CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

1.1 AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

The aspiration of different ethnic groups of Assam for maintaining their ethnic identities has been a living factor, which plays a significant role in the politics of the state. The concept of ‘identity’ implies the personality and personal identification of an individual. Identity refers to the collective aspect of a set of characteristics by which a thing can be understood, or recognized or known. Identity also refers to the condition of being the same as something else.

The term ‘identity’ is not used only by academicians for academic purpose. Now, it is more commonly used by various political groups and other organizations to mean the fact or state of remaining the same or the sense of self. Although identity may be studied at the individual level, a social scientist’s concern with social process and social analysis, which lead him to seek explanation more on collective identity.¹

D M Taylar and L.M Simard (1979) in ‘Emerging Ethnic Boundaries,’ define Ethnic Identity as “that component of a person’s self-determination which is derived from an affiliation with a specific group”. According to Prof. B. Pakem this self-definition is generally derived from what was ‘given’ at birth like race, language, culture, tribe and history of group’s relationship with groups in a society.² Identity perception also helps to distinguish one group from another and thus stratifies the society.

On the other hand, ethnic identity is a sort of community level consciousness, which is necessary for the development of group solidarity. Ethnic identity as a political force has been gaining ground in North East India since the colonial period. The anxiety of the smaller ethnic groups of North East India has been associated with

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the identity crisis which they have been facing due to various factors, such as, exclusion from mainstream social, economic, political and cultural processes of the country, and their illiteracy and ignorance.

The North East India in general and Assam in particular is marked as the abode of different ethnic groups. The ethnic groups inhabiting the region possess their own culture, custom, tradition, language, dialect, and historical background on the basis of which they maintain separate identity and they do not want to merge their distinct identities with national mainstream.

During the last few decades several ethnic groups in Assam have become conscious of their identity and become politically active with the growing process of democratization. Different ethnic groups inhabiting Assam have been pressing the government either for the creation of separate states, or for special constitutional safeguards for the protection of their respective identities. On the other hand, to fulfill their demands or as a measure of maintaining distinct identities, some of them have been adopting violent ways. Tea garden labourers are also not exception to this process. A recent emerging issue on their Scheduled Tribe (P) status is believed to have significant impact in the politics of Assam. They have become an important factor in the new political alliances and pluralistic society of Assam.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Assam can be broadly divided into three physical units, the Brahmaputra valley in the north, the Barak valley in the south and the hilly region which separates these two valleys. Due to unique geographical location, Assam becomes a home land of various races and tribes. The physical divisions of Assam have led to the emergence of two distinct ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups, namely the dwellers
of the hills and the plains. In the pre-colonial period most of the communities of North-East India were not conscious about their ethnic identities and their world was confined to their family, clans and villages. In spite of having differences regarding their languages, cultures, customs and traditions, they considered themselves as a part of the greater Assamese society and began a process of formation of multicultural society. A process of assimilation between hill people and plains people had started in Assam since prehistoric period and continued till the arrival of the British. In this regard Prof Hazarika (2005) mentions,

“Prior to the British rule and even after that, the hill people came in close contract with the plains people of Assam mainly for commercial purposes. Since they could not produce all the necessary requirements, they used to come down to the neighbouring markets in the plains of Assam, with their forest goods and products of crafts for exchange with their essential requirements. These commercial relations emerged as the source of mutual understanding between the hills and plains people resulting even in the process of assimilation also.”

However, the process of assimilation was not completed; rather the British separated the hill people from the plains by introducing Inner Line Regulation. Thus during the colonial administration the formation process of multicultural society in Assam was disrupted. In this regard, Prof. Phukan (2003) mentions that this process received a set back during the rule of the British and the ethnic groups became conscious and tried to maintain their distinct identity. Due to illiteracy and ignorance, these ethnic groups failed to take advantage of economic avenues created by the British administration. The Assamese Hindu elite, who had held important positions in the bureaucracy even during the Ahom rule, obviously could occupy
important positions in the government and commercial undertakings under the British rule. On the other hand, most of the ethnic groups, such as the Bodos, Kacharis, Mikirs, Mising, Deuries, Koch-Rajbonshis, Morans, Motoks, and Rabhas could not occupy any respectful position from the colonial rulers and became backward sections of the society. With the passage of time an elite section of these ethnic groups emerged, who could understand their position in the society and felt that they were deprived of their due share in social and political aspect of their life. Considering their contribution to the history of Assam and their numerical strength, they felt that they deserved much more than what they could achieve. Different organizations of the ethnic groups have been formed to mobilize their people on ethnic lines and they have agitated for demanding adequate share in social, political and economic sphere, such as, reservation of job in government and semi government and educational institutions, adequate representation in the legislature, recognition of minority rights, removal of social inequality, and development of their ethnic languages and cultures etc. Although the tribes were virtually included into the Hindu social structure, they were accorded only low castes status in the Hindu social hierarchy. As such they became untouchable group of people in the Hindu dominated Assamese society. Common constraints and suffering made them united and encouraged them to form a common platform, such as, All Assam Plains Tribal League and All Assam Tribes and Races Federation in order to pressurize the government and the national political parties to fulfill their demands. Neither the government nor the Congress tried to make a fusion between the interests of the caste Hindus with those of ethnic groups and to bring them within the national mainstream. As a result of which, the ethnic groups of the region thought that being the original inhabitants of the province, they were
deprived of their due share and unable to fulfill their aspirations. Under this background the ethnic consciousness of these groups of Assam may be understood.

However, after independence, the intensity of the ethnic consciousness in Assam increased due to the changes that occurred in the political, social and economic set up of the state. Introduction of democratic political process gave impetus to the ethnic groups to come forward and demand their social and political share from the legal authority of the state. In the late sixties, when the Central government proposed the reorganization of the Northeastern states, the ethnic groups inhabiting the region mobilized their respective communities in order to demand for separate states on the basis of their distinct lingo-cultural identities. In this race of search for identity some other backward classes, such as, Tai-Ahom, Chutia, Koch-Rajbanshi, Moran, Motok and Tea Garden Labourers, started their demands for adequate constitutional protection of their respective identities. Under such circumstances, an attempt has been made to analyze the concept of identity assertion of the tea garden labourers of Assam, in the present study. The present study has been designed to answer some important questions in this regard, such as, what is the process of formation of ethnic group in case of tea garden labourers of Assam? What made the tea garden labourers of Assam enthusiastic to make an effort for searching identity and in what form? What is the role of elite section of tea garden labourers to assert their identity? Can they be considered as a homogenous group? What are the constraints in the way of their identity assertion? What is the role of government in policy formulation and responses towards the tea garden labourers of Assam? And last but not the least, whether granting of Scheduled Tribes status to the tea garden labourers would be beneficial to the people living inside the tea gardens of Assam?
1.3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The present study is based on the perspectives of conceptualization of the efforts of the ethnic groups of Assam to assert their identity in general and tea garden labourers in particular. It has been carried out within the conceptual framework of identity assertion and ethnic group. Identity assertion is associated with the concept of ethnicity and ethnic identity, which require some conceptual clarification in the context of the present study.

