CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

To accomplish the primary objective, the study tries to provide a detailed overview of the tea garden labourers of Assam, with special reference to the tea gardens of upper Assam in respect to their efforts for asserting ethnic identity. Through this study an effort has been taken to accomplish six specific objectives. With regard to the first objective, a description of the origin and the socio-economic life of the tea garden labourers living inside the tea garden of Assam has been made in the second and third chapters. The study of origin or the growth of tea garden labourers and their social and economic life is an essential condition for a study which aims to enquiry about their ethnic identity. Ethnicity is usually an inherited status based on the society in which one lives. Without having knowledge about the origin or ancestral history, it is not possible to identify the membership of an ethnic group. The data provided in the second and third chapters help the researcher to have knowledge about the growth and development of tea garden labourers’ society in Assam and about their socio-economic life. Moreover, these data help to analyze the process of ethnicity formation in case of the tea garden labourers of Assam. Prof Pakem (1990), mentioned about three stages of ethnicity formation- dormant, calmed and active ethnicity. Data provided in these chapters help the researcher to examine the growth and development of these stages in case of tea garden labourers. During these stages level of ethnic awareness and behavioral pattern of the people may be affected by various factors, such as social and geographical mobility, economic condition, politicians, and other human organizations. 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. Social exclusion leads to social insecurity.
Social exclusion is a multidimensional term that includes social, economic, political and cultural sphere of the society. Therefore, study of these factors, in terms of a brief description of the migration history of the community, settlement and employment methods of the labourers, caste, religion, marital status, family pattern, pattern of marriage, education, occupation, income, indebtedness, land holding, job satisfaction, social participation, and knowledge about origin is indispensable for accomplishing the study.

For achieving the second objective, analysis of the political participation and the voting behaviour of the tea garden labourers of Assam have been made in the fourth chapter. Political participation is important because it has positive influence on the values of democracy and the society; at the same time it has also positive effects on the personal development and attitudes of people. For most individuals, political participation is not an end in itself, but rather a means to influence decision making mechanism. In democracy, this is usually achieved by casting votes for a political party or candidate that is expected to represent their interest in the legislature. With the help of the data provided in the fourth chapter, an attempt has been made to understand to what extent tea garden labourers of Assam is related to various forms of political behaviour. The expectation is that the electoral systems provides better chances for them to become represented in policy making institutions, which leads them to develop more positive attitudes toward the political system as well as stronger motivation to express political demands via conventional means of political engagement, such as voting, volunteering for a political campaign, belonging to activist groups and serving in public offices, staging demonstrations and protests, signing petitions, supporting boycotts and so on.
While analyzing the efforts of the tea garden labourers in asserting their identity, it is indispensible to study about the role of elite section and educated youths to mobilize their people on ethnic line. With regard to the third objective, an analysis of the organizational activities of the tea garden labourers, with special reference to the trade unions, viz, Assam Chah Mazdur Sangha, Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha and students’ organizations, viz. Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association and All Adivasi Students’ Association Assam, has been made in the fifth chapter. Rise of students’ power among the tea garden labourers has been a significant aspect of the post-eighties period of the twentieth century. The elite section and the educated youths of the community have started a revolution for asserting their identity and all around development of their society under two distinct banners i.e Adivasi (AASAA and other Adivasis organizations) and tea tribe (ATTSAA and other tea garden labourers’ organizations) movements. On the other hand, to accomplish the fourth objective, this chapter also includes an analysis of the role of governments (Central and State) in policy making for redressing the grievances of the labourers as well as in asserting their identity. The demand for Scheduled Tribes status has been a long standing demand of the tea garden labourers of Assam. So, it felt necessary to examine the responses of the governments in this respect.

Sixth Chapter is designed to highlight the fifth objective of the study, which deals with the ethnic identity of the tea garden labourers of Assam. In spite of developing a sense of affinity through mutual adjustment and often presenting themselves to the outside world as single community, i.e. tea garden labourers’ community, significant differences exist amongst them in case of language, religion, and culture. On the other hand development of tea tribe identity and Adivasi identity and their gradual assimilation into the Assamese society have become a threat to the
formation of a single identity of the tea garden labourers. Keeping this aspect in mind, an attempt has been made in this chapter to understand the perception of tea garden labourers towards the politics of identity prevailing in Assam and their response to it.

In the concluding chapter (seventh chapter), a deduction is made on the basis the data provided in the main body of the thesis. To accomplish the sixth objective an attempt has been made in the chapter to explore the constraints on the way of their ethnic identity assertion and chalk out the measures to get rid of the obstacles they faced in establishing their identity.

