms numbered 179,283 and Muslims were 208,431 in number comprising 9.3% of

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4 *Census of India, Assam Report, 1881*, pp. 22-34 and 63-102.
the valley's population, but a quarter of them were concentrated in the
erstwhile Goalpara district.\(^5\)

It may be noted that the areas where large tea gardens developed
during the colonial period were sparsely populated, and the large-scale import
of immigrant labourers by the planters since the mid-nineteenth century led
to significant demographic changes. Migrant tea labourers numbered 67,500
in 1876, 243,400 in 1891, 461,800 in 1911 and 747,200 in 1931 excluding
those migrants who after expiry of their contract period took up independent
agriculture outside the tea gardens.\(^6\) But anti-immigration sentiments that
developed among the indigenous population of the valley since the early
decades of the twentieth century were not directed against migrant tea
workers who led a secluded life inside the self-contained world of the
plantations and were not perceived as posing any type of threat to the
economic interests or cultural identity of the indigenous population; they were
seen rather as part of the larger Assamese society:

Imported tea garden labourers whose number along with that of their
descendants is about 15 lakhs at present have completely identified
themselves with the indigenous population of the state and they constitute
an important part of the composite Assamese society and culture.\(^7\)

What disturbed the educated Assamese population was the fear of
being numerically outnumbered and culturally dominated by settlers from
Eastern Bengal who came in large numbers and of being economically

\(^5\) Ibid.
Thesis, Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1984,
p. 66.
\(^7\) Ibid.
subordinate to the Marwari traders. In the post-independence period, anti-outsider sentiments among the Assamese led them to relations of conflict with Bengali, Bihari and Marwari settlers at various points of time, and culminated in the rise of the Assam Movement in late 1979. This anti-foreigner movement demanded stoppage of illegal immigration of foreign nationals from neighbouring countries, especially Bangladesh and Nepal, prevention of their participation in the electoral process in Assam, and deportation of all foreign nationals living illegally in Assam to enable the indigenous population to protect their distinctive identity. The movement led by the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) witnessed unprecedented popular mobilization and periods of large-scale violence, and officially came to an end on 15th August 1985 with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the movement leaders and the Government of India, which came to be popularly known as the Assam Accord.

In the post-accord period, a spate of ethnic movements by various tribal groups in Assam, notably by the Bodos sprang up causing violent unrest in many areas, while insurgent groups held sway over political and social life in the state for considerable periods. The socio-political attitudes that have developed among tea workers in the backdrop of such ethnic turbulence and political violence shall be the focus of this study.
We may briefly review some of the earlier works dealing with various aspects of the lives of tea labourers in Assam, which can provide a good background to our study.

**Review of Literature:**

Detailed information on the history of tea plantations in India and especially in Assam is available in books by Griffiths\(^8\), Antrobus\(^9\), Bose\(^10\), Buchanan\(^11\), Siddique\(^12\), Guha\(^13\), Bhowmik\(^14\), Barua\(^15\) and Borpujari\(^16\). On the working of the plantation system in various parts of India and the tropical world, and its effect on the lives of migrant labourers, useful information can be found in the works of Courtenay\(^17\), Das Gupta\(^18\), Das Gupta\(^19\), Das\(^20\), Jain\(^21\), Tinker\(^22\), Choudhury\(^23\), Xaxa\(^24\), Jain\(^25\), Bhowmik, Xaxa & Kalam\(^26\), Beckford\(^27\).

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and in the papers included in the 1992 special issue on plantations of *Journal of Peasant Studies*. These works bring out the similarities in the workers' situations in plantation systems located far apart from each other, which are legacies of European colonialism that dominated the world in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries.

A guidebook for planters issued by a labour recruiting agency in the early nineteen-twenties presents a detailed account of the castes and tribes employed on tea plantations in North-eastern India, describing their customs, traditions and various group characteristics including their suitability as plantation labour. Written in the heyday of British rule in India, it provides a key to the understanding of the colonial planters' mindset. Piya Chatterjee's article discusses the considerations of gender and race in labour recruitment for British Indian tea plantations, dominated by colonial stereotypes attributing 'labouring' qualities to 'primitive' subject peoples. Articles by Ranajit Das Gupta on the structure of the labour market in colonial India and on the working of colonial capitalism leading to transformation of

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peasants and tribals to plantation workers, by Virginius Xaxa\textsuperscript{32} on tribal migration to plantation estates in North Eastern India, and by Kaushik Ghosh\textsuperscript{33} in \textit{Subaltern Studies} on primitivism and race classification in the indentured labour market of colonial India illustrate the historical processes involved in the formation of the plantation labour population in Assam.