The term ‘ethnicity’ is a derivation of the term ‘ethnic’, which means belonging to a particular racial group. According to ‘The Concise Oxford Dictionary’ the term ‘ethnic’ means relating to a group of people having common national or cultural tradition. On the other hand the use of the term ‘ethnicity’ is very much confusing, as it is used to mean various terms like tribe, cultural group, linguistic group, religious group, community, etc. In the context of North East India, the term ‘ethnic’ group is a recent sociological alternative to the term ‘tribe’ which is considered to be out of date and pejorative term.9

In general sense the term ‘ethnic’ refers to a particular racial group’. But, since time immemorial different races have intermixed in different proportion in different areas and at present all humanity is a mixture of races.10 Therefore pure race is an allegory. But the term ‘ethnic’ is used in a broader sense. In this regard, Saikia and Majumdar (Pakem,1990) mentions that according to Hunter & Phillip the term refers to any group of people within a larger cultural unit who identify themselves as a distinct entity separate from the rest of that culture. These groups usually possess a number of characteristics which show its distinctiveness and social distance between itself and others. This characteristics may include a separate language (or dialect), distinctive tradition and social customs, distinctive dresses, food habits and modes of
life, and a circumscribe land base. In some hierarchical societies ethnic group may be similar to social classes or castes. Ethnic groups are present in many societies for two major reasons; migration of people from original homeland to other countries and incorporation of several small, separate cultural units into one large nation-state.\textsuperscript{11}

On the other hand, ‘ethnicity’ is a new concept in social science. It is primarily an inherited status of the members of a group. Shared cultural heritage, ancestry, origin, myth, history, home land, language or dialect, religion, mythology, ritual, dressing style, art, food habit, physical appearance etc are the characteristics, through which the membership of an ethnic group can be defined. However, there are divergences of opinion regarding the meaning of ‘ethnicity’. Regarding the use of the term ethnicity, Prof. B. Pakem (1990) mentions,

“it was first used by David Riseman in 1953 as referred to the 1972 supplement of the Oxford English Dictionary, then in 1973 by Cinthia H. Emloe and in 1975 by J. Das Gupta in India. Before 1953 other terms were also used to refer the term ‘ethnicity’ such as, in 1938 the term “ethnic communities’’ was used by Caroline F. Ware in the Encyclopedia of Social Sciences and in 1941, “ethnocentrism’’ was used by Edward Byron Reuter in Modern Handbook of Sociology. After 1953 the term “ethnic groups” was used by H.S. Morris in International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences (1968) and Max Weber and Talcot Parsons. In 1963 “Primordial group attachments” was used by Clifford Geertz ; in 1975“communal group” by Daniel Dell, and in 1964 “minority group” by Preston Valien.”\textsuperscript{12}

However, all these terms applied to identify a particular social group.
Moreover, Prof. Pakem also observes that there are generally three stages of ethnicity formation – the dormant, calmed, and active ethnicity. In case of dormant ethnicity, the ethnic characteristics is always out there. During this stage the level of ethnic awareness and behavioural pattern of the people may be affected by various factors, such as, social and geographical mobility, governments, politicians and other human organizations. In this regard Prof. B.Pakem mentions,

“In the early stage of ethnic formation, economic development and education may also create ethnic consciousness among the people who shared some objective ethnic characteristics. For example, the gap in the economic or educational level between any two people may further strengthen the ‘we’ and ‘they’ attitude. The same is the position with the growth of urbanization and spread of communications. Natural forces like dependence of agriculture on climate and weather may sometime effect the ethnic intensity, awareness, and behavior of ethnic groups. When any or all of these and other factor are present, ethnic awareness starts germinating.”13

Prof. Pakem refers it as the embryonic stage and the ethnic consciousness does not go beyond dormancy, it can be consider as ethnic quietism. In this stage political awareness is not fully developed among the members of ethnic groups.

In the second stage of ethnicity formation as mentioned by Prof.Pakem, the governments and politicians use to step into the process to suppress or calm down the growth of such formation. So this stage is marked with resentment, and mobilization of the people on ethnic line by the elite section begins.
The most formidable stage of ethnicity formation is active ethnicity, in which ethnic groups try to assert their identity through the formation of regional political parties and insurgent groups are also formed.

If we want to analyze the process of ethnicity formation of tea garden labourers of Assam according to Prof. Pakem’s analysis, then we can consider the period from the beginning of emigration of tea garden labourers to Assam to the second decade of the twentieth century as stage of ‘dormant ethnicity’. Because, during that period different communities (tribal and non tribal) of tea garden labourers had to concentrate fully to adjust and acclimatize in a new common habitat (tea plantations) and to maintain their respective ethnic features within the common socio-economic environment but in a heterogeneous society. In due course they knowingly or unknowingly got themselves intermingled for the cause of their common interest since there was no option for them but to get themselves assimilated into a single whole. A new society emerged after complex interactions that underwent among different sections of tea garden labourers population belonging to various tribes and castes. Gradually they developed a common culture, tradition and language and become a part of the land (Assam). They emerged as a new group popularly known (unofficially) by of the people as ‘Chah mazdur sampradai’ or ‘Tea Tribes’ or ‘Chah Bonua’ or ‘Bagania’ or ‘Adivasi’ and so on. During this stage tea garden labourers of Assam, unlike other ethnic groups, gradually started a transformation from heterogeneous to homogenous community with certain common characteristics.

The second stage, as mentioned by Pakem, is ‘calmed ethnicity’ in which the governments and politicians try to suppress the process of such ethnic group formation. In case of tea garden labourers, the period between twenties and the eighties of twentieth century, can be considered as period of ‘calmed ethnicity. An
educated and elite section of tea garden labourers emerged, who tried to mobilize their people on ethnic line for the protection of their identity. Different students’ organizations and their wings have been formed and they have demanded for the development of socio-economic conditions from the government and have tried to assert their lingo-cultural and ethnic identities. With the passage of time they could understand the motive of white coloured people whom they called as ‘sahib’. So they started revolt against the British within and outside the tea-gardens. There were a large number of incidents that took place in the history of the country where the predecessors of tea garden labourers had played a remarkable role against the British to safeguard their interest as well as the interest of the country. In spite of being barricaded within the tea plantations enclaves, tea garden labourers had been directly or indirectly involved in the National Movement of Independence of India.

According to Pof, B.Pakem, the third stage of ethnicity formation is active ethnicity. The most formidable stage of ethnicity formation is active ethnicity, in which ethnic groups try to assert their identity through the formation of regional political parties and insurgent groups are also formed. In case of tea garden labourers this stage has begun since nineties of the twentieth century. Formation of militant groups like Adivasi Cobra Militant Force of Assam (1996), All Adivasi National Liberation Army (AANLA), Birsa commando force (BCF), Adivasi People’s Army (APA), Adivasi Dragon Fighters (ADF) for the protection of the interest of their people is significant.

Similarly, Paul R. Brass (1991) finds out three processes involved in case of ethnicity formation. Firstly, within the ethnic group itself for control over its material and symbolic resources. Secondly, between the ethnic groups as a competition for rights, privileges, and available resources. Thirdly, between the state and the groups
that dominate it, on one hand and the population that inhabit its territory on the other. However, in case of tea garden labourers third process, as mentioned by Brass can be considered as one of the factors involved in the process of ethnicity formation. Tea garden labourers of Assam constitute a major section of the total population of Assam. They are large in number but their social and economic status is pitiable and they are exploited by the planters and the government. Since the dawn of tea industry in Assam till to-day, tea garden labourers have been exploited by the planters and their subordinate managers of the gardens to fulfill their selfish interest of earning profits from the tea industry. On the other hand, labourers who live inside the tea gardens of Assam have to live with basic facilities provided by the planters. After they had permanently settled in the tea gardens they acclimatized with the new environment very well but not with the greater fold of Assamese society of Assam.