The present study springs up several conclusions regarding the identity consciousness of tea garden labourers, their perception of ethnic identity, their responses to the rapid socio-political transformations around them, and emergence of organizations to protect the interest of tea garden labourers and to assert their identity.

In the 19th century, during the formative stage of Assam plantation, local people like Singphos, Kacharis, Mataks, Kukis, Nagas, were employed in active assistance of the chiefs of their respective groups. But these arrangements did not prove successful for the colonial planters. Local people were by and large reluctant to take employment in the tea plantations under the surveillance of the colonial planters as they enjoyed a self sufficient economy and their socio-cultural background made them averse to work as tea labourers. Prior to 1860 local labourers in most of the plantations indulged in a number of strikes and revolts. So, the British planters showed unwillingness to employ local people and decided to procure labourers through their agents (Arkattis, Sardars) from outside Assam. They thought that the uprooted labourers would be easier to control and to exploit. Consequently, labourers were recruited from various cultural, linguistic and ethnic groups from other provinces; mainly from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Poverty in their home land and
false promises of less work with high wage ensured the labourers to come with the recruiting agents of the British planter.

Tea garden labourers of Assam represent a legacy of the colonial tea plantation in Assam and they are as a whole, considered to be one of the oldest, largest and important sections of the people of Assam. Unfortunately, they are still living as indentured labourers inside the tea gardens of Assam. Even after independence of the country, their condition has remained the same. They never received proper attention in the developmental process of the state. Previously living in tribal or agrarian society and now working in the plantations, they experienced a complete transformation of values in their new habitat, which is different not only from their previous one but also from the society that prevails in the modern industrial sector. Unhygienic living condition in labourer lines, inadequate facilities (provided by the garden authorities), isolated habitat, low rate of literacy, unemployment, lack of self-respect and identity lead to social insecurity of the tea garden labourers of Assam.

The heterogeneous ethnic groups, while sharing similar experiences in the isolated environment inside the plantations, reveal a complex process of acculturation. This acculturation brings out a process of change from diversity to unity among them. Gradually they were identified as tea garden labourers, and popularly came to be known as the ‘tea tribes’ or ‘Adivasi’ in Assam, a conglomeration of diverse groups, who speak different dialects, practise different customs, and profess different religions. Most of the tea and ex-tea garden labourers living in Assam basically belong to Scheduled Tribes or Castes in their original home lands. But in Assam, they have been deprived of the benefits and privileges as Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes.
In the mid-twentieth century, a tiny section of enlightened person began to emerge from the community with a certain level of formal education. They have played a pioneering role in raising the level of social awareness among the tea garden labourers. Simultaneously, different organizations were formed to protect the interest of the community and to mobilize their people on ethnic lines. The organizations of the tea garden labourers have made a variety of demands before the government, constantly seeking the adequate opportunities in socio-economic aspects, the recognition of tribal status, privileges for the development of Sadri language, permanent land possession, reservation of seats in educational institution, jobs in Government and semi Government departments, preservation of their folk culture and so on. The activities of Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association, All Adivasi Students’ Association of Assam and Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha are significant in this respect.

The present study which is concerned with the identity assertion of the tea garden labourers with special reference to upper Assam, revealed some significant aspects which stand on the way of the tea garden labourers of Assam in asserting their identity. The following are some major findings based on the researcher’s study of the labourers living inside the tea gardens of Assam, the role of the educated youths and enlightened section to improve their socio-economic conditions as well as asserting their identity, and the responses of the governments (Central and State) to protect their interest.
MAJOR FINDINGS

Tea garden labourers of Assam constitute a numerically significant portion of the total population of the state, but their social, economical and educational backwardness impeded them from realizing social and political facilities, which in turn could have led to their overall development.

From the economic point of view, tea garden labourers are in a state of poverty, hardship and suffering. Labourers are employed on daily wage basis as permanent and casual labourers. Besides, teenagers are also employed as adolescents (*Sukra or Sukri*). At present, the wage rate of a labourer is Rs. 115 a day (for both man and woman) and the wage rate of adolescent varies from garden to garden. Generally it is fixed by the garden authority, which is less than the wage of an adult labourer. Now a days, most of the gardens do not appoint such category of the labourers as ‘sukra’ or ‘sukri’. On the other hand, the survey reveals that the children of the same age group are employed as casual labourers in the peak season of the industry. Generally, the permanent labourers are entitled to get the fringe benefits. Except in the rich tea gardens, fringe benefits are not provided to the casual labourers. Middle standard tea gardens provide some of the fringe benefits to the casual labourers, while they are working in the gardens. Casual labourers have to remain jobless during the off season of the industry. Of course, the rich tea gardens like Hoolungoooree Tea Estate of Jorhat District and Koomtai Tea Estate of Golaghat district appoint the casual labourers for the whole year and provide a few benefits to them. On the other hand, the labourers of the tea gardens, nearer to town areas, often go out of the tea gardens in search of work as daily wage earner in the houses of town dwellers or in other places. Possibility of getting work (as daily wage earner) outside the gardens is not certain; often they have to come back home empty handed. The seasonal
appointment of the labourers in the tea gardens creates a seasonal unemployment problem for the casual labourers living inside the gardens of Assam. On the other hand, the economic condition of permanent labourers is not at all satisfactory. Their wages are very low, which is not sufficient to lead a comfortable life or to educate their children or to spend for purchasing commodities even for minimum comfort. They are still leading an unsophisticated and simple way of life. Most of the younger labourers are satisfied with a bicycle and a mobile phone. A pucca house, electrification, a television set, and a mobile phone are their demands or expectations for better life. Their income is not sufficient to run their families smoothly, so they have to remain busy with economic activities exclusively.

