

**The Impact of Trade Unions on Tea Plantation Workers:
A Study of Dibrugarh District of Assam**

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the research work embodied in the dissertation titled “**Impact of Trade Unions on Tea Plantation Workers: A study of Dibrugarh District of Assam**” has been carried out by me at the Department of Sociology, Sikkim University, under the supervision of Dr. Swati Akshay Sachdeva.

In keeping with the scientific tradition, due acknowledgment has been made wherever work done by others has been utilized.

Statement verified

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Certificate

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “**Impact of Trade Unions on Tea Plantation Workers: A study of Dibrugarh District of Assam**” submitted to the Sikkim University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Social Sciences embodies the result of *bonafide* research work carried out by Prithiraj Borah under my guidance and supervision. No part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree, diploma, associated-ship, fellowship.

All the assistance and help received during the course of the investigation have been duly acknowledge by her.

Dr. Swati Akshay Sachdeva

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The responsibility for the arguments and errors in the entire dissertation rests solely with me.

Prithiraj Borah

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Abbreviations

AASA: All Adibasi Student Association

ABCMS: Akhil Bharatiya Cha Mazdoor Sangha

ACMS: Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangha

AITUC: All India Trade Union Congress

APCC: Assam Pradesh Congress Committee

ASCSS: Assam Sangrami Cha Shramik Sangha

ASSAM: Assam Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Mission

ATTSA: Assam Tea Tribes Student Association

BPL: Below Poverty Line

CITU: Centre of Indian Trade Union

CPI: The Communist Party of India

CPR: Community Property Resources

CSP: Congress Socialist Party

FAOSTAT: Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations

INTUC: Indian National Trade Union Congress

IPL: Indian Penal Court

KII: Key Informant Interviews

MNC: Multi-National Company

MWA: Minimum Wage Act

NSS: National Sample Survey

PLA: Plantation Labour Act

PLU: Plantation Labour Unions

TBI: Tea Board of India

TE: Tea Estate

TGC: Tea Garden Community

TRA: Tea research Association

TSI: Tea Statistics of India

WLSR: Waste Land Settlement Rules

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Chapter 1: Introduction:

1.1: Background:

Tea is one of the oldest industries in India and today it enjoys one of the biggest industries in the country. More than a million workers in India are directly employed in the tea plantations and manufacturing industries (Misra, 1986). India's place in the world tea market is unquestionably very high. The leading provinces in respect of tea industry in India are Assam and West Bengal. The area devoted for this purpose in Assam is 270,163 ha in 2002 (Baruah, 2002). Tea is produced in some other provinces like Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. But, in fact the plantation of tea is practically restricted to the table land of Assam with its two adjacent districts Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri of West Bengal, and to the elevated regions of Malabar Coast and Nilgiri regions of South India (Selogman, 1957). The origin of tea plantation in India can be traced as back as to 1774. When China tea seeds began to arrive in India, Warren Hastings, the Governor General of India, selected them and sent to George Bogle, British emissary in Bhutan. In 1815 Colonel Latter noticed the tea drinking habits of Assam tribes. Very surprisingly, it took some 18 years for the recognition of this Assam tea to be genuine and indigenous variety. This probably leads some people to claim that the home of this shrub is the province of Assam from where it spread to China in the 3rd century A. D., and to Europe by the Dutch and to England around 1645 (Baruah, 2008).

Robert Bruce, merchant and soldier of fortune, discovered the tea plant in 1823 during his visit to Rongpur, where he was imprisoned by the Burmese (Bhuyan, 1974). A Singpho chief furnished Bruce with some plants. In 1824, Robert Bruce gave some plants to his brother C.A. Bruce who handed them over to David Scott. Scott in turn gave a few specimens to the Botanical Garden, Calcutta. The discovery of tea plant in Assam enabled the East India Company to develop trade, which China had hitherto monopolized, the first experimental tea estate was established at Chabua in Assam in 1837. Then the Assam Company was accordingly formed in England in 1839 with a capital of Rs. 5 lakh. The Assam Company with its headquarters in Nazira is the oldest commercial tea company of Assam, which is still functioning. The second company was formed in 1859 as the Jorhat

Tea Company and even today, its central office is at Jorhat The India Tea Association started in Calcutta in 1900 the biggest research center of tea in the world, now situated in Jorhat. In 1904, a laboratory was shifted to Tocklai (Jorhat) and was renamed as Tocklai Experimental Station. In 1964, the experimental station became Tea Research Association (TRA) (Enquirer, 2002).

The first Indian to start planting of tea was an Assamese nobleman Maniram Dutta Barma, popularly known as Maniram Dewan. He was the Dewan of the Assam Company until he resigned in 1845 to start his own tea plantation. However, the British could not tolerate that a 'native' would go for tea plantation competing at par with them and put many obstacles (Barua, 1993). Maniram Dutta Barua was a person of firm determination. . He established two estates, one was Cinnamara near Jorhat and the other was Senglung (now Singlo). But the British government hanged him in 1858 for taking part in 1857 mutiny (Sarma, 2013). Before his execution, Dewan exhorted the Assamese people to look after the golden tea bushes of his two tea estates. Maniram Dewan was not only the one to discover or the first to have brought tea growing in Assam which was noticed by the Britishers, but was also the first to start tea plantation on individual basis and the first martyr for India's freedom from North East India and tea's first martyr (Dutta, 1992). After his execution, the two tea estates were confiscated by the British and sold in auction. George Williamson was the purchaser who got the tea estates at a very nominal price (Baruah, 1989).

Assam's tea industry is dependent on about 30-40 lakhs of the 'tea tribes' that is present and past tea garden laborers who are estimated to be approximately 60 lakhs in Assam (Fernandes, 2003). Almost all of them were brought to Assam as indentured labourers by the East India Company from 1830's through 1920's, mostly from the Santhal Parganas district of Bihar (now in Jharkhand state). The descendents of these labourers are now called tea tribes (Dasgupta, 1981). The tea tribes are the backbone of the Assam's tea industry. The tea tribes are found mainly in the districts of Darrang, Sonitpur, Nagaon, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Cachar, Karimganj, Tinsukia. People from the Singpho, Boro, Moran and Kachari tribes are also involved in growing and harvesting of tea (Behal, 2006). The tea tribes of Assam are among the most backward and exploited tribes in India, though their new generation is comparatively educated and now it has few intellectuals and

professionals in various fields. The tea tribes, being labourers, live in villages inside tea estates (established by tea planters). These tea estates are located in interior places and this contributes to the backwardness and exploitation of them by the tea planters. The workers in a way, have to live with the basic facilities provided by the tea-planters. Violence and agitation of labourers against the management is common, where the state machinery normally protects the tea planters (Sahu, 2004). Lack of educational facilities, poverty, addiction of males to country-beer, poor standard of living and health facilities are the basic problems of their life. There are instances when tea planters were not even given the lifesaving drugs when workers are dying because of epidemics (Misra, 2007-08).

1.2 Statement of the problem:

By official count, around 12% of Indian tribals lives in the North East, but they do not include the plantation workers who are Munda, Oraon, Santhal and the other tribals of Jharkhand origin. They are included among what are popularly called the Tea tribes. Their exclusion is a sign of subordination, their exploitive situation and their low status makes them different from both the Jharkhand tribals and their counterparts in North Bengal whose ancestors too came from Jharkhand (Fernandes, 2003). They were bought to Assam by the British government giving them false assurance regarding easy work, ideal condition of work, better pay and unlimited land for cultivation. These factors motivated them to migrate to Assam. Historical studies point to the fact that there was a process of exploitation and subordination among the tea garden workers in the colonial period. After reaching the tea states, the migrant labourer's mobility was restricted within the boundary of the tea garden and factories. They were completely isolated from the outside world. Gradually the migrant workers realized that it was all false assurances of good pay and better facilities and that their labour was being exploited for massive profit gains by the tea planters (Mallick & Duara, 2012) . The workers fought back at the individual level, the forms of struggle varied from absconding and occasional litigation to strikes and violent mass attacks on the planters. However, there was lack of unity among the tea garden workers. Since all these revolts were organized at individual level, collective consciousness among the tea garden workers was missing. According to Amalendu Guha after their revolt against the British government, the Assam Labour and Emigration Act 1915 was passed where,

further recruitment of plantation workers through thikedari system was made unlawful (Guha, 1984). Their resistance and protest brought some new perspectives to them. However, because of lack of unity among themselves, the tea garden workers started collaborating with the Assamese people to form trade unions.

This study tries to understand the impact of the trade unions on the lives of the tea garden workers. Also, this study tries to find out whether the trade unions have a future in fulfilling the demands of the tea garden workers, that is, will the continuation of the trade unions movements generate change or will it remain static among the tea garden workers?

But the fact that tea garden labourers are being treated as bonded labourers even in the twenty-first century raises serious concern about the identity and rights of these workers. In last 150 years, the tea community in Assam has received less attentions. Studies and research have been conducted on the early phases of the tea industry, which highlighted the exploited situations of the tea garden workers in the colonial era. With regard to the impact of the trade union movements upon the tea garden workers, research has been done which focuses on socio-economic factors. This study tried to understand the reasons behind their exploitative statues of the tea workers even in the present time. The proposed study also explored the impact of the trade unions on the lives of the tea workers. This research tried to add more to the existing literature and also makes an attempt to bridge the research gap. This proposed research also tries to draw some academic attention to the impact of the trade unions in the present conditions of the tea garden workers.

1.3 Review of Literature:

Review of literature is a major ingredient of the research work on which the researcher has to rely to understand and analyze the subject of research. Number of Books, journal articles, newspaper articles, project reports confining to the areas and concerning the objectives of the study were reviewed. The review of literature for this study has been divided into three parts,

- 1) First part focuses on the historical migration of the plantation workers in Assam.
- 2) In the second part studies on the the uprising of the workers against the authorities were reviewed.

- 3) Lastly review was also done on the concept of trade unions and how they came to exist in the tea gardens of Assam.

Lastly, on the basis of existing literature the research gaps were identified.

1.3.1 Plantation workers migration in Assam:

The term migration refers to the movement of people, as individuals or groups, from one place to the other. Migration is an old story. For thousands of years, people have migrated in search of food, survive, conquer frontiers, and colonize new territories, escape from war zones or political turmoil, and look for new and more rewarding and exciting opportunities (Davis 1974; Diamond 1997; Hirschman 2005). There are several factors, which push people to migrate. These reasons may be economical, social or political. Sociologists, demographers and geographers have focused their attention on the study of migration in order to understand the implications of a certain type of the movement of people one place to another. Migration results in multi-dimensional changes in the population composition ethnic, ethno lingual, religious, demographic, cultural and economic (Chandna, 1986).

Sociologists have long been interested in theorizing about different types of societies—from Ferdinand Tönnies’s dichotomy of “community” and “society” to Émile Durkheim’s “mechanic solidarity” and “organic solidarity.” The former being the more traditional society, is characterized by more intimate relations among members—that is, people in the group know each other well. Decisions in these communities were often made by village or clan leaders rather than collectively. In contrast, in the modern societies, it is impossible to know all the people in the community, and decisions concerning the welfare of community members are more likely to be made jointly in one way or another. The founders of sociology clearly captures the major trends of social change and transformation over time; what was not made explicit was that underlying this transition from a traditional to a modern society, there is also a story of migration. As cities become centers of economic activities, there is also an increase in rural to urban migration. Urban communities are commonly much larger than villages, and secrecy is a major feature of urban society (Liang, 2006).

In his treatise on “Perpetual Peace”, philosopher Immanuel Kant (1795) argued that all ‘world citizens’ should have the right to free movement, a right which he grounded in

humankind's common ownership of the earth (Bohman, 1997). Migration is at the heart of sociological concerns. From August Comte to Emile Durkheim to Karl Marx, all these thinkers have been interested in the movement of people. Durkheim for example, was concerned with the break-up of rural solidarity and the consequent migration of the cities. In contrast to sociologist like Comte and Durkheim, who described migration in peaceful, evolutionary terms, Karl Marx's theories have come to see migration as a more violent process. Displacing the individuals from the soil for industrial purposes came to be seen as brutal practices. For example, Marx wrote, "In the sphere of agriculture, modern industry has a more revolutionary effect than elsewhere, for this reason, it annihilates peasant, the bulwark of the old society, and replaces him by the wage-labourer" (Marx, 1847). The wage laborers in England that Marx was referring to then were migrants from rural areas. There is a reciprocal relationship between migration and development. Migration is driven by economic development. Economic development in urban areas generates the demand for labour, but in rural areas makes many peasants redundant. As a result, a large number of peasants move to cities to work in the burgeoning manufacturing sectors. Massey (2006) argues that the process of capital accumulation, enclosure and market creation weaken individuals social and economic ties to rural communities, making large-scale migration possible.

In case of Assam after the development of the Tea industry in the first phase of cultivation, the planters used the skilled Chinese labourers. The Chinese labourers demanded the increment of their wages, the demanded wage rates of the skilled Chinese workers were higher than the local Assamese people's wage and the cost of import was also high. Therefore, the British government employed local Assamese people and the tribal people in the tea estates (Misra, 2007-08). However, because of increase in the numbers of tea estates in Assam it was impossible to work with minimum labour force. In addition, the local Assamese labourers also revolted against the British government because of the wage rates. Gita Bharali (2003) in her work "Seuj Silpar Sandhana" contends that because of the shortage of labourers the planters had to find workers elsewhere and they recruited them mostly from present day Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh as indentured labour in slave like conditions. They were uprooted from their land and livelihood, by the Permanent Settlement 1793 meant to ensure regular tax collection for the colonial regime.

Impoverished by it they had no choice but to find other sources of livelihood. In the absence of alternatives, they were forced to follow the labour contractor and become indentured labour in Assam. Also Assam's indigenous communities had too lost their land holdings for the tea gardens under the same colonial processes. The indentured labourers were at first recruited through professional contractors who were notorious for exploitation. The tea garden community folk songs have passed details of such exploitation down from one generation to the other.

Pradip Baruah (2008) in his essay on "The Tea Industry of Assam: Origin and Development" explains that the agrarian regions of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, famine, drought, flood and epidemics coupled with excessive exploitation of poor peasants and landless labourers by the big landlords and zamindars was common. These factors led to migration of huge bulk of population to Assam in search of livelihood. Apart from these push factors, certain pull factors like false assurance regarding easy work, ideal condition of work, better pay and unlimited land available for cultivation were given to the workers which motivated them to migrate to Assam. The transportation of the workers to these estates, covering sometimes a distance of 800 kms without any road or rail link was a hazardous task. The long journey mostly caused sickness and high mortality.

1.3.2 Social Movements of the plantation workers:

Social movements have long held a fascination for analysts of society. Because they often arrive seemingly unannounced, they have enormous potential for social change and they are capable of profoundly transforming the social order. Social movements whatever their organizing principle, demand the attention of those who wish to understand the process by which social systems resolve conflicts and effect large-scale change (Traugott, 1978). The sociological perspective of social movements can be traced back to a specific historical period and cultural setting. Western Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the point of origin for a series of changes among which the development of sociology may be counted as one of the more modest. These changes had ramifications in all aspects of social life but were most clearly associated with the growth of capitalism in the economic realm and the emergence of the "masses" in the political sphere (Blumer, 1951). The French Revolution represented culmination of these changes. Many individuals

important in the development of the sociological tradition were tied to it, either as inspiratory such as Montesquieu and Rousseau, or as its analysts and interpreters such as Burke, Tocqueville, and Marx. Indeed, European social theorists continued to be preoccupied through-out the nineteenth century by this true turning point in modern history, the immediate motivation for so much of the nineteenth century intellectual activity that laid the foundations for a branch of sociology concerned with social movements (Smelser, 1962).

Social movements are parts of social progression. These phenomena represent varieties of collective actions across time and space. As social processes, social movements emerge as manifestation of collective discontent against the established social, economic and political orders. Social movements have broadly been perceived as organized or collective effort to bring about changes in the thought, belief, values, attitudes, relationships and major institutions in society or to resist any change in the societal arrangements (Singh, 2003). Theda Skocpol (1979) argued, on the basis of a comparative study of the French, Russian and Chinese revolution, that revolutions are not made by revolutionary theorists or by dedicated bands of revolutionaries, but rather they are the outcomes of complex interactions between social and political conditions. The study of social movements is primarily a study of social change as well as cultural change, of a changing social order as well as changing values and norms. In the words of Sherif and Sherif (1956), a social movement is a formative stage of interaction in human relations. It expresses an ongoing process. Hence, the attention is focused on the interaction of conscious, striving human beings as a part of an emergent collectivity, which is the social movement. The greatest work to the study of social movements came from the early work of Robert E. Park (1924) "In An Introduction to the Science of Sociology" Park and Burgess provided an early characterization of collective behavior as phenomenon, which exhibit in the most obvious and elementary way the process by which societies are disintegrated in to their constituent elements. It is the process by which these elements are brought together again into new relations to form new organizations and new relationships.

The indentured labourers fought back at the individual garden levels gradually, as is evident from the available official statistics on disputes for the years 1884-93. The forms

of struggle varied from absconding and occasional litigation to strikes and violent mass attacks on the planters. For example, in 1884, the manager of Bowalia Tea Estate in Cachar was gheraoed in his house for defiantly dismissing a boy in the presence of assembled workers. About a dozen men were sentenced to terms of imprisonment varying from three days to one year on this occasion, while the manager was able to escape by paying a fine of Rs. 200 only for his folly (Ganguli, 1972). According to Das (1931) in his book, *Plantation Labour in India* stated that the figures of collisions during the year 1890-1903 were not numerous they indicated a steady increase.

Thus, the workers carried on their struggle against the colonial exploitation. Because of their resistance at last in 1906, a committee was appointed by the Government of India to investigate the working of the labour laws. As a result of the recommendation of the Assam Labour Enquiry Report of 1906, certain changes were introduced in the legal position of the tea garden workers. The planter's private power to arrest the workers was abolished in 1908. Therefore, because of their resistance and protest brought them new perspectives. Before the uprising, the workers the Assam Company commissioned two steamers for the purpose to collect the labourers, the main ones were thikedari system and sardari system. Out of the two systems of collecting labourers, in the thikedari system, commission agents collected labourers from impoverished areas with false promise of prosperity in Assam and earned a good fortune as commission. These agents deployed contractors to work for them. They went to areas like Chhotanagpur, Singbhum, Ranchi, Telengana etc where famine took place and lured the poor, starved local people to work in Assam tea plantations with false hopes and promises. In the sardari system, first started in Cachar district in 1870, the sardars (headman of a group) were entrusted with the job of collecting labourers. The tea companies bore all the expenses of collecting the labourers and the sardars were paid wages for their job by the company with which they were employed. They too, indiscriminately brought people on false promises (Baruah, 2008). In Amalendu Guha's (2006) "Planter Raj to Swaraj" stated that after their revolt against the British government the thikedari system was made unlawful under the Assam Labour and Emigration Act 1915 and the tea garden sardars were made the sole recruitment agents. In response to the new situation, the organized tea interests came forward and formed Tea District Labour Supply Association in 1917, to control and coordinate recruitment under the sardari system. By 1920, it had

complete monopoly over the supply of labour to the tea industry (Guha, 2006). According to Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22 out of the 210 reported cases of conflict between the planters and workers, from 1904-05 to 1920-21, there were 141 cases of rioting and unlawful assembly, arising from the issue of inadequate remuneration economic conditions (p.23).

1.3.3 Rise of the trade unions:

According to Karl Marx an individual's class-position is determined by his/her production relations. That is, the fact whether the person owns the means of production or not. Hence class-interests of the employers and the employees are mutually opposed. Marx asserted that ruling bourgeoisie class exploits the working class and sustains an unequal system not only by force but also by spreading an ideology that justifies the class-inequality. He further postulated that in due course of time, however, the working-class will develop a true consciousness and realize that its miserable condition is not due to its own failure but is the result of an unjust system. Marx (1947) made a distinction between the objective class-situation of people and their subjective awareness of it, by giving the concepts of 'class in itself' (klasse an sich) and 'class for itself' (klasse fur sich). So long as a class is not subjectively aware of its objective position within the production relations it remains a category, a 'class in itself'. By becoming conscious of its objective position, it becomes a 'class for itself', it transforms itself into a community capable of acting in unison.

Marx was aware that some social groups do not have the potential for becoming fully developed 'class for itself' in spite of the fact that they share common class-interests in the system of production. He illustrated this point by an example of the small-holding peasants of France of his time, who used their voting rights against their own interests and allowed themselves to be subordinated (Marx & Engels, 1845-46). However, he prophesied that unlike the French peasants, the industrial proletariat would inevitably become a self-conscious and organized class. Because the conditions of life in the factory bring the workers together in such a way that they become aware of their common interests and the strength of their unity. In other words, in Marx's theoretical scheme objective class-position is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the development of class-consciousness.

Marx considered these trade unions as a school of solidarity and socialism, which provided the workers primary 'class training' (Patel, 1994).

In Marx's view a trade union was not merely an organization to redress the workers' grievances, but also a setting for a more general process of socialization in the class-consciousness. As workers solve their immediate problems through trade unions, they also learn in the process radical attitudes and values, that is, new dispositions to act. This view is shared by the later-day neo-Marxists like Lukacs and Gramsci. Lukacs (1968), for instance, states "...class consciousness implies class-conditioned unconsciousness of one's own socio-historical and economic condition". However, this, according to him, will be overcome in the capitalist society by a revolutionary movement. Similarly, Gramsci (1928) also asserted that though the dominant class does succeed in thwarting the development of true consciousness among the workers, the radical intellectuals will play a vital role in creating the revolutionary ideology which will ultimately percolate to the masses of the workers.

To Marx, class-consciousness means politically expressed economic group-interest of a class. This subjective awareness, which is known as class-consciousness, implies that the members of a class perceive their own class as distinct; that they develop a feeling of identification with fellow class members and a feeling of difference from and opposition to the other class; and that they possess a capacity to act in unison to pursue collective interests of their own class (Patel, 1994). That is when an objective class, i.e. 'class in itself', develops this kind of subjective class-consciousness it becomes a 'class for itself'.

Trade unions in India and their overall organization have basically to be analyzed in the context of the democratic political structure the country has adopted. In a democratic country trade unions can essentially be looked upon as interest groups of industrial workers. As such their main function can be described as the pursuit of the social, economic and political interests of workers (Seith, 1968). In the early years of industrialization workers were sporadically organized in places like Madras and Bombay to counteract inhuman exploitation by employers. Most of these early attempts were however stillborn due to economic and political dominance of employers over workers, their attitude to workers as mere instruments for profit-making and the legal protection they enjoyed

against unionist activities. Genuine trade union activity began soon after the First World War. By then, contact with the British rulers and their culture had introduced an element of liberalism and understanding for the rights of the working-class among the newly-educated Indians, including some employers. In addition, considerable trade union activity was generated by the Indian nationalist movement. Gandhi's world famous leadership of textile workers in Ahmedabad inspired many of his followers, and this marked the onset of systematic unionism in the country. The Gandhian leaders looked upon unions not merely as bargaining and welfare agencies but also as instruments for mobilizing public opinion in favour of political and moral programmes in order to achieve freedom for the country (Punekar, 1948). Trade unions do function as agents of political communication as well as of political socialization. As political parties are controlling the trade union affairs, political events swiftly pass down the line. Moreover, since politicians are interested in the support of unions and workers at governmental elections, they have a continuing interest in training union members in the political processes and communicating information. The flow of information is conditioned by factors such as education and the degree of politicization of individuals and groups of workers (Subramaniam, 1966).

H. Crouch (1966) in his study of "Trade Unions & Politics in India" described that trade unions in India have been often grounded for political recruitment. After the Independence movement, many rank-and-file workers moved up from union work to politics. This has since become more uncommon, though not completely unknown. Due to the prevailing control of political parties over unions, the union leaders are often recruited from political parties. It appears that most of the trade unions in India are questionable to offer a significant number of genuine trade unionists as recruits to politics.

Hiren Gohain (2008) in his essay "A Question of Identity: Adivasi Militancy in Assam" contend that from 1980s, Assam has been witnessing a series of movements, wherein the local people have been fighting for their rights over the land, language, civil liberties rights, and special reservation status for development. The tea garden labourers, who mostly live in the tea gardens, which are more or less isolated from the mainstream political and economic development process in the state. Therefore, the trade unions have gradually begun participating in these movements by creating several types of organizations to raise

their demand for the development of the community. The all-India federation of trade unions (All-India Trade Union Congress) closely associated with the Indian National Congress came into existence in 1920. The Indian Trade Unions Act of 1926 conferred legal status on unions and also gave them a measure of legal and social security. However, as soon as ideological differences arose within the Congress, leaders of different shades of political opinion tried to gain control over various unions. Eventually AITUC went into the hands of leftist leaders and the Congress established a new union federation (Indian National Trade Union Congress) in 1947. Subsequently, when the socialists separated themselves from the Congress, they developed their own trade-union wings. During the last 65 years after independence, the tea garden labourers have mostly been represented by the INTUC-led Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS), which is affiliated to the Congress party, and enjoys a hold over almost all the tea gardens in the state, followed by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). The ACMS is beginning to exercise control over the vital issues concerning the welfare of the tea garden community in Assam (Saikia, 2006). The production and cultivation of tea in Assam have been increasing substantially over a period, yet the working conditions of the tea garden labourers have been deteriorating. Except in case of a few tea gardens (managed by big multinational companies), the conditions of labourers in the rest of the tea gardens do not even adhere to the basic levels of decent human existence.