However, the tea garden labourers’ society is consisted of several ethnic groups. Large scale emigration of tribal and non-tribal people took place from different parts of the country to the tea plantations of Assam. So, the process of maintaining ethnic boundary of tea garden labourers is different from other ethnic groups of Assam. P.K. Das Gupta (Pakem,1990) mentions two processes of maintenance of ethnic boundary in his article, such as, maintenance of ethnic boundary in mono-ethnic situation and in poly-ethnic situation. In case of mono-ethnic situation, a tribe or a group of people lives in its traditionally defined territory, but in case of poly ethnic situation, a group moves out of its traditional niche to a poly-ethnic situation. The maintenance of ethnic boundary in case of Bodos, Kacharis, Missings, Khasis, Karbis are good examples of mono-ethnic situation. On the other hand, maintenance of ethnic boundary among the tea garden labourers of Assam is an example of a poly-ethnic situation.
On the other hand, question of identity assertion of ethnic groups arises when identity crisis occurs among the members of different groups due to social exclusion and social insecurity. Social exclusion leads to social insecurity. Social exclusion is a multidimensional term that includes social, economic, political and cultural sphere of the society. According to Marshall Wolfe, there are various kinds of social exclusion, such as exclusion from livelihood, exclusion from social services, welfare and security networks, exclusion from political choice, exclusion from popular organization and solidarity and exclusion from understanding of what is happening. Tea garden labourers living inside tea gardens of Assam are socially excluded group of people. They were excluded by the colonial planters and Government in pre-independence era and even after independence by the European and native planters and government; as such, they were deprived of social recognition, self-respect and social values. Through the present study, attempt has been made to explore the causes of insecurity in different aspects of the tea garden labourers living inside the tea gardens of Assam, which made them enthusiastic to search a separate identity (Tea Tribe/Adivasi). Efforts of the students’ organizations, particularly Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association and All Adivasi Students’ Association of Assam and trade unions, particularly Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha and Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha are analyzed to have an in-depth understanding about the organizational activities, which are formed to protect the interest of the tea garden labourers of Assam.

In the light of the above mentioned concepts, in the present study an attempt has been made to inquire into the process of ethnicity formation and identity assertion in case of tea garden labourers of Assam.
1.4 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The politics as it developed in the North-East Indian state of Assam in the twentieth century is highly influenced by the issues of ethnic identity of different ethnic groups of the region. One of the early largest migrant groups of colonial period of Assam was tea garden labourers, who constitute a large portion of the total population of the state.

Tea garden labourers are a socially excluded section of Assam, as they are deprived of their due share in social, economic, cultural and political sphere. In the social context of Assam, the issue of social exclusion is related to social inequality, which leads to identity crisis of the ethnic groups and thereby leads to identity assertion of the ethnic groups. Tea garden labourers are not exception to it. The plantation system compelled the labourers of varied origin to constitute an unusual social class having limited interaction with the outside world. They were categorized by the colonial planters as ‘coolie’ and their language as ‘coolie bat’ or language of the labourers. Due to lack of communication facilities they had to lose their contact with their native places far away from the tea plantations of Assam and gradually they became permanent residents of the state. Once they entered and settled in the tea gardens, they were not allowed to go back home unless the contractual period was over. However, it was common that after the expiry of the contract period they were forced to renew the contract, as a result of which they have been living in the tea gardens for generation after generation. Another factor that compelled them to live in the tea gardens of Assam was that the return journey to their homeland was not very easy for them. So, they were not able to go back home.

The labourers living in the tea gardens of Assam are either tribal or non-tribal and were hired by the colonial authority through agents or ‘arkatis’ or ‘sardars’, from
various cultural, linguistic and ethnic heritages of India. They live inside the tea gardens of Assam, which are generally located in the interior places. They are accommodated within the tea gardens’ boundaries and put in the row of huts which are called ‘coolie lines’ or ‘labourers’ lines’, where they have to live under the surveillance of the managers and their subordinate officers. The planters usually exploit them in every possible way.

On the other hand, tea garden labourers are deprived of the basic facilities needed to survive. Within the tea gardens they are provided little opportunity to educate themselves and their children. The required educational resources and facilities are not available in the tea garden’s school, so their literacy rate is very low. Similarly, medical facilities and other fringe benefits given to the labourers are not sufficient and not up to the mark (as mentioned in Plantation Labour Act).

The status of tea garden labourers in the garden’s administrative system remains at the bottom of the hierarchy, which is characterized by dominance of superior over inferior. In this hierarchy, always orders are given to those who belong to the lower level. Within this hierarchy, the voices of those who belong to lower level are rarely heard by those who belong to the upper level. Generally the administrative structure is divided into six strata, which can be shown as below.

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DIRECTOR
  |  MANAGERIAL STAFF
  |   CLERICAL STAFF
  |   TECHNICAL STAFF
  |   SUB STAFF
   | LABOURER
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Thus tea garden labourers living inside the tea gardens of Assam are deprived of their due share and self-respect, which leads to social insecurity. Regarding the social status of the tea gardens labourers of Assam, the Census Commissioner of India, C.S. Mullan observes,

“In Assam, a coolie is always a coolie and whether he works in garden or whether he has left garden and settled as an ordinary agriculturist, his social position is nil.” 19

Another cause of social insecurity of the labourers is that due to migration to new habitat they had to give up many of their traditional beliefs and customs. While entering Assam they possessed their own languages/dialects with their distinctive cultures and traditions. Their traditions and customs, rites and rituals have undergone many changes with the passage of time. Their original cultural identity rarely remained intact in the new geo-demographic environment and socio-economic setting. 20 Spontaneously emerged a common identity which popularly came to be known as the ‘Tea and Ex-Tea Tribes’ or ‘Adivasi’ on the basis of certain common socio-cultural criteria.

Tea garden labourers are economically exploited by the planters; they have to work from morning till evening, under the strict supervision of the managers and their subordinate officials, in the tea industry for a paltry wage. The tea industry of Assam as a whole has been seriously hit by the explosive environment of North Eastern Region of India in general and Assam in particular. Since 1990, the tea industry has been undergoing a crisis, which becomes apparent through the static condition of production, decline in exports, and winding up of tea gardens. As a result, labourers have to face a crisis of livelihood. Due to lack of adequate educational qualification, permanent land holding (except the possession they have in the labourers’ line) and
lack of agricultural land, it becomes difficult for them to move out of the gardens to find alternative source of income. Due to the deteriorating condition of tea industry, the policy of employment of the labourers in the industry has changed. To reduce the number of permanent labourers, garden authorities have started appointing the labourers as casual workers. Because, casual labourers are not entitled to get the fringe benefits which are to be provided by the tea gardens authorities. This is done to reduce the production cost of the industry. In the era of globalization, tea industry is facing stiff competition with other tea producing countries, such as, China, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Vietnam. Free imports and reduced export created a harsh situation for the owners and managers. So, they prefer to increase the casual employment of labourers in tea gardens. The crisis in the tea sector, particularly in Assam, has led to labour unrest and apprehensions regarding the future prospect of the sector and of the workers depending upon the sectors. Employers and labourers relations have deteriorated over the past decades and the catastrophe in the tea industry has provoked it. Declining productivity in the tea sector at the all India level gets manifested in the tea gardens of Assam much more pronouncedly than in any other state or region.