Indebtedness is a serious evil factor, which makes the tea garden labourers poorest of the poor. The poor economic condition of the tea garden labourers is largely because of their alcoholic habit. Most of the labourers (male & female) are addicted to alcohol (homemade sulai, laopani, haria). Due to their intoxicating nature, they usually remain absent from their duties, as a result of which they get less wages. Women are also not exception to this habit. Moreover, their alcoholic nature leads to another habit, i.e. borrowing money on interest from money lenders available inside the gardens. Hence, labourers living inside the tea gardens have to engage in economic activities from morning till evening to meet their day to day demands, and they do not get time for other activities relating to social, political and other aspects of their life.

The study also reveals that the chances of having subsidiary occupations in case of tea garden labourers are very few. They are employed in the tea industry as residential labourers, so they do not get any opportunity to do whatever they wish. They have to live inside the tea garden according to the rules and regulations fix by
the authorities of the gardens. On the other hand, they have to keep busy with garden duties from morning to till evening. They hardly get time and space to carry a subsidiary occupation. The agricultural lands which are allotted to them are often taken back by the authorities for tea plantation purpose. The houses allotted to them are also on temporary basis, as it is subjected to the fulfillment of the conditions of the authorities. Thus, tea garden labourers are land less. Though they have been continuing their lives within the tea gardens for generation after generation, they cannot be considered as permanent residents of Assam in the true sense, which is unjustified and a serious threat to assert their identity. Without having permanent land holding, it is very difficult to be recognized as bonafide member of the state.

The present study reveals that the literacy rate of the tea garden labourers is very low and the education provided to them is of poor quality. Illiteracy among the tea garden labourers is the root cause of their ignorance, superstitious nature, narrowness or inferiority complex, indifferent attitude towards social awareness, alcoholic nature, and high rate of drop out of education of their children. Due to their illiteracy, they are not in a position to avail of the fruits of the Scheduled Tribe status. Possibility is that in the course of time, the real beneficiaries of the Scheduled Tribe status might be the members of the ex-tea garden labourers’ community. Due to poor economic condition and isolated environment of tea gardens, the education level of labourers is very low. Children of the tea garden labourers prefer to work in the tea gardens instead of going to school located several kilometers away from the gardens. Inside the garden, only primary level of education is available for them. On the other hand, the standard of education is very poor. Most of the parents are illiterate and their minds are preoccupied by economic constraints, so they always think from the economic point of view. They consider higher education as luxury for them, because, labourers
working in the tea industry get comparatively less wages than those of the labourers working in other industries of the state. Moreover, price hike of essential commodities make their life miserable. They cannot afford to provide education for their children. Another reason that stands on the way of getting education is the isolated location of the tea gardens. Only a few tea gardens are easily accessible. But most of the gardens are located in the outskirts of the town areas. Though primary level and Middle English school level of education are available inside the tea garden for the children, but achieving higher education is a very hard task for them. Children have to go several kilometers for studying in high schools and colleges. Hence, it is very costly for them. Unlike other industries the job availability inside the tea gardens for the labourers, irrespective of their communities, sexes tempt them to be engaged in the tea industry. After attaining the age of 14 years, the children are engaged in the tea garden jobs as adolescent labourers and entitled to get some fringe benefits. The study reveals that children of labourers belonging to the age group of 15 to 25 years are employed in the tea gardens. The children of this age group are generally school or college going students. Whereas, tea garden labourers’ children are engaged in the tea garden activities, which resulted in the increase of dropout rate in their school, before reaching the level of High school Living Certificate Examination. Most of the labourers of this category are employed as casual labourer in the peak season of the industry. Hence, they have to remain jobless during the slack season of the industry. It is a very common scene inside the tea garden that most of the children are busy in playing marbles on the roads, youths (during the slack season) are gambling with their fellow friend. Even the teenage girls are found to be very fickle minded; usually they like to go out of the home at any time and roam here and there. As a result of which they have become a vulnerable section of tea garden labourer society. They easily fall
in the trap of abductors or mobile trafficking. The root cause of this problem is their illiteracy. Illiterate parents are not able to guide their children properly or leave the habit of drinking or encourage the children for going to school and so on.