According to the study of H. Toppo (1999), a majority of the tea gardens lack of proper health facilities, drinking water, sanitation and electricity connections. So the trade unions have taken up issues include disbursement of yearly bonus, granting of tribal status to the tea garden community, creation of a separate department for the tea garden labour community, and the provision of electricity, drinking water and housing, among other things, to the tea garden labour lines. As regards the Provident Fund schemes and dues to be paid to the individual members, the trade unions are also seriously taking up these issues and conveying them to the government. Further, these organizations are demanding the amendment of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 include appropriate measures for the welfare of the community. Although under the Act, there are several provisions related to the human development of the tea community, these are not accorded any importance either

in the state government policies. No substantial plan has been announced so far for promoting the human development of the tea garden labourers. Biswajeet Saikia (2008) in his report on the “Research Notes & Communication Development of Tea garden Community & Adivasi Identity Politics in Assam” emphasized that the Assam Human Development Report was published in 2003 with a picture of tea garden labourers plucking tealeaves, but it does not contain any section on the poor development conditions among the tea garden labourers. The report has only incorporated the Tea Board of India estimates on tea production in the state, while avoiding inclusion of the human development index of the tea labour community. The tea labour community, which accounts for an estimated 20 per cent of the total population in the state, thus lives and works in very poor human development conditions, which also affects the development index of the entire state. So it is very important to study the impact of the trade union on the plantation workers in the present scenario. There are trade unions which demonstrate sound democratic organization. There are unions which have achieved a lot for their members by collective bargaining and have provided exemplary welfare facilities to workers. It would be useful academically as well as for improving unions to identify the various situational factors contributing to democratic unionism.

1.4 Theoretical framework of the research:

Karl Marx saw exploitation as class based social phenomenon and believed that a proper sociological understanding of the social context. To Karl Marx an individual's class position is determined by his/her production relations. That is, by the fact whether the person owns the means of production or not. Class for him is a group of people in similar situation respect to their control over the means of production. According to the general description of the process of capitalist production it is not so much the individual capitalist who is responsible for the exploitation, but rather capitalism itself. If people consent to the rule of capital, this is not much because they are coerced into doing so by the ruling class, but because the mystifying character of the wage relation conceals the process of exploitation (Marx, 1976). Capital is money that produce more money, but according to Marx it is also a social relation. Money becomes capital only because of a social relation and capital cannot increase without exploiting those who actually do the work (Ritzer,

2002). In case of Assam Tea Industry also is the social structure that emerges from the exploitative relationship. It is important to know how this exploitation of the plantation workers happened in the development of the capitalist tea industry of Assam.

Marx also propounded theory of alienation that defines the types of human relation which are not controlled by their participants. Marx believed that there is an inherent relation between labour and human nature, he thought that this relation is perverted by capitalism and alienation is the product of capitalism. Marx had earlier expressed the alienation theory in the Economic and Political Manuscripts of 1844. Philosophically alienation theory relies upon 'The Essence of Christianity' by Ludwig Feuerbach which argues that the supernatural idea of God has alienated the natural characteristics of the human being. Feuerbach contends "Individual created 'God' in their own images and transformed themselves to lowly and unworthy Beings" (Staples, 2007). Marx accepted Feuerbach's materialism, he felt that Feuerbach had gone too far in focusing one-sidedly, non-dialectical, on the material world. Feuerbach failed to include the most important of Hegel's contributions, the dialectic, in his materialist orientation, particularly the relationship between people and the material world (Ritzer, 2002). Marx's concept alienation is the breakdown of the natural interconnection among people and what they produce. Alienation occurs because capitalism has evolved into a two-class system in which a few capitalists own the production process, the products, and the labor time of those who work for them. Instead of naturally producing for themselves, people produce unnaturally in capitalist society for a small group of capitalists. Rather than being end in itself an expression of human capabilities labour in capitalism is reduced to being a means to an end earning money. He did not view alienation as a philosophical problem. He wanted to understand what changes would be needed to create a society in which human potential could be adequately expressed. Marx's important insight was that the capitalist economic system is the primary cause of alienation. The capitalist who wishes to produce exchange values capable of generating profit must therefore employ labour. Workers in exchange for their labour, are paid a wage. In effect, the worker's labour itself becomes a commodity to be exchanged for money. What is capitalist is buying is not the actual amount of labour performed by the workers, but the worker's labour-power or capacity to work for a given period of time (Joseph, 2003). The proposed research work will be based on the

understanding of capitalist development, the class exploitation of Assam's Tea industry and also how the plantation workers alienated from their production activity and their human potential.

Another influential thinker on the development of the modern system punishment related with the disciplinary actions was Michel Foucault. To see the disciplinary codes through the frame of a genealogical¹ history, for Foucault, it is valuable advance on seeing it simply as an ongoing 'human improvement' over earlier historical forms of punishment. For it allows individual to see that the discipline of the body as performed by prisons scoops up various disciplinary codes that originated at different points in history, and which have come to shape the functioning of wider relations of power in schools, military life and organization. In modern society says Foucault, individuals are increasingly subject to what he terms 'disciplinary power', a power that is hidden, monotonous and invisible. In case of Assam Tea Industry the British Government used to discipline the migrated labourers through exploitation and in term it became unofficial rule for the workers. In this present research Foucault's term 'Panopticon' has been used to describe the disciplinary power exercised by the tea garden authority to exploit the labourers. 'Panopticon' was the term used by social philosopher for a set of proposals he tried to sell to the British government for the retraining of a criminal's mind from irrational law-breaking to rational law-following (Elliott, 2010). The tea garden of Assam is one of the 'Panopticon', in which labourers are increasingly caught up in the system of power and through which visibly is a means of social control.

¹ In philosophy, genealogy is a historical technique in which one questions the commonly understood emergence of various philosophical and social beliefs by attempting to account for the scope, breath or totality of ideology within the time period in question, as opposed to focusing on a singular or dominant ideology. Moreover, a genealogy often attempts to look beyond the ideologies in question, for the conditions of their possibilities. It has been developed by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Michel Foucault expanded the concept of genealogy into a counter-history of the position of the subject which traces the development of people and societies through history.

1.5 Objective:

- a) To study the origin of Assam Tea industry and the historical migration of plantation workers.
- b) To examine the role of the Assam Company in the recruitment of the plantation workers and the creation of the tea unions against the British Empire.
- c) To study the role of major trade unions namely Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangha(ACMS), Akhil Bharatiya Cha Mazdoor Sangh(ABCMS) and Assam Sangrami Cha Shramik Sangha(ASCSS) in the empowerment of the plantation workers.
- d) To study the impact of the trade union movements on the present conditions (wage rates, gender discrimination, education levels, health) of the plantation workers.

1.6 Research Question:

To study the above objectives the following research questions were made

- a) What were the situations under which the migration took place and what were the troubles faced by plantation workers after they reached Assam?
- b) How the tea garden workers waged the social movements against the British government and what were the outcomes of these movements?
- c) Is there any change in the present conditions (wage rates, gender discrimination, education levels, health) of the plantation workers because of the establishment of the trade unions?
- d) What are the steps taken by the trade unions in the upliftment of the tea garden workers?

1.7 Methodology:

The research study was initiated by identification of research problems followed by a literature review. The nature of the proposed research is descriptive and substantiated by

both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative data is collected from secondary sources like, books, journal, newspapers, and other existing literatures. For Quantitative, primary data was collected from the field by employing various sampling methods. This study employs both random and purposive sampling methods. The site selected for this research was the tea estates of Dibrugarh. The sample population was divided into two parts, the first was the tea plantation workers with the sample size 150 including both men and women, the second part was the trade union activists (ACMS, ABCMS and ASCSS personals) with a sample size of 28. The information was gathered by key informant interviews (KII), schedule interviewed. Next, the data collected was analyzed and examined and conclusion was drawn. This research highlighted the colonial condition and as well as the present scenario of the plantation workers. This research also carried in depth intensive analysis of historical materials. Descriptive research helped to understand the historical roots of the Assam's plantation system and the analysis of the preexisting data derived from previous research study. The data collected was interpreted and organized in a meaningful way.

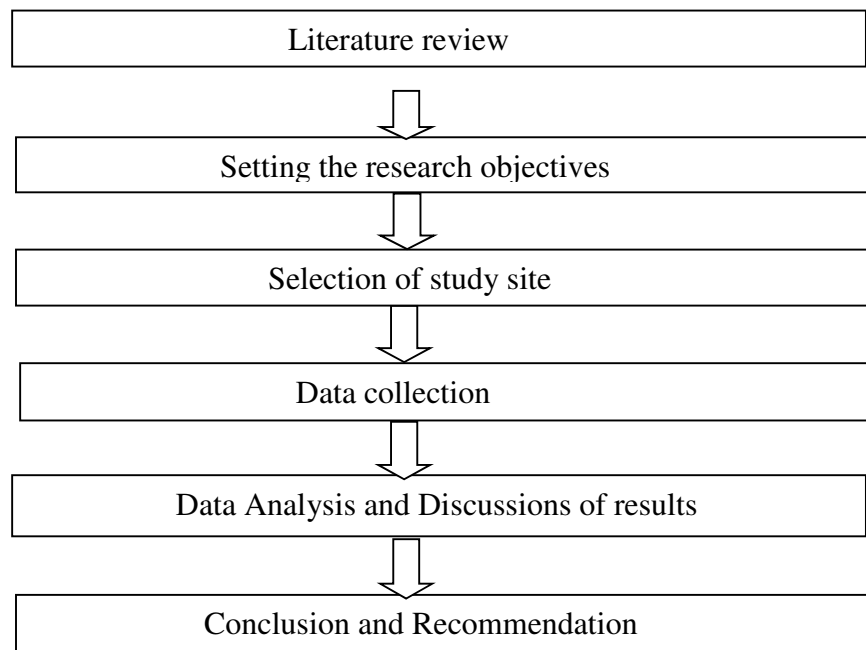


Figure 1.7.1: The framework of the study.

1.8 Data Collection:

1.8.1 Data Collection Tools

Interview Methods:

Personal interviews were conducted during the field investigation. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10-15 individuals from 10 gardens in order to understand and explore the current situation of the workers. Also interviews were conducted with 7-10 individuals from 3 trade unions in order to understand their activities for the plantation workers.

1.8.2 Process of Data Collection:

Two stages were used in sampling method to draw sample. The size of the sample of the plantation workers was 150 and the sample size of the trade union members was 28.

First Stage:

When a sample is scattered over a region and complete lists of the total populations are not available, “clustering” is of assistance in sampling (Bresler, 1995). Purposive sampling was used in this study to collect information about the trade union activists. The workers were covered from the 10 tea estates of Dibrugarh district. All the respondents were hailing from the tea estates are namely Chabua T.E., Sealkotee T.E., Nudwa T.E., Muttuck T.E., Dikom T.E., Ethelwood T.E., Bokul T.E., Nahortoli T.E., Madakhhat T.E., Jalan T.E. of Dibrugarh district. The study was conducted from July 2, 2014 to July 28, 2014. Primary survey has been done in Dibrugarh tea district of Assam. These areas had been selected because they are among the highly tea garden concentrated areas and they were familiar to the researcher so that the data can be verified in future if needed. Chabua is the place where the first tea garden of Assam was established at least 200 years before was also included.

Second stage:

Two separate structured schedules with questions had been prepared (In English). One for the tea garden workers to collect information about the awareness of the trade union activities among the tea plantation workers, the major problems faced by the workers inside the tea estate, the changes in the tea state because of the trade union or are they satisfied

with the role played by the trade unions and also the role of women plantation workers participation in the trade union activities. Another one included the trade union activists from three different trade unions who involved in the upliftment of the plantation workers. Both close ended and open ended questions were included. Age estimation was certainly a great problem in the field, where written records were not available in most of the cases, especially in this community. The illiteracy and backwardness of the workers was another big problem while collecting data. So sometimes help of local educated personals such as school teacher or local trade union activists have been taken.

1.9 Research Area:

Assam is in numerous ways a state of exceptional interest. Assam comprises the Brahmaputra and the Barak river valleys along with the Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills with an area of 30,285 square miles (78,438 square km) comprising 27 districts. As per 2011 census, total population of Assam is 31,169,272, which is 2.58 percentage of India's population comprising of 1,210,193,422. Male population of Assam is 15,954,927 whereas female population is 15,214,345 (Assam, 2012). Assam is bounded on the North by Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan; on the South by Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Manipur; on the West by West Bengal and Bangladesh. The inhabitants of Assam are a broad ethnic intermixture of Mongolian, Indo-Burmese, Indo-Iranian and Aryan Origin. The tribes of Mongolian origin mostly inhabit the hilly tracks of Assam. The state has the largest number of tribes within their variety in tradition, culture, dresses and exotic way of life. Most tribes have their own languages. Bodo, Kachari, Karbi, Kosh-Rajbanshi, Miri/Mishing, Rabha, Dimasha, Tiwa, Deori are some of these tribes exhibiting variety in tradition, culture, dresses and exotic way of life (Guha A. , 1984). The main research area for the proposed research is Dibrugarh district of Assam. Dibrugarh district, is situated on the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra, lies in the North-eastern corner of Assam. The district occupies an area of 3381 km². It extends between 94°44' E and 95° E longitudes and 27°3'45 N and 8° N latitudes. It is bounded on the North by the rivers Brahmaputra and Lohit, on the East by a part of Lohit of Arunachal Pradesh, and the South Western boundary of the district runs along the eastern boundary of Sibsagar district. Population of the district is composed of the members of various ethnic, linguistic, social and religious affiliations. Dibrugarh had population of 1,326,335 with male and female were 676,434

and 649,981 respectively (Assam D. o., 2011). A large number of tea plantations are located in Dibrugarh district. Around 30 per cent of the plantations of the state are situated here. It is also estimated that around 25 per cent of the population of the district is composed of tea and ex-tea plantation workers and their dependence.² Dibrugarh had 145 numbers of tea estates (Assam D. o., 2011) and the head office of Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) and Assam Sangrami Cha Shramik Sangha (ASCSS) is situated in Dibrugarh district. The important towns of the district include Chabua, Duliajan, Namrup, Naharkatia and Moran. Most of these towns have developed centering on tea plantation. The name of the tea estates which was included in the field survey are namely Chabua T.E., Sealkotee T.E., Nudwa T.E., Muttuck T.E., Dikom T.E., Ethelwood T.E., Bokul T.E., Nahortoli T.E., Madahkhat T.E., Jalan T.E. of Dibrugarh district.

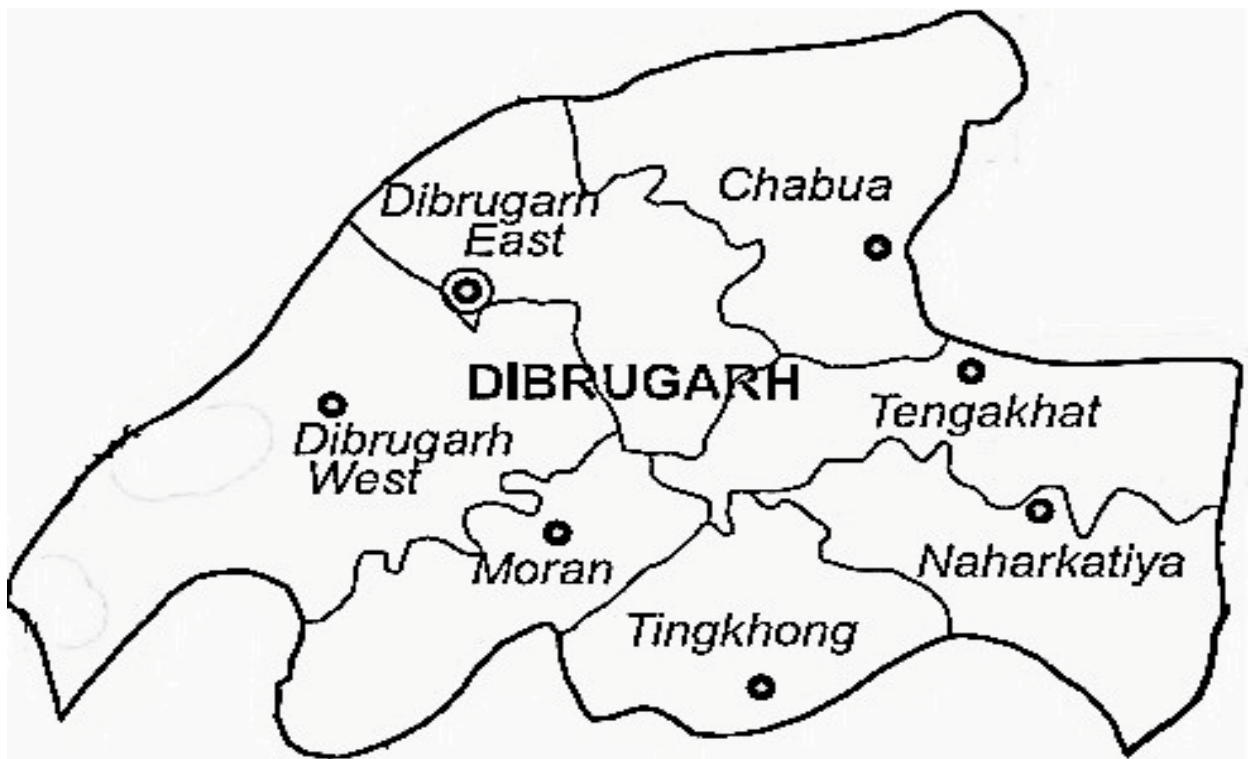


Figure 1.9.1: The map of Dibrugarh district.

² Kar, R. K., 2007 Tea plantation and its labour in Assam: An overview. An unpublished paper presented in the seminar on Society and Development in the Tea Gardens of the North East with special reference to Barak Valley, organized by the Department of Sociology, Assam University, Silchar in September.

1.10 Chapters:

This study is divided into following chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter gives a brief outline of the nature of the study, rationale and the objectives of the intended study. The inherent gaps in the existing literature in the plantation workers migration and the social movements by the plantation workers will be examined in details.

Chapter 2: A brief history of the Tea industry in Assam and the workers migration:

This chapter studies the background of the tea industry in Assam how it was established and then in-depth study of the origins and roots of the Assam Tea Industry was made. This chapter highlights why the Tea industry was established and what the consequences were. This chapter also examined the factors of the plantation workers migration to Assam. It looked at the process of change they had gone through.

Chapter 3: The role of Assam Company and the status of workers:

This chapter analyzes the recruitment of plantation workers by the Assam Company. This chapter was devoted for understanding the exploited condition of the plantation workers that was caused by the British government.

Chapter 4: The Uprising of the Trade Unions:

This chapter tries to look at the social movements created by the trade unions and explained the success of these movements. The trade union movements in the plantation industry launched various movements to liberate the exploited labourers from the yoke of crude and primitive form of exploitation.

Chapter 5: Discussion and analysis: Impact of trade unions on the tea plantation workers:

This chapter examines the effectiveness of the trade union movements on the plantation workers. That is, what is the present states of the plantation workers in Assam and whether the trade unions has been able to bring some light or has it escalated the dawn for them.

And this chapter also looked at the role of Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS), Akhil Bharatiya Cha Mazdoor Sangh (ABCMS) and Assam Sangrami Cha Shramik Sangha (ASCSS) in the empowerment of the plantation workers.

Chapter 6: Conclusion:

This chapter summarized the study, analyzed the validity of the research question and recommended measures for further studies in the area or research.

Chapter 2: A Brief History of the Tea Industry in Assam and the Workers Migration

2.1 Origins of the Tea Industry in Assam:

The tea industry was established in China many centuries before the Christian era. The dominance of the China tea industry had two unfortunate effects on the development in India. The history of tea production in India goes back to the period of the East India Company, who at that time was the sole proprietor of tea production in India. The fact that the East India Company had the monopoly of the tea trade with China caused that company to discourage any tea venture in India (Whittaker, 1949).

After the acquisition of the Diwani of Bengal in 1765 the East India Company came into direct connection with the medieval kingdom of Manipur, Jaintia, Cachar and Assam, as well as the tribal communities of the adjoining hills. These sparsely populated territories did not have enough economic worth or surplus revenue yielding potential to attract the attention of the British annexationists. The East India Company left those areas undisturbed, until the Burmese invasion (1817-24) of Manipur, Assam and the Cachar plains brought an end to the policy of indifference. Then in November 1823, David Scott, the Magistrate of Rangpur and Civil Commissioner for the district of Goalpara and Garo Hills (formed in 1822), was also appointed Agent to the Governor-General on the Northeast frontier of Bengal (Guha, 1972). The Burmese were finally forced to surrender their claim over Assam under the Treaty of Yandabo, 1826 (Lahiri, 1954).

After the treaty of 1826 for which Assam has been under British rule and enjoyed the blessing of a settled Government. Its trade had grown, and its exports of mustard seed, potatoes (introduced in the Khasi hills by David Scott), silk and other local produce had increased greatly, both in the quantity and value. Coal also had been discovered and worked in various parts, especially in the neighborhood of Makum in the Lakimpur district ³and mineral oil had been found at Digboi in the same district, where wells had been sunk for its extraction (Gait, 2013). But by far the most important factor in the growing prosperity

³ After independence Makum is now a part of Tinsukia district.

and commercial importance of the province had been the remarkable expansion of Tea industry.

2.2 Discovery of the Tea plants:

The origin of tea plantation in India can be traced as back as to 1774. At that time when China tea seeds began to arrive in India, Warren Hastings, the then Governor General of India, made a selection of them and sent to George Bogle, British emissary in Bhutan. The introduction of tea in India was known as early as in 1815 a British officer (Colonel Latter) had reported that certain hill tribes in North-East Assam made a drink from wild tea growing in the hills. Very surprisingly, it took some 18 years for the recognition of this Assam tea to be genuine and indigenous variety. This probably leads some people to claim that the home of this shrub is the province of Assam from where it spread to China in the 3rd century A. D., and to Europe by the Dutch and to England around 1645 (Selogman, 1957). It may be relevantly noted here that the hills and forest of Assam (in places like Sadiya, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Tezpur, Mongoldoi, etc.) has wild tea plants since long. The Singphos used to call it fanpe, and the English called it tea (the word tea originates probably from the Chinese thea, some maintain that in China it was called cha or tscha). It is said that in Assam the use of tea liquor as medicine in cold and fever was in practice long before.

In 1823 Major Robert Bruce took a trading expedition to Sibsagar and found wild tea, he was in the service of the Ahom Raja Chandra Kanta Singh. Major Bruce supposedly saw tea plants growing wildly in some hills near Rangpur (present Sibsagar), then the capital of Assam. Major Robert Bruce, an adventurer and trader, went to upper Assam in search of trade as an agent of the dethroned Ahom King of Assam with the permission of the East India Company. He made an agreement with a Singpho Chief, Beesa Gaum to supply him some tea plants and more seeds during his next visit in the following year. Assam was then under Burmese occupation and in 1824 war broke out with them. Major Robert Bruce died in 1824 before he could collect the tea plants. But he must have confided of his agreement with the Singpho Chief to his younger brother, Charles Alexander Bruce before his death.⁴

⁴ Barua, Dr. D. N. 1992. The Tea Industry of Assam: Its Historical Background. Paper presented at Seminar on Tea Industry of Assam on Jorhat College Silver Jubilee, Jorhat, 22.02.1992.

His brother Mr. C. A. Bruce, was later appointed as the Superintendent of the Government tea forest, and established a factory for the treatment of leaf plucked from the wild trees in the jungle. C. A. Bruce in the following year also planted these seeds in the Commissioner's Garden at Gauhati (now Guwahati) and in Bruce's own garden at Sadiya. At that time it was supposed that Assam tea was a degenerate variety of the Chinese plant, and seeds there were tales that they were brought from China and then the plantation started. The fact that the Chinese had an upper hand in the plantation process of tea, favor the growth of the Chinese tea seeds with labourers and seeds brought with great difficulties from China (Antrobus, 1957). Some plants were submitted to David Scott and were forwarded to the Superintendent of the Botanical Gardens, Calcutta for examination. They were pronounced to be the same family, but not the same species, as the plant from which the Chinese manufacture their tea (Gait, 2013).

Nothing further happened until 1832, when Captain Jenkins was deputed to report on the resources of Assam, and the existence of the tea plant was pressed upon his notice by Mr. C. A. Bruce. The tea commerce was still doubted by the Calcutta botanists, but its existence was proved that the latter will thrive to India and Government decided to take steps to introduce it (Allen, 1927).

2.3 First step of manufacturing and auction of Assam Tea:

The Bruce brothers were given the credit for the discovery of tea in Robinson's Descriptive Account of Assam, which was published in 1841. In a report submitted in 1835 by Dr. Wallich from Botanical Gardens of the Tea Committee, he stated that it was Mr. Bruce and his late brother Major Robert Bruce who originally brought the Assam tea to public notice. Many years ago when no one had the slightest idea of its existence.⁵ As a consequences of the discovery Mr. C. A. Bruce was appointed Superintendent of the Governments Tea Forests and he at once set to discover all the tracts in Lakhimpur where the tea plants were plentiful, and to arrange for the purchase of the leaf. This was mostly plucked by the

⁵ The report was quoted in an anonymous pamphlet entitled Assam: Sketch of its History, Soil and Production, London : Smith, Elder & Co., 1839.

Singphos and the other villagers, and brought at irregular intervals to the factory (Barpujari, 1980).