Dr. Rashbehari Ghose's speech on the indenture system provides us details of the working of the labour recruitment system and its perilous implications upon the lives of helpless migrant workers\textsuperscript{34}. It illustrates the educated Indians' indignation at the humiliation of Indian labourers in the hands of the European planters in the colonial period. Similar sentiments are echoed in various accounts of the tea workers' conditions quoted in Prasenjit Choudhury's brilliant analysis of relations between the nineteenth-century educated Indians and the Assam tea labourers\textsuperscript{35}, and in the speeches and letters of Mahatma Gandhi\textsuperscript{36}. Behal and Mahapatra examine the working of the indenture system, through which thousands of tea workers were recruited in the period between 1840 and 1908, exposing its inhumanity and scant regard for human life\textsuperscript{37}. The article shows that the migrant workers served as bonded labourers with no freedom at all, and that the concept of a free

\textsuperscript{32} Virginius Xaxa, "Tribal Migration to Plantation Estates in North Eastern India", \textit{Demography India}, 14:1, 1985.


\textsuperscript{34} Dr. Rashbehari Ghose, \textit{Speeches Delivered on Various Occasions}, Calcutta, 1915.

\textsuperscript{35} Prasenjit Choudhury, \textit{Asamar Chahbonua Aru Unoish Satikar Bidwat Samaj}, (in Assamese), Guwahati, 1989.

\textsuperscript{36} Chandra Prasad Saikia, (ed.) \textit{Asamat Mahatma}, (in Assamese), Guwahati, 1969.

labour market where labourers could bargain over the price of their labour was non-existent in the case of tea workers in Assam. Keya Dasgupta's article analyses the wastelands colonization policy of the colonial government, the planters' response and the settlement of surplus or time-expired labourers on land in the vicinity of gardens leading to the growth of an ex-tea garden labour population.38

On the conditions of labour and the state of labour movement in India, Ghosh39, Mukherji40, Dange41, Choudhury42, Ramanujam43, S. Sen44, and S.K. Sen45 provide a good deal of information. Regarding the growth of trade unionism and class-consciousness specifically among tea workers in Eastern India, valuable information can be gathered from the writings of Guha46, Bhowmik47, Harlalka48, Sarmah49, Behal50 and Das51. Important documents relating to importation of labour and their conditions in the plantations are to be found in Puriekar & Varickayil52. Behal examines the forms of labour protest in the Assam Valley tea plantations between 1900 and 1947 and

42 Sukhbir Choudhury, Peasants and Workers Movement in India 1905-1929, Delhi, 1972.
46 Amalendu Guha, op. cit.
47 Sharit Bhowmik, op. cit.
51 Omeo Kumar Das, Jiwan Smriti, (in Assamese), Guwahati, 1983.
analyses the reasons for the retarded growth of labour unions in the context of repressive strategies adopted by the planters. The papers included in the NEICSSR-published book on the problems of tea industry in North East India, especially Guha's paper on class formation among tea workers, provide some understanding of the labour situation in the Assam tea gardens. Golok Chandra Sarmah, as a pioneer of the INTUC in Assam, throws light on the growth of trade unions, particularly the ACMS among the Assam tea workers. Bhowmik and Xaxa's Manual on Rights of Tea Plantation Workers serves as a useful guide to the legal provisions on the rights of tea workers, regarding which there is a lot of ignorance not only among tea workers but also among trade union leaders. R.K. Bhadra's seminar paper examines the impact of tea plantations on the agrarian structure of Assam, while the one by Virginius Xaxa describes the mode of exploitation in the plantation social system.

A large body of literature has been published in vernacular languages including Assamese dealing with the socio-economic and cultural aspects of tea workers' lives. Nakul Chandra Bhuyan's work on the history and culture of tea workers in Assam published in 1960 is the earliest of the Asam Sahitya.