From the present study it is also revealed that the social awareness among the tea garden labourers is appalling. They are not interested in these activities due to several reasons, such as, paucity of time in their busy schedule of garden duties, poor economic condition, lack of interest, and lack of social and cultural organizations inside the gardens etc. Occupational and household engagements prevent them from being engaged in social activities, as they have to work in the tea plantations or factories for the whole day and even at night (in the factory). Every worker has to complete a prefixed amount of work or ‘nirikh’ duties in a day. Otherwise they are not entitled to get full wages for the day. Women labourers are found overburdened by dual duties. After coming from day long garden duties, they are engaged in their household activities. Hence, no room left in their life for any social activities. Similarly, poor economic condition prevents them from being engaged in such activities. They are appointed in the tea gardens on ‘no work no wage bases’, so they cannot avoid their garden duties at any cost. As a result of which they are less interested in social activities. Lack of social or cultural or other organizations inside tea gardens is another significant drawback in this regard.

Another significant finding of the study is that the tea garden labourers belonging to the present generation do not have knowledge about their place of origin or migration history. Their ancestors were illiterate, so they could not keep any written records about their past. It has only verbally passed from generation to generation. Knowledge about ancestry is important to understand the ethnicity of a person. So, this aspect of tea garden labourers is not favourable for their efforts of identity
assertion. Whereas, the history of emigrated labourers in Assam is hundred and half century old, and they have been living in the tea gardens of Assam for four generations.

Another notable finding of the study is that the social, economic and political condition of the ex-tea garden labourers is better than that of the labourers living inside the tea gardens. The labourers who have been living inside the tea gardens are categorized as tea garden labourers. On the other hand, ‘time expired labourers’ during the colonial rule and some others who could not adjust themselves in the plantation environment decided to leave the tea gardens and settled down in the nearby villages or ‘bastis’. They are known as ex-tea garden labourers. As they have been living outside the gardens, they have got the chances to communicate with other communities of Assam. The educated section of ex-tea garden labourers has gradually started living in the urban or sub urban areas. They can understand the government plans and schemes, the reservation policies and so on. On the other hand, tea garden labourers living inside the tea gardens have no idea regarding the government policies, schemes and benefits of reservation policy or inclusion within the Scheduled Tribes list etc. They are indifferent to these issues made by the tea garden organizations of Assam. In consequence of which, the efforts of identity assertion under the guidance of tea garden labourers’ organizations have lost its strength.

One of the significant findings is that the tea garden labourer society is lacking in the social values in general and family value in particular. Shifting of occupational pattern of the emigrant labourers in tea industry of Assam from tribal or agrarian to industrial has compelled them to lead a mechanical life, because they were settled by the British planters as nuclear families. In joint families it is very common that the family values are transferred from grandparents to grand children, which is lacking in
nuclear families inside the tea gardens. Alcoholic parents are not in a position to
discuss the family matters with their children. Inside the tea gardens they are
barricaded by the planters in such a manner that no outsider can come to them or they
can go outside of the tea gardens. From morning till evening they have to work in the
tea plantations, they hardly get any time for other activities of the society.

The level of political awareness among the tea garden labourers is found low.
Due to illiteracy and ignorance of the labourers, they are always exploited by the trade
union leaders. Their trade union leaders serve as the sole representatives of the tea
garden labourers in the political sphere, become more interested in winning elections
than in imparting the workers some degree of social and political awareness. During
the election period the leaders of the political parties generally try to collect people
from the tea garden areas to attend their meetings and even hire vehicles to carry the
people from the tea gardens to the assigned places, where meetings are held. Most of
the casual labourers like to attend such kind of meetings as they get free meal with an
amount of money for attending the meetings. Generally casual labourers of the ‘sick’
or ‘poor’ tea gardens are involved in such kind of activities. In other words,
unemployed labourers are hired by the members of political parties or other
organizations (as reported by the labourers), to increase the numbers of members’
presence in any demonstrations, rallies, meetings, and such other activities. Such
category of labourers possesses a different attitude towards the collective activities of
the political parties or other organizations or even towards tea garden labourers’
organizations. They try to measure their benefits of co-operating in such activities
from the economic point of view. This is harmful for the tea garden labourer
organizations. Without the sincere participation of the members the success of tea
garden labourers’ movement is impossible.
Participation in the Freedom movement was one of the most significant aspects of tea garden labourers of Assam. There were many 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 plantation enclaves, tea garden labourers were involved directly or indirectly in the National Movement. During the Movement, many of them lost their life, many of them were imprisoned, but they did not get proper recognition from the sovereign government of the Country. Since the formation of independent Government in India, literate section of the community has been participating in the political affairs as legislators in the State as well as Central level.