On the other hand, tea garden labourers are excluded from constitutional rights and safeguards. The tea and ex-tea garden labourers living in Assam belonged to Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes in their original home land. But in Assam they have been deprived of enjoying the benefits and privileges as Scheduled Tribes (ST) or Scheduled Castes (SC), because they are not recognized by the Government of Assam. Prof. Nibaron Chandra Laskar (member Constituent Assembly) in a speech addressed to the then president of the Constituent Assembly of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, in a meeting at Constituent Hall, New Delhi on 24th August 1949 said,
“I would like to draw the attention of the House to the position of the tea garden Labourers. The 1911 census figure shows that the strength of the garden labourers was 5,07,058. They mostly belong to the Depressed Classes. I refer to Article 73, page 57, of the census report of 1921 vol-III part I, in which it is stated that the total garden Labour population is 9,22,000. Over 7,82,000 or 80 percent are Hindu. Vide 1931 Census report, vol. III, part I, page 222, these garden labourers were considered as garden coolie caste and their population given in the report was 14 lakh in which number of Hindu was 13,16,000. According to 1941 census, this garden Coolie Caste changed their status and they were considered as Garden Tribes. They were included in the Scheduled Tribes and thus increased the population of Scheduled Tribes from 16 lakhs to 28 lakhs. Thus the status of garden labourers has been changed gradually, up to 1921 they belonged to Depressed Classes, then they were promoted to garden Coolie Caste in 1931, then they were considered as Garden Tribes in 1941. 

From the speech it becomes clear that before independence the British Government had not denied their Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes status. But after the independence of our country they were de scheduled by the newly elected government of Assam which was headed by Gopinath Bordoloil, on the plea that if tea garden labourers were allowed to remain as Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes, then the political scenario of Assam would be changed, because tea garden labourers constitute a major portion of the state population. However, their counterparts in the state of Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and even in Tripura
of North Eastern region of India are recognized as Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes. As such they became victims of the politics of Assam. They are now enjoying the status of Other Backward Caste (OBC) only. Unfortunately, a major portion of tea garden labourers is not conscious about their positions or status mainly because of their poor socio-economic condition and illiteracy.

In Assam the question of identity is gaining momentum with political development and raising aspiration of the different communities after independence. The important struggle led by the students of Assam for the protection of the linguistic and cultural identity of the Assamese people did a lot for the identity assertion of the tea garden labourers of Assam. First one was in 1960 over the issue of official language of Assam, the second one was in 1972 over the issue of medium of instruction and third one was the agitation over foreign nationals issue in 1979, which mobilized a large section of Assamese people including the peasantry, tribal people and the tea garden labourers of Assam.

The Assam Movement launch by All Assam Gana Sangam Parisad and All Assam Student Union (AASU) in 1979 had drawn the attention of the different ethnic groups of North East India in general and Assam in particular. Different ethnic groups of Assam have begun to mobilize their own people on ethnic lines for the protection of their respective identities. Tea garden labourers are not exception to this system. The demand for Scheduled Tribe (P) status of tea garden labourers became apparent during the eighties of the 20th century.

In India, Reservation is one of the major policies, which is used to provide justice to those who have not received their due share, in other words economically and socially backward sections. Like many other ethnic groups, the tea garden labourers of Assam have been demanding the Scheduled Tribes status and reservation
of seats in educational institutions and job in the government and semi government department on the basis of their poor socio-economic conditions and backwardness. But unfortunately, it is not welcomed by the Government and many other sections of the greater Assamese society. This has led to unrest and uprising of the tea garden labourers in Assam in the recent past. All Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association (ATTSA) along with the other five communities of Assam, namely, Tai-Ahoms, Koch- Rajbanshis, Morans, Motaks and Chutias united under the banner of ‘Choi Janagosthir Oikkya Mancha’ and have been continuously staging demonstration for demanding Scheduled Tribe status since 2001.

Thus, isolated habitat, alienated from their natal home and own people, poor living and economic condition, low literacy rate, deprived of the basic facilities needed to survive and lack of self-respect and identity lead to social insecurity of the tea garden labourers of Assam.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

The exclusionary tendencies created by both the state and the tea garden authorities lead to the identity crisis of the tea garden labourers of Assam. Now a days, tea garden labourers are trying to emerge as a homogenous group with common culture, languages, habits and environment. The educated youths and elite section of labourers have realized that the tea garden labourers’ community has certain common cultural and social similarities. As such, they get impetus to come together and form organizations, through which they started to mobilize their people on ethnic line to demand Scheduled Tribes (P) status for the community as a whole. The formation of students’ union of tea garden labourers like All Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association (ATTSA) and All Adivasi Students’ association of Assam (AASAA) and
many others have been generating consciousness and awareness among the tea garden labourers living in the tea gardens of Assam. Though, they were heterogeneous at the very beginning of the tea industry, gradually they came closer to each other irrespective of their communities and claimed to be a homogeneous group. A recent emerging issue on their ethnic identity has become an important factor in new political alliances and pluralistic society of Assam.

Tea garden labourers as a whole can be considered as one of the oldest, largest and important sections of the people of Assam. The present day population of the labourers in the state is estimated to be 20 percent of the total state population. Tea garden labourers being a collection of people identifying themselves as a member of a distinct community constituting a major portion of the total population of the state, having cultural speciality and emigrating from other parts of India long back, deserve a systematic and scientific investigation of the nature of present status of identity consciousness.

The comprehensive sociological study has already covered almost all the diversified aspects of the North East Region of India in general and Assam in particular. Studies have been conducted on the demographic changes in Assam and its neighbouring states, the ethnic mosaic of the region, growth and development of the ethnic organizations, socio-economic condition of the tea garden labourers and so on. All these sociological attempt dealing successfully with specific problems of the specific portions of wide and diversified society of the region. But, no attempt has so far been made to carry out a systematic, fruitful, and fact finding study on the effort to assert the identity by the labourers living inside the tea gardens of Assam or living at the grass root level. It is thought that the role of labourers living at the grass root level and the role of the tea garden labourers’ organizations to assert their identity would
surely be a rich, fertile and ‘virgin field’ for cultivating human interest to fulfill the instinctive demands of revealing half hidden fact of the society of Assam. This is surely a serious problem or a social phenomenon to be noticed and discussed.

1.6 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The general objective of the study is to analyze the efforts of the tea garden labourers in asserting their ethnic identity and also to assess the role of tea garden labourers’ organizations in order to achieve that goal.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To study the origin of the tea garden labourers and the socio-economic backwardness of tea garden labourers of Assam.

2. To study the political participation of tea garden labourers of Assam and their readiness to welcome changes occur in the context of present socio-political development.

3. To assess the role of tea garden labourers’ organizations in mobilizing the tea garden labourers on ethnic line and to assert their identity.

4. To analyze the role of government in redressing the grievances of the tea garden labourers.

5. To understand the perception of tea garden labourers towards the politics of identity prevailing in Assam and their responses to it.

6. To find out the problems on the way of their identity assertion and to chalk out measures to get rid of the obstacles they faced in establishing their identity.
1.7 KEY HYPOTHESES:

1. Low rate of literacy is the major hindrance on the way of the identity assertion of the tea garden labourers of Assam.

2. Poor economic condition leads to lack of awareness among the tea garden labourers of Assam.

3. The differences prevail amongst the tea garden labourers prevent the emergence of a common ethnic identity.

1.8 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The methodology of present study is not the traditional one, rather it is an ethnographic study, at the same time it is descriptive and explorative.