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53 Behal, op. cit.
54 NEICSSR, Problems of Tea Industry in North East India, Shillong, 1981.
56 Golok Chandra Sarmah, op. cit.
58 R.K. Bhadra, Impact of Tea Plantation on the Agrarian Structure Of Assam, paper presented at the Seminar on Sociological Perspectives of Plantation Labourers in North East India, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, North Bengal University, 1984.
59 Virginius Xaxa, Plantation Social System and Mode of Exploitation, Seminar Paper, Department of Sociology, North Bengal University, September 1990.
Sabha’s Assamese language publications on this topic. Subsequent publications of the Sabha on related topics have been written by Khound, Gohain, Ghatwar, Kurmi, Tasa and Gogoi. Among these, Kurmi’s 1983 book written in the context of the Assam Agitation of the early 1980s reflects the socio-political views of a significant section of the younger generation of the ‘tea community’, while the rest are mostly accounts of tea workers’ culture and way of life, aimed at bringing about a better awareness among Assamese readers about this community which had long remained deprived and segregated from the mainstream Assamese people. Other works written in the same vein include Karmakar, Ghatwar, Amarjyoti Tanti, Samir Tanti, Barua and articles in journals, magazines and souvenirs relating to the tea tribes such as Chah Mazdoor, Jingani, Juhar and Jawa. Ganesh Chandra Kurmi’s book on the ‘Kurmi Kshatriya’ caste is of sociological interest as it forwards the claim of tea workers in Assam belonging to the Kurmi caste.

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for Kshatriya status\textsuperscript{72}, in contrast to the present-day situation where such attempts at Sanskritization have been overtaken by the demand for Scheduled Tribe status for all tea workers.

A few studies have addressed the question of identity in detail, examining the internal dynamics of the tea worker community and its relationship with other communities. Myron Weiner briefly examines the political postures of tea workers in the context of language politics in Assam till the mid-seventies\textsuperscript{73}. While Kar and Sharma\textsuperscript{74} study the processes of social stratification and ethnicity among the tea and ex-tea garden workers, Mazumdar deals with the inter-relationship between the tea workers and the Assamese community\textsuperscript{75}. Kar provides an insightful study of the socio-cultural dynamics and process of adjustment of a migrant tribe of tea workers placed in the plantation setting\textsuperscript{76}. Das Gupta & Khan’s book examines the impact of tea plantation industry on the lives of migrant tribal labourers\textsuperscript{77}. Sobhita Jain’s article on the process of acculturation on an Assam tea garden brings out interesting facets on the transition from particularistic caste/tribe identities to

\textsuperscript{72} Ganesh Chandra Kurmi, \textit{Kurmi khatriya jatir somu parichay}, (in Assamese), Guwahati, 1969.
\textsuperscript{73} Myron Weiner, \textit{Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India}, Delhi, 1978.
\textsuperscript{75} D.N. Mazumdar, \textit{Tea Garden Communities and the Assamese Society}, paper presented at the Seminar on Sociological Perspectives of Plantation Labourers in North East India, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, North Bengal University, 1984.
a generalized ethnic identity of the tea workers. The papers included in collections edited by Karotemprel and Dutta Ray and Pullopillil provide a good deal of information on various aspects of life of tea and ex-tea garden workers in Assam. On the history of Christianity and Christian missions among tea workers, Downs, Becker, Kar, Karotemprel and Muthumana provide adequate information. U. Phukan's work on the ex-tea garden labour population in Assam remains an authoritative account of the economic and social conditions of this marginalized community.

A few works provide useful data on the socio-political situation in the Brahmaputra valley that sets the contextual background of political dynamics among the tea worker population, including those by Dev & Lahiri, Chaube, Bhadra, Barthakur, and some of the papers in Bhadra &

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81 F.S. Downs, Christianity in North East India, Delhi, 1983.
82 C. Becker, History of the Catholic Missions in North East India 1890-1915, Shillong, 1980.
87 Bimal J. Dev & Dilip K. Lahiri, Cosmogony of Caste and Social Mobility in Assam, Delhi, 1984.
Mondal\textsuperscript{91}, Misra\textsuperscript{92}, Hazarika \& Baishya\textsuperscript{93} and Deka \& Phukan\textsuperscript{94}. S.K. Chaube's book brings out facets of political behaviour of different sections of people in Assam including the tea workers as manifested during the 1977 general elections\textsuperscript{95}.

However, no detailed work appears to have been done focusing on the politics of identity among tea workers in the Brahmaputra valley with reference to the wider socio-political context of the valley. Our work shall focus on the level and extent of social interaction between the tea workers and the surrounding social milieu and its political manifestations, especially in the period since 1985.