The rise of students’ power among the tea garden labourers has been a significant aspect of the post-eighties period of the twentieth century. The Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association and All Adivasi Students’ Association of Assam constantly pressurize the government for the fulfillment of their demands, but the governments (Central and State) have not paid adequate attention in this regard or shown any interest to fulfill their demands, such as, demand for Scheduled Tribe status, reservation of seats in the legislature, reservation of seats in various educational institutions, reservation of jobs in the government and semi-government departments, bringing about social reforms, specially to abolish the superstitions and harmful social customs, illiteracy, ignorance, drunkenness, etc. Of course, a few short lasting assurances are given by the State government and Central Government to these organizations, which have provided temporary relief to the tea garden labourers of Assam. After every uprising of these organizations, Government tries to abate the intensity of their insurrections with certain assurances of fulfilling their demands,
without any definite or concrete decisions. It is worth mentioned here that, the role of Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association in the Brahmaputra valley appears to be significant, but in many areas of Borak valley, All Adivasi Students’ Association of Assam yields considerable influence. On the other and, the dimensions of inclusion of the members of both the organizations are also different. Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association includes all the tea and ex-tea garden labourers as ‘Tea Tribe’, irrespective of their communities and origins, which bestow a larger social coverage and political importance to it. On the other hand, All Adivasi students’ Association of Assam includes only the Adivasi labourers brought by the colonial rulers to work in the tea plantations and to work in the construction of railways, roads, mines, etc. As a result, tea garden labourers are found to be divided into two sections i.e. ‘Adivasi’ and ‘Tea tribes’. The unification of tea garden labourers under different names causes difficulty for asserting their identity as a whole. On the other hand, administrative authorities have taken the chance of delaying to fulfill their demands, specially enlisting them as Scheduled Tribes on the plea that all the constituting communities of tea garden labourers are not hailing from Adivasi origin or the name ‘Tea Tribes’ is unconstitutional. If only the Adivasi people are granted (re granted) the Scheduled Tribes status, then it is obvious that tea garden labourers will be divided into two sections, Adivasi tea garden labourers and non Adivasi labourers, which will create another unforeseen problem for the tea garden labourers of Assam and its repercussion may affect the tea industry of Assam as a whole, and the economy of the state as well as the country.

The prevalence of Assamese language and culture among the tea garden labourers and their gradual assimilation into Assamese society has become a threat to the formation of ‘Tea Tribe’ identity. The study reveals that a section of the tea garden
labourers have been largely assimilated with Assamese culture while retaining some of their cultural practices, such as observation of bihu festivals, performing ‘bhawona’ and ‘husori’, ‘nau-khuwa’ (harvest festival) etc. The women of this section like to wear ‘mekhela-sador’ and men wear ‘dhuti-kamij’ and ‘gamucha’. They communicate with their family members in Assamese. The non-tribal communities like Oriyas and Karmakars can be included in this category. On the other hand, tribal labourers are seen to be less assimilated with the local communities and more protective of their separate cultural identity. Some of the labourers are found to have embraced the Assamese form of Vaishnavism under the influence of Assamese population. The contribution of Assam Sahitya Sabha to bring the tea garden labourers into the mainstream socio-cultural life of Assamese society is significant.

On the other hand, labourers, living inside tea gardens are not aware of the activities of these organizations. The primary units of the students’ organizations (except Trade Union) are not actively working inside the tea gardens of Assam. Only Trade Unions, particularly Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha and Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha have been working actively inside the tea gardens. However, these trade unions are primarily concerned with the economic aspect of the labourers. Absence of active wings or units of other organizations, at the tea garden level or grass root level is one of the significant drawbacks of the organizational structure of the tea garden labourers’ organizations. On the other hand, the leaders of these organizations never maintained close relationship with the labourers (except a few) living inside the tea gardens, as a result, labourers are not aware of the activities of these organizations. As such, the agitations of the tea garden labourers’ organizations remain far away from a mass revolution of the tea garden labourers of Assam, rather it can be considered as uprising of Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association or All
Adivasi Students’ Association of Assam. Hence, the efforts of the organizations at the grass root level to assert the tea garden labourers’ identity and to develop the society have lost its intensity. Though, one or two members of these organizations are the inhabitants of the tea gardens; they are mostly children of the tea garden labourers. Even then they have not made any efforts to make the labourers living inside the tea gardens aware of their activities. On the other hand, the leaders of these organizations do not visit them regularly; they occasionally come to them to seek their support or presence in the rallies, and other demonstrations, where large gathering is required to show their strength. The occasional visit of the leaders and the members of the tea garden labourers’ organizations is one of the major factors which make the labourers indifferent to these organizations. The activities of the students’ organizations in grass root level are insignificant. The expectation level of the labourers from these organizations was expressed before the researcher in a vague manner. The tea garden labourers’ organizations have not yet tried to touch the hearts and minds of the labourers living inside the tea gardens of Assam.