But it was admitted that the Assam plant was undoubtedly a variety of the tea plant of China, it was still thought that it had degenerated by neglect of cultivators. The proper course would be to introduce the cultivated plant from the country. So Mr. Bruce was supplied, not only some skilled Chinese tea manufactures but also a few plants brought to India by Mr. Gordon,⁶ and from this time there was a constant importation of Chinese tea seeds.⁷ In 1837, Mr. Bruce packed forty six boxes of tea, but because of defective packing most of it was destroyed before it reached Calcutta, and only a small portion was sent to England. The report was very hopeful and it was declared that Assam tea would be quite capable of competing with the Chinese product.⁸ The first Government tea plantation was located on a sandbank near the confluence of the Brahmaputra and the Kundil rivers. The poor and porous soil was quite unsuitable for the purpose, and the experiment proved a failure. The plants were therefore moved to Jaipur, where a new tea garden was opened. This garden was sold in 1940 to the Assam Company,⁹ which had been established in 1939 with a capital of half a million. This garden established factories at Dibrugarh and at the junction of the Buri Dhing and Tingri rivers. Plantations were made from China seed; but for some time the leaf brought from the wild forests continued to be the chief source of supply.

The first importation of tea from the British territories in Assam, consisting of eight chests, containing about 350 pounds, was put up by the East India Company in public sale rooms, Mincing Lane, on January, 1839 and excited much curiosity. Among the eight chests, three of them were Assam souchong,¹⁰ and five of Assam pekoe.¹¹ The first of souchong was sold for 21 s (shillings) per pound, the second was for 20 s per pound and third and the last was for 16 s per pound. The Assam pekoe teas generated much competition. The first lot

⁶ A Tea committee which was introduced by Captain Jenkins, Mr. Gordon was sent to China to procure plants, seeds and persons skilled in tea manufacture.

⁷ Griffiths, History of the Indian Tea Industry, pp. 269-73.

⁸ D. Chaman Lal, coolie: The story of Labour and Capital in India, Vol. 2 (Lahore, 1937), p. 5.

⁹ The role of the Assam Company will be discussed briefly in Chapter III.

¹⁰ A fine black variety of China tea.

¹¹ A high-quality black tea made from young leaves.

Assam pekoe teas were sold after much competition for 24 s per pound, the others Assam pekoes fetched respective prices 25 s, 27 s 6 d, 28 s d, and an extraordinary 34 s per pound. A further produce of the East India Company was sold in auction on 17 March, 1840 at prices between 8 s and 11 s per pound (Griffiths, 1967).

Meanwhile, commercial firms were formed in Assam for tea cultivation and the first private company was Assam Company. The first London sale of Assam Company's tea took place on 26 January, 1842 and it comprised the entire crop of Assam Company for 1840 amounting to 10,201 lb, of which 146 chests contained black tea and 25 chests green tea. The first auction sale of tea in India took place in March, 1841 in Calcutta. The tea belonged to East India Company consisted of 35 chests manufactured by Singpho chiefs and 95 chests produced in the Government tea plantations in Assam in 1840 (Baruah P, 2008).

The highly favorable first auction sale of Assam tea established the value of the indigenous Assam tea plant and also determined the course of the tea cultivation throughout the world. The Governors of The East India Company decide to invite private enterprise to undertake tea cultivation in Assam.¹² When it was established tea could be grown in Assam and it would fetch high price, as a result number of enterprising businessmen approached Government in London and Calcutta for transfer of Government plantations to them and to start the plantation themselves. The Assam Company with its headquarters in Nazira is the oldest commercial tea company of Assam, which is still functioning. The second company was formed in 1859 as the Jorhat Tea Company and even today, its central office is at Jorhat (Enquirer, 2002). In 1904, a laboratory was shifted to Tocklai (Jorhat) and was renamed as Tocklai Experimental Station. In 1964, the experimental station became Tea Research Association (TRA) (Dutta, 1992).

¹² Barua, Dr. D. N. 1992. The Tea Industry of Assam: Its Historical Background. Paper presented at Seminar on Tea Industry of Assam on Jorhat College Silver Jubilee, Jorhat, 22.02.1992.

2.4 Pioneers of Assam's Tea Planters:

The beginnings of modern political consciousness in Brahmaputra Valley is traced from 1953, when Maniram Dewan submitted his memorials to A. J. Moffat Mills, who had come to enquire into the conditions of Assam and recommend measures for improvement.¹³ The first Indian to start planting of tea was as Assamese nobleman Maniram Dutta Barua, popularly known as Maniram Dewan. He was a Dewan of Assam Company until he resigned in 1845 to start his own tea estate. After his resignation he had turned an extremist and had by then taken an anti-British stance. He resented the reduction of the upper and landless classes to the most miserable and hopeless state of misery through abolition of their offices, liberation of their slaves and unprecedented subjection to the assessment of land revenue. He protested against the appointment of several 'Bengalis from Sylhet' and Marwaris as mauzadars when a number of respectable Assamese were already out of employ. He pointed out that by the introduction of new customs, 'innumerable courts, an unfair system of taxation and the objectionable treatment of the Hill Tribes, the consequences of which had been a constant state of warfare, neither the British Government nor their subjects have gained any benefit' (Guha, 2006).

Dewan's political platform was no doubt a revivalist one, betraying his orthodoxy and basic loyalty to an outmoded social system. Nevertheless, he was not totally blind to the need for change and for opening up of the country for exploitation of its resources. He admitted that the abolition of slavery and the introduction of modern schools would do well to the common people. Even though no concession land grants were made available to him, he came forward to establish two small gardens of his own. He established two estates, one was Cinnamara near Jorhat and the other was Senglung (now Singlo). There is a controversy regarding the real discoverer of Assam tea plant. According to some sources,¹⁴ the tea plant was discovered by Maniram Dewan. Hannangan¹⁵ validated this view, he viewed it as almost certain that Maniram Dewan introduced Bruce to indigenous tea plant

¹³ A. J. M. Mills, Report on the province of Assam (Calcutta, 1854).

¹⁴ Baildon, S., Tea in Assam, 1977. Quoted in Science and Practice in Tea Culture, Dr. D. N. Baruah, Calcutta-Jorhat, Tea Research Association, 1989.

¹⁵ Lt. Col. Hannangan. 1987 Darjeeling Plantation (From Old Files). The Assam Review & Tea News, 76 (2): 34.

and 'he was acquainted with the plant for many years before 1823, and he should be regarded as the true discoverer of *Thea Assamica*.¹⁶

This view was confirmed by Dr. Barua (1989) affirming that 'Maniram Dewan was the most prominent and knowledgeable person in Ahom court. It is quite plausible that Bruce learnt about the existence of the tea plant in Assam from Maniram Dewan who introduced him to Singpho Chief.'¹⁷ The role of the Singpho tribe of Assam in the discovery of the Assam tea plant is most noteworthy. It was a Singpho Chief who supplied seeds and tea plants to C. A. Bruce. Another Singpho Chief prepared 130 chests out of 35 chest of tea which Bruce sent to Calcutta in 1841. This clearly showed that the Singphos were not only familiar with the tea plant but were making and drinking tea from ancient times. However, according to Paritosh Kumar Dutta, Maniram Dewan was actually appointed by the British and his involvement with the discovery of Assam tea could not be established without sufficient proof (Dutta, 1981).

Maniram Dewan was hanged by the British in 1858, for taking part in 1857 mutiny (Sarma, 2013). Before his execution, Dewan exhorted the Assamese people to look after the golden tea bushes of his two tea estates. Maniram Dewan was not only the one to discover or the first to have brought tea growing widely in Assam to the notice of the Britishers, but was the first to start tea plantation on individual basis and the first martyr for India's freedom from North East India and tea's first martyr (Dutta, 1992). After his execution, the two tea estates were confiscated by the British and sold in auction. George Williamson was the purchaser who got the tea estates at a very nominal price (Baruah D. N., 1989).

2.5 Role of Captain Francis Jenkins's Colonization Scheme:

The Charter¹⁸ granted to the East India Company in 1833 marked the final superiority of British industrial interests over mercantile and had full impact on the settlement of newly conquered Assam. The Charter, for the first time, allowed Europeans to hold land outside the Presidency towns on a long term lease or with freehold rights. This paved the path for

¹⁶ British Parliamentary Papers, vol. 39 (1839), paper 63: Griffith, "Report on the Tea Plant of Assam."

¹⁷ Barua, Dr. D. N. 1992. Op cit.

¹⁸ The Charter is a written statement describing the rights that a particular group should have or the principles and aims of the group.

a colonial plantation economy (Guha, 2006). Even before the tea culture in Assam had been firmly established, Francis Jenkins in a report dated 22 July 1833, advocated the settlement of Englishmen of capital on its wastes lands. It appeared to him that a scheme of colonization offered a better prospect for the speedy realization of improvements than any measures that could be adopted in the present ignorant and demoralized state of local inhabitants. His idea was to attract a class of European planters with capital who would produce sugarcane, indigo and such other plantation crops (Guha, 1967).

Captain Jenkins would not mind even the displacement of the local inhabitants from their lands through the operation of a discriminatory land revenue policy in favor of white colonies. For, such a policy, according to him, would promote the long run interests of the locals themselves. But he was afraid of the fact that if the government assessments upon the inhabitants were generalized and not heavy, then they would not be available as tenant cultivators under European superintendence. On the other hand, if the assessment on the plantation was heavy, then the inhabitants would have no alternatives other than work for the European capitalist's farmers.¹⁹ Jenkins believed that it would be more than made up as soon as large quantities of waste land were bought under cultivation and other improvements followed. The two premises of this colonization thesis were (i) that a large number of local peasants had no means to provide ploughs, seeds and cattle for themselves, and (ii) that the colonists be able to make the necessary advances to the growing export crops.²⁰

2.6 Waste Land Settlement Rules: Land to the Plant-holders

The idea of introducing British enterprise, capital and skill in agriculture caught the head of the Board of Revenue and the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal. The victory in the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1826, by which western Assam was immediately annexed to the British India and eastern Assam was brought under direct colonial rule in 1839. Since then for about 35 years Assam remained under the umbrella of the Bengal Presidency till the administrative reorganization of 1874. The Tea committee started the Government

¹⁹ Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, pp. 9-10.

²⁰ Jenkins to Secretary to the Government at Fort William, 22 July 1833, *Foreign Political Proceedings*, 11 February 1835, No. 90.

experimental Tea gardens in 1836 and the first successful manufacture of Assam tea in December 1837 made Jenkins's scheme of colonization more acceptable. To make the waste lands available for special cultivation on attractive terms, a set of rules were framed. These were known as the Wasteland Rules of 6 March 1838 (Das, 2012).

Waste land was offered to applicants on a 45 years lease on condition that a quarter of the area must be cleared within five years, failing which the land was liable to resumption. Indigenous aspirants were not discriminated against, but the rules were apparently framed in such a manner so as to exclude them from all concessional grants in practice. No grant for agricultural purpose could be made for less than 100 acres at a time and to one who did not possess capital or stock worth at least Rs. 3 per acre. Under these conditions, only Europeans could avail themselves of the opportunities.²¹ However, the rule 1838 Rules did not go far in attracting European capitalists, these were revised in 1854 providing for a 99 year lease on more liberal terms. At the same time the minimum area of land for which one could apply was 500 acres. Later the limits was reduced to 200 acres and relaxed to even 100 acres in special cases, if the local applicants could satisfied the Collectors of their ability to bring workers from outside Assam (Griffiths, 1967).

²¹ Revenue and judicial letters from India and Bengal, 14 march 1837, No. 5, cited by Barpujari, Assam in the Days of the Company, p. 212.

Waste Land Settlement Rules: 1838 and 1854

Rules of 6 March 1838 Three Categories of Waste Land				Rules of 23 October 1854 Irrespective Of categories of waste land	
Under grass	Under reeds High grass	Under forests	Land revenue Per acre		Land Revenue per Acre
First 5 yrs	First 10 yrs	First 20 yr	Nil	First 15 yrs	Nil
Next 6-8 yrs	11-13 yrs	21-23 yrs	As.	16-25 yrs	3 as.
Next 9-30 yrs	14-35 yrs	24-25	Rs 1-2 as.	26-99 yrs	6 as.

One-fourth of grant perpetually revenue free. One-fourth of grant perpetually revenue free

Source: Tabulated from information in B. H. Baden-Powell, *The Land Systems of British India*, Vol. 3 (London, 1859), pp. 410-415.

Table 2.6.1: Waste Land Settlement Rules: 1838 and 1854.

The waste land settlement policy tempted planters to grab more land than they required or could manage. This was because such waste lands provided them with far greater resources than what land as a factor of production ordinarily denotes. The waste lands contained necessary housing materials including in most cases, even valuable timber. Being transferable under the 1854 Rules, such lands could be sold later for an unearned profit. Therefore, labourers could be settled as tenants on the surplus lands of the plantation or could like so many serfs tied to their soil. About 0.7 million acres of land had been settled with the planters in Assam by 1870-71, but the area actually under tea was 56,000 acres,

which is 8% or so.²² They were big landlords in the countryside who dominated, but they paid the lowest average rates per acre of holdings. While the peasants annually paid Rs 3 to Rs 1-8 per acre of their land revenue in 1870, the planters paid land revenue only in a nominal rate of 3 acres to 9 acres, Rs 1-2 per acre.²³

The planters not only employed the wage workers but also settled rice producing tenant cultivators on their lands, so that the latter could provide them with casual labour in the peak seasons. The planters grabbed the grazing fields and encroached upon the jhum (slash and burn) rights of the tribal shifting cultivators. They even disrupted inter village communications by fencing in portions of existing public roads and denying the way to villagers. There were cases where cultivators lands not yet regularly settled, were sold as waste lands to tea companies over the heads of their occupants.²⁴

2.7 Labourers of Assam in the tea plantation system:

The tea industry of Assam has a unique feature of employment of a huge labour force in all spheres of work in the tea estates. The Assam Company in its beginning years paid its imported Chinese staff some four to five times the wage rate paid to the corresponding categories of Assamese labour.²⁵ After the services of the Chinese workers were dispensed with in 1843, the local people remained practically the sole source of labour for the industry till 1859. The total labour force in the Assam plantation in 1859 hardly exceeded 10,000 although knowledgeable planters put the requirement for the province at 16,000 to 20,000 hands for current plantation alone.²⁶ The most important source of recruitment was the Kachari tribe of Darrang district. Besides, peasants of nearby villages in their relaxed season were also employed through contractors.

In the early British ruled Assam the cultivated portion of the Brahmaputra valley was covered by small-scale peasant holdings. Most inhabitants practiced a multi-tiered system

²² Altogether 6,25,780 acres in Assam were held by the planters under concessional grants and 33,761 acres under ordinary settlement rules. Report on the Land Revenue Administration of the Lower Province, 1870-71, pp. 43-44.

²³ Land revenue rates on ordinary cultivation in 1870 are from Gait, History of Assam, pp. 342-43. For the concessional rates, see the table in the next page.

²⁴ Bengal Administrative Report, 1867-68 p. 144.

²⁵ Antrobus, History of Assam Company, pp. 383 and 388.

²⁶ Selection from the Records of the Government of Bengal, Vol. 37, pp. 63-66 and 69-72.

of plough-based cultivation. All over Assam people collected timber and other necessities from the non-arable, forested commons which were plentiful all around. The scare factor of production in Assam was labour rather than land, given the low population and abundant uncultivated territory. Rice was grown by all, almost entirely for subsistence, but in the new cash economy introduced by the British, peasants needed marketable products.²⁷ The Assam Company was attempting to enlist local peasants to work in the tea enterprise. A good number of peasants responded positively since they needed extra money and this was a source of extra income. Yet these peasants could not stay for long periods and risk neglect of their rice fields. As the tea venture's need for regular, disciplined labour force became urgent.²⁸ British officials speculated that it was an essential laziness in Assamese people which made labouring work so unpopular. So colonialism discovered Assam's lazy natives. They acquired the nickname of *lahe lahe* (slowly slowly). The essentialist explanation of local laziness could be explained to the peasant's easy access to *kane* (opium). According to the British officials basically Upper Assam was the main place for the opium cultivation.²⁹ So Upper Assam peasants, whether opium consumers or not, mostly resisted incorporation into the tea garden's strict labour ranks. In their place socially and economically Kachari cultivators from Lower Assam momentarily formed the plantation's workplace. The British were especially interested in the Kachari people of the Lower Assam districts of Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Darrang and Goalpara. Several colonial commentators already distinguished Kacharis from the other locals because of their capacity for work: an "aboriginal race of Assam" who were "cheery, good-natured, semi-savage folk".³⁰

Previously Assamese elites had played a key role in identifying Kacharis as potential labourers. The last Assam ruler, Purandar Singha, first drew British attention to the Kacharis. He recommended that to recruit them whom he called the labouring class of the country.³¹ Assamese folklore with ubiquitous tales describes Kacharis as servants and Brahmin as masters, a long-standing hierarchical relationship between the high status caste

²⁷ Barpujari, *An Account of Assam and Her Administration*, appendix, "Report of Captain Welsh."

²⁸ Selection from the Records of the Government of Bengal, "Evidence from District Collectors."

²⁹ A. J. M. Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, "Petition from Moneeram."

³⁰ Endle, *The Kacharis*. An introduction by the Administrator J. D. Anderson.

³¹ *British Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 39 (1839), paper 63: Jenkins Letter to Wallich, 5 May 1836.

society of Upper Assam and the Kachari peasants who made a sparse living from the submontane lands of Lower Assam.³²

The planters now escaped the trap of high wages for Chinese workers in their place they recruited low waged, unskilled labour from the Assamese locality. Instead of Rs 16 a month that the Chinese labourers earned, the wage rate for the locals was a low 2 annas a day (Sharma, 2012). The wage rate generally varied between Rs. 2.50 and Rs. 3.50 per month in the 1840s and early 1850s, and it rose to Rs 4 immediately after the revolt of 1857. The local labour had bargaining power. It is on the record that the labour of the Assam Company struck work in 1848 and gheraoed the superintendent's office to realize three months wage arrears. They were able to secure an assurance about no default in payment of wages in the future. Again, in 1859 the Company's Kachari labour struck work for a wage increase. This time, with the help of the District Magistrate, the leaders of the strike were apprehended, tried on the spot and punished on the plea that any stoppage of work before the expiry of their contract was illegal.³³ Twenty two leaders were arrested and imprisoned for periods up to one year, and twenty others were dismissed from service.³⁴

The conditions soon changed after indentured labour began to appear on the tea plantation system. The labour policy of the planters and their government was not to encourage a free labour market by offering competitive wages. Unlike the public works department and the railways, the planters made the worst use of semi-feudal methods of reducing the free labourer to a kind of serfdom. In 1864, while a free labourer was able to earn a wage of Rs. 7 per month when employed by the public work department, the going rate of wages in the Assam Company's was only Rs 4 to Rs 5. The average wage earned in many tea gardens was even as low as Rs 3.50 per month (Guha, 2006).

³² P. D. Goswami, *Folk Literature of Assam and Tribal Folk-Tales of Assam*.

³³ Antrobus, *History of Assam Company*, pp. 97-98.

³⁴ 'Proceedings of the Company's Calcutta Board', 28.10.1859, Manuscript No. 9925, Vol. 10 (Guildhall Library, London).

2.8 The indentured labourers of Assam in brief:

The migratory labourer's situation can be understood in the context of Permanent settlement of 1793 and the Assam tea plantation system. To make the revenue collection easy the Permanent settlement 1793 in the Calcutta Presidency to which Jharkhand belonged depended on individual land ownership and landlordism. The British who knew no other system than landlordism, turned tikedars and jathedars whom the local king had appointed as tax collectors into zamindars. The Permanent Settlement began the process of the marginalization of the tribal communities that depended not on the individual ownership or landlordism but on community property resources (CPR) in which land and forests belonged to the village. The Jharkhand tribes had a form of individual ownership known as khuntkatti linked to the right of the descendants of the founder of the village to cultivate land in it (Sarkar, 1993) but even among them forests were community owned. The tribal communities had inhabited these areas for several centuries before these laws were enacted and sustained themselves on the forest produce and other CPRs that met more than 50% of their food, fuel, fodder, medicinal herb and other needs. Such dependence was higher among the tribes that depended fully on the CPRs (Hoffmann, 1950). These laws were based on the colonial principle of eminent domain according to which all natural resources were state property, so is all land that does not have an individual patta. They thus turned them into encroachers on their own land and deprived them of their traditional rights (Misra, 2000). Crucial to this process was the fact that the Permanent Settlement broke the link between the CPRs and their communities, weakened or destroyed their cultural identity, the economic security linked with it and impoverished them. The agrarian regions of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa saw famine, drought, flood and epidemics coupled with excessive exploitation of poor peasants and landless labourers by the big landlords and zamindars. These factors led to migration of huge bulk of population to Assam in search of livelihood. Apart from these "push factors", certain "pull factors" like false assurance regarding easy work, ideal condition of work, better pay and unlimited land available for cultivation were given to the workers which motivated them to migrate to Assam. The transportation of the workers to these estates, covering sometimes a distance of 800kms without any road or rail link was a hazardous task. The long journey mostly caused sickness and high mortality (Baruah, 2008). After reaching the tea estates,

the migrant labourer's mobility was restricted within the vicinity of the tea garden and factory alone and they were completely isolated from the outside world. They were consciously made dependent on the basic facilities provided in the estate. Gradually the migrant workers realized that it was all false assurances of good pay and better facilities was just used to get the labour in order to earn massive profit from tea production. There was and still exists excessive exploitation of the workers by the owners of the estates (Duara & Mallick, 2012).

The labourers were brought to Assam by the British planters in the early part of the nineteenth century to work in the newly established tea gardens of the state. The labourers were brought originally from various parts of Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. In early nineteenth century with the spate in establishment of tea gardens in Assam, a huge demand for labourers arose and when the efforts to rope in local population failed, the companies were imported labourers from the other parts of the country.³⁵

The British planters initially tried to employ local people, the Singphos, the Kacharies and the Nagas to work in plantations. Such attempts failed due to poor working conditions and irregular payments made the tribal people to go away from the tea plantations. The labourers bought from China were mostly employed in tea factories for manufacturing and technical works. Thus, there arose great scarcity of labourers and the Assam Company decided to recruit labourers from the other parts of the country and sent agents to then Bengal and present Bangladesh. In 1852, an agency was opened in Rangpur district of Bengal and 392 labourers were brought to Cachar tea estates for the first time, and then another 400 in 1859 from Chota Nagpur, Ghazipur and Banaras.³⁶

The Transport of Native Labourers Act of 1863 did not stipulate a minimum wage but required the wage rate to be started in written contract. However, the actual payment was made proportionate to the amount of work done, according to the tariff of task work shown

³⁵ Arindam, Madhuryya. 2005. Tea Garden labourers: Origin & Evolution. The Assam Tribune, 18 November, 2005.

³⁶ Kurmi, Sushil. 1991. Chah BagicharJivan Aru Sanskriti. (Assamese: Life and Culture in Tea Garden). Asom Sahitya Sabha, 1st Ed: 1-88.

to the recruit in Calcutta.³⁷ That Act was passed merely for licensing recruiters and registering in-migrants, to regularize the recruitment through arkattis (agents) that had been going on for some time. In this arkatti system, commission agents collected labourers from impoverished areas with false promises of prosperity in Assam and earned a good fortune as commission. These agents deployed contractors to work for them. They went to areas like Chota Nagpur, Singbhum, Ranchi, Telengana where famine took place and lured the poor, starved to local people to work in Assam tea plantations with false hopes and promises.

Statutory wages were laid down by amending act of 1865. The minimum wages so set were Rs 5 and Rs 4 respectively, for men and women workers above the age of 12. Child labour was to be paid Rs 3 per month. The planters had undertaken to supply labour with rice at Rs 1 per maund³⁸. The relevant legislation merely provided for the supply of rice at specified rate, to be include in the terms of the written contract. But once a rate was specified, it had to be maintained. Planters soon began to violate their own undertaking and started charging around Rs 2-8 as per maund of rice supplied to the labour. Thus they could lower the real wage by manipulating the stipulated price of the rice. Even the nominal minimum wage could be further lowered by varying the standard task. A commission of enquiry appointed in 1867 found that in most gardens minimum wages were not earned. There were even instances where the wage payment was kept in arrears for as long as six months.³⁹

The Act of 1865 prescribed nine hours of work per day and six days per week. It also laid down that a contract must not be extended beyond three years. But, for lack of proper inspection, these provisions of the Act were not observed. The same was with the provision for a hospital in every garden. The above-mentioned commission of enquiry found that,

³⁷ Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings, 1865-67, p. 14.

³⁸ The maund is the anglicized name for a traditional unit of mass used in British India and also in Afghanistan, Persia and Arabia, the same unit in the Moghul Empire was sometimes written as mun in English, while the equivalent unit in the Ottoman Empire and Central Asia was called the batman. At the different times, the mass of the maund has varied, from as low as 25 pound (11 kg) to as high as 160 pound (72.5 kg).

³⁹ Secretary to Government of Bengal to Secretary to Government of India, Home Department, 3 December 1866, and Agent to the G.G. and Commissioner of Assam to Secretary to Government of Bengal, 21 March 1867, Assam Proceedings of Legislative Department, Government of Bengal, August 1867, Report of the Commissioners on the Tea Cultivation of Assam, 1868, p. 50.

generally speaking, the protective clauses had broken down.⁴⁰ Desertion on the part of the workers was made criminally punishable under the Act, and even continued 'laziness' on his part was a criminal offence. The planters was empowered in his own to arrest without warrant any workers alleged to have absconded from his tea garden, and this privilege enjoyed up to 1908.⁴¹

Under the Amendment Act of 1870, the sardari system of recruitment was recognized, though not allowed to replace the arkatti (licensed recruiter) system. In the sardari system, first started in Cachar district 1870, the sardars (head man of a group) were entrusted with the job of collecting labourers. The tea companies bore all the expenses of collecting the labourers and the sardars were paid wages for their job by the company with which they were appointed. They, too, indiscriminately brought people on false promises. From that time till 1915, both methods of recruitment were in vogue simultaneously. Another amendment, the Bengal Labour Districts Emigration Act, passed in 1873, permitted free recruitment outside the provisions of the Act of 1865, provided that the contract did not extend beyond one year.

