



# **Socio-Economic** and **Political Problems** of **Tea Garden Workers**

**S N Singh**  
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The book is the result of intensive field study of the socio-economic and political problems confronting the tea plantation labourers of Assam. The morbid situation in Cachar plantations in south Assam, where most of the workers still live a life of penury, is also highlighted here.

The immigrant labourers of Assam tea plantations, being the victims of poverty, ignorance, illiteracy and excessive exploitation by the Zamindars and agricultural landlords, left their ancestral places a century and half earlier and settled permanently in different tea estates, have since then become part and parcel of Assam. These labourers gave blood, shed tears and worked hard day in and day out to turn the barren tracts into green patches of lush tea bushes producing the black diamond. It is true that the tea estates which sprawled in the shimmering sylvan valleys have undoubtedly the economic profile of the state of Assam. But the socio-economic problems of these workers continued to be deplorable. The fruit of the participatory democracy is still beyond their reach. The authors have critically analysed all these aspects in detail which may be helpful to the planners and decision-making bodies at different levels.

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**SOCIO-ECONOMIC  
AND  
POLITICAL PROBLEMS  
OF  
TEA GARDEN WORKERS**

—A Study of Assam

**S.N. SINGH  
(KR.) AMARENDRA NARAIN  
PURNENDU KUMAR**



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