Field study was an important part of the study. Six tea gardens were selected for the study from Golaghat and Jorhat districts (three tea gardens from each district) for intensive study. These were considered as sample tea gardens selected from these two particular districts to carry out the study. On the other hand, Jorhat and Golaghat districts are better known as tea districts of upper Assam and tea gardens of these districts are as old as the tea industry in Assam. Most of the tea gardens were established by the colonial planters. These two districts possess a good number of tea gardens. Before selecting the names of six tea gardens for final consideration, a pilot study was conducted on a randomly selected sample to test the feasibility of the hypotheses. On the basis of findings, only six gardens namely Koomtai, Rungajan, and Dalowjan tea estates of Golaghat district and Hoolungooree, Cinnamara, and Gatoonga tea estates of Jorhat district have been selected as the universe of the study. Among these tea gardens two are rich tea gardens, two are poor or ‘sick gardens’ and rest two are medium standard (in terms of infrastructure) tea gardens and owned by
Assamese planters. In case of rich tea gardens labourers have to work under the strict rules and regulations of garden authorities. In case of poor or sick gardens, labourers lead an unrestricted and free life but full of sufferings, caused due to slackness of authorities, poor economic condition and unemployment. In case of medium standard tea gardens they have been leading life under reasonable restrictions and to some extent they can lead a freer life than those of the labourers, who live in the rich tea gardens. The selection of gardens was made after carefully considering certain important factors, which are considered essential to create a positive and suitable environment. The first factor was the condition or status of the garden, as it directly affects the living condition of the labourers. Secondly the selected gardens are historically significant, and the labourers settled in these gardens have a historical background trace back since their emigration to Assam.

The pilot study not only helped to grow familiarity with the respondents but also helped to make a background to establish rapport with them, though it was not sufficient to carry on further a fact-finding study. Therefore, the necessity of meeting some other persons like Trade Union Leaders, tea garden labourers’ organization leaders, political leaders and literate persons was felt before conducting the second round of investigation through a prepared interview schedule. A brief introduction to these tea gardens is given below.

**Rungajan Tea Estate:** Rangajan Tea Estate is located 5 kilometers away from the head quarter of Golaghat District. By the side of the tea estate the 37 National Highway runs to the southernmost part of the garden. The communication from and to the tea estate is easily accessible. To the east of the tea estate Ultajan Tea Estate is located. To the west of the tea estate Tol Grant is situated and the northern part of the estate adjoins by Thoramukh Gaon. This tea estate is included under the purview of
Rungajan Gaon Panchayat. Total geographical area is 1314.10 hectares and under tea plantation is 670.80 hectares.

**Koomtai Tea Estate:** Koomtai is another tea estate from Golaghat District selected for this study. This tea estate is 18 kilometers away from the district headquarters. Koomtai is one of the important tea estates of Badulipar Tea Company. This tea estate was established during the British reign. The 37 N.H. runs along the North of the estate; to the East of the tea estate Koomtai and NRL railway station are located; the west boarder of the garden touches by Kosupothar Gaon, Chongkola Gaon, Bongoan, and Komar Gaon. The Dhansiri River flows by the South of the estate. The area of the estate is 2072.38 hectares. Koomtai tea estate is included under the purview of Botlikhowa Gaon Panchayat.

**Dalowjan Tea Estate:** Dalowjan Tea Estate is located 12 kilometers away from the headquarters of Golaghat District. It was established in the year 1921, during the British reign. Now it is owned by Dalowjan Company Private Limited. The geographical area of the estate is 149.20 hectares; out of which 105.95 hectares is planted area. To the North of the garden Oating Tea Estate is located and to the South Sengajan Tea Estate is located. Oating Railway station is in the East and Dalowjan Tinali is in the West of the estate.

**Gatoonga Tea Estate:** Gatoonga Tea Estate is located in Jorhat District, 16 kilometers away from head quarters of the district. Originally it was possessed by Williamson Magor Company Limited but after independence, an Assamese Tea planter, Hemendra Prasad Baruah purchased it from W. Magor in the middle part of the sixties. Now it is owned by Baruahs & Associated Private Limited. Total area of the estate is 621.21 hectares and total area under tea plantation is 261.97 hectares. To The North of the estate Tekela Gaon is located and the Southern border of the estate
touches by Thangalbari Tea Estate and Kakodonga Tea Estate. The eastern part of the garden adjoins by Saraibahi goan and Sangesa Tea Estate is located in the East of the estate.

**Cinnamara Tea Estate:** Cinnamara Tea Estate is located 5 kilometers away from the headquarters of Jorhat District, Garh Ali runs to the Northern most part of the tea estate that makes the communication from and to the estate easily accessible. To the south of the garden Garhmur village is located. Bhugdoi River and Doklongiya Tea Estate are in the eastern border of the garden and Rajabari Tea Estate and Toklai Research Center are located to the west of the garden. The total area of the estate is 1846.64 hectares including three out divisions. Total area under tea plantation is 746 hectares. This tea estate bears a great significance as far as the history of tea industry of Assam is concerned, Cinnamara Tea Estate was the first tea estate established by an Assamese, Maniram Dutta Baruah, popularly known as Maniram Dewan. After his death, the tea garden was sold to George Williamson in an auction. Presently, Cinnamara tea estate is owned by Assam Tea Corporation Limited.

**Hoolungooree Tea Estate:** Another Tea estate taken as sample for the present study is Hoolungooree Tea Estate of Jorhat district. It is located in Mariani subdivision of Jorhat district. It is 10 kilometers away from head quarter of Mariani subdivision and 35 kilometers away from head quarter of Jorhat district. Cinatali Gaon is situated to the East of the tea garden; to the West is Dihingiyapara Tea Estate, Bhugdoi River and Naga Hills lies in the North, and Dhudar Ali runs through the South of the garden. Hoolungooree Tea Estate is run by Andrew Yule and Company Limited, a Government of India Enterprise. The total area under the plantation is 37,233 hectares (including the out garden).
1.9 SAMPLE OF THE STUDY

As the questions demanded some degree of maturity, only the adult labourers (above 18 years) were included in the sample and gender parity was maintained to the extent possible in each garden. Survey was conducted in the tea gardens with the help of interpreters, usually the line *chowkidars, sardars* and *mohorars*. Purposive sampling was designed to elicit opinions from the respondents of each tea gardens and one member from the same household was selected, irrespective of their age, education, social status and economic condition and so on. Due to the busy work schedule of the labourers, interview had to be conducted at various places wherever they were available.

The total number of labourers’ sample was 574, of which 238 were male and 236 were female. 82 labourers (40 male and 42 female) were interviewed in Koomtai tea garden, 80(40 male and 40 female) labourers in Hoolungoore Tea Garden, 100 labourers (50 male and 50 female) in Rungajan Tea Garden, 42(21 male and 21 female) labourers in Dalowjan Tea Garden, 150 (75 male and 75 female) labourers in Cinnamara Tea Garden and 120 labourers (60 male and 60 female)in Gatoonga Tea Garden. The study covered 25 pc of the total households of each sample tea garden and was confined to the labourers permanently living inside the tea gardens, who are the descendants of the emigrated labourers of tea plantations in Assam. Only the inhabitants of the tea gardens were included in the present study, and those who were inhabitants of nearby villages or outside the gardens were excluded from the purview of the present research investigation on the ground that they were no longer a part of tea garden labourers’ society. They are to some extent assimilated with the Assamese society. They possess land holding and lead an independent life unlike the labourers who live inside the garden, so their life style is different from the labourers living
inside the tea gardens. Tea garden labourers working as stuff and sub-stuff, like *babu*, *mohorar*, *chowkidar* and *sardar* were also included within the sample.