By the mid-1860, the policy of recruitment of labourers from the other provinces was well under way. Available early labour statistics, though imperfect, were adequate to show the change that was going in the ethnic composition of the labour force. Of a total plantation labour force of 34,433 was reported by the Bengal Administrative Report in Assam for 1867-68, 22,800 or two thirds were imported labour, and only 11,633 or one third local. The total number of outside recruits, net of all wastages by way of death, desertion etc, stood at approximately 24,000 in Assam and 20,000 in Cachar on 31st December 1872.⁴² Living far away from their homes and hearths and contract bound, these labourers undoubtedly were the most easily exploitable and exploited section of the people. Although there were legal provisions of recruiting people under the above Acts, the norms were grossly violated and most of the people collected were sent to the tea gardens illegally. In the year 1877, an estimate put the number of labourers brought under legal provisions at 44,549 and 91,258 illegally (Baruah, 2008). In the initial years, the river Brahmaputra was

⁴⁰ Griffiths, History of the Indian Tea Industry, pp. 261-71.

⁴¹ Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj, p. 14.

⁴² Bengal Administrative Report, 1867-68, p. 204 and *ibid.*, p. 15.

the only means of transportation and the labourers were brought from different parts of India in boats and steamers. In 1847, the first government steamer in Assam was introduced between Calcutta and Guwahati and then between Calcutta and Dibrugarh in 1856. However, they ran into trouble and got discontinued. Indian General and Steam Navigation Company started steamer service regularly between Calcutta and Dibrugarh in 1860 which helped the process of transportation of labourers. With the birth of the railways in Assam 1882 and further extension in 1883, Dibrugarh became a railway station and things became easier.⁴³

The conditions of recruitment were inhuman. During the two years from 15 December 1859 to 21 November 1861, the Assam Company brought 2,272 recruits from outside, of whom 250 or 11% died on the way. Of a total of 2,569 recruits who were sent down the Brahmaputra in two batches during the period from 2 April 1861 to 25 February 1862, as many as 135 died, including deaths by drowning, and 103 absconded. Of 84,915 recruits for Assam between 1 May 1863 and 1 May 1866, 30,000 had died by 30 June 1866. This high mortality did cost the planters, for the price charged by contractors per recruit ranged from Rs 12 to Rs 20.⁴⁴ Men, women and children were enticed, even kidnapped and traded like cattle, absconders were hunted down like runaway slaves. Under the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act of 1859, Section 490 and 492 of Indian Penal Code (1860), Labour Act of 1863 as amended in 1865, 1870 and 1873, runaway workers could be punished by the government alone. Yet the planters themselves generally disciplined such workers, inflicting upon them punitive tortures of all kind. For labour was too precious to be sent out their tea gardens to police and jail custody.⁴⁵

This new sets of population gave rise to a new spatial dimension, to the region, with new people pouring from distant land with new culture, traditions, religion, food habits, language, there was a complete assimilation of new blend of society living in a common space with harmony bringing a change in the demographic as well as social dimension. The

⁴³ Kurmi, Sushil. 1991. *Chah BagicharJivan Aru Sanskriti*. (Assamese: Life and Culture in Tea Garden). Asom Sahitya Sabha, 1st Ed: 1-88.

⁴⁴ Note by J. W. Edger, Off. Junior Secretary to Government of Bengal, 11 September 1873, in *Papers Regarding the Tea Industry in Bengal, 1873*, p. XIX. *Proceedings of Legislative Department, Government of Bengal, 1863*, No. 15-18.

⁴⁵ D. Chaman Lal, *Coolie: The Story of Labour and Capital in India*, Vol. 2 (Lahore, 1932), p. 5.

company provided them with certain beneficiaries along with free rented housing, which were termed as coolie lines.⁴⁶

Coolie, a generic category for the ‘unskilled’ manual worker, offering services for hire had various pre-colonial lineages⁴⁷ (Yule, Burnell, & Croke, 1903), was attempted to be recast in the late eighteenth-nineteenth century colonial capitalist worlds, through discursive constructions and material practices for ‘mobilized-immobilized’ labour. In particular, the ‘coolie labour system’ organized in a period of abolitionism, was often depicted as a ‘solution’ to the impending ‘problems of labour shortage’. The aspiration of freedom that encapsulated the spirit of abolitionism was apparently undermined by contracts which bounded the ‘free labour’, raising moral indignation and political action. Coolie labour, was often proclaimed as a particular compromise between the past (slave-labour) and the future (free-labour), straddling the two different regimes, yet a stage in that promised transition.⁴⁸ A quest for migrant workers and planter strategies of contracting migrant workers (or *coolies*)—emerge as one of the early resolutions of such plantation aspirations in the post-slavery world. For instance the framing of a special indenture contract (Assam contract) did not do away a general contract—the Master and Servant contract (Act XIII) in Assam plantations. The contract(s) assumed specialized and overlapping forms in its attempts to immobilize workers in a fairly differentiated plantation landscape (Hui, 1995).

⁴⁶ The term coolie line refers to the numbers provided to the different settlement with a region, as a mark of distinction. The tea garden too was given different numbers for better management purpose. The practice even today holds a great importance in the tea industry, even today there are numbers marked both for settlement and gardens for better management purpose.

⁴⁵The etymology of the term is sometimes traced to the Tamil word *kūli*, signifying ‘hire’ or ‘wage’, and also to the ethnic group (Koli) performing menial tasks in Western India.

⁴⁶ In the post-slavery plantations and colonial enterprises coolies came to be identified with the Asiatic labour from India and China, working under terms of indenture. The recruitment, transport and settlement of coolies was conducted under patronage of the colonial regimes and worked through native middlemen and recruiters, in what came to be described as the ‘coolie trade’.

Chapter 3: The role of Assam Company and the status of plantation workers:

In this chapter the role Assam Company is studied and this has been divided into three sections. First Privatizing the discovery of tea in Assam and emergence of Assam Company, Second The Assam Company, and third section deals with measures of the Assam Company- Labour and Recruitment. This chapter also attempts to look at the status of the tea plantation workers in the colonial era after the establishment of the Assam Company.

3.1 Privatizing the discovery of Tea in Assam and the emergence of Assam Company:

The operational setbacks of the tea experiment could not dampen the excitement and hysteria generated by the news of the “discovery” of tea in Assam, which was receiving enthusiastic reviews in contemporary British press. These reactions reflected a sense of anticipation about the evident feasibility of producing tea within the bounds of the Empire, threatening to end the long-standing Chinese monopoly of the drink (Gupta, Chatterjee, & Suranjan, 1981). This mood was eloquently articulated in a contemporary treatise on the subject:

Discovery (of tea) has been made of no less importance than that the hand of Nature has planted the shrub within the bounds of the wide dominion of Great Britain: a discovery which must materially influence the destinies of nations; it must change the employment of a vast number of individuals; it must divert the tide of commerce, and awaken to agricultural industry the dormant energies of a mighty country.⁴⁹

The enthusiasm reached a climax when the samples of tea produced in the experimental plantations and packaged in around ninety odd chests were forwarded to the tea brokers and dealers of London in 1838. The much publicized ‘First Public Sale’ in the London’s tea market—Mincing Lane, drew substantial public interest and high prices in the market.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ W. Sigmund, *Tea its Medicinal Efforts and Moral* (London, 1839) p.3.

⁵⁰ Information on the discovery and character of the tea plant in Assam (London, 1839) p.3.

Having conducted the experiment of cultivation, manufacture and marketability of Assam tea, the East India Company now found itself in the position to realize the founding objective of privatizing the venture. Such an idea was ‘popularized’ by the exaggerated pronouncements from “authorities” and “experts” on the ground, whipping up the jubilant mood of the British public and market basking in the success of the “discovery” of tea in the Empire.⁵¹ Bruce’s speculative commentary on the potentialities of transforming Assam into ‘one big tea garden’, and Jenkins’ far-fetched assertion regarding the ‘extent of discovery’ which justified an ‘immediate commencement of manufacture at the largest scale by capitalists’, were generally read as informed opinions on the feasibility and profitability of large scale investments of private capital, in the contemporary British journals, trade magazines and information manuals (Reid, 1966). A passage from the topographical/scientific survey of the province, quoted generously in these publications, read more like an “infomercial” targeting the potential European settler, colonizer and entrepreneur:

*Assam’s climate is cold, healthy, and congenial to European constitutions; it’s numerous crystal streams abound in gold dust and masses of the solid metal; it’s mountains are pregnant with precious stones and silver; its atmosphere is perfumed with tea, growing wild and luxuriantly; and its soil is so well adapted to all kinds of agricultural purposes, that it might be converted into one continued garden of silk and cotton, of tea, coffee, and sugar, over an extent of many hundred miles.*⁵²

A climate of market frenzy and hopes of fabulous profits culminated in the floating of a joint stock company, Assam Company in London with the explicit intention to acquire the experimental plantations with related establishment and undertake the production of tea for exporting to the British market (Chatterjee & Gupta, 1981).

3.2 The Assam Company:

When the East India Company explored new realms of agriculture and commerce, following the increase in worldwide tea consumption during the 1830s, a group of British merchants formed the Assam Company in London on February 12, 1839. The Assam

⁵¹ Information on the discovery and character of the tea plant in Assam (London, 1839) p.10.

⁵² J. McCosh Topography of Assam (Calcutta, 1837) p.133.

Company was formed in a meeting of merchants in London with a capital of 5,00,000 pounds in 10,000 shares of 50 pounds each, of which 8000 were to be allotted in Great Britain and 2000 in India. It was also India's first joint-stock company in the non-banking sector to have the liability of its shareholders limited by an Act of Incorporation in 1845. The Assam Company initially concentrated their activities in these districts, dividing the operations into three divisions (Northern, Southern and Eastern) and headquartered at a place called Nazira. Yet a characteristic nature of the joint stock companies (like Assam Company), with a decisive control over operation and expenditure with the board of directors and shareholders, removed from the scene of production and often determined by profit and fluctuations of the markets, had a significant bearing in conditioning the nature of management and work on the plantations (Misra, 2003). The British monarchy endorsed the Assam Company and displayed support by transferring two-thirds of government-owned tea stations to the Company in February of 1840. The Company acquired two-thirds of the government's Experimental Tea Gardens, together with permission to settle on other lands as well (Sircar, 1986). Since its inception in 1839, the Assam Company Ltd did not have any corporate rival in the field of cultivation and manufacture of tea in India. The intervening period this company witnessed the development of a characteristic form of management-labour relations that provided the backdrop to the industry as a whole until Independence in 1947. In order to create a profit in light of strong Chinese competition, the Assam Company's main objective was to acquire an economic monopoly in the tea industry (Antrobus, 1957).

The East India Company petitioned the government to relax tax payments, and by 1854 the Waste Land Rules— first enacted in 1838 to allow government-granted land to be free of revenue for twenty years—was in full swing and led to a rapid increase in British cultivation. Later acts, such as the Fee Simple Rules of 1862, the Revised Fee Simple Rules of 1874, and the New Lease Rules of 1876, further enabled “British planters to own large tracts of the most fertile land of Assam at highly concessional rates” (Misra, 1980). These legislations, which directly stemmed from the East India Company's customs houses, displaced indigenous inhabitants and discriminated against aspiring Indian planters. Due to the nature of colonial capitalism, “only entrepreneurs with huge capital could take up

tea cultivation. Difficulties for the indigenous entrepreneurs were thus increased during a nearly three-decade period, initially by the government, and later by the government and the planters in conjunction,” further alienating local traders and aspiring Indian businessmen (Chatterjee & Gupta, 1981).

These acts marginalized the Indian people—from traders, to laborers, to peasants. The Assam Company squatted on “as much land as possible to preempt any future rival,” and only one half of land was actually cultivated for tea, while the other half remained “set aside for future expansion”. The little land remained was out of reach of the local population, literally and figuratively, because only those with a large amount of capital could risk tea cultivation. In addition, while British evaded taxation, Indian landowners paid two rupees per acre to their British masters. The peasants who were not coerced into working in the plantation sector remained “largely subsistence oriented” and “the bulk...impoverished as a result of rack-renting and usurious practices of money-lending, [they] did not possess enough capital to invest it in land reclamation in the district” (Sircar, 1986). Indians who did not work for the tea gardens became impoverished, due to discriminatory land taxes and duplicitous British loans.

Further, Company Rule maintained its economic hegemony through violent means as well. The Company took no chances with local competition, and “aspiring Assamese planters were discriminated against and discouraged from entering into competition with the British planters”. Maniram Dewan,⁵³ the Indian leader who had first alerted the British of the presence of indigenous tea, resigned from his post with the Assam Tea Company in order to create his own plantation. However, his land was maliciously classified as ordinary rice-property and, therefore, subject to very high revenue, which ultimately discouraged his success and bankrupted his plantation (Xaxa, 1985).

⁵³ He was described briefly in the Chapter II.

3.3 Measures of the Assam Company- Labour and Recruitment:

Assam company plantation experienced a severe “crises” of workers during the first phase of plantation season. There was an obvious discrepancy in the area of clearance and the land actually put under cultivation and regularly tended. In 1842, only two hundred odd acres of land was under cultivation out of more than six hundred fifty acres cleared in northern and eastern division. Again in 1843, around two thousand five hundred acres cleared land in southern division was left unattended due to “insufficient” supplies of labour.⁵⁴ In the early stage of plantation Assam Company was relayed upon the Kacharies, a tribal group from the districts of Nowgong (Now Nagaon) and Darrang and partially fulfilling the demands for the plantations. Their crucial and growing presence was mentioned in an early report of the company:

*In the manufacturing season when the hands are insufficient to pluck the leaves which in short time become too ripe for manufacture and are lost. Endeavors are being made to send up gangs of Kachari...under agreement to serve for a fixed term.*⁵⁵

The Kacharis commitment to the Company’s plantation was also contingent on the wages on offers. A reduction and delay in payment caused discontent, work stoppages and even strikes. There was also evidence of some articulated anger at times regarding the discriminatory wages paid to the imported Bengali labour. In the year 1846, around 250 Kacharis left the Company’s gardens for being paid less than their Bengali counterparts (Sircar, 1986). But later the Assam Company did the same with the Bengali labourers as they did with the Kacharis in respect of wages. The monopoly of Assam Company started when the cultivation and production of the tea in Assam, by early 1850s with planting districts and the other districts of Assam valley.

⁵⁴ The early plantation practice in Assam had established in 1839, from March to October to be the manufactured season when the ground had to hoed once every two months which believed to have an influence on the capacity to bear leaves and therefore the overall outturn of the tract. Again when the trees flush, the young leaves should be plucked and even a delay of a day made it deteriorate and unfit for manufacture. R. Bruce, Report of tea and on the extent and produce (Calcutta, 1839) p. 21.

⁵⁵ Report of Calcutta Board of Assam Company for the year 1840-1841. H.A. Antrobus, A History of Assam Company (Edinburgh, 1957) p.386.

Districts	Tea factories	Land acquired (acres)	Land cleared (acres)	Production 1858-59 (in pounds)
Sibsagar	31	13,796	5,227	8,46,249
Lakhimpur	10	14,038	1,700	2,82,000
Kamrup	10	12,207	297	6,160
Nowgong	14	11,034	48,000
Darrang	3	3,783	375	23,280
Taotal	68	54,859	7,599	12,05,689

Table 3.3.1: Tea Production at the end of the decade of 1850s.⁵⁶

Because the Assamese inhabitants did not willingly seek employment with the Assam Company, tea companies therefore dismissed indigenous people as lazy. A civil servant in Bengal during this period wrote: “the village folk do not, as a rule, work harder than they are compelled to do...so long as their urgent wants are satisfied they do not care to exert themselves...they do no more than they must”.⁵⁷ Because of this discriminating narratives against the local peoples, planters forced labourers from other regions, and ultimately produced a system of indentured labourers from vast distances throughout the entire country.

Recruiting labourers from the foreign districts solved many issues, especially because tea companies considered local labourers to be expansive, lazy and risky for one, local laborers were more likely to protest poor conditions and garner the support of the neighboring villages (Chatterjee & Gupta, 1981). To prevent this type of unrest, companies sought labourers from far distances. Unlike the local labourers, immigrant workers were easier for

⁵⁶ Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal (Calcutta, 1861).

⁵⁷ Andrew H. L. Fraser, *Among Indian Rajahs and Ryots; a Civil Servant's Recollections & Impressions of Thirty-seven Years of Work & Sport in the Central Provinces & Bengal*, London: Seeley, 1911, Print, 189.

plantations to control because they could not “trek back home whenever they had reason to be dissatisfied with the Company”. Immigrant labourers could be “exploited and ill-treated without much impact on the surrounding villages,” and therefore, tea companies preferred immigrant labour (Sircar, 1986).

The Assam Company further claimed that immigrant labourers from the region such as Bihar, Chota Nagpur, Telengana were “physically stronger than the weak local labourers” and more capable of “understanding hard work in the jungle;” therefore they were “better suited to the unhealthy climate of the districts of Assam”. In actuality, many foreign workers like as Chinese, Bengali Muslims could not survive the Assam’s climate, and the foreign worker mortality rate reached 35 percent on the plantation. These new immigrant labourers, derogatorily referred to as “hill coolies, dhangar and boonah (jungle-dwelling),” were easier to exploit than the local people and Company could keep them illiterate, and therefore ignorant of their rights (Sircar, 1986).

Because of the market competition the Chinese tea, the Assam Company sought to keep all investments, especially labour costs, as low as possible in order to increase profit and remain competitive. There was little mechanization within the tea plantations so labour was the main element in the total cost of production of tea, therefore the less that companies spent on labourers the higher their personal margin of profit would be. Potential workers from the alien districts had little incentive to travel far distances to the plantations because the sufferings of the death rates were common and further efforts to procure a fresh supply of labourers proved to be increasingly unsuccessful. Sardari recruitment developed to entice workers forcefully, from the distant regions. Sardars, natives trusted by Assam Company to appeal to the indigenous people, worked as intermediaries and registered labourers far from their homes (LaFavre, 2013). Similar to sardars, native arkatis served as middlemen because they knew how to induce their peers to become laborers. They used both fair means and foul to secure peasant labour for Assam Company. Ultimately, the combined efforts of the British planters and their labour recruiters created a deceitful system, which caused peasants throughout India to surrender their lands and resign themselves to kamiouti or forced labour, because they believed they had no other option.

The arkatti had earned the reputation of fear and hatred built on the scenario of physical threat, kidnapping and other abuses. There were stories from the district of Sambalpur (Orissa) of the families roped together to prevent the recruiters from carrying them off.⁵⁸

The Assam Company further prevented mass protest by isolating their divided workforce from the outside world. The Assam Company enacted measures of discipline in various ways the labourers were compelled to reside within the vicinity of the gardens their mobility within and outside the plantations was severely restricted, they were isolated from the outside world, and they were made completely dependent on their employers. The struggles that developed on the plantations remained isolated, and no links could emerge in the detached climate. Labourers both native and foreign to the Assam were not allowed to leave the estates, and chowkidars prevented them from contacting villagers nearby (Behal, 1985).

Just as private inland trade developed during the early years of the East India Company, the Company Rule of tea corporations, such as the Assam Company, encouraged private gain at the expense of local development. Private tea managers reaped enormous profits and refused to invest in surrounding villages. During the years of tea mania everybody was quietly busy making his own fortune and private merchants' established extravagant lifestyles for themselves⁵⁹- often in stark juxtaposition to the poverty that characterized the plantations and the neighboring villages. The real profit from these tea estates ended up in the hands of the owners and managers in the form of profits or salary, they received a salary ten times the size of their common labourers. In this way, tea plantations mirrored greater exploitative trends of the East India Company as a whole- especially because, as a result of these practices, many districts of Assam valley remained severely underdeveloped (Philips, 1968). British planters did not invest in charitable organization or state development and preferred to hoard their profits. The Assam Company supported by the

⁵⁸ Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts (Calcutta, 1906) p.61.

⁵⁹ Sudipta Sen, *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and Making of the Colonial Marketplace*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1998, Print, 4.

British government, utilized exploitative means just as the East India Company furthered European interests at the expense of the non-western indigenous population.

3.4 The status of the tea plantation workers:

The term status is different to conceptualized and it is often elusive to the empirical grasp. In defining a status as “an effective claim to social esteem in terms of positive or negative privileges”, Weber (1978) emphasizes its relational base and the fact that a status claimant must have an audience from which to receive or to demand differential responses. Gerth and Mills (1953) emphasizes that a status situation is not fixed, it tends to be played out on the uncertain grounds of the claimant and the audience negotiation and compromise. According to the international Encyclopedia of Social Sciences Sills (1968), “Age, sex, birth, genealogy and other biological and constitutional characteristics are very common bases of status. Until about 1920, the term ‘status’ was most commonly used to refer either to the legally enforceable capacities and limitations of people or relative superiority and inferiority”.

Linton (1921) defines status and says, “The popular positions in such patterns of reciprocal behavior are technically known as statuses. The term status, like the term culture, has come to be used with a double significance. A status, in abstract is a position in a particular pattern. It is thus quite correct to speak of each individual as having many statuses, since each individual participates in the expressions of a number of patterns. However, unless the term is qualified in some way, the status of any individual means the sum of all the status he occupies. It represents his position in relation to the total society.” Merton (1963) observes that an individual has an array of social positions, forming a composite status.

By the second half of the nineteenth century the tea regime devised a way to bring labourers of for the choice to the plantations. Starting with the Transport of Native Labourers Act (1863), the colonial state passed numerous laws to facilitate the recruitment and control of Assam’s migrant workforce. By the end of nineteenth century Chotanagpur labourers acquired the highest rank among Assam plantation workers. They were known as “Class I

jungiles” in the planter’s lexicon.⁶⁰ In the recruitment market, they were the most prized and the most expensive: planters ranked them high in terms of resilience, labouring ability and resistance to disease (Sharma, 2012).

Planters employed semi-feudal methods of discipline and coercion to subject ostensibly free labourers to a new kind of serfdom. Indentured labourers were open to oppression in a way that earlier recruits had not been. They were virtually imprisoned in the squalor of the housing lines and locked in at night. These migrant labourers found themselves living in the middle of remote, forested terrain, allowed little or no contact with the neighboring villages.⁶¹ Many records provide some records of the frequent floggings, beatings and even killings of labourers but were usually silent about the forms of exploitation. In many accounts the female workers were sexually exploited by Assam’s white masters and illegitimate children born. These regressive aspects of labourer’s life had an enduring, negative impact on the migrant’s status among the local population.⁶²

The plantation hierarchy consisted of the European managers at the top and the indentured labourers at the bottom. In between were European assistant managers aided by a number of native supervisors or mohurirs.⁶³ Most of them were Assamese or Bengali caste Hindus. For example A. R. Ramsden’s tea estate, employed five mohurirs described as “Assamese and agriculturist by birth” (Ramsden, 1944). Their main task was to oversee the workforce of like three thousand labourers. Ramsden’s clerks earned an average of one rupee a day as well as a monthly commission “on the payment for work done by those they supervise”. Considerable distance and subordination separated the indentured labourers and those upper caste who disciplined them on behalf of white “sahibs”. Many mohurirs possessed a full share of racial prejudices and caste differentiation to subjugate these indentured labourers, addressed these tribal labourers as alien, ritually low intruders. Census report

⁶⁰ Report of the Labour Enquiry Commission of Bengal, p 15

⁶¹ See Report of the Commissioners on the Tea Cultivation of Assam, 1868. Jan Breman shows how the Batak people on the Sumtran East Coast were co-opted into becoming coolie hunters for the planters.

⁶² Planters illegitimate children do not appear in written records, but there are subjects of Jayeta Sharma’s next research work, on mixed-race Anglo Indian children, Assamese folklore talks openly and maliciously of coolie women’s liaisons with men.

⁶³ Supervisors in government courts and offices, or tea plantations.

detailed how the local mohurirs sent as enumerators refused to call them as Hindus, but indifferently lumped them together with christians or Animist, because they said, “they eat anything”.⁶⁴ So their social status was negligible after they reached Assam.

Despite the planter’s complaint about the high cost of importing labourers, their state conferred ability to impose starvation wages and extreme cruel work regime was quite unprecedented (Mohapatra, 2004). In 1864, while a labourer in the Public Works Department earned Rs 7 monthly, the going rate in the Assam Company was only Rs 4 to 5. In this manner the indentured labour and penal contract systems permitted planters to bypass prevailing wage structures (Behal & Mohapatra, 1992). The significance of Assam tea industry to the British Empire was reflected in the large body of legislation enacted to facilitate labour supply. The Transport of Native Labourers Act of 1863 was followed in quick succession by the Bengal Acts of 1865 and 1870, the Inland Emigration Act of 1893, the Assam Labour and Emigration Acts of 1901 and 1915, and finally the Tea Districts Emigration Labour Act of 1932. As the overseas sugar industry, the state claimed that these laws would facilitate the recruitment and maintenance of labour and also allay humanitarian concerns. For the tea industry the only relevant parts of this legislation related to labour recruitment and discipline. Penal privileges such as the right of private arrest formed the foundation of Assam’s notorious “Planter’s Raj” (Sharma, 2012). Minimum wage rates remained the same for forty years. Legal provisions which limited work to nine hours a day and six days a week or stipulated the construction of a hospital on every plantation existed only on papers. The state did not attempt to enforce these benefits, while workers had little knowledge of their legal entitlements. They had no way to make a claim even on recruitment promises. Given the isolated, regimented and illiterate conditions of labour, planters easily enforced with writ.⁶⁵ Although the penal provisions underlying tea recruitment were removed in 1926, almost four years later the Royal Commission of

⁶⁴ Report: Census of Assam 1881. Calcutta, 1883.