**Objectives of the Study:**

The study seeks to understand the perceptions of tea garden workers towards the politics of identity prevailing in the Brahmaputra valley and their responses to it, especially as manifested in their electoral behaviour. One of the questions that we shall strive to address is regarding the emergence of a common ethnic identity among the members of the heterogeneous tea workers:

Has the ethnic process... reached a stage where the tea tribes and tea castes have attained such a state of absorption that we can speak of a single ethnic community?\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{91} R.K. Bhadra \& S.R. Mondal, *op. cit.*
\textsuperscript{92} Udayan Misra (ed.), *Nation-Building and Development in North Eastern India*, Guwahati, 1991.
\textsuperscript{94} K.M. Deka \& K.N. Phukan, *op. cit.*
\textsuperscript{95} S.K. Chaube, *op. cit.*
\textsuperscript{96} Thomas Pullopillil, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
As the politics of identity intensified in the eighties and the undercurrents of ethnic tension found overt expression in various forms of political action, our period of study shall be from the 1985 elections onwards, which for the first time brought a regional party to power in Assam. We shall attempt to correlate the political responses of the tea garden workers with their material conditions of life as well as with the surrounding socio-political scene and the factors impinging on them in various parts of the Brahmaputra valley.

**Hypotheses:**

We shall on the basis of our preliminary observations, start with a few assumptions which can be put to test in the course of our research:

(a) Despite their diverse ethnic origins and identifications, tea garden workers tend to maintain a distinct group identity *vis-à-vis* other ethnic groups, which finds expression in the political sphere.

(b) Politically the tea workers tend to identify with ex-tea garden workers in the surrounding areas on the basis of ethnic affiliation.

(c) Since the mid-eighties, the political activity of tea workers has changed from a largely protective one, restricted to safeguarding of their economic interests, to one of ethnic assertion, with the ‘tea tribe’ identity and the demand for SC/ST status gaining importance.

(d) Student organizations based on ethnic identity have steadily emerged as competitors to the trade unions in shaping political opinion among tea workers.
Research Methodology:

The study employed a combination of methods and techniques to gather the required information. This included analysis of documents and existing literature, structured questionnaires, observation and interview techniques for relevant persons. Statistics published by the Census of India and other agencies proved to be useful. First-hand information was gathered through interviews from members of the tea garden community, political leaders, party workers, and knowledgeable persons including local academicians and journalists.

Fieldwork occupies an important place in the study. Fieldwork was conducted in 3 tea estates scattered in the Brahmaputra valley, viz., Mornai in Kokrajhar district, Monabari in Sonitpur district, and Duklungia in Jorhat district. Being widely separated from each other and located in distinct sub-regions of the valley, i.e. Western Assam, Northern Assam and Upper Assam respectively, the data gathered from these gardens may be held to be broadly representative of the prevailing political attitudes among different sections of tea workers in the valley. The survey was carried out in three phases between the period October 1998 to October 2001. While the first two phases were of the nature of pilot study covering a number of gardens and neighbouring areas, the third phase in September-October 2001 was focused on conducting administration of questionnaires. A brief introduction to these gardens is given below.
(1) **Mornai Tea Estate**: Situated in Gossaigaon on the western boundary of Assam, adjacent to the Dooars tea belt of West Bengal, Mornoi T.E. is owned and managed by the Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church (Santal Mission) with its headquarters at Dumka in Jharkhand state. Its area under plantation is about 385 hectares. Its workers are invariably found to be Adivasi Christians from the Jharkhand region belonging to the Santhal tribe. The neighbouring villages are populated both by ex-tea workers and by Santhals who settled in the area as agriculturists after the Santhal revolt in the 19th century, and with whom the workers have close social links. The Bodo-Santhal clashes in recent years have directly affected the neighbouring population and have had some impact on the garden workers there. It is believed that the Adivasi consciousness among tea workers is strongest in this part of the Brahmaputra valley.