However, in asserting the identity of the studied people, some other organizations have been playing an active part. So, to have a comprehensive knowledge on the topic, the leaders of the organizations like Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association, All Adivasi Students’ Association of Assam and Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha are also discussed, which was the secondary support of what had been said by the respondents of study.

### 1.10 TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES OF DATA COLLECTION:

Survey technique was used as the main tool for gathering information needed for the present study. For this purpose an elaborate interview schedule was prepared for collecting information from the respondents. Interview schedule consisted of different variables, such as, age, caste, religion, marital status, family pattern, pattern of marriage, education, occupation, income, indebtedness, land holding, job satisfaction, social participation, pattern of migration, knowledge about origin, organizational pattern, political participation and consciousness about their identity. These variables are taken to have an in-depth knowledge about the efforts of tea garden labourers living inside the tea gardens or at grass root level for asserting their identity. The supplementary methods used for the present study are observation (non-participant), individual and group interview method.

### 1.11 DATA PROCESSING, TABULATION AND ANALYSIS:

First of all the data collected through different methodologies were systematically processed and then arranged in tabular form. This part was managed
manually. A sample of 574 respondents from above mentioned six sample tea gardens was taken and the data collected on various aspects were properly analyzed through statistical tools like simple table analyses with percentage analysis. First the raw data were classified in terms of variables. All frequency tables in simpler forms were prepared question wise and the distribution of data was observed tea garden wise. After completing the procedure, theorization of the studies has been done in chapters. Moreover a comparison between the theoretical information gathered from secondary sources and the information gathered from primary sources has been also made.

1.12 PERIOD OF DATA COLLECTION:

The study was an extensive one and covered a period since the inception of the tea industry in Assam till 2016. Field survey was conducted with the help of interview schedule during the period from the month of January, 2012 to December, 2015. The primary data were collected from various sources, mainly from the Tea statistics of Golaghat and Jorhat districts, Tea Board Statistics, Census reports, records of the sample tea gardens during the period from 2011 to 2016. Library works have been done at Gauhati University library, Dibrugarh University Library, Assam State Archive, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development and many other libraries at local level during 2011-2016.

1.13 REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Though a number of studies have been conducted on tea garden labourers of Assam from different perspectives and on different issues, but still there is a dearth of literature on the identity assertion of the tea garden labourers or ethnic identity of the tea garden labourers of Assam. No serious work has yet been done in this regard in
order to draw the attention of the scholars as well as general readers. Due to lack of literature on this field, certain facts and figures were lost with the passage of time. Only the historical writings can provide a light towards the origin and ethnicity of tea garden labourers. It is worth mentioning here is that a few writers of the tea garden labourers and non tea garden labourers of Assam have discussed on the topic to some extent.

In Robinson(1841), Antrobus(1957), Bose (1957), Griffiths (1967), Guha (1977), Borpujari (1977), Gait (1909), Bhowmik (1981), Siddique (1990), Chakravorty (1997), Barua (1998), Gogoi (2004), a detailed description of the origin and development of tea plantations in Assam by the British, the growth and development of tea industry and migration of labourers from outside Assam can be found. Dutta (2007) deals with a micro level study on the discovery of Assam tea and intrusion of colonial rulers in North East India in general and Assam in particular specially in search of tea plant. He describes the contribution of Maniram Dewan towards the discovery of tea in Assam.

Goswami (1990) analyzes the consequences of industrialization and colonial intrusion in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam during the nineteenth century in the general context of the colonization of India. Author discusses the motive of colonial ruler behind the annexation of North Eastern Region of India including Assam. This volume also provides a wide range scope for a research work to have an analytical view regarding the tea industry established by the British, Waste Land and Grant Rule for tea industry, early problem of recruitment of labourers from the outside Assam, enticement of labourer provided by the planters, absenteeism, wage structure of tea garden labourers and so on.
The works of Borgohain (1980), Jain (1988), Bhowmik, Xaxa & kalam (1996), Xaxa (1997), Dasgupta (1999) present detailed information on the working of tea industry in various part of the country and its effect on the lives of the tea garden labourers of Assam. Indeed, these works are the fertile source of information regarding the tea industry of Assam and its trade as well as exploitation of Assam by the colonial planters before independence and by the native capitalist after independence of the country.

Baruah (2008), is an exclusive book on the tea industry of Assam and it was an outcome of years of extensive research. The author has made an overall critical in-depth analysis of the tea industry of Assam covering all the aspects like origin, development, production, marketing, labourers’ contribution to the economy of Assam, quality factors, problem and prospects and suggestions for future development etc. This work provides a chronological data regarding the area under tea, production, exports and employment of labourers in the tea gardens of India in general and Assam in particular along with the figures of global production of tea, from which a comparative study about the growth of the tea industry can be had by a beginner of research in this aspect.

The works of Dange (1973), Harlalka(1975,Sharmah (1990), Sen(1994), deal with the socio-economic conditions of tea garden labourers in India in general and Assam in particular and the labourers’ resentments, growth of trade union and class consciousness among the tea garden labourers of Assam. Sharma, Das (2008), is an extensive study on socio-economic distresses of the plantations workers of North-East India in general and states of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Darjeeling in particular. The author illuminates issues like emigration and settlement history of various ethnic communities, social transformation, occupational mobility, cultural
integration, inter-ethnic relationships, and health dimensions of the tea garden labourers of North East India.

Sengupta (edit.)(2009), is an illustrious collection of twenty two research articles and deals with the description on the history, migration and pattern of settlement of the indentured labourers in the tea plantations in North East India in general and Assam in particular. The articles included in the volume cover most of the aspects needed to study about the labourers working inside the tea plantations of North East India in general and Assam in particular. The demographic characteristics, socio-economic and political constraints of the labourers in present day context, impact of Missionaries inside the tea gardens, trade union movements, identity consciousness of the tea garden labourers, etc were the important aspects included in the volume which will be great use for the readers.

One of the most significant issues in the politics of our country particularly in North Eastern region is the politics of identity of different ethnic groups. The movements for identity assertion by different ethnic groups have started in India in the post independent era and it has increased since 1980's. Chaube (1999) explains the concept of nationalism which partly ignored the identities of smaller ethnic groups, territorial boundary that criss- cross different ethnic consideration and the process of industrialization which practically had no relation with the traditional economy as the root causes of the political turmoil in North-east India. The author gives a chronological description of the emergence of British influence in this region (eighteenth century), the establishment of British power in 1826, and its impact on the post-independent political situation.

Pakem (edit),(1990), is the proceedings volume of a seminar on questions of Nationalities, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity in the context of North-East India. This
volume includes the research papers, which focuses on the issues of nationalities and identity movements of different ethnic groups inhabiting in North East India. The issues of nationalities, ethnicity, and cultural identity have assumed a multidimensional importance in view of the urgent need for economic, social, cultural and political development of the region. This volume provides a clear concept on the issues of nationalities, ethnicity and identity and hence, this volume can be considered as insightful source for a scholar working on ethnographic aspect

   **Eriksen (2002)** defines ethnicity as a dynamic and shifting aspect of social relationships and it is far from being an immutable property of groups. In this volume Eriksen examines the relationship between ethnicity, class, gender and nationhood and discusses the recent studies of migration, cultural creolisation, racism, gender and nationalism, and the dilemmas of multiculturalism. This is an extremely useful, empirically well informed introductory overview that adds significantly to our body of knowledge in the ethnicity and nationalism study areas and is indispensable to anyone seriously interested in understanding ethnic phenomena.