⁶⁵ A legal document from the court telling somebody to do or not to do something.

Labour found that workers still believed they could be arrested by their employers if they left before their contracts expired.⁶⁶

Michel Foucault in his “Discipline and Punishment” (1979), focuses between the period 1757 and the 1830s. In this period the torture of prisoners was replaced by control over them by prison rules. (Characteristically, Foucault sees this change developing in an irregular way; it does not evolve rationally.) The general view is that this shift from torture to rules represented a humanization of the treatment of criminals; it had grown kinder, less painful, and less cruel (Foucault, 1979). The reality, from Foucault’s point of view, was that punishment had grown more rationalized (“the executioner [in the guillotine] need be no more than a meticulous watchman” and in many ways impinged more on prisoners. The new system of rules was more regular, more effective, more constant and more detailed in its effect. The new system was not designed to be more humane, but to punish better to insert the power to punish more deeply into the social body (Brenner, 1994). In *Discipline and Punishment* he described a new technology of disciplinary power. He described three instruments of disciplinary power. First hierarchical observation or the ability of the officials to oversee all they control with a single scrutiny. Second the ability to make normalization judgments and to punish those who violate the norms. Third is the use of examination to observe subjects and to make normalizing judgments about people (Ritzer, 1988). Foucault sees these three disciplinary power to control the prisoners in the prison cells. But in case of Assam’s tea industry the mohurirs and the sardears used to punish the indentured labourers while violating any rules inside the gardens. Planters’ relatively high outlay on the recruitment of indentured labourers from distant lands was easily offset by the shocking low wages they paid. The workforce was placed under constant surveillance, night and day. Two watchmen for each line of labourer’s houses, and the house were built in straight rows or “lines”, so that the watchman could get about easily among them (Bamber, 1866). The degree of control was far removed from the planters’ situation of the local workers, who were sharply observed to be “what they term themselves, mon khushi coolies, or labourers who do as they please” (Lees, 1866). Surveillance and control

⁶⁶ Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, chapter 20, “Recruitment for Assam: Difficulty of Return.

prevented labourers from deserting and halted connections with locals. Plantations became restricted zones where outsiders were not permitted entry. It's like how Foucault discussed in his essay in defining the modern prison. Locals referred to Upper Assam As the land of "Planters' Raj" (Sharma, 2012).

The geographically separated, socially differentiated and seemingly isolated, hint at a range of anxieties which came to be associated and characteristic of the Assam tea gardens. This has to be situated in the context of changing nature of work organization in plantations, and intensified strategies of work.⁶⁷ Such anxieties, as the incidents suggest, engendered a sense of apprehension, fear and resistance in the people willing to go to Assam. It came to be acknowledge by the colonial officials, tea agents and the missionaries, stationed in the recruiting districts, that Assam was extremely "unpopular" and generally had a "bad name".⁶⁸ A recurring anxiety associated with the Assam cha-bagan in the recruiting regions was a deep sense of loss. Numerous concerns were voiced regarding the many family members, friends and acquaintances who were taken there and never returned.⁶⁹ The generous advances made by the recruiter and the hope of earning and saving some money in Assam addressed to that immediate crisis. Unlike some other destinations, where labour often "circulated" in search of employment and earning for varying degrees of time, cha-bagaan seemed to be a more permanent change, a point of no return.

⁶⁷ Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts (Calcutta, 1906).

⁶⁸ The 1906 Enquiry Commission found a widespread sentiment of unpopularity associated with Assam in the different recruiting districts. A construction engineer from Ranchi (Chotanagpur) opined that it was a way of frightening a person that he could be taken to a tea garden. Such proverbial "bad name" of Assam was noted by an English recruiting agent from Purulia. A labour contractor from Kharagpur (Bengal) felt that any kind of migration to Assam seemed unpopular. This closely resonated the opinion held by a missionary from Sambalpur (Orissa). The District Commissioner of Raipur (Central Provinces) mentioned that the idea of going to Assam was 'something like being transported'. Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts (Calcutta, 1906) p.18, 24, 45, 48, 81.

⁶⁹ The idea and concern of non-return was very evident in the interviews conducted by the 1906 commission in the recruiting districts. This was a process which started from the early phase of Assam migration. For instance, in the late 1860s, around ten thousand people left for Assam tea gardens from Midnapur district in Bengal and they as '...a rule did not return.' Such a state of affairs continued well into the twentieth century. A colonial officer stationed in Bihar mentioned many cases of people coming up to him and saying 'My wife, or daughter or son has been taken off to Assam. How am I to find him?' Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts (Calcutta, 1906) p.29, p.45, p.48, p.52, p.57, p.58, p.60.

The nuanced representation of the stories about Assam found resonance in the anxieties of dukh (State of unhappiness) and taklif (Problems) that animated the various tales about the life on the Assam tea gardens and the “experiences” of people who had been there.⁷⁰ The “extraordinary” nature of the life on the plantations, as particularly induced by the practices of policing/disciplining, formed the substance of the “experiences” about the tea gardens. People were arrested and beaten for leaving the “compound”, even when they just wish to visit acquaintances and relatives on other gardens.⁷¹ The life and activities of the labourers were said to be at the complete disposal of the manager/tea-garden. Labourers were compelled to labour even when they felt unwell and had to turn out for work during heavy rains. The female labourers were not permitted to stay longer than four or five days at home after child birth.⁷²

The practices of control and immobilization critical to the production of cheap indentured labour force with no social status, entailed a loss of control over personal freedom, choice of well-being and interactions. The perceptions and anxieties about Assam tea gardens were also becoming a part of wider constructions of cha-bagan as a site of “oppression” (places of dukh and taklif) articulated in other narratives sketching the life on the tea gardens. Jhumur songs an important element in the cultural traditions of tea labourers in Assam, this songs depicted their conditions while working in the tea gardens.⁷³

⁷⁰ The expressions of dukh and taklif were apparently made by individuals having spent time in Assam and narrating the circumstances of work and life there. Here, common cultural codes of pain and anxiety were invoked to communicate a common sense of despair. Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts (Calcutta, 1906) p.32, p.74.

⁷¹ A report investigating the conditions of labour in Duars tea plantations noted that ‘...there can be no doubt that inter-garden movement of coolies are much commoner in the Duars than under the Assam system of indentured labour. Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts (Calcutta, 1906) p.76. Report of the Duars Committee (Shillong, 1910) p.24.

⁷² Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts (Calcutta, 1906) p.13, p.87, p.64.

⁷³ The Jhumur song represented here are compiled from varied sources. This is particularly drawn from, S. Sengputa & J.L. Sharma, Jhumur: Folksongs and Dances of Tea Garden Labourers of Assam, P.P. Mahato, World View of the Assam Tea garden labourers from Jharkhand in S. Karotemprel, B.D. Roy (ed.) Tea Garden Labourers of North East India (Shillong, 1990) pp.131-142, pp.214-226.

1	Assam Desher Chah Pat Pani Boli Bar Mitha Chal Sakhi Chal Jabo Bagane Tulbor pata anand mane	Assam, the land of tea Where the water is supposed to be sweet Friends! Let's go We will pluck leaves on the gardens with joy
2	Sardar bole kam kam Babu bole dhoran Sahab bole libo pither chan Re Jaduram Phanki diye bandu pathali Assam	Sardar says work work Babu says nab the fool Sahab threatens to peel the skin of my back Oh Jaduram You deceived us to Assam

The song 1 captures Assam as a land of hope, opportunity and work. These hopes are shattered when the reality of life on the tea garden is found to be harsh and oppressive. Song 2 harps on the agony of the labour-who is trapped in the disciplinary regime of the tea garden. These songs depicted their status in the tea gardens and the realization of the nature the work being different from what was anticipated.

The songs in a sense the transition of the Assam tea garden from being imagined as sites of hope and become the sites of despair and difficulties. During the course of the late nineteenth century, tea gardens had also become a major avenue and opportunity for work and survival for societies during the acute scarcity and conditions of deprivation. Large scale migration to tea gardens during the famine years attests to that process.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ A tour of a famine affected Bilaspur in the late 1890, an observer found that a standard answer to the whereabouts of the husbands of many destitute women was, "...he has gone to Assam to the gardens." On further enquiries he learnt that the civil doctor of the station was passing around sixteen hundred people per week (for Assam). F.H.S Merewether, A tour through the famine district of India (London, 1898) pp.130-

The popular construction of the tea garden was premised on some false hopes for the indentured labourers, then from their personal/familiar experiences and the wider circulation of information through rumors, stories about Assam. Their status was also changed after they reached Assam. Their cultural songs also give the exploitative practices and abuses which was happened to them. It undermines the notion of ignorance and acceptance of the social groups migrated to Assam, emphasizes on how the knowledge of tea garden-recruitment practices, conditions of life and nature of work in plantation.

The next chapter is on the upsurge of trade unionism in India and also how it effected on the tea plantation industry. It has also included the post independent condition of the tea plantation workers of Assam.

131; Resolution on Surgeon-Major Campbell's Report on the Arrangements for Transit of Emigrants to Assam. Revenue and Agriculture, Emigration A, June 1897. NAI.

Chapter 4: The Uprising of the Trade Unions in Assam's tea plantation:

4.1 Introduction:

The trade union movement in India is over a century old. It is gradually becoming less powerful than it was a few decades ago due to the changes in the world economy, technological advances, response of the state and employers are creating immense pressure and tensions for the trade unions and making them increasingly vulnerable. The trade unions alone cannot fight with the major challenges of the new millennium. They need to establish and collaborate with the other partners of the civil society. In the past, trade unions mainly focused their activities on asking for more and more for their members through collective action and collective bargaining. While this idea may have worked in a few situations, by and large, the lot of the working class remained poor for a majority of the workforce. Trade unions need to be agents of socio economic change and undertake a variety of non-bargaining activities. Also, it is not enough to focus on job protection alone, they need to think of their role in creating jobs (Ratnam, 2007). This chapter attempts to contemplate chronologically on the themes relating to the Trade Union activities happened in India, then how it had spread especially in Assam in the colonial period; followed by the role of Trade Unions on fulfilling the demands of tea plantation workers in the post independent period. The role of the founding leaders of the trade union movement in terms of their ideology and role is dealt with.

4.2 Trade Unionism in India:

The formation of a number of central trade union in India like All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Central of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) and others have a history of its own and is intimately connected with the socio-political conditions. It is 'politics' that gave birth to the Indian trade union movement and it is 'politics' again that accelerated or related its growth at different points of time. This chapter attempts to give some idea about the founder leaders of the Indian trade union movement, in terms of ideology and role.

The Social Workers groups included people like B. P. Wadia, Joseph Baptista, S. H. Jhabvala, F. J. Ginwala. For them, the working class was the most oppressed and exploited

section of the society. The workers poverty, ignorance and helplessness called for sympathy. B. P. Wadia was mainly responsible for building up the Madras Labour Union. The moderate politicians like N. M. Joshi, V. V. Giri belonged ideologically to the well-known Liberal Party. Their political thinking and their socio-economic outlook was reflected in their attitude to trade unionism its role and goal. They wanted to build up trade unions on the model of the British Trade Union Congress. They wanted trade unions to remain distant from the anti-imperialist politics of Congress. Hence they were forming a separate political party on the model of the British Labour Party.

Another group included a section of Congress leaders namely Jawaharlal Nehru, C. R. Das, Lala Lajpat Rai, Subhas Bose. They belonged to the 'left' of the anti-imperialist movement and lent their support to the workers movement with a view drawing to the latter into the fold of their political movement. It needs to be pointed out that these leaders did not participate in trade union activities in their individual capacities only. It is well known that the Congress leaders did not share any common social or political ideology. Communist groups which had not combined into the communist party of India who were scattered groups but were actively working in Bombay, Calcutta, Cownpore (now Kanpur) and Lahore. They were positively influenced by the Russian Revolution of 1917 and for the first time brought the concept of class and class struggle in the field of Indian labour. Through their activities, they consistently tried to propagate the Marxist view on labour-capital relationship, and gave a new orientation to the trade union activities (Bose, 1979).

The labour unrest was primarily centered round demands for wage increase, bonus, shorter hours of work and putting end to the misbehavior of employers. On certain occasions and in certain centers anti-British political movement also had its impact on the working class. The strikes were frequent but usually lasted for short periods. The mill owners were not under any social or legal obligations they could crush organized labour movements. It was also difficult for the workers to hold out for a long period and for the sake of survival they left for their homes whenever mills remained closed for a long periods. This usually brought about a dull trade union activities accompanied by a fall in union membership (Karnik, 1966). The circumstances which led to the birth of trade unions and trade union activities in the immediate post World War I period can be found in the report submitted

by the Viceroy to the Secretary of State of India—"the pressure of high prices; the general belief that profiteering is freely practiced by middlemen and retail dealers; knowledge that very large profits are being made by the capitalists, millionaires in particular; the general short-age of industrial labour, accentuated by the increased demand of rapidly expanding industrial establishments and aggravated by the ravages of influenza, the results of which were most obvious in crowded towns and in consequence kept away country labour (this aspect was also reiterated by the Viceroy, in 1917, while announcing the abolition of the indenture system of recruitment for British sugar plantations in colonies like British Guiana, West Indies etc.); reluctance of the employers to grant pay increase till discontent with the existing conditions has manifested itself in a strike (Sen, 1977)." These factors produced widespread labour unrest throughout the country.

Starting with Bombay textile worker's strike (August 1917), labour unrest spread out and circulated all the industrial centers of the country. In 1920, about 200 strikes took place all over the country, and in Madras alone, 62 strikes were declared. In 1921 about 400 labour disputes were noted. In 174 cases the strikers demanded higher wages, and in 75 cases, the demand was for bonus. 'Personnel' problems caused 63 disputes, and in 10 cases, the issues involved were leave and other matters. In Bombay, 162 strikes were declared, the figure for Bengal being 135. Cotton and woolen mills accounted for 164 strikes, while the corresponding figures for engineering, jute and railways were 31, 28, and 28 respectively. Of these, 88 were successful and 82 partially successful (Mathur, 1964). It would be interesting to concentrate on the nature and intensity of labour unrest in Bombay prior to the formation of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) because it was in Bombay that AITUC was formed. The cause and nature of workers strike struggle indicate that they had not yet emerged as a mature politically conscious proletariat. The political programme adopted by the Congress did not include agitational or organizational work among industrial workers. For example Congress did not formulate its view on the role of working class vis-à-vis the dichotomy existing between foreign and Indian capital. This also led to halfhearted attempts by the Congress leaders to bring the working class into the fold of nationalist movement (Bose, 1979). The congress leaders therefore failed to see or established appropriate links between the trade union movement and the anti-imperialist movement that was led by them.

The role of M. K. Gandhi as a trade union organizer is also pertinent because not only he was the most influential Congress leaders, but because his principles of trade unionism and trade union activities were not equally shared or practiced by other Congress leaders. In the early period Gandhian principles of trade unionism, as propounded by him in the course of his activities in Ahmedabad (during and after the famous Ahmedabad labour strike of 1918), did not serve as the guideline for the other trade union activists including those who were belonging to the Congress. But his attitude to the growth of trade unionism was also reflected in his opposition to the formation of the AITUC. Probably he naturally felt that such a step would have far reaching consequences and would draw the working class away from the path marked out by him. That is reason why he advised the Ahmedabad Labour Association not to affiliate itself with the AITUC. He also did not share the views of the founder leaders of the Trade Union Congress (Hurst, 1925).

So it is very difficult to conclude that the Indian working class itself was seriously feeling the need to form a central labour union like AITUC because the leading personalities responsible for the forming of AITUC comprised of all the four groups described above. Their views regarding the role of the trade union movements were basically identical but with different political views. Later on the ideological conflict among the founder leaders of AITUC brought devastating consequences later on.

4.3 First phase of workers unrest in Assam's Tea plantation:

Aftermath of the workers movements happening all over India also affected the Assam tea plantation industry. In Assam gradually the tea plantation labourers became aware of the harsh conditions provided by the British government. The Chotanagpur's inhabitants realized that the act of Assam migration as "being sold". Their children also learnt of Assam as a "death trap" from where their ancestors never returned. While former labourers who returned to their home districts spread these negative messages their peers on the plantations took every chance to challenge the planters. The tea industry now complained about indentured labourers working slowly and spoiling the tea bushes that was their clear tactics of everyday resistance. Labourers also resorted to violent protest.⁷⁵ Sir Henry Cotton

⁷⁵ Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, "C. L. Wilkin, Manager, Hautley Tea Estate, Sibsagar."

noted that, “there is a growing tendency in the working class to resent a blow by striking a blow in return and this soon leads to serious results, as the workers act in combination among themselves and armed with formidable weapons, the implements of their industry (Cotton, 1911).” Such violence occasionally culminated in workers setting fire to the manager’s bungalow, the seat of power they sought to challenge.

Planter’s punishments of protesting workers were extremely harsh. Still, they failed to arrest the increase in assaults, rioting and unlawful assembly. Between 1904-5 and 1920-21 there were one forty-one reported cases of rioting and unlawful assembly. A worried state established tea enquiry commissions in 1906, 1921 and 1929 but the commission’s recommendations to improve work conditions remained in the papers, given the industry’s opposition to any substantive reform. Planters blamed nationalist protestors associated with Congress and Communist party for labourer’s unrest. They attempted to prevent Assam’s local Congress activists from connecting tea workers. They harshly suppressed attempts at labour organization. The Non-Cooperation movement was progressing the export economy of Assam was caught in a deep crises because of a collapse in a tea industry and a sharp fall in labour earnings (Fuller, 1930).

In Sylhet and Cachar, the tea garden workers became restive in the beginning of 1921, because of economic sufferings. Their frequent contacts with the Congress volunteers at haats⁷⁶ and bazaars encouraged them to come out in the action of their own way against the British government.⁷⁷ Strikes broke out in the Dholia Valley in south Sylhet on the first week of May in 1921. The tea garden labourers in Chargola valley struck work demanding a pay increase. Then there was a historic mass exodus from the Chargola and Longai valley in Karimganj sub division had started, with the departure of 750 men, women and children from Anipur tea estate on 3rd of May. Those workers had demanded a wage increase but that was denied.

They were influenced by the name of M. K. Gandhi and put their faith in myths concerning his power of doing well to the oppressed. They themselves indulged in all sorts of mythmaking and accepted Gandhiji as a messiah- an Avatar. Thousands of labourers

⁷⁶ A weekly or bi-weekly market serving a group of villages.

⁷⁷ Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, pp. 9,14 and 19.

particularly from the tea gardens of the Chargola and Longai Valleys, left their gardens and marched to the nearest train station by shouting ‘Gandhi Maharaj ki jai’ as they walked.⁷⁸ This theme titled the ‘Nationalist upsurge in Assam’ sponsored by the Government of Assam, the episode stands as a testimony of the messianic powers of Gandhi who comes to Assam to “deliver” the coolies from their bondage:

*To the simple, poor people, Gandhiji was an avatar and they fondly believed that he had come to Assam to deliver them from their age-old bondage. Gandhiji’s visit to Assam gave the tea workers an opportunity to take part in the Congress programmes. In May 1921, the historic labour exodus from Chargola and Longai valleys of Cachar district began when thousands of labourers of thirteen tea gardens left their gardens, shouting Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai.*⁷⁹

Determined to quit their jobs, they sold their cattle and other properties at ridiculously low prices. The government feared that the exodus would blow to the plantation economy and tried to make the workers return by persuasion and threats, but failed. By 19th May their number increased to 4000 at Chandpur alone. On the night of the 20th they were brutally chased out of station yard by the armed police. Then they attracted the sympathy of the Congress and the people at large. The local steamers workers joined the strike in sympathy after four days. The entire country was charged with indignation, and the strikes paralyzed the railways in Assam and East Bengal. The sufferings of the labourers continued to be persist until the middle of June, by when the plantation workers were on their way home. Adequate funds were raised to meet their transportation costs (Broomfield, 1968).

The exodus of Chargola holds a particular significance in the contemporary nationalist writings and later regional histories. Most of these writings picture this as “moment” when the plantation enclaves—demarcated and guarded in the forests of Assam—were finally breached by “outside” ideas and influences. The oppressive labour regime which was built on a close nexus of contracts and contractors was finally broken. The Assam tea coolie was

⁷⁸ Indian Annual Register, 1919-1947 (edited by H. N. Mitra and later on N. N. Mitra; Annual publication, Calcutta.), pp 1168. For some years it was also called Indian Quarterly Register.

⁷⁹ S.Goswami, ‘The Nationalist upsurge: Its impact on Peasants and tea garden workers’, in A. Bhuyan (ed.) Nationalist Upsurge in Assam (Guwahati, 2000) p.194. For similar writings see S.K. Ghosh, ‘Labour Strike in the Surma Valley Tea Gardens’ in Proceedings of North East India History Association, 7th Session, Pasighat, 1986-87.

set free. The enormity of the “episode” can be summed up in the words of a contemporary nationalist newspaper:

The strike of the coolies of the tea gardens of Assam is really a revolt against the age-old tyranny and exploitations to which they have been the most hapless victims. From the time the coolie falls into the hands of the artful recruiter, the arkatti...till he finds his resting-place in his grave away from his native home, his life is one long drawn-out misery. And not only men but women and children have the same old story...the helpless coolie passed into the gardens it was felt that he was lost to civilization and humanity. He had fallen into conditions from which it seemed to earthly power could rescue him...But his redemption has at last come...he is determined to break the shackles forever or die in attempt.

So the objective of the strike was deportation of the plantation at the planter’s or government’s expense to their respective homes. The Chargoala exodus though a well-known historical episode but it is also a social phenomenon. Generated by the deep rooted economic disorder, the unrest in the Chargoala and Longai Valley groups of tea gardens first took the form of strike for an increase in wages. It later developed in to a spontaneous mass exodus of labourers who wanted to reach their village homes, hundred miles away.

This exodus brought new hope for the whole Assam plantation workers, the labourers from Brahmaputra Valley who earned slightly higher wages than the other valley. The labourers there were no less a discontented and in an angry mood. There were strikes in June 1921 in Dibrugarh and Panitola tea estate, purely due to economic reasons. A large body of labourers looted several Marwari shops and manhandled the garden sardars. Some 60 workers were jailed on the cases of rioting. A considerable numbers of workers in Upper Assam left the tea gardens for their homes (Antrobus, 1957).

4.4 The Role of Non Cooperators:

The Non-Cooperation movement could not avoid an offensive directed against the British planter domination in Assam. The British planter’s domination over the rural marts became the target of direct political action. In the most of the gardens, there were weekly bazaars and haats where the villagers used to bring their farm products for sale to the labourers.

These market places were under the planter's exclusive control. Over the decades, the planters had seized portions of many village paths and ancient public roads by bringing them within their enclosures. In many areas, villagers had to walk longwindedly for several miles around a group of tea gardens to reach a destination that was actually within a walking distance of a mile or two (Guha A. , Planter Raj to Swaraj, 2006).

Public roads passing through the tea gardens were of course still used by the villagers, but under strict surveillances. Planters had also established, over the years certain racial and feudal practices to demonstrate their power. No Indians, certainly not a common villager was allowed to pass through a tea estate on a bicycle or horseback, or with his umbrella open up, in the presence of sahib.⁸⁰ Hence, the entry of a Congress volunteers into the plantation was necessary for the movement. But the planters would not allow the Non-Cooperators to propagate swadeshi and temperance in the labour lines or even in the tea garden bazaars. So, the only alternative for the Non Cooperators was to boycott the tea garden haats and bazaars, and to establish new market places under popular control in their locality. In the districts of Darrang, Sibsagar, Sylhet and Cachar, one of the main places of the Non-Cooperation movement was to boycott market places located in the British tea estates, and to establish rival bazaars and haats (Barthakur, 1968).

4.5 Rise of the Trade Unions in the tea plantation:

In December 1927, members from British Trade Union Congress was assisted by local Congressman to get first-hand knowledge of the deplorable working conditions in Assam's tea gardens. Later, the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) sent Hari Krishna Sahu to organize the tea garden labour in Assam. In May 1928, he visited Dibrugarh and formed a trade union committee with Kedarnath Goswami as secretary and several citizens as members. He was arrested and imprisoned for a month (Guha A. , 2006). There were workers unrest in the Assam plantation industry from the 1927-36. The number of tea gardens and their workers involved in strikes on records were as followed:

⁸⁰ For instances of racist and feudal practices of planters, see Indian Echo (Calcutta), 1 March and 23 August 1886; The Mussalman, 14 September, 1926; speeches by R. K. Hatibarua, N. C. Bardaloi, S. Barua and L. Barua.

Plantation workers strikes: 1930-36

Year Lost	Garden Involved	Workers Involved	Man-days
1930	3	1,900	-----
1931	12	3,200	-----
1932	8	3,200	-----
1933	11	5,000	-----
1934-35	8	4,071	11,850
1935-36	13	7,016	20,360

Source: Reply of A. K. Das Chanda on 1 March, Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings (ALAP), (1938) pp. 83-86; Labour Investigation Committee, Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in Plantation in India (Delhi, 1946), p 72.

Table 4.5.1: Plantation Workers Strikes: 1930-36.

