PREFACE

The politics as it developed in the Northeastern region of India in the twentieth century is largely influenced by the issue of ethnic identity of different groups of the state. During the last few decades, several ethnic groups in India have become conscious of their identity and the repercussion of which has been spread to North Eastern Region of India in general and Assam in particular. So far as the tea garden labourers are concerned, they are not exception to this process.

At the very beginning of tea cultivation in Assam, they were brought by the British planters for the sake of the development of tea industry, from various cultural, linguistic, and ethnic heritages of India. The British planters settled them within the tea plantations in such a manner that they were bound to live together with the people of different ethnic roots permanently in a common habitat. The plantation system compelled the tea garden labourers of varied origin to constitute a peculiar social category having limited connection with outside world. They were categorized as ‘cooler’ class by the colonial planters and their language as ‘cooler bat’. Due to lack of communication facilities they had to loss their contact with their native places which were far away from the plantations of Assam. Since then, several generations have been passed and gradually they have been trying to develop a common culture, tradition, and language, and become a part of the land. In this new habitat, they had to change their occupation to tea garden labourers from hunter-gatherers, simple artisans, agriculturist (settled and shifting cultivation) as they were in their natal places. Their individual as well as racial identity were hidden under the bushes of the tea plants and emerged as a new group popularly known by the people as ‘Chah Mazdur Samprodai’ or ‘Tea Tribes’, or ‘Chah Banua’, or ‘Bagania’ or ‘Adavasi’ etc. But unfortunately even after the lapse of more than one and half century, their descendents are looked down upon by the local inhabitants living outside the periphery of the tea gardens. At the same time their life inside the tea gardens of Assam is miserable and they are not even granted some of the constitutional privileges by the government as granted to some other ethnic groups or communities of Assam and even to their counterparts in their original home land. As such, they have become a socially excluded section of Assam. Now a days, the educated and elite section of the community have been trying to mobilize their
people on ethnic line. They formed several organizations, through which they have been demanding their socio-economic, and political share from the Governments. Movements and uprisings are at work to assert their ethnic identity, as it brings a kind of permanent grip in the society. So, keeping this in view, the researcher has taken up the task of conducting an in-depth study among the tea garden labourers of Assam in order to find out how and to what extent they are continuing their effort to achieve that goal.

This task would not have been completed without generous help and cooperation of the respondents, well-wishers, and others. So, at this juncture, I would like to express my gratitude to all who have directly or indirectly help me to achieve the goal. At the very outset, I extend my reverential gratitude to my guide Prof. Niru Hazarika, former Dean Faculty of Arts, Professor, Department of Political Science, Gauhati University, who contributed immensely towards the entire work through her valuable guidance and scholarly suggestions.

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