   **Phukon (2003)** provides a comprehensive analysis of the ethnicity and the politics of North East India. The nature of colonial policy adopted by the British to fulfill the interest of establishing tea industry in Assam has been thoroughly explained in it. This volume also provides knowledge about the nature of activities of the youths belonging to different ethnic groups of Assam to mobilize their respective community on ethnic lines, which gives momentum to the member students’ organizations of the tea garden labourers to organize their people on ethnic ground.

   **Biswa and Sukladaidya (2008)** deal with the phenomenological notion of the life-world to understand the culturally-embedded construction of communities, for whom the lived experience of cultural politics constitutes their identity. It analyses the
cultural and political determinants of ethnic- and identity-oriented struggles in India's North-East, as well as the cultural politics of ethnic mobilizations in the region. Such mobilizations are an attempt to construct a self-identity distinct from that constructed by the state, both colonial and post-colonial India, which becomes a source of concern for the latter with regard to its achieving legitimacy and development in the region.

Authors analyze the articulation of ethnic politics in North-East India that takes into account moves for integration as well as apparent differences. He also critically examines two major insurgent outfits of the region, NSCN and ULFA. This book is thought-provoking and analytical, and opens a new window to the study of India's North-East, which will intrigue students and scholars across various disciplines of development studies, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, political science and ethnic studies, and will be of interest to policy-makers, NGOs and global humanitarian communities.

Bhaumik (2009) illustrates the transformation of India's North East into a constituent region of the republic and analyses the everlasting crisis in the region since Independence. Author explains how land, language and leadership issues have been the root cause of disputes and controversies in the North-east and how factors like ethnicity, ideology and religion have aggravated the situation. The major insurgencies, internal displacements, protest movements and the regional drug and weapons trade in the region have also been highlighted. Large bodies of original data, documentation and field interviews with major players as well as stakeholders have been included in the book. This book is very useful as a reference resource for students of politics and international relations, especially for those involved in South Asian studies and conflict studies.
Dutta (2012) has presented an overview of the issue of identity assertion specially in Assam and covered the period from the conclusion of the Assam Movement to the present. The trend of violence which emerged in the post Assam Movement period and the emergence of insurgent outfits in the state have also been explained. In this volume, the issue of migration has been discussed from the perspective of the society that receives the migrants and defines itself through a negative response to the other.

Santos E Carlos & Taylor Adrina J Umaha (Edit), (2015) present qualitative and quantitative approaches of examining the development process of ethnic identity by bringing together a diverse group of social and applied scientists from wide range of fields including educational anthropology and sociology. They investigate the process by which ethnic identity is formed and maintained throughout life span. Authors present contextually rich accounts of ethnic identity that keep the focus where it belongs, on lived experience of real people.

Weiner's (2015) deals with the relationship between internal migration and ethnic conflict in India which is exceptional for two reasons. Firstly, it focuses on intercultural and interstate migration throughout the nation, rather than on merely local or provincial phenomena. Secondly, it examines both the social and the political consequences of India's interethnic migrations. He describes the forces that lead individual Indian citizens to move from one linguistic-cultural region to another in search of better opportunities, and he attempts to explain their emergence at the top of the occupational hierarchy. In addition, the author provides an account of the ways in which the indigenous ethnic groups ("sons of the soil") attempt to use political power to overcome their fears of economic defeat and cultural subordination by the more enterprising, more highly skilled, better educated migrants. In addressing the
fundamental clash between the migrants' claims to equal access to their country and
the claims of the local groups to equal treatment and protection by the state, author
considers some of the ways in which government policy makers might achieve greater
equality among ethnic groups without simultaneously restricting the spatial and social
mobility of some of its own people.

Gogoi (2016) presents an in-depth illustration of the debates on sovereignty,
self-determination and nationalist upsurges in Northeastern India, particularly in
Assam. At a deeper level, it analyses the coordination of multi-ethnic societies with
the nation state. Alongside this, the volume presents internal disputes and
contradictions among different ethnic groups, based on the framework of international
relations and geo-politics. It also proposes a new structure of ‘Common Ethnic House’
to resolve persistent inter-ethnic tensions among different communities and the
impasse between the Northeast and the centre. This book will interest scholars and
researchers of politics and international relations, sociology and social anthropology,
area studies, peace and conflict studies, especially those concerned with South Asia
and Northeast India.

During the last few decades, different ethnic groups inhabiting in Assam have
been pressing either for the creation of separate states on the basis of their respective
identities or for special constitutional safeguards of their respective identities. Tea
garden labourers are also not exception to this process. A recent emerging issue on
their ethnic identity is believed to have far reaching vibration in the politics of the
state. A few studies are related to the question ethnic identity assertion and the internal
dynamics of the tea garden labourers community of Assam. Kar (1981) highlights the
socio-cultural dynamics and process of assimilation of different communities of tea
garden labourers in the plantation settings. Mazumder (1984) describes the inter-
relationship between tea garden labourers and their relation with the communities of greater Asamese society. **Kar and Sharma (1985)** deals with the process of social stratification and ethnic identity among the tea and ex-tea garden labourers. **Kurmi (2011)** is a book on ethnographic write up of more than hundreds of communities living in Assam and working inside or outside the tea plantations. The author gives an extensive description about the title or surname of the tea garden labourers of Assam, their origin and their position in the social strata. This work of Kurmi certainly provides guidance to the government officials as well as to the researchers working on ethnographic study.

**Assam Sahitya Sabha** has contributed significantly by encouraging the writers of the community by publishing their books which include different aspects of the tea and ex-tea tribes. These publications are the valuable source of secondary information for the readers. Following are some works done by tea garden labourers’ and non tea garden labourers’ writers. **Bhuyan (1960)**, is the earliest publication of Assam Sahitya Sabha, which highlights the history and growth of tea garden labourers of Assam in a very simple manner. **Tassa (1981), Gohain (1974), Ghatuar (1975), Kurmi (1977, 1981)** describe about the culture, traditions and customs of tea garden labourers of Assam from which we can get ideas about the socio-cultural life of tea garden labourers of Assam. **Kurmi (1983)** mentions the views of youth of the community regarding the socio-political aspect in the context of Assam Agitation 1980. In **Adhikari,(2012)**, the author has depicted the picture of the social-cultural life of the tea garden labourers which is reflected in their folk songs. This volume provides the readers knowledge about the traditional heritage of the tribes living inside the tea gardens of Assam.
Another category of literature reviewed for the present study consisted of journals, magazines, and souvenirs published by different organizations, members of both tea garden labourers and other sections of Assam, which comprises of articles about the different aspects of the life of the people living inside the tea gardens of Assam. Though, this kind of literature provides knowledge in a limited scope, but able to provide rear view knowledge over the theme. Following are the literary works reviewed in this category.

The first work reviewed in this category was the souvenir, ‘Probin Neta Sanu Kheria’(Assamese), edited by Cidananda Saikia (1976), published in the memory of Late Sanu Kheria, the freedom fighter, first tea garden labourers’ elected member of State Legislative Assembly, and great personality of Golaghat district. He had contributed significantly to the history of labourers’ movement and labourers’ organization of Assam. This work includes a few articles regarding the organizational activities of tea garden labourers of Assam and their role in the freedom movement of the country, which provides valuable information regarding the grass root level activities of tea garden labourer to protect their interest as well as the interest of the country as a whole.