The educated and elite section of tea garden labourers have played a pioneering role in raising the level of social awareness among the tea garden labourers and claim to be united as a homogenous group with the development of their lingua franca (Sadri), common festivals (Durga puja, Kali puja, Holi, Dewali, etc), common folk dance (jhumur), Common habitat (tea plantation), and common economic condition etc. But in actual practice to prove their homogeneousness they need a common identity, which is possible with a common community name. In this regard, the labourers are in a state of confusion. They are confused whether they should be recognized themselves as ‘Tea Tribes’ or ‘Adivasi’ or ‘Chah Banua’ or ‘Bagania’ or ‘Chah Baganor Assomia’ and so on.
There were a number of legislations, passed by the British Government during the pre-independence era and by the Indian government in post independence period. The objectives of the legislations made by the British government were to protect the interest of the colonial planters while they were trying to bring the labourers from other parts of the country to the tea plantations of Assam. However, after independence, Government passed several Acts for the elevation of the socio-economic conditions of the tea garden labourers as well as to protect their interest. Significant Acts are The Tea Plantation Labour Act, 1951 and Assam Tea Plantation Provident Fund Schemes of 1952, Pension Scheme 1967, Family Pension Scheme 1972, Deposit Linked Insurance Scheme 1984, etc. These are surely certain positive steps taken by the Government to dispense justice to the labourers living inside the tea gardens of Assam. Although, some of them have come to the fore front by climbing up these ladders provided by the Government, but majority of the tea garden labourers are not aware of the provisions of these Acts. These legislations are able to provide a little amount of relief to the tea garden labourers in their socio-economic aspects. Due to lack of proper implementing mechanism, these legislations have become ‘scare crow’ for the tea garden labourers of Assam. The provisions of Plantation Labour Act are not yet fully implemented by the tea gardens’ authorities. Though, in the rich tea gardens, these provisions are implemented to some extent, but these are not up to the mark. In medium standard tea gardens, these provisions are implemented in a very loose manner, and in sick tea gardens these are completely violated by the authorities.

A significant finding of the present study is that in the heterogeneous society inside the tea gardens a hierarchy exists on the basis the position of different communities. The pattern of hierarchy developed inside the gardens is unique. Every community has its own interpretation of justifying its rank in the society in terms of
food habits, occupation and customs related to marriage and other socio-religious rituals. Generally beef and pork eaters are considered as the member of the communities belong to the lower stratum of the society. The Orans, kharias, Savaras and the Sonporia Mundas are considered to be of lower status by some groups, such as the Kamars, Patirs, Kurmis and a section of Savaras who do not take beef and pork. The traditionally cultivating groups like, Orans, Mundas and Kharias considered themselves socially superior to non-cultivating artisan groups such as weavers, potters and blacksmiths. Lohars, Boraiks, Ghasis, Mahilis and Turis were originally non-agriculturist. Non-converted Hindu labourers considered themselves higher than their Christian counterparts and do not dine with them. They consider the conversion to Christianity as an act of ritual pollution. Inter-religion marriage between the Christians and their non-Christian counterparts is very limited. Converted Christians take beer, pork and beef, so they are segregated from non-Christian brethren. Tantis, Tashas, Kurmis, Karmakars, Rajputs and many other groups have considered themselves as member of communities belong to the higher stratum of the society and some others like, Teli, Robidas, Julha and many others are considered as the people of lower stratum. The people belonging to the communities having higher position in the society do not like to dine with the people belonging to the lower stratum. Marital relation between higher and lower group is considered as sin. However, this aspect of the labourers’ society prevents them from being united as one community and hinders the growth of oneness among them with an objective to fight for asserting their identity.

The acceptance of *Sadri* as the lingua franca is not 100 pc, which is identified through the present study as one of the significant constraints in case of unification of tea garden labourers into one community. Tea garden labourers are tri-lingual people.
They speak their own languages (mother tongue), Sadri and Assamese with their family members or own community people.