The halt of work as a means to better working conditions came into prominence in 1926-27 when tea garden workers gained concessions through lighting strikes. A series of such strikes took place in the districts of Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Nowgaon. In 1928-29 violence had to be prevented by the Assam police on the five or six such occasions. In the same year there were short lived strikes in the both the Valleys in a number of tea gardens involved no less than 2500 workers in such as Paloi, Silcooria, Messa and Tarajuli etc (Chamanlal, 1932). The above figures suggest that plantation workers strikes were neither co related to trade union organization nor any contract with outside politics.

Short lived strikes took place in many tea gardens from 1937-41. In the same time the Assam Oil Company workers also agitated over the questions of low wages, retrenchment and non-recognition of bungalow servants as company employee. There were also strikes launched by the Assam Railways and the Trading Company workers in 1939. These strikes spread beyond and had spontaneously involved as many as 23 gardens of Assam. The situation was so pressing that India Tea Association had to set up a definite grievance handling procedure and emergency committees to meet the challenges of the strike waves for the first time. The procedure adopted involved three successive measures: (a) enquiry

into the labour grievances, (b) declaration of a lock out if the strike was found unjustified, and (c) a publicity offensive against such strikes. Several plantation labour unions, some or the all them perhaps paper unions, bounced up in the Brahmaputra Valley while there was a lone one in the Surma Valley (Griffiths, 1967). These are listed in the table below.

Plantation Labour Unions: 1939-40

Name	Headquarters	Date of Registration
Upper Assam Tea Co. Labour	Dibrugarh	27 April 1939
Rajmai Tea Co. Labour Union	-do-	-do-
Greenwood Tea Co. Labour Union	-do-	6 May 1939
Makum (Assam) Tea Co. Labour Union	Margherita	30 May 1939
Sylhet-Cachar Cha-Bagan Mazdoor Union		27 April 1939

Source: Governments reply to A. K. Chanda, 14 November, Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings (ALAP), (1940), p. 1313

Table 4.5.2: Plantation Labour Unions: 1939-40.

In the Surma Valley 1938, there were three gardens strikes in Sylhet, each of one day duration. In the same year, five tea gardens of Cachar were also in strikes, involving some 2,000 workers and a loss of 6,326 man-days.⁸¹ The Sylhet-Cachar Cha Mazdoor Sangathak Committee was formed in 1938. Renamed the Sylhet-Cachar Cha-Bagan Mazdoor Union it was registered under the Trade Union Act on 1939. With A. K. Chanda as its president and Santakumar Ahir as the vice president, the Union had a membership around 900 in Cachar. They paid an annual membership fee of 2 annas per head. During the world war period also this union had carried its activities in the plantation silently, because of lack of freedom movement (Bose, 1954). As the labour situation in the plantations of both the Valleys was getting out of hand, the government set up a Tea Garden Labour Unrest

⁸¹ A. K. Das to A. K. Chanda on 12th September, Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings (ALAP) (1938), pp. 420-423.

Enquiry Committee on 23 May 1939. The government warned that strikes, lock-outs and such other activities were unwelcome.

The phase of the labour struggles during the years of 1937-40 was a turning point in Assam's history. From the beginning these struggles were against British capital, had a clear anti-imperialist character as well as a broad Left-nationalist orientation. The socialist and communist thoughts gripped the youth and the student intelligentsia in both the Valleys. There was also increasing awareness among nationalists that the demand for national freedom had to be correctly linked to the workers and peasants aspirations. Since 1938, Subhas Chandra Bose had been advocating an uncompromising struggle against imperialism linked with the workers and peasants of India. In course of his visit to Assam in 1938 and October 1939 developed several parties in Assam the Congress Socialist Party, Communist Party and like Communist League gained a foothold in Assam (Misra, 1972). While the Congress leaders were either behind the prison bars or under custody orders, the Communist Party of India tried to win over the nationalist masses, but their success was limited. But they bought a setback to the workers and peasants class struggles that were at their peak in 1939 and 1940.⁸² The number of strike affected tea gardens all over the province increased from thirteen in 1937 to seventeen in 1938 and thirty five in 1939. Police forces had to be rushed to nineteen out of these 65 strike affected tea gardens. Lakhimpur and Cachar were the districts most affected. As a sequel to the labour upheaval, as many as 106 labourers in twelve tea gardens were victimized in form of discharged, dismissal or force repatriation during the period from November 1938 to October 1939, as per official admission.⁸³ The number of strikes in Assam plantation was in the years 1937-41 was as follows:

⁸² Communist Party of India, Assam Provincial Committee, Bharata Communist Party Asam Pradeshik Sanmilan Rajnitik Prsatav: Pratham Adhiveshan (Gauhati 11-48 February 1948).

⁸³ These figures are from a government statement in reply to A. K. Chanda, 21 March, Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings (ALAP) (1940), pp. 1061-63 and the Indian Labour Year Book (1947-48), Government of India, p. 118.

Plantation Strikes in Assam: 1937-41

Year	No. of strikes	No. of workers Involved
1937	10	3,700
1938	7	3,700
1939	37	not given
1940	17	„
1941	7	„

Source: Labour Investigation Committee (Chairman: D. V. Rege, Government of India), Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in Plantation in India, p. 72.

Table 4.5.3: Plantation Strikes in Assam: 1937-41.

4.6 Trade Union Activities in the tea plantation:

The Rege committee with Chairman D. V. Rege while touring Assam noticed that there was virtually no improvement in such important matters as cash wages, real freedom of movement and association, education and organization of work during the world war years. The plantation suffered a setback in 1942 because practically no strike took place. During the three years from 1943 to 1945, altogether no more five spontaneous strikes had taken place. In the industrial field as a whole, there were only five work stoppages in 1945, involving 1,988 workers and a loss of only 2,208 man-days (Committee, 1946). Thereafter, the situation began to change.

The third annual conference of the Assam Railways and Trading Company Labour Union was held in March 1942 at Dibrugarh. A conference of the trade unions of Assam was also held at Dibrugarh on 28 November 1943. On the other hand, they called on workers to boost war efforts through increased production and it urged to release national leaders. These process of the trade unions were bound to be slow. The branch of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the only organized body till in the war period, held its annual conference at Gauhati (Now Guwahati) on 26-27 May 1945 (Griffiths, 1967).

The Communist Party of India (CPI) wanted to contest all the four tea labour seats in Assam with the necessary Congress support, which was not forthcoming. Finally CPI contested in

the three labour seats on its own strength and was miserably defeated. It also contested and lost three general seats. While exposing the weakness of the CPI vis-à-vis the nationalist upsurge under the Congress flag, the 1946 polls also facilitated its limited entry into the plantation settlement. In several tea gardens of Upper Assam like Mikirpur, Hatipati and Barbari, trade union were formed. Labour meetings were also held on the other likes Myzan and Duklinga. The CPI popularized the demands such as old age pensions, rations for children, supply of cheap cloths, minimum daily wage rate of Rs. 1.25 and dearness allowance of Rs. 25 per month etc., in some of the tea gardens. These developments led to the formation of the Assam Cha-Bagan Mazdor Union with Gaurishankar Bhattacharya (1915-2002) as president and Mani Bhoumik as general secretary in mid-1946 with the headquarters in Tinsukia. About 900 labourers of the Suntak Tea Estate, belonging to the Assam Company, went on lightning strikes on 16 September 1946 for such wage related demands. Under a strike threat, the management of the Barbari Tea Estate yielded to some of its worker's demand. Later it turned for cooperation to the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) to confront the CPI (Bose, 1954).

Congress victory in the labour constituencies in the 1946 polls brought home to the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) for the need of regular political and welfare work among workers, particular those of the plantation. A Congress labour cell was formed and it made considerable progress in its works. In 1947 the Congressmen made continual efforts to gain footholds in the tea gardens in Lakhimpur. They decided to form a trade union for the office employee of the tea gardens, so that their influence could later utilized to unionize the remaining categories of the plantation workers. The Assam Cha karmachari Sangha was accordingly formed on 9 February 1947 a meeting held at Tinsukia, was registered under the Trade Union Act on 21 April 1947. Its headquarters were set up at Dibrugarh (Guha A. , 2006). The formation of this powerful trade union marked the beginning of a new phase of the labour movement in Assam.

After independence Assam's Chief Minister Gopinath Bardoloi ministry was keen on developing an understanding among labour, capital and the government with a view to maintain industrial peace in the province. Members of INTUC and Bardoloi negotiated an agreement with Indian Tea Association. The ITA agreed to allow free access in the tea

gardens to only INTUC organizers. INTUC, on its part gave an assurance that its organizers would make speeches only for the purpose of legitimate trade union activities and not to upset existing labour-management relations. The Indian National Trade Union Congress was formed on 3rd May 1947 and its Assam branch came to existence with K. P. Tripathi as a president on 3rd September 1947. Thus, by the time national independence was attained, INTUC had entered the plantation in a big way with the blessings of both ITA and the government. The main theme that united the INTUC was their common interest in keeping the communists out. By November 1947, trade union had been formed by INTUC organizers in about 200 tea gardens and the spadework was extended too many more (Sharma, 1974). It emerged as the biggest trade union to be formed in the province. The leftist efforts in the plantation field even taken together diminished into insignificance before the predominant position of INTUC.

4.7 The Post-colonial situation:

With the sun having set over British's empire, one era of India's anti-imperialist struggle came to an end. As colonies free themselves from the colonial rule and became independent states, a new set of production relation developed. Political pressure forces the government to provide protection and security of employment of plantation workers. Coercion is relaxed and trade unions begun to function among the workers, enabled them to fight for their rights. In the initial post-independence stage, plantation labour benefited from the laws granting protection to workers, mainly because of the struggles of the other section of the working class (like railway workers, oil industry workers etc.) that had pressured the government to pass these laws. Later, as a result of the protection, plantation labour was able to organize struggles on its own (Bhowmik, 2011).

After India attained independence the character of the state changed. The new government's attitude toward the working class was more favorable than that of the earlier colonial regime. It tried to impose some regulations on the class of employers while granting some protection to the workers, and hence tried to mediate between two. At the Indian Labour Conference held at Delhi in 1951, representative of workers put up a strong appeal for a rational fixation of wages. The conference decided to set up committees in various industries to formulate statutory minimum wages for each, including the tea

industry. This guarantee of a minimum wage provided some protection for the plantation workers. So the planters could not fix wages, they now had to accept the concept of a living wage and any violation would result in prosecution under the Minimum Wages Act of 1948. Subsequently, other acts were passed, granting some facilities to the workers. Some of these acts, such as the Payment of Bonus Act and legislation providing for Provident Fund and Gratuity, affected the working class in general. Other acts, such as the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947 and the Factories Act of 1948, granted security of employment and conditions for safety at the workplace. The planters initially ignored these acts as there was no check on them; a state apparatus to enforce them did not exist. In the early 1950s, the state governments set up labor bureaus headed by a labor commissioner, and labor officers were appointed in different regions to ensure implementation of the provisions and deal with conciliation between labor and management. Labor tribunals were also set up to decide on disputes (Bhowmik, 1981).

All these changes resulted in formalizing of relationships between the planters and workers. The planters started losing the tight grip they once had over their workers, thus altering the relationship from the existing master-servant form to employer-employee. Workers now had some legal protection and were no longer dependent on the planters. Among the legislation affecting plantation workers the most important one was the Plantation Labour Act of 1951. This was the only act that sought to raise the living standards of plantation workers. It contained several provisions related to housing conditions, health and hygiene, education, and social welfare. This act, along with the Factories Act, regulates employment, working conditions, and working hours. It provides for compulsory housing and declares that every year 8 percent of the houses must be converted into permanent structures (with brick and mortar walls, and tiled roofs). There are provisions for sanitary facilities and water supply in labor residences (known as labor lines), as well as daycare for infants and primary schools for children. The act thus has a great deal of potential for improving the working and living conditions of plantation labor. However, despite the several decades since the act was passed, possibly no tea plantation in Assam or West Bengal has implemented all of its provisions (Davala, 1993).

The above changes helped in some extent to provide greater freedom to workers, and have also provided the basis for workers to form trade unions. In fact, the level of unionization is fairly high among plantation workers. The Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), which formed close links with the Indian National Congress, has a wide membership in Assam, though some other unions have also made inroads, including the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) that maintains links with the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), which is linked with Communist Party of India, and the United Trade Union Congress, which is linked with the Revolutionary Socialist Party (Loomba, 1973).

4.8 Globalization and Tea garden workers:

India has been one of the global players in the tea production, consumption and exports, the changing trends in the global tea production have important implications for the Indian tea sector. The tea industry in India is said to be going through a crisis since the early 1990s, primarily because of a fall in tea auction prices. Other manifestations of this crisis include decline in exports, closure and abandonment of tea gardens, increasing labour unrest at times leading to violent protests and confrontations, non-payment and curtailment of wages and other statutory benefits of workers, declining living standards and worsening human security in the tea garden. Tea production in India is not only enough to meet the domestic demand but also to export around 2 lakhs tones a year (Mishra, Upadhyay, & Sarma, 2012).

India's recent growth performance is widely credited to the bold steps that were taken to deregulate and liberalize the economy with the reforms initiated in 1991. While the overall growth of the economy has fuelled considerable optimism within and outside the country, India's agriculture sector has failed to grow at an appreciable rate. In fact, productivity growth in agriculture has decreased since 1990s, leading to an agrarian crisis in many of the poorer regions of India. The informal sector that provides employment to nearly 90 per cent of the workers has also been showing signs of continuing distress in this period of rapid economic growth. Plantation Economy that share the characteristics of both agriculture and industry (Ramadurai, 2002). Plantation economies in general, and the tea sector in particular, have historically been associated with bondage and indentured labour

systems. Although the tea sector is officially part of the organized sector, Informalisation and casualization of labour have been among the key dimensions of the recent changes in this sector. During the post-liberalization period the Indian tea industry has been facing a severe crisis, primarily because of a fall in tea auction prices. Other manifestations of this crisis include decline in exports, closure and abandonment of tea gardens; increasing labour unrest at times leading to violent protests and confrontations, nonpayment and curtailment of wages and other statutory benefits of workers, declining living standards and worsening human security in the tea gardens (Guardian, 2007)

Tea gardens in India experienced closures and abandonment especially during the years 2002-04 in the Dooars region of West Bengal, in Ponnudi, Trivandrum District and Peermade, Idukki District of Kerala with a lesser magnitude in Assam and Tamil Nadu. There have been reports of strikes and even cases of violent confrontations between workers and management personnel. The crises in the tea sector, particularly in Assam, has led to labour unrest and apprehensions regarding the future prospects of the sector as well as the workers depending upon the sector. The relation between tea garden employers and labourers has deteriorated over the past decades, aggravated by the crises in the tea industry. This trend of growing labour unrest is not limited to Assam alone. There have been global concerns about the declining standards of living of the labourers in the tea gardens (Misra, 2003).

The share of major tea producing countries in world tea production, China had the highest share in world production of tea around one-third, in 2008. It is remarkable increase from around 10 per cent in 1961. India was the largest producer of tea with a 36 per cent share during 1961 and maintain this status until 2004; since then India's share in world total tea production has declined continuously (Table 4.8.1). Similar changes are also noticeable in the share of different tea producing countries in total area under tea. By 2004, China's share in tea went up to nearly 46 per cent, while that of India had come down to 19 per cent. India, which had 34 per cent of total area under tea in the world, has steadily lost its position and by the 1990s its share had already come down to 19 per cent (Table 4.8.1).

Table 4.8.1: Annual Production of Tea in China and India: 1961-2008 (in metric tons)

Country	Year						
	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2004	2008
China	97,064 (9.87)	179,984 (13.76)	368,223 (19.52)	562,961 (21.98)	721,536 (23.49)	855,422 (24.96)	1,275,384 (32.75)
India	354,397 (36.02)	435,468 (33.28)	559,583 (29.67)	720,300 (28.13)	847,000 (27.58)	878,000 (25.62)	805,180 (20.68)

Note: Figures in parentheses show percentage share in total.

Source: FAOSTAT (Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations)

Table 4.8.2: Area under Tea in China and India: 1961-2004

Country	Year					
	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2004
China		303,000 (27.74)		1,060,530 (48.90)	1,140,700 (43.24)	1,262,310 (45.49)
India	332,254 (33.69)	356,516 (25.19)	384,242 (34.44)	420,500 (19.39)	509,806 (19.32)	521,403 (18.79)

Note: Figures in parentheses show percentage share in total.

Source: Tea Statistics of India (Tea Board, various issues)

The tea industry in India is said to be facing a severe crisis, particularly after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the largest importer of Indian tea. However, over the past decade domestic consumption of tea has increased at a faster rate than production, because of steady increase in domestic demand and the inability of the tea sector to enhance production has resulted in a decline in tea exports. The decision of the government to allow cheaper tea imports from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, according to tea producers has only deepened the crisis (Mishra, Upadhyay, & Sarma, 2012).

The succeeding chapter is on the present study of the tea plantation workers in the study area. The impact of the trade unions on their present situation is also highlighted along with their day to day related problems.

Chapter 5: Discussion and analysis: Impact of trade unions on the tea plantation workers:

5.1 Introduction:

This chapter attempts to study the problems faced by the tea plantation workers in the Dibrugarh districts and how trade unions have helped them to improve their present situation. The Indian tea industry is in crisis and the plantation workers have been living in miserable conditions since 150 years. Due to the pressure from the trade unions the government of India amended the Plantation Labour Act 1951⁸⁴ to provide some benefits to the workers. But the state governments have not formulated the rules necessary for its implementation. The Act still remains mostly unimplemented, this chapter tries to study the problems faced by the plantation workers inside the tea garden and also a critical study is done about the Plantation Labour Act.

In this chapter factors such as the amount of awareness about the trade union activities among the tea plantation workers, the major problems faced by the workers inside the tea estate, the changes in the tea state because of the trade union or are they satisfied with the role played by the trade unions and also the role of women plantation workers participation in the trade union activities. These factors are used to examine the effectiveness of trade union activities on the plantation workers.

This study also included the trade union activists from three different trade unions who were involved in the upliftment of the plantation workers. That was done to understand, what is the present states of the plantation workers in Assam and whether the trade unions has been able to bring some light or they have not. However, these parameters are not rigorous in all the studies of such kind. This chapter reflects an interpretation of the sample population that was used for the study and also highlights their variations in different situations.

⁸⁴ The Plantation Labour Act 1951 sought to raise the living standards of plantation workers. It contains several provisions related to housing conditions, health and hygiene, education, and social welfare.

5.1.2: Gender Profile of the Sample Population:

The study sample of the tea plantation workers comprised of 93 males and 57 females. Despite the effort and emphasis to represent equal percentage of male and female respondents in the study, the male respondents appear to be predominant. The gender disparity in the sample population has emerged due to the fact that some of the women workers were not willing to talk about the trade union activities as they considered trade unions to be a political and male domain. While almost all the male respondents who were approached, actively participated in the interviews and discussed without any hesitation. In few cases only the husband who was the head of the family responded to the questions while in some both the husband and the wife responded participated.

Table 5.1.1: Gender Profile of the sample population of the plantation workers

Sex	Number	Percentage
Male	93	62%
Female	57	38%
Total	150	100%

Source: Fieldwork, June-July 2014

5.2 Age composition of the tea plantation workers:

Table 5.2.1: Age Composition of the plantation workers:

Age Group	Male	Female	Total
16-25	20	20	40
26-35	32	24	56
36-45	21	9	30
46-55	13	3	16
<55	7	1	8
Total	93	57	100

Source: Fieldwork, June-July 2014

The age of the responded varied from minimum 16 years to maximum 68 years. 56 of the tea plantation workers are in the age group of 26-35, majority of the both male and female respondent falls within this age group. The number of the respondents in the age group between 26-35 years were higher than the other age categories mainly because most of the people in this age group were physically sound and had aspirations to make better future. The second highest number of respondents which is 40 were in the age group between 16-25 years. The respondents between the age of 36 years and 45 years are 30. The respondents between age of 46 years and 55 years and above 56 are 16 and 8 respectively, which makes these two age groups numerically the lowest age group category of the tea plantation workers.

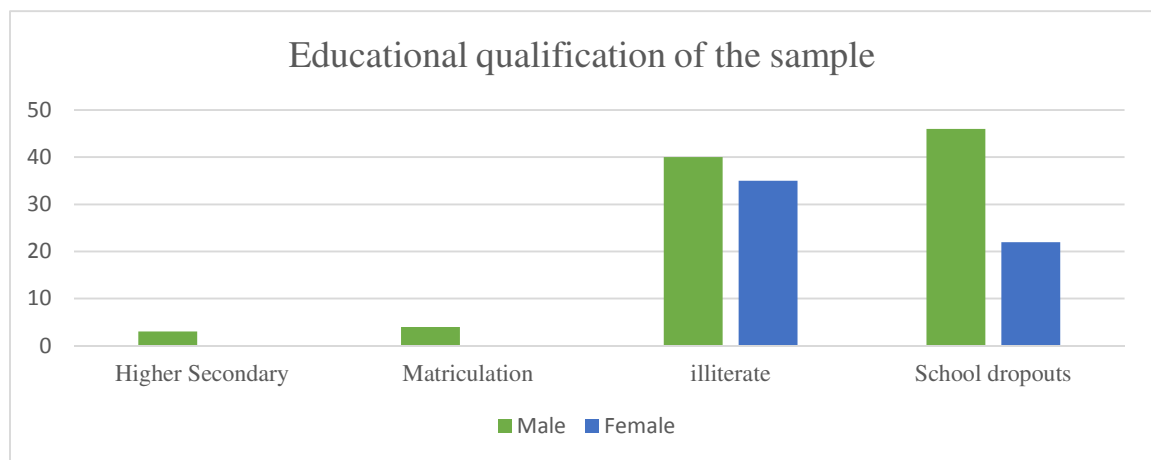
5.3 Educational qualification of the plantation workers:

Education has always been considered to be a very important dimension of any agenda for development programmes in a society. With the socio-economic and political evolution of mankind and its growth in consciousness, education has gradually recognized as a “human rights”. This is how ever not the scenario among the tea plantation workers in the study sample. 40 male respondents were illiterate and 35 numbers of female respondents were illiterate. Among the respondents there were 68 school dropout out of which 46 were males and 22 were females. There were only 4 male respondents who had completed their matriculation and 3 male respondents had completed their higher secondary education.

Education has long been associated with upward mobility. But the tea garden labourers and their children face a number of hurdles in access to better education. While there is the provision for schools in most of the gardens, more of these schools offer education only up to primary or upper primary levels. For further studies these children have to travel long distances. The problems are critical as most of the gardens are located in the isolated places with very poor connectivity to nearby urban centers and villages. Even when the schools are available there is virtually public transport available for the children. The young children are very often not able to cover a distance around two km on foot to reach school. This difficulty increases during the rainy season, when the road is bad and slushy. While

conducting the interviews on the issues of education, a good number of people stated that the authorities of the garden hardly provide even the minimum facilities for education. As a general convention, a plantation, by and large, has provision only for an L. P. school within its jurisdiction. But here the minimum infrastructural facilities are not available. Deepak (aged 23 years) has completed his matriculation but could not study further because he have to earn for his poor family. The family members are also very happy to help them in earning. In this field survey it was quite difficult to find respondents who were doing their bachelors or masters degree. The illiteracy and school drop outs were maximum among the female workers. Kaberi (aged 40 years) and Sonu (aged 33 years) belong from Chabua Tea plantation. Kaberi is a casual worker while Sonu is a permanent labourer. Both of them illiterate. They have 7 children; 3 boys and 4 girls. The eldest daughter Sumon, too, works in the tea plantation as a child labour. Though all the elder children are daughters, none of them have been sent to school. Instead, the boys have been admitted for the purpose. When asked to share their reasons for the apparent discrimination, they said education for a girl was useless for the family. The reason, they maintained was that the girl would finally go to some other family after marriage.

Figure 5.3.1: Educational qualification of the plantation workers.



Source: Fieldwork, June-July 2014

The single most important factor contributing to the lack of interest in schooling is the availability of jobs within the gardens as ‘non-adult’ workers. Its suits both parents and the

management but limits the scope of learning and occupational diversification among the workers. During the field investigation many parents in fact demanded that their children be allowed to work in the gardens. The mean years of schooling was only 2.65 in the ten interviewed tea gardens. A very poor infrastructural facility of the school stands as the most important reason for children not attending school. Most gardens only have a lower primary school with anything between 199 to 250 children. In most garden classes are held in a poor quality building with mud walls. They usually have two small classrooms and one or two teachers for 100-250 pupils. About 50% of the teachers worked only half time. In most cases a literate labourer is appointed as a teacher.

5.4 Occupation of the sample population:

Out of 150 respondents 77 were working in the tea garden. But female plantation workers are much higher than the male plantation workers. In this study out of 77 respondents 44 were female plantation workers which is 57.14% and male plantation workers are 33 only 42.86%. The unemployed section of the sample population is also maximum related to the male respondents, out of 30 unemployed 23 are male. There were 11 respondents who worked outside as construction workers, drivers. In the figure 5.1 showed that school dropouts and illiteracy is maximum in the 10 tea gardens of Dibrugarh districts so there are only two students found inside the tea gardens. That is why there is only one respondent is doing a government job.