Secondly, the souvenir, ‘Dahar’(Assamese) published on the occasion of the Tea-Tribes Youth Festival, held at Baruakhat Goan, Koomtai T.E. of Golaghat district (2002), includes articles about different aspects of people living inside the tea garden with special reference to Koomtai Tea Estate. The article on tea garden labourers’ leaders and their roles in the development of tea garden labourers’ society, authored by Kamakha Prasad Tasha is worth mentioning. The author mentions about the inclination of tea garden labourers towards the Congress party and its reasons. Moreover, he also cited example of two political leaders of the community namely
Powan Singh Ghathuwar and Prithibi Majhi with an analytical view regarding their contributions to the tea garden labourers’ society and added a few suggestions for them. Another noteworthy article is ‘Chah Janagusthir Yuba Somajor Dayitya aru Kartbya’, by Makhanlal Barhoi mentions about the duties of the youth of the tea garden labourers to develop their society or to assert their identity. The author also criticized the role of intellectual people of the community in this context. The article, ‘Artha Sankat Aru Chah Sramikor Uttaron’, by Umesh Boraik highlights the financial crisis of tea garden labourers and their causes. Another article, ‘Koomtai Chah Bagichar Sahitya-Sangskritir Avumuki’, by Jiba Prosad Kurmi provides an account of the cultural, educational and social organizations formed within the Koomtai Tea Estate over the years.

Thirdly, the souvenirs, ‘Sandnee’(Assamese), published on the occasion of the 1st Convention of Assam Chah Janagosthi Sahitya Sabha (30 and 31 January, 2010) and ‘Unmeelon’, published on the occasion of 1st Biennial Conference of Assam Chah Janagosthi Sahitya Sabha(11and12 February,2012) are good sources for acquiring ideas or knowledge from the pens of the authors belonging to tea garden labourers’ community living inside or outside the gardens of Assam, which can be considered as the raw feelings of the elite section of the community.

Fourthly, the articles published in ‘Prantik’, the Assamese fortnightly provides a fertile source of information for a reader. The article authored by Khamakha Proshad Tasha in the issue 1-15 May, 2014, describes about the Rajasthani businessmen inside the tea garden and their trade. During the British period even after independence these businessmen were working as the ‘banker’ of the management, so they had good relationship with them. For this reason they were able to get allegiance from the workers of the garden, But with the passage of time their
role inside the gardens declined. Most of them wound up their business inside the
garden and sold it to others. In this article Tasha presented all these aspects in a
nutshell and illuminated the light of knowledge to the readers, which still remained
untouched by most of the other literatures. Another Article by Pulin Kalita,(1-15
September,2015), ‘Dainee Kando Eta Arbasin Ghotona’, is regarding the ‘witch
hunting’, which prevails in the Adivasi tribes of the tea garden labourer and other
ethnic groups like Karbi, Bodo, and Nepali. To have a basic idea regarding the origin
of this evil practice, this article can be considered as an important piece of work. The
author in another article (1-15, October, 2012), describes about the 6th Schedule of
Indian Constitution and inclusion of territories in the purview of it. This article helps
to understand the responses of the Government to fulfill the demands of the different
ethnic groups of Assam to get constitutional safeguard. Because the side effects of
which, could be seen among the ethnic groups which were not included under the
purview of the Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes list, due to lack of necessary
criteria. Tea garden labourers are also not exception to this. Ajit Kr. Dutta, in his
article (16th December, 2009), ‘Maniram Dewan, the First Indian Tea Planter’,
mentions about the discovery of tea in Assam and Nigrola, the Singpho chief in this
regard. In another article, ‘Chah Bagichar Sikha and Shikkhok’, author Ajit Dutta
writes about the education system inside the tea garden of Assam and its anomalies in
regard to imparting education and the employment of teacher and ‘ Sarva Shkhisha
Avijan’(SSA) inside the tea gardens. ‘Jatigota Sangarakhan Byabostha aru Deshor
Vabishyat’(1-15 December,2014) is an article where the author Jyotismita Sarmah
highlights the Articles of Indian constitution through which reservation for the ethnic
groups are provided. The author also mentioned about the loop holds of these articles.
Likewise the article published in ‘Sambhar’ (Assamese), the Weekly Magazine, (10th July, 2005), ‘Chah Janagusthi, British-Asomiya Madhyabitya aru Bharotiya Pujipotir Xusonor kabolot’, the author Puspajyoti Knowar, touches on the exploitation of tea garden labourers by the British as well as Assamese middle class and Indian capitalist. He also mentions about the leftist organization formed within the tea garden of Assam as the first organizational activities to protest against the exploitations. The author has pointed a few fundamental demands for which tea garden labourer have been fighting since the pre independence era of the country.

The article ’Axomor Chah Bagichar Shramik Andolon (1900-1930)’, published in the magazine (Assamese), Dainik Janambhumi. Sarodiya Sangkha, 2015, by Dr. Kamol Kumar Tanti highlights the labourer movement inside the tea gardens of Assam, and provides information with facts and figures regarding the migration of the tea garden labourers of Assam, which can be considered as an important source of information to the reader.

Fifthly, the articles publish in the daily newspapers are another source of gathering knowledge regarding the various aspects of workers working at the lower strata of the tea garden society. These articles are very relevant to the time and needs of the tea garden labourer community. The article published in Assamese daily Niyamiya Barta (3rd January, 2014) by Rounthon Gogoi provides information regarding the demands of the six tribes (Tai Ahom, Koch Rajbanshi, Motok, Moran, Chutia and Tea Tribes) for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribes(p) list, and the constitutional provisions in this respect. Moreover he also discusses the responses of government in granting the status to these tribes. In a similar article ‘Janajatikaron aru Asom’, published in the same paper (6th March and 13th March, 2013), writer Abul Husain discusses the ethnic characteristics of different tribes which are
requisite for the inclusion in the Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes list of the Government. Article, ‘Bonded Labour: its incidence and Pattern’ (The Assam Tribune, 25th March, 2013), the author Raphal Kujur has identified a numbers of factors responsible for the slave like condition of the labourers living inside the tea gardens of Assam.

1.14 CHAPTERISATION:

The thesis is divided into following chapters:

CHAPTER-I : INTRODUCTION.

CHAPTER-II : TEA GARDEN LABOURERS OF ASSAM: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE.

CHAPTER-III : SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF THE TEA GARDEN LABOURERS.

CHAPTER-IV : POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF THE TEA GREN LABOURERS OF ASSAM

CHAPTER -V : TEA GARDEN LABOURERS’ ORGANIZATIONS AND STATE’S ROLE.

CHAPTER-VI : ETHNIC IDENTITY OF TEA GARDEN LABOURERS OF ASSAM.

CHAPTER-VII : CONCLUSION.
NOTES AND REFERENCES:


2. Ibid, p-1

3. Pakem, B. 1990, *Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity in North East India*, p-1


5. Phukan, G. 2003, ‘*Ethnicisation of politics in Northeast India*’, p-62

6. Ibid


8. Ibid.


13. Ibid, p-116


15. Sengupta S. 2009, op.cit. p- ix


22. ibid

23. ibid

24. Prof Nibaran Chandra Laskar (born February 1908 - 8 January 1967) was an Indian politician belonging to the Indian National Congress. He was elected to the Lok Sabha, from the Cachar constituency in 1952 and 1957. Laskar was also a member of the Constituent Assembly of India.

25. parliamentofindia.nic.in