Similarly, controversy exists regarding the acceptance of Jhumur dance as the only folk dance of the labourers living inside the tea gardens of Assam in general and Upper Assam in particular, as different communities have their own dance forms, such as, Kharia dance, Oriya dance, Chahu dance and so on. So the efforts made by different organizations of tea garden labourers to mobilize their people as homogeneous community or group, by considering Jhumur dance as their folk dance, is wanting in strength.

They still preserve a heterogeneous culture and celebrate numerous festivals and ritual ceremonies separately only with the members of their own community. Prevalence of different community related festivals along with varied dance forms, languages and dialects prevent the tea garden labourers from uniting under the banner of one community. Of course, they are recognized by other communities of the greater Assam as one community, i.e, ‘Chah Janagoosthi’ or ‘Chah Janajati’ or ‘Tea Tribes’. Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association, All Adivasi Students’ Association of Assam and many others, have been trying to organize them as ‘Tea Tribes’ or ‘Adivasi’. But in actual practice, they are not yet united into a single whole.

From the present study it is revealed that due to illiteracy, ignorance and lack of proper leadership tea garden labourers are not in a position to avail of the fruits of the Scheduled Tribe status. Possibility is that in the course of time, the real beneficiaries of the Scheduled Tribe status might be the members of the ex-tea garden labourers’ community.

As already proved by the intensive field study, the life of the labourers is surrounded by various problems relating to different aspects of their life. Hence, some
concrete and fruitful suggestions are put forward to mitigate the problems and to help the tea garden labourers in asserting their identity in near future.

The Government of India has already passed several Acts for the elevation of the socio economic conditions of the tea garden labourers of Assam. These are surely certain positive steps taken by the Government to dispense justice to the labourers living inside the tea gardens of Assam. But majority of the tea garden labourers are not aware of the provisions of these Acts. So, it should be the part of duties of the Government to spread knowledge among the labourers living inside the tea gardens by adopting effective measures in this regard. Government should constitute committee entrusting the duty to do the same. Efforts should be made to popularize the schemes or to make tea garden labourers aware of the Government’s schemes by advertising these through Mass media, hanging pictured hoardings inside and outside the tea gardens, so that, illiterate labourers can understand the provisions of the schemes and able to avail its benefits.

Government should take effective measures to compel the tea garden authorities to abide by the provisions of the Plantation Labour Acts. Instead of going through the papers submitted by the tea garden authorities regarding the implementation of the provisions of the Acts, Government should inspect the activities of the tea gardens. In case of the violation of the provisions of Acts, the garden authorities should be punished. Moreover, older provisions of the Acts implemented by the Government should be amended to meet the demands of the time.

Government should try to improve the environment of the schools located inside the tea gardens by undertaking measures like, improving the infrastructure of the schools, increasing the number of teachers, upgrading the school from lower to higher level, frequent supervision by the inspectors of the school, award with financial
aid for best school, best teacher, and best student, audio-visual teaching for the students, teachers’ training programmes, night school for the adult labourers etc. On the other hand, there should be a ban on the employment of adolescent labourers of above 14 years and below eighteen years in the tea industry, because the children of this age are either school going or college going students. In the tea industry, the children of this age get employment during the peak season, in the tea garden activities or factory duties (in a minimum wage). As result, the children of this age get lured by the tea garden’s job as it is easily available for them and say good-bye to their education. Government should take measures to prevent the employment of such kind of labourers by implementing laws specially for the protection of the children of tea garden labourers and government inspection in this regard is also essential to prevent the garden authorities from employing such labourers.

Establishment of libraries by the garden authorities inside gardens will be a fruitful measure to enhance the interest of the children and even the adults for education. During the survey it was seen that community halls were built by the gardens’ authorities for recreation of the tea garden labourers. It is indeed appreciative. It will be very helpful for the children, if the garden authorities provide books and selves and make arrangements for keeping these books and selves in one corner of the community halls or built separate libraries and appoint educated youths of the community as librarians. Book has enchanting power, it can attract anybody. So, the children, who are usually found playing ‘marble game’ inside the community hall (when it is not used for other purpose), can be made to play with drawing books, fun books, comics and pictured story books and so on. Thus, they can be attached to books, which surely will help them to grow a habit of reading. Besides, library should
be established anywhere (easily accessible place) inside the gardens or in the schools located in the gardens.

From the present study it is revealed that due to illiteracy, poor economic condition, and busy work schedule of the tea garden, labourers are not in a position to cooperate with their organizations. They are not even aware of the benefits of enlisting as Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes, and have no idea regarding the reservation policy of the Government. Therefore, it should be the duty of tea garden labourers’ organizations to make them aware of these, and prepare them to avail themselves of the benefits of government policies and schemes. The students’ organizations or other organizations should organize awareness camps within the tea gardens.