Table 5.4.1: Occupation of the sample population

Occupation	Total	Percentage
Plantation workers	77	51.33
Unemployed	30	20
Shopkeeper	12	8
Working Outside	11	7.33
Retired	6	4
Sharder	6	4
Chowkidar	5	3.33
Student	2	1.33
Government Job	1	0.67

Source: Fieldwork, June-July 2014

Among all categories of workers within the garden, dissatisfaction with working conditions was highest among the casual tea garden workers. The unemployed people were mostly casual workers. Workers perception on their working conditions and the desire to change occupations provide insights regarding the condition of work inside and outside the gardens. Over all, a large number of workers have reported not to be satisfied with their working conditions. Interestingly, casual tea garden workers outside the gardens are more satisfied about their working conditions than their counterparts inside the gardens. Within the interviewed gardens, the desire to change the current employer is remarkably high among the casual tea gardens workers although in total large workers have expressed their opinion in favour of changing the employer.

5.5 Problems faced by the workers inside the garden:

The problems faced by the tea garden workers are countless. In the interviews conducted in the tea gardens, the respondents expressed plenty of problems that they have to suffer every day. The problems are mainly related to housing facilities, sanitation, low education, health conditions of the workers mainly women, low wage rate, unemployment because of casualization of labour force, electricity problem, domestic violence, alcoholism etc.

The plantation workers mainly suffered from joblessness because the tea sector is said to be undergoing crisis since the early 1990s. This crisis in the tea industry is manifested through stagnation in production, decline in exports and closure of the tea gardens. This linkage is the root of the crises in the low productivity in the tea sector. Inter alia tea garden labourers are facing a crisis of livelihood. For a number of reasons, it is difficult for them to move out of the gardens and find alternative sources of livelihoods. Their story is among many such contradictions that remain at the margins of the narratives of a globalizing and developed India (Mishra, Upadhyay, & Srama, 2012). Tea plantations in India employ more than a million permanent workers, and perhaps twice as many seasonal laborers. This makes the industry the largest private-sector employer in the country. But workers depend on plantations for more than just employment millions of workers and their families live on the plantations, and rely on them for basic services, including food supplies, health care and education. The crisis in the tea sector, particularly in Assam, has led to labour unrest and apprehensions regarding the future prospects of the sector and of the workers

depending upon the sector. Relations between tea garden employers and labourers have deteriorated over the past decades and the crisis in the tea industry has aggravated it (Hirst, 1997). 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. At the same time we can see informalisation of employment in this sector.

Casualization of workers have made most of them unemployed, inside the tea gardens casual workers do not even get the basic housing facilities. On the basis of the terms of appointment, it is divided into two categories, namely permanent and casual or temporary (faltu) workers. A permanent worker is one who resides inside the tea estate and whose name is entered in the estate roll of workers. With regard to the permanent workers the wage rates are 93 Rs. to 110 Rs. per day, it is depending upon the tea estate management. But there is no difference in wages on the basis of sex. As far as wage is concerned the status of men and women seems to be at par. The permanent workers are entitled to all the benefits like sickness allowances, rent free accommodation, maternity benefits, provision of paddy land subject to availability, provisions of fire wood, free cinema shows (1 show in a month plus 4 shows during Durga/Kali puja), bonus minimum is 8.33% of annual wage and drinking water etc. They are also getting miscellaneous one apron in 2 years, one pair of slippers in 2 years, one umbrella in 2 years, one mosquito net and a blanket in 2 years and sunglasses, gum boots and hand glove for sprayers of pesticides and insecticides.

The temporary (faltu) workers are engaged in the garden to work for a specific period. A temporary worker appointment is limited to a maximum period of 150 working days. The period from May to November is generally regarded as the busy season in a tea plantation. During this peak plucking season there are quite a large number of temporary workers who are employed for the plucking of the tea leaves. The number of temporary workers varies from plantation to plantation depending on the plucking potentially on the basis of the intensity of the flushing of the new leaves. It is thus implied that the casual workers are the pluckers, and as such, the majority of them are women. If the volume of work demands, even the minor girls and others are also employed casually. The wage for the pluckers is always proportionate to the quality of leaves, plucked by a worker irrespective of sex. But

the fringe and other social security benefits vary with the nature of the appointment. The temporary workers are not entitled to the benefits like rent free accommodation, provision of paddy land and bonus.

The permanent workers along with their families of the interviewed tea gardens are provided with housing facilities by the management under the provision of the Plantation Labour Act (PLA), within the plantation boundary. Different types of houses have been observed in different residential clusters in the field during the time of investigation. These can be divided into three categories based on the quality and content of construction. They are (1) pucca houses, (2) semi pucca house, and (3) kutcha houses. The pucca houses are built of brick walls with cement plaster (only inner side), the floor is unpaved, and the roof is made of asbestos sheet with bamboo ceiling. The semi pucca houses consist of two living rooms with one kitchen and a front verandah. The floor are made of brick, sand and cement and the rest of bamboo with mud plaster. With regards of the kutcha house, its roof is made of thatch resting on bamboo walls with mud plaster. It was observed that these do not conform to any uniform plan and are relatively more unhygienic. It may be noted here that without any official approval of the management, many of the labour quarters have been extended by bamboo and thatch construction to cope with the large size of the family. These unplanned extensions in many cases have made the home environment unhygienic and thereby have contributed negatively to the health and welfare of the people. Even otherwise, the provision of the ventilation in pucca and semi pucca houses cannot be considered as sufficient because the rooms, even during the day time remain dark and the floor damp. With regards to the maintenance and repairing of the houses, the PLA has by and large violated by the management. Most of the houses are in a dilapidated condition. During the rainy season, at times through the rotten roof, water enters within the house. Lime washing, painting and varnishing according to the provisions of the rule are also not done.

The bathing enclosures too are provided by the garden authorities. Some of these are twinned, some are single. These enclosures are made of bricks and cement plastered walls and floors. Some of have no roofs. During the investigation, however, most of the

enclosures showed broken floors containing lots of moss here and there. These make the floor very slippery, unhygienic and also insecure. Apart from this, the drainage system of the ten tea estates under investigation seem to be very poor. During the rainy season the kutchra by-lanes of the divisions become water logged and filled with mud. The entrances of the houses become slippery with mud causing inconvenience and hindering easy accessibility. Besides, cowsheds are generally built attached to the dwelling houses. Even if these are built independently, the distances from the dwelling houses are very negligible. The manner of keeping the domestic animals too seem to have some adverse effects on the health of the people.

It seemed from the study that economic compulsion is the main driving force for the large number of women seeking employment in the tea plantation. Most of them spend whatever they earn in meeting the basic needs of the family. In other words, their income is by and large contributed to the common family fund. However, though an earning member, a woman worker very often does not enjoy absolute liberty in spending her income. Many respondent answered that they require permission from their husbands to spend the amount. They are not allowed to spend the same as per their independent desires. In these families, normally the entire amount is spent to purchase food and other necessary commodities. Most of the women manage their family budget themselves. It may be relevant to note here that there are a good number of families where the husbands spend their entire income on country liquor, and do not contribute anything to the family expenditure. In these families the basic needs are managed by the wives from their own income only.

During the present investigation, it was observed that the people, irrespective of their gender, by and large are in the habit of taking alcoholic drinks especially the locally fermented haria, more or less regularly. Some of them get so much addicted to it that they spend a major part of their earnings, very often at the cost of their basic needs on haria. This affects not only their basic economic condition and health but also the peace and tranquility of the family. It often lead to quarrels between husband and wife. Many of female respondent told that sometime their husbands beat them up. So in the tea gardens alcoholism among the people leads to domestic violence. There are some extreme cases

where the husband's entire income is spent on haria, and the wife has to manage the family expenditure from her own wages.

With regards to the plantation worker's health the male workers does not have much bad health condition. Many of the male respondents health condition is in bad condition because of too much drinking of haria. But during this study an attempt has been made to portray an overall qualitative idea about the health scenario of the womenfolk under investigation. The women workers of the tea plantation often remain busy with their work in the tea beds for a larger part of the year. After the day's work when they return to their homes, they have to perform almost every household tasks. There is very limited time to take care of themselves. On the whole, the women workers, by and large do not get time for recreation and relaxation. The situation however, is not identical with the menfolk. After finishing their work in the plantation, they generally spend the evening without any definite work to do. This continuous excessive strain, coupled with an imbalanced and under nutritious food habit, may probably have contributed towards the frequent incidence of a number of diseases among the women. Most of the women workers have been found to suffer from diseases like backache, chest pain, knee pain, gastritis, cough and cold etc. Interestingly, most of the respondents have taken these ailments as part and parcel of their working life, and as such, they generally do not go for any kind of treatment for the same. Another problem related to woman worker inside tea estate is absence of crèche. During this field investigation in many of the tea gardens there were crèche but they were not functional. In the interviewed they answered it was just functioning for around 5-10 years back, but now it has no use. So during the peak season the women pluckers also have to take care of their kids. These types of gender discrimination in the tea gardens are often noticeable.

The respondents answered that the management used to deduce around 400 to 800 Rs from their wage rates in the name of electricity. Because of this reason they could not even afford electricity. So there is no electricity for 5 years in the workers line. During the field investigation in Muttuck tea estate there has been no electricity since from 5 years. Also in terms of education in all the tea estate there is only lower primary schools. So after completing their primary education students have to move out from the tea estate. So the

school drop outs are maximum in the tea gardens as showed in the figure 5.3.1. During this study it is very important to note that just outside the tea estate there is difficulty to find out a graduate student. But in this field study there is not a single one doing his/her graduation.

5.6 Participation of the workers in the Trade union activities:

Trade union is an association of workers for the purpose of safeguarding their interests as well as of improving the working conditions of the workers through collective discussions and negotiations with the authority. As discussed earlier (Chapter 2 and Chapter 3) in the initial period working condition and the social status of the indentured plantation workers were very unsatisfactory. So the plantation workforce relied upon the trade unions for uplifting their working conditions and as well as the status. But in the present study it was found among the 10 tea gardens many of the responded hadn't participate in the trade union activities. From the 150 respondent only 79 have participated in the trade union activities like strike, awareness programmes, fund collection and rallies and 71 respondents have not yet participated in trade union activities.

Table 5.6.1: Sample population participated in the trade union activities

Participation	Yes	No
Male	50	43
Female	29	28
Total	79	71

Source: Fieldwork, June-July 2014

5.7 Effectiveness of the trade unions:

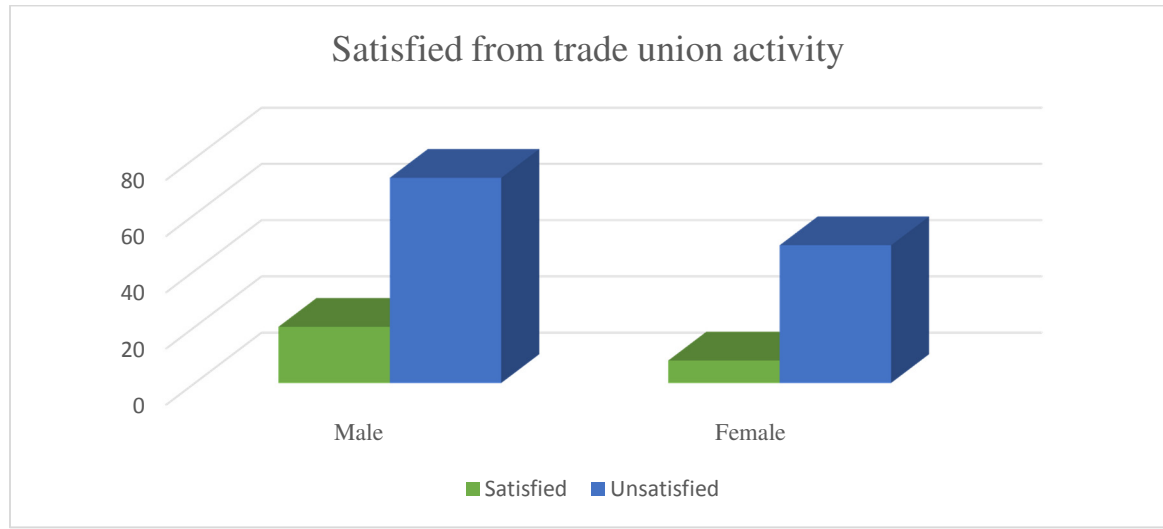
A discussion on the community life of the people under investigation remains incomplete unless some mention is made about their relations with the industrial authorities. This, in turn, calls for a brief passing reference to the trade union activities in the plantations, and the degree of participation, particularly of the workers, which participation may be constructed as a scale to measure (in terms of quality) their position in the labour

community as well as with regard to the industrial authorities. A trade union is an association of workers for the purpose of safeguarding their interests as well as of improving the working conditions of the worker through collective discussion and negotiations with the management. In each tea estate, a garden unit is constituted. Its activities are confined to the particular garden, and it looks into the affairs of non-fulfillment of certain small-scale demands of the labour community by the authorities. In case an issue becomes a stalemate, the garden unit seeks the intervention of the circle or the Central Body.

In this section an attempt has been made to study the measures taken by the trade unions, are the workers are satisfied by them, role of the workers in the trade union activities. According to the respondents from the tea garden the trade union is trying to make change inside the tea garden in forms of problems are discussed with the management, awareness programmes, providing help in repairing old houses and toilets, sometimes strikes and rallies. But many of the respondents showed negative attitude towards the trade unions. Out of 150 respondents 122 were not satisfied by the trade union activities and only 28 were satisfied by them. In the tea gardens like Chabua, Sealkotee, Nudwa, Muttuck, Dikom, Nahortoli, Madakhhat respondent showed no sign of satisfaction with regards to trade union. Only in Ethelwood, Bokul and Jalan tea estate showed some mixed responses with regard to their satisfactions. Because these three tea estate is situated nearer to the main Dibrugarh town, so trade union activists have some kind of influence on them. But the other seven tea gardens many of the respondent answered they do not even show any sign of trade union activities from around 2-3 years.

26 respondents from mainly Chabua, Shealkotee, Nudwa, Muttuk and Dikom answered that the trade union members doing nothing in many years to the upliftment of the people. 16 respondents especially from Nahortoli and Madakhhat said that the trade union activists do not even come to the tea gardens. 24 respondents answered that the trade unions members only came with pen and papers, then only wrote their problems and then doing nothing at all. So that there is much less active participation among the tea garden workers in the trade unions now a days.

Figure 5.7.1: Satisfaction from trade union activities:

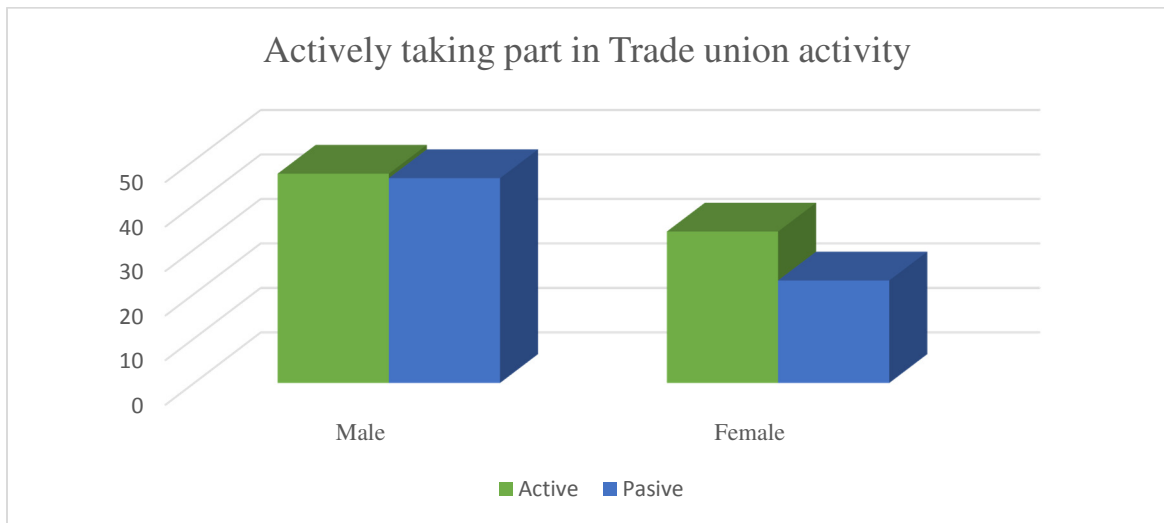


Source: Fieldwork, June-July 2014.

Because of this reason the participation rates of the sample population is going down as shown in the table 5.4. But many of the respondents answered that till 2005 trade unions had significance influences among the tea garden people. They also said that because of weak leadership their activities are day by day decreasing. Now in some of the tea gardens they don't even come for last 2-3 years. One thing is notable that the tea garden workers still have confidence on the trade unions. During the field study many respondent also answered that in the tea gardens many people taking active participation in the trade union activities, such as rallies, awareness programmes, fund collection, strikes etc. Among the total sample population 81 respondents have actively taken part in the trade union activities, where 47 respondents were male and 34 were female. But 79 respondents played a passive part in the trade union activities. They were mostly belonged from the tea gardens like Chabua, Sealkotee, Nudwa, Muttuck, Dikom, Nahortoli, Madahkhat where respondent showed no sign of satisfaction with regards to trade union. Among these 79 respondents 46 were male and 23 were female. Another interesting case was carried out during the interview that the respondent from the age above 45 still have confidence on the trade union. The most of the younger generation of plantation workers has joined tea tribes' student unions like All Aadibasi Student Association (AASA) and Assam Tea Tribes Student Association (ATTSA) because of lost in faith on the trade unions. The newly

growing student organizations among the labour community is taking over the vital issue of welfare of the tea garden community in Assam. Since the 90's ATTSA and very recently the AASA are raising their concerns. These two organizations are demanding a Schedule Tribes (ST) status to the tea garden labour community.

Figure 5.7.1: Actively taking part in trade union activity



Source: Fieldwork, June-July 2014.

There is another factor related with the field investigation was the conflict situation between the workers and the authority, and how trade unions helps to build the peace situation in the tea estates. Among the 150 respondents, 98 said that the relationship between the plantation workers and the authorities are improving but 52 answered it's still bad. The role the trade union on the conflict situation is very important. Because many respondents answered that although the trade unions are not capable of solving the problems inside the gardens but they are doing their best to keep good relation between the workers and management. There are many conflicting situations arise in the tea garden during the time of bonus distribution in the festivals. The management wanted to keep the bonus distribution as low as possible, but the trade union rose their voices in those occasions. Among the total respondents 87 said that the relation between the workers and the authority is improving but 63 respondents answered that the trade union don't play significance role to improve the relations. But there were various variations in opinions regarding the ten tea estates about the relationship between the workers and management.

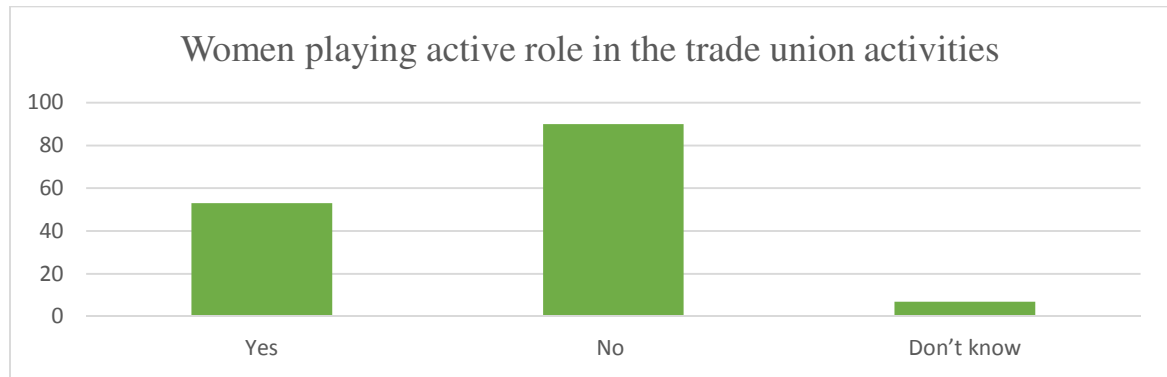
5.8 Women workers and the trade union:

It is relevant to emphasize here that although considerable attention has been paid to the study of trade union activities in general, any exercise with regards to the participation of women workers in these activities has received very little attention. In the present setting, however, the situation with regards to women's participation and involvement in the union activities seems to be mixed one. Notwithstanding the domination of the male members, there are some women members in the executive body. A good number of women have also been found not only to attend the general meetings but also actively to participate in the deliberations and proceedings of the meetings. It may be noted here that the executive body and the office bearers of the garden unit of the union is formed through election/selection for a term of three years in a general meeting, attended by all the labourers with the outgoing president in chair, and occasionally having some observer from the management/circle unit. But there are less women members in the executive committee. This however, does not depict the total picture with regards to women's participation and involvement in the trade union activities. There are a good number of women workers who are not at all bothered about these meetings, proceedings and elections. They are not only indifferent in this regard, but also some of them detest of discussing these activities. As a matter of fact, most of them are not only over-burdened with their indoor and outdoor pre-occupations, but they also firmly believe that the trade union leaders work more for the interest of the management than for the welfare of the destitute labourers.

During the time of interview when asked about their awareness, participation and involvement in the trade union and its activities in the tea garden, they simply said that neither had they heard about it, nor did they know what a trade union meant. They had also never bothered to acquire any knowledge and information about the trade union activities in the tea garden. They added that they did not have any confidence in the leaders. They maintained that the leaders were, by and large self-seekers, and worked more for the interest of the management than for their co-workers. Many of the women workers also said that the trade union activities were meant for the male workers only, who had no other concerns and household worries. According to them, trade union activities were mainly meant for male workers and they gave more importance to their productive and re-

productive activities than to trade union activities. They answered that even otherwise they were quite indifferent towards the activities of the union as they did not have any confidence in the most of the leaders who were at the helm of its affairs.

Figure 5.8.1: Women workers playing active role in trade union activities:



Source: Fieldwork, June-July 2014.

Notwithstanding these observation, it seems, the women workers are gradually coming forward to participate in trade union activities. With time, it is expected that their awareness of the same is likely to increase.

5.9 The role of trade unions:

The sample population the trade union activists is comprised of 28 respondents including both male and female with varying age, education qualification etc. The trade union activists are mainly belonged from Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS), Akhil Bharatiya Cha Mazdoor Sangh (ABCMS) and Assam Sangrami Cha Shramik Sangha (ASCSS).

Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS): The ACMS (Central Office) Dibrugarh is the registered body under the Indian Trade Union Act affiliated to INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress). The ACMS Central Office dibrugarh has 22 branches spread throughout Assam. Each Branch is functioning with jurisdictions demarcated according to local conditions and convenience with the primary committee based at the plantation level. The primary units at plantation level form the base of democratic set up comprising of three tires in more than 800 Tea Gardens in Assam. ACMS is very fortunate that it owns approximate 3 lakhs members who are working permanently in the Gardens in Assam.

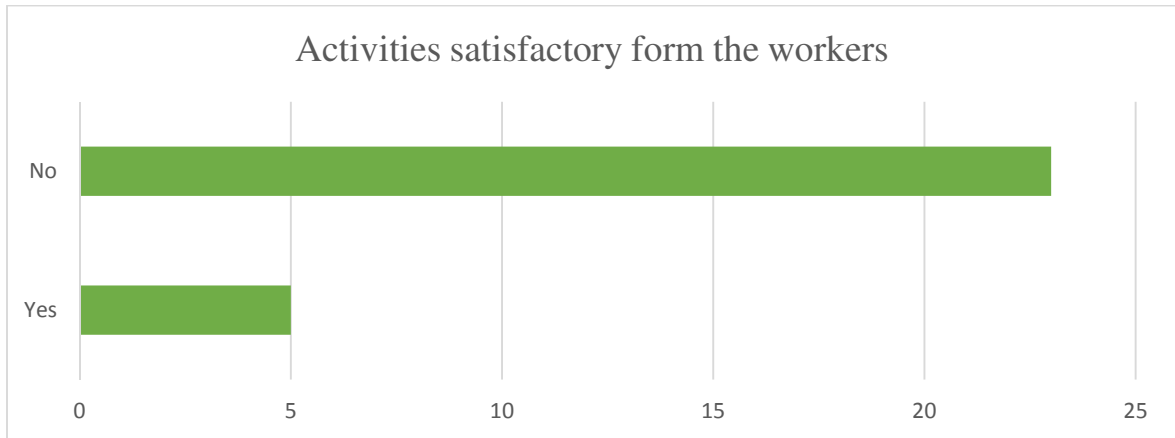
ACMS also achieves success to some extent in serving the needs of the Temporary Workers who are equal in number like the Permanent Workers in Assam.

Akhil Bharatiya Cha Mazdoor Sangh (ABCMS): The ABCMS (Central Office) Sonitpur is a registered body under the Indian Trade Union Act affiliated to CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Unions). ABCMS mostly fights for the increase of wage rates in the plantations and also on the payment of bonus to workers by the tea managements.

Assam Sangrami Cha Shramik Sangha (ASCSS): The ASCSS (Central Office) Dibrugarh is a registered body under the Trade Union Act affiliated to CPI (ML). The ASCSS is reported to be active at Maijan, Greenwood and Thanai tea estates in Dibrugarh circle as well as at Nalani and Nokhroy tea gar-dens under the Panitola circle in south bank. Demands include payment of wages on Sundays, payment of 20 per cent bonus and to curb the managements' right to declare a lock out on 'flimsy' grounds.

In the sample population of trade union activists comprised of 16 males and 12 females. The occupation of the trade union activists of the total 28 respondent is only limited to the trade union activity only. During this interview when they asked about their social security as belonging to the trade unions, 64.29% said no and only 35.71% of the respondents said yes. It is clear that if they are not able to secure their own life as being a trade union activists who they can able to bring lights to the tea garden workers. But they have full confidence on their trade unions, but there were lots of expectation in terms of better wages, legal protection, taking care of long employment, free education to their children, better working conditions etc. When asked about the problems faced by the workers inside the tea gardens, the answers were same as the workers like wage rates, housing conditions, sanitation, education level, domestic violence, medical facilities etc. They were taking measures like protest, discussion with the authorities, awareness programmes, strikes, rallies, fund collection to minimize the problems of the workers. But when they were asked whether these measures were sufficient or not only 5 respondents answered yes, 23 said no.