(2) **Duklingia Tea Estate**: Situated on the Jorhat-Mariani road at a distance of 5 km. from the railway town of Mariani, this estate has about 690 hectares under plantation and is owned by Rydak Syndicate Ltd. This garden was one of the centres of Left union (APTUC) activity in Upper Assam in the mid-1940s. Its labour force includes sizeable numbers of Oriya and Jharkhandi workers, belonging to Hindu and Christian faiths.
Monabari Tea Estate: This is one of the largest tea gardens in Asia, and is owned by Williamson Magor Ltd. Located in Sonitpur district near Biswanath Chariali town, this garden figured prominently in the labour unrest of the early 1920s. Its workers are predominantly descendants of Jharkhand migrants, though good numbers of other communities like Oriya and Chhatisgarhi are found.

Various methods were employed to gather relevant information during the fieldwork including participant and non-participant observation, individual and group interviews, and administration of questionnaires to the workers. Informal discussions in labour lines, teashops and weekly markets yielded a significant amount of information. Since recording of observations on paper seemed to put people on guard and made them less forthcoming in their views, paperwork was avoided in the field and the writing was done immediately afterwards. As the questions demanded some degree of maturity, only adults (above 18 years) were included in the sample and gender parity was maintained to the extent possible in each garden. Interviews in the labour lines were conducted with the help of interpreters, usually the line chowkidars, whose approval was necessary to visit the line households. Purposive sampling was designed so as to elicit opinions from residents of each line in the garden and from not more than one member from the same household. Due to the busy work schedule of the labourers, interviews had to be conducted at various places wherever they were.

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97 Area under plantation is 1040 hectares, including four divisions, viz., Old Lines, New Lines, Behupukhrie and Lahorijan.
available. In some cases, the workers displayed reluctance to cooperate, initially bordering on hostility due to an inherent suspicion of outsiders, but they gradually became cooperative and provided valuable clues to the study.

Roughly 30% of the adult work force in each garden was covered. The total number of workers sampled was 678, of which 337 were males and 341 were females. 132 workers (66 males and 66 females) were interviewed in Mornai Tea Estate, 231 workers (115 males and 116 females) in Duklingia Tea Estate, and 315 workers (157 males and 158 females) were interviewed in Monabarie Tea Estate. Due to the low level of literacy in the sample, the questionnaire was orally administered in all cases. Members of the sub-staff, e.g., chowkidar and sairdar were also included as their socio-economic position is not very different from that of the workers.

Chapterisation:

The scheme of chapterisation is as follows. Besides this Introduction that acquaints the reader with the topic and reviews the earlier works done on socio-economic conditions and political attitudes of plantation labour, and a Conclusion that presents the main findings of the study, the thesis consists of four chapters, of which the first outlines the theoretical perspectives on the politics of identity and their relevance to the study of tea workers in the Brahmaputra valley. The second chapter outlines the historical background of tea plantation workers and their social life in the Brahmaputra valley in the context of the colonial labour policies and a brief account of their struggles against exploitation culminating in their achievement of trade union rights.
The third chapter deals with the tea workers' changing social position and their search for social justice and a dignified existence in the society at large. The emergent situation of ethnic-political assertion since the late seventies in the Brahmaputra valley and its profound social impact upon the tea workers, and their collective response to the politics of ethnic identity during the period between 1985 and 2001 have been surveyed in the fourth chapter.

**Terminology:**

The terms plantation, estate and garden are used synonymously in the context of tea in Assam, and 'tea estate' is the official term to denote the same. Various terms are used to refer to tea workers in Assam\(^\text{98}\); they shall be referred to here as tea workers, unless the context demands otherwise. The terms 'tea community' and 'tea tribes' used in this work need some explanation. The labour recruitment policy of the early planters led to the growth of a huge population of ex-plantation workers in Assam, who remained segregated from the local people for long and came to be identified as ex-tea garden workers. The ex-tea garden people (migrant tea workers who have left garden work, and their descendants) today constitute a substantial population, and their social relationship with the tea workers is close. Both the tea and ex-tea garden workers are found to refer to themselves as 'tea tribe' or 'tea community', signifying their social cohesiveness. Adivasi in the context of Assam refers mainly to tribals from Jharkhand, including those working as tea garden labourers; Jharkhand and

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\(^{98}\) Some of the terms applied collectively to tea workers in common parlance are: *coole* (now considered derogatory), *lebar* (derived from 'labour'), *baganiya, bagan-mazdoor, chah-mazdoor, chah-bonua, chah-shramik*, etc.
Chotanagpur both refer to the east-central Indian plateau, including parts of West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, besides the present state of Jharkhand.