Economic backwardness is one of the major hindrances in the life of tea garden labourers living inside the tea gardens. The meager income from the tea garden job is not sufficient to fulfill the basic demands of their families, which is further worsened by their indebtedness. Tea garden labourers are trapped by the money lenders, readily available inside the tea gardens. A major amount of their wages goes to the pockets of the money lenders; sometimes they even forcefully take the money from the hands of the labourers. Of course, it is also common that after getting the wages some of the labourers try to avoid the money lenders and flee away stealthily. In this case, garden authorities can help the labourers by issuing salary card for the payment of the labourers as done in the Hoolungooree Tea Estate of Jorhat district. By doing this, a habit of savings can be developed among the labourers and the habit of borrowing can be reduced. Moreover, labourers can be encouraged by the ‘babus’ or such other persons for depositing money in the Post Office and Banks in Recurring Deposit Account. Garden authorities can contract the banks or post office in this regard and invite them for the purposes.
Organizational structure of the tea garden labourers should be strong enough inside the tea gardens and labourers living at the grass root levels should be involved in the organizations. They should not be used by the organization for the purposes of rallies or to increase the ‘heads of gathering’ or other demonstrations only. They should be involved in social activities, such as, observation of alcohol free day, no smoking day, tobacco free day, road cleaning day, home cleaning day and child care day and so on. Regular activities for the development of the tea garden labourer society should be undertaken within the tea gardens. Garden authorities will not get any chance to oppose in such observations, as by performing such activities, a healthy environment can be developed inside the gardens, which will be welcome by all. On the other hand, to have a strong hold among the labourers, the organizational structure should be strengthened at grass root level. Through the strong grass root level units, Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association, All Adivasi Students’ Association of Assam or such other organizations will get the chances to secure the faith and allegiance from the labourers living inside tea gardens. Beside these, tea garden labourers’ organization should organize programmes for the development of the labourer society within the tea gardens. In such programmes women should be involved and women wings should be formed within the tea gardens. Of course, it was informed by the leaders of the tea garden organizations that their access inside the tea gardens is not very easy. Members living inside the tea gardens have to face problems while trying to mobilize the people inside the gardens to protest against exploitations and to demand the fulfillment of basic needs, as labourers are scared of reducing their wages due to such activities. But these are their fundamental rights, and nobody can deprive them from availing these rights.
This study reveals that the tea garden labourers do not like to change their traditional calling in regard to family, religion, race, etc., nor have they acquired formal education to the extent of availing the opportunities to other job avenues. So, they need to change their attitude towards life and also broaden their views. This can be done only by organizing themselves into united groups under the leadership of able and expert persons, so that their hidden potentialities may come out automatically either in this way or that way. To change the mindset of the labourers, education is must. For the protection of their identity they must be educated otherwise they will remain as they were before, under the surveillance of the tea planters as indentured labourers.

On the other hand, the tea garden labourers living at the grass root level are still not aware of the circumstances prevailing in their surroundings due to the issue of their Scheduled Tribes status. They are still confining to their daily work routines and passing through an indentured labourers’ life inside tea gardens of Assam. They are preoccupied by social and economic constraints; hence, no rooms are left for other things even for their ethnic identity. Scheduled Tribes status alone cannot make their lives comfortable, until and unless they become educated. Literacy is the only way to rescue them from their miserable present to a prosperous future. If the effort to assert their identity is going on with full support from the whole society, there will surely come a day when the tea garden labourers will feel the need of singing the song of liberty and to glorify their identity as a community living in the tea gardens of Assam.

**Scope for further Research**

This study opens up new grounds for further research. Further studies can address the following areas to have more perceptions on the subject.
a. Studies can be done on the relevance of Scheduled Tribes’ status of the emigrant labourers living inside the tea gardens of Assam.

b. Further studies can be extended to the voting behaviour of tea garden labourers of Assam.

c. A similar study can be conducted on the labourers’ unrest and social insecurity of the tea garden labourers.

d. Studies can be carried on the heterogeneous groups living in common habitat, having different demographic characteristics pertaining to their rites and rituals and maintenance of ethnic boundary.

e. Similarly, further research might concentrate to the Language retention and change amongst the emigrant tea garden labourers of Assam.

f. Another interesting dimension will be to find out the trends of assimilation of tea garden labourers’ community to the Assamese culture.

g. An engrossing area of study might be the socio-religious life of the tea garden labourers of Assam.

h. Similarly, studies can be carried on the working of the students’ organizations of tea garden labourers at the grass root level.