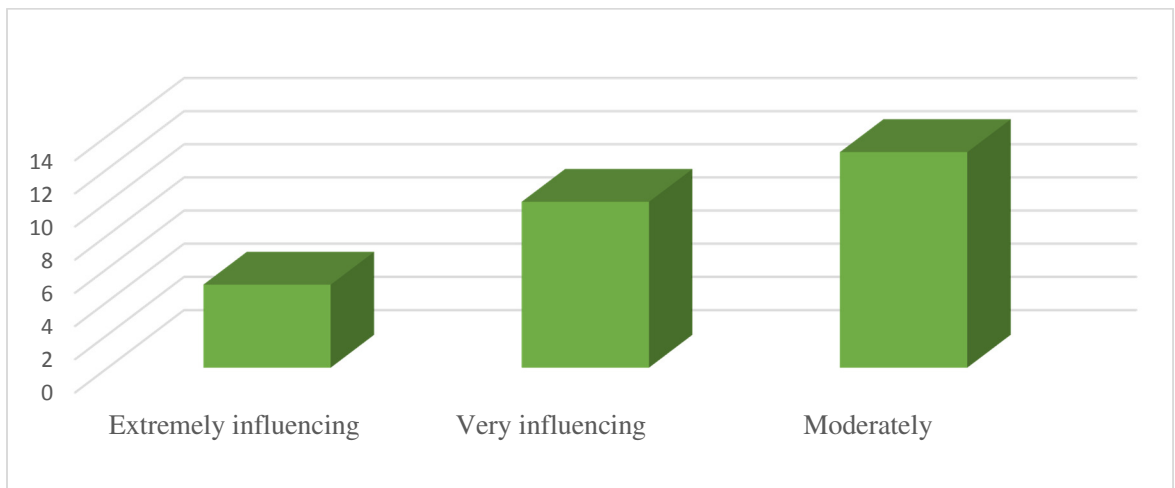
Figure 5.9.1: Trade union activities satisfactory for workers



Source: Fieldwork, June-July 2014.

During this study when the trade union activists were questioned about the trade union and whether they activities have exerted any influence in improving the working condition of the plantation workers, out of total 28 respondents 17.86% said they had extreme influencing, 35.71% had very influencing and 46.13% answered they had moderately influencing in proving working condition of the plantation workers.

Figure 5.9.2: Influence in proving working condition of the plantation workers:



Source: Fieldwork, June-July 2014.

But in the trade union activities the women activists playing an important role as representatives as well as decision making. Because 21 respondents answered that women activists were playing active role in the union activities. It's important to note that among the 28 respondents women activists were educationally highly qualified as compared to the male activists. Because of women's participation in the trade union is increasing so, women workers will get more appropriate status in the tea gardens.

5.10 Discussions:

The increased economic activities with respect to globalization, have caught trade unions off guard. The concepts of competition and individualism were alien issues as the national trade unions have been functioning in an environment of government monopoly and political party patronage. This is indicative from the fact that over 70% of the membership of trade unions, which is in any case confined to the organized sector representing less than 10% of the workforce, is drawn from government controlled corporations. The emerging scenario has thus further marginalized the already weak and fragmented Indian trade union movement. The changed role of the government, dis-investment in PSUs, voluntary retirement schemes, and above all the new form of politicking have jointly increased ineffectiveness of traditional unions which in turn are resulting in their declining membership. Recently there have been moves to form trade unions in the unorganized sectors, including that of agriculture labour. The extent of success achieved has, however, been negligible (Ratnam & Sinha, 2000).

The trade unions leaders drew much of their power from their association with a political party of their affiliation. As such, INTUC, which is affiliated to Congress was better placed to get benefits for workers till the time Congress Party had formed government at the Centre (Rodrik, 1997). Changing equations amongst political parties have led to a further marginalization of trade unions as well as their leaders. There have been declining trends in trade unions as far as the representative body of Indian workers is concerned. Intra and inter-unions' rivalry; conflicting interests of political parties of affiliation; ineffective and stale strategies; inconsistent policies and programmes; concentration of power in top leadership resulting in delayed and inconsistent reactions; politically biased motives, etc.

have jointly led to declining powers of trade unions which in turn has resulted in distrust and revolt amongst rank and file (Sinha, 1993).

Informalisation or casualization of employment is increasing in tea industry. The industry is also facing stiff competition. Free imports and reduced exports created a harsh situation for the owners and managers. With the objective of lowering the cost of production owners are increasingly resorting to casualization of employment. Manager's increasingly using the contract labours. Now only 30-40% tea garden workers in Assam are formally employed. Each garden employs casual workers in the peak seasons (Ananthanarayanan, 2008). Thus the tea sector of Assam, while facing the challenges posed by globalization, has opted for a strategy of cost reduction that involves increasing casualization of labour force. In Assam's plantation industry, trade unions activities are mostly related with the permanent workers only. The trade unions activities are not related with the casual labour force. The younger generation labours are mostly casual workers where female workers occupied the maximum numbers. The young male casual workers have lost their confidence upon the trade unions and many of them joined hands with the tea tribe's student unions. The other casual workers do not get any support from the government, authorities, their trade unions or the student unions. So this has led labour unrest and relation between tea garden employers and the labourers have deteriorated over the past decades.

During the field investigation, the trade union activists opined that the trade union membership is declining. Because they are also not satisfied by their wages, legal protection, long time employment, education for their children etc. So their activities now limited to the nearby tea estates only. So the most of the tea garden workers have not even seen trade union activists from last one year. Many respondents felt that the trade unions members only came with pen and papers, only wrote their problems and then did nothing at all. So that there is much less active participation among the tea garden workers in the trade unions now a days. So that there is much less active participation among the tea garden workers in the trade unions now a days. In the words of one of the respondents

..... they come once in a blue moon they came with a piece of paper and pen and wrote the plantation workers problems and did nothing. Ananta Bhuyan (aged 25)

Militancy is affected heavily on the tea industry. Their owners abandon many tea gardens and many others are somehow functional. These factors have led to deterioration of the economic conditions of tea labourers in Assam. There were many conflicting situation arise in many places like Guwahati, Kokrazhar, Sonitpur and Tezpur. On 26 December of 2012, the workers of Bordumsha tea state of Tinsukia district killed the tea state owner and his wife. Another same kind of incident was happened in Sonitpur district on 7 June 2013 (Sharma, 2013). This incidences are just the tip of the iceberg. These types of inhuman activities arise only because of the anxiety and pain that they had suffered from the colonial period. Moreover, militant outfits like the Adivasi Cobra Force, the Birsa Commando Force that played a major role during the Bodo-Adivasi clashes, have now begun to increase their influence among the tea garden workers. This could further complicate the situation (Misra, 2007-08). In such an situations unless there are some initiations from the social agencies like trade unions or by the state through the regulation those are prevalent in welfare state, a rise in development of tea plantation workers cannot be expected.

5.11 Major Findings:

Growing casualization of plantation labour has minimize the membership in the trade unions. Also most of the trade union activities are limited to the permanent workers only. The younger generation of the plantation work force is also not willing to join the trade unions. Many respondents addressed that the trade unions as corrupted and politicized. There are also intra and inter unions rivalry, conflicts interests of political affiliations, politically biased motives have led to declining powers of trade unions.

Most of the trade union activists are answered that trade union activities will not bring any kind of security in the life. But still they have full confident on their trade unions. They also have some expectations from their trade unions in case of extension of employment, high wages, legal protection or education for their children etc. However they admitted that

they have now a days moderately influential among the plantation workers. Trade union politics in the tea gardens have contributed to the rise of many leaders affiliated to many political organizations in the state during the post-Independence period and the state has elected 12 members belonging to the tea garden community to the Legislative Assembly on a general seat.

But according to the trade union activists in last 2-3 years women workers participation rate is increasing. In many of the interviewed tea gardens it was found that women workers are also taking important roles like decision making, secretary in the trade union activities. Interestingly during the field visit in the Ethelwood tea estate, the trade union secretary was a woman and whole questions were answered by her husband only. In Chabua tea estate the trade union secretary answered that the election for secretary do not happen in the basic of election but they are selected by the authority and the trade union activists only.

Regarding the question of conflicting situation between the managers and the workers inside the tea gardens. 66% of the total respondents answered that they have good relation with the authorities and here according to 63% of the total respondents responded that trade unions are playing positive role to reduce conflict. But in most of the isolated tea gardens the situation was very different. Because of very poor connectivity from the town or village area to these gardens the respondents were of the general opinion they did not see any kind of trade union activities inside their tea gardens. The relation between authorities and workers was very bad, according to them the managements were providing very less bonus in the festival season. So once they attacked the manger bungalow with sticks and bamboos, after local police came and controlled the situation. Even the local police is also afraid of the plantation workers, there were many incident in the Dibrugarh district the plantation workers attacked the police station. Years of suppression and isolation sometime brings agony to the planation workers.

In a town or village area of Assam it is easy to find one student doing his/her graduation. But during the field visit among 150 respondents there was not a single respondent doing his/her graduation. The rate of illiteracy and school drop outs are maximum inside the tea gardens. A survey commissioned by the Assam Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Mission (ASSAM)

during 2002 has shown that 25 per cent of the children in the age group of 6-14 years are out of school in the entire state of Assam, while the corresponding figure for children in the tea gardens is about 43 per cent (Saikia, Development of the Tea garden Community and Adivasi politics in Assam, 2008). The quality of the school infrastructure is very poor. A majority of the tea gardens have only lower primary schools with the capacity to educate 100-250 students. Usually, only one or at the most two teachers are available for four classes with 100- 250 students. Majority of schools are closed during the plucking time since both the teachers and students work in the tea garden during that time.

But again the trade union activists from ACMS answered that education scenario inside the tea gardens are changing, according to them many of the students from Dibrugarh tea estates doing their bachelors or masters. According to the field investigation the mean years of schooling of 150 respondents was only 2.65. However in some tea after the introduction of SSA management has arranged for the supply of free textbooks to the tea garden schools and provision of mid-day meals to the students as well as the initiation of compulsory teacher training. According to many respondents now a days there has been a decline in the school drop-out rate after the introduction of SSA. At the same time, it is believed that this decline could also be due to the mid-day meal scheme, which encourages children to enroll in and stay on in schools in the tea gardens.

The coolii lines do not fall under the purview of the Panchayati Raj system, the residents here are being deprived of benefits accruing under many Central and State government welfare schemes The tea garden coolies are considered as neither urban nor rural areas. They have not even been declared as habitat villages within the tea gardens while the labourers residing here are not recognized as Below the Poverty Line (BPL) despite their obvious poverty and poor living conditions. They have thus not received any ration card-cum-identification card mentioning their BPL status. Consequently, the coolii lines in the tea gardens of the state have no rural electricity connections nor are they covered by any subsidized rural electrification schemes for the BPL population (Saikia, Development of the Tea garden Community and Adivasi politics in Assam, 2008). After consistent demands by tea labour organizations, a few tea garden managements owned by big tea companies

have initiated the electrification process in the cooli lines. The Directorate of Assam Tea Labour and Ex-Tea Labour has also initiated rural electrification in the cooli lines by installing grid connections and metering in a few tea gardens in Upper Assam. During the field visits in Muttuck tea estates respondents said that there is no electricity inside the cooli lines for around 6 years. The respondents answered that the management used to deduce around 400 to 800 Rs from their wage rates in the name of electricity. Because of this reason they could not even afford electricity. So there is no electricity for 5 years in the workers line.

Tea is one of the labour intensive industries that depends mainly on woman workers. It has however, been observed that more than 50% of the woman workers are casual, who do not enjoy any social security benefits. Given the availability of few childcare alternatives, women who pluck tea leaves often bring their young children with them into the fields. No maternity benefit schemes are available for these women tea garden labourers. Further, there are no facilities to provide pre-nursing care and mandatory leave during the post-delivery period to these women workers.

Chapter 6: Conclusion, limitations and recommendations:

This chapter includes the summary of the research, analyzed the validity of the research questions, limitations of the study and recommended measures for further studies in this area or research. This chapter deals with the summary of the research, the analysis of the validity of the research questions, the contribution made, the limitations of the study and the recommendation.

6.1 Conclusion:

The origin of tea plantation in India can be traced as back to 1774, when Chinese tea seeds began to arrive in India. Warren Hastings, the then Governor General of India, made a selection of them and sent to George Bogle, British emissary in Bhutan. In 1824 it was Mr. Bruce and his late brother Major Robert Bruce at Jorhat who originally brought the Assam tea to public notice many years ago when no one had the slightest idea of its existence. The first commercial firm which was formed for cultivation of tea was Assam Company. From the time there was a steady growth of tea industry but after a decade the industry faced labour shortage. The technology of the plantation system was primitive and labour intensive. After the services of the Chinese workers and the local Assamese people, the planters began to recruit workers from Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and other parts of India as indentured labour in slave like conditions. They were uprooted from their land and livelihood by the Permanent Settlement 1793 meant to ensure regular tax collection for the colonial government. Impoverished by it they had no choice but to find other sources of livelihood. In the absence of alternative, they were forced to follow the labour contractor and became indentured labour on the land that the Assam's indigenous communities had lost under the same colonial processes to the tea gardens. The labour policy of planters and their government was not to encourage free labour market by offering competitive wages, unlike the public works department and railways. The planters made the worse use of semi feudal methods to suppress wages. The daily wages also that did not provide any possibilities of savings and mobility. That resulted in total dependence on the plantations with no alternatives. The management was supposed to provide all the facilities including health but the management refuses to bear the health cost on the excuse that the industry was passing through a crisis and the suffering of the death rates were common.

Because of the market competition with the Chinese tea the Assam Company in order to increase profit and remain competitive, they lowered the labour costs as low as possible. The company prevented mass protest by isolating the indentured workforce from the outside world. The Assam Company enacted various measures of discipline to restrict the labourers within the tea gardens only, they were isolated from the outside world and they were made completely dependent on their employers. During these years everybody related to tea industry were busy making their own fortune and established extravagant lifestyles for themselves and refused to invest any profits to improve the living condition of the labourers. The local supervisors or mohurirs possessed a share of racial prejudices and caste differentiation, addressed them as tribal labourers as alien, ritually low intruders. During that time the planters ensured that the labourers can produced more value than what is given back in wages. So through the wage-labour relation a form of exploitation takes place forms the basis for the planter's profits. The social status of the migrated plantation workers was negligible after they reached Assam. Their cultural songs also give the exploitative practices and abuses which was happened to them. It undermines the notion of ignorance and acceptance of the social groups migrated to Assam, emphasizes on how the knowledge of tea garden-recruitment practices, conditions of life and nature of work in plantation. The key to capitalist production is to be able to generate 'surplus values'. This surplus is based on the difference between the workers produce and what they receive in wages, which was the main feature of Assam Tea Industry. The labourers were alienated where they separated from their true essence. Because they did not objectivate their ideas and they were not transformed by the labour in any meaningful way. The main productive activity belonged to the planters and they decided what was to be done with it, the tea garden labourers were alienated from the productive activity.

But gradually the plantation workers became aware of the harsh condition provided by the British government and realized that the act of Assam migration as "being sold". Labourers also resorted to violence protest and such violence occasionally culminated in workers setting fire to the manager's bungalow. Then there was a historic mass exodus from Karimganj with the departure of 750 men, women and children in 1921. This exodus

brought new hope for the whole Assam plantation workers, lots of strikes happened in Assam purely due to economic reasons.

After India attained independence the character of the state changed, the new government's attitude towards the working class was more favorable than the earlier colonial regime. There also have provided the basis for workers to form trade unions. In fact, the level of unionization is fairly high among plantation workers. During the field investigation it was found that in the early years of formation of trade unions, they had performed very well to protect the rights of the workers. But now a days because of declining of trade union memberships they do not come to the remote and isolated tea gardens. The younger generation of the plantation work force is also not willing to join the trade unions. Many respondents addressed that the trade unions as corrupted and politicized. There are also intra and inter unions rivalry, conflicts interests of political affiliations, politically biased motives have led to declining powers of trade unions. From the field interaction it was found that the trade unions in the contemporary days has failed to uplift the working condition of the plantation workers. Trade union activities are mostly limited to the permanent workers. Many of the casual workers lose their hope in the trade union.

First the plantation workers were oppressed by the British Government and after independent they are now betrayed by their own trade unions. Now in the era of globalization the Indian tea is in a deep crisis. The tea industry in India is going through a crisis since the early 1990s, primarily because of a fall in tea auction prices. Other manifestations of this crisis include decline in exports, closure and abandonment of tea gardens, increasing labour unrest at times leading to violent protests and confrontations, non-payment and curtailment of wages and other statutory benefits of workers, declining living standards and worsening human security in the tea garden. Lots of tea gardens were closed and abandoned during the years 2002-04 in the Dooars region of West Bengal, in Ponmudi, Trivandrum District and Peermade, Idukki District of Kerala. But abandonment of tea gardens effected with a lesser magnitude in Assam. The crisis in the tea sector particularly has led to labour unrest and the relation between the tea garden employers and

labourers has deteriorated over the past decades. There were many conflicting situation arise in many places like Guwahati, Sonitpur, Tezpur and Dibrugarh.

Growing casualization is deteriorating the living condition of tea garden workers. Casual workers are more destitute. Historical continuity of the enclave economy⁸⁵ creates specific features of labour supply in tea gardens, which have facilitated casualization in tea gardens. It has been perceived that in the present competitive and liberalized regime, tea plantation estates are pushed to the extreme to cut down their labour costs. As the wages and other benefits in tea estates are ensured by PLA 1951, the management always makes effort to cut down the labour costs. The inclusion of casual workers however leads to the deployment of labourers in higher in the tea estate. The casual workers works for minimum of 3 months and maximum of 6 months in the garden. During the field investigation it was found that maximum of casual workers were engaged during the plucking season. Field interactions with the workers reveal that the male casual workers are mostly engaged in field maintenance and female workers are engaged in tea leaf plucking. Within the interviewed gardens, the desire to change the current employer was remarkably high among the casual tea gardens workers although in total large workers have expressed their opinion in favour of changing the employer. Interestingly the trade unions activities are mostly related with the permanent workers.

Capitalism that is growing in India today, as distinct from what the Nehruvian period had witnessed, it is unleashing a huge process of informalisation in labour market. Underemployed, the semi-employed, the intermittently-employed, “disguised-unemployed” or casually employed, they are generally categorized as being employed in the “informal” sector, a euphemism for what Marx had called the “reserve army of labour”. The workers being thrown into the ranks of the reserve army of labour, cannot be organized

⁸⁵ Enclave economy is defined as an economic system in which an export base industry dominated by international or non-local capital owners. The term is widely used to describe post-colonial dependency relations. An enclave economy differs itself from rest of the economy in terms of culture, legal etc. there are both plantation and mining types of enclaves. Still existing colonial structure made tea Industry in Assam an ‘Enclave Economy’ (Gupta, 1985) (Baran, 1967).

into trade unions. And the fact that the bulk of the informal sector employment, which is a camouflage for the reserve army of labour, happens to be in informal segment of employment within the organized sector also, makes unionization even more difficult. However, lack of unionization also means that they cannot develop any new form of collective social life. They increasingly come to constitute instead what Marx had called the lumpen proletariat, a “whole indefinite disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither” (Patnaik, 2013). This creates a moral vacuum an aggressive and self-seeking individualism along with still existing severe oppression this lumpenisation of workers gave birth many times criminal incidences.

Capitalism in India is kind of lumpencapitalism where more and more workers are going outside the ambit of collective social activities. Because of the growing process of casualization which not only deteriorated economic life of the people who are working in the tea gardens but also creating cohesions in their quotidian social life. The trade unions have to find a way to bring those casual workers to their collective social life and that will help to increase their bargaining power. Which may improve life of tea garden workers. This section of people are still living in the slave like condition inside the tea garden. In a society where social hierarchy is very strong. A better social life for the lower section of these group of people is not only neglected but also denied. Still ongoing isolated and socially and economic destitute life of the tea garden workers reflects that. The present evidentially shows the destitution which is increasing more among the casual workers not only made them poorer but also creates social unfreedom. Among all the workers, women plantation workers are particularly disadvantaged, with lower recognized work participation, lower in trade union participation, inferior working conditions. It should come as no surprise that the generally low status of women in the plantation work renders them particularly vulnerable to the other forms of exploitation, abuse and violence within the workplace.

In such an enclave situations unless there are some initiations from the social agencies like trade unions or by the state through the regulation those are prevalent in welfare state, a rise in development of Adivasi workers cannot be expected. It is largely the limited job opportunities in the other sectors for the Adivasi tea garden workers resulted unlimited

supply of labourers in plantation jobs. Establishment of an institutional structure to ensure human development in tea plantation is urgent. The state also needs to help provide opportunities for higher education, better social life and skill development among the tea garden workers, so that they can explore opportunities offered by other expanding sectors of the society. This will also break the asymmetry of surplus labour under employment and casualization in the plantation state.

6.2 Limitations:

The gender disparity in the sample population among the tea plantation workers has emerged due to the fact that some of the women workers were not willing to talk about the trade union activities as they considered trade unions to be very much political. Tea plucking is almost totally a manual work. So health concerns should get overwhelming importance. A large portion of the tea plantation workers in India are still women and they are also educationally backward. So education with related to women workers empowerment should get importance. Participation in trade union activities and casualization of the labour force should also get importance. Due to the unpleasant conditions in the field FGD (Focus Group Discussions) could not be conducted. Because it was difficult to get a respectable group in the tea gardens from where answers could find.

6.3 Recommendation:

The present study evidentially showed that the plantation workers still living in slave like conditions inside the tea gardens. The trade unions have to find a way to bring those workers to their collective social life and that will help to increase their present livelihood conditions. In such conditions social agencies like trade unions take responsibilities raise the productivity in the tea industry (which is decreasing over the last 10 years) and mobility. More technological inputs will increase the productivity of labour. Establishment of an institutional structure to ensure human development in the tea plantation is urgent. The state also needs to help by providing opportunities for higher education, better social life and skill development among the tea garden workers, so that they can explore the opportunities offered by other expanding sectors of the society. There will be upward mobility and supply of labour will decrease. Lesser labourers will remain in gardens with

higher productivity, there wage will also increase. Implementation of Government popular schemes-Right to Education, Indira Awaas Yojana, and Public distribution system is needed. Because from the present study the workers both permanent and casual workers deprived of garden proving house/ration/education.

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Annexure 1: Questionnaire for tea plantation workers:

Serial Number: Educational Qualification:

Name: Name of the tea Estate:

Sex: Occupation:

- 1) Are you aware of the trade union activities: (Yes/No)
- 2) What is your opinion about the trade union activities:
- 3) Have you ever participated in the trade union activities: (Yes/No)
If yes what types of activities like (strike, awareness programmes, fund collection, rallies, others)
- 4) How did you come to know of the trade union activities or existence (From News Papers, Friends or family members):
- 5) What are the major problems faced by the plantation workers inside in tea estates:
- 6) What kind of measures took by the trade unions to overcome such problems:
- 7) Do you think these measures were sufficient to overcome such problems: (Yes/No)
- 8) What is your opinion about the measures taken by the trade unions:
- 9) Do you notice any change in your tea estate regarding the role played by the trade unions: (Yes/No):
If yes what are they?
- 10) Are you satisfied with your present condition (wages, education, health, housing facilities, electricity problems others):

11) What kind of actions took by the trade unions to uplift your present condition:

12) Are you satisfied from the role played by the trade unions to uplift your present conditions: (Yes/No)

13) After what interval of time the trade union activities are taken place inside your tea estates:

14) In your opinion what measures should be taken by the trade unions to uplift your present condition:

15) What kind of role is played by the plantation workers in the tea union activities:

16) Have you ever witnessed or seen any women in trade union activities: (Yes/No)

17) Are women participators playing an active of in the trade union activities (as decision making, as representatives etc): (Yes/No)

18) From whom they get encouragement to participate in the trade union activities (from the trade unions, family, friends, others):

19) Do you feel the women should have representation in the trade union? Yes/no

20) What is the relationship between the plantation workers and the authorities inside the tea garden: (Very good, good, bad, very bad)

21) Did the trade unions take any kind of measures to improve the relationship between the plantation workers and the authorities: (Yes/No)

If yes what are they?

- 11) What kind of measures your trade union take to cope up with these problems of the plantation workers: (Strikes, Rally, street plays, fund collections others)
- 12) Do you think these measures are sufficient to cope up the problems of the plantation workers: (Yes/No)
If no what will be the alternatives?
- 13) Are women participators playing an active of in the trade union activities (as decision making, as representatives etc.): (Yes/No)
- 14) From whom they get encouragement to participate in the trade union activities (from the trade unions, family, friends, others):
- 15) What kind of role has women played in your trade union:
- 16) As leadership is generally controlled by men in the trade unions, how do women participate or find her space in the trade union activities?
- 17) What is your perception towards women participate in the trade union activities?
- 18) What is your opinion towards the relationship between the plantation workers and the authorities inside the tea garden: (Very good, good, bad, very bad)
- 19) Did your trade union take any kind of measures to improve the relationship between the plantation workers and the authorities: (Yes/No)
If yes what are they?
- 20) Do you think there is a change in how trade union worked in the past and how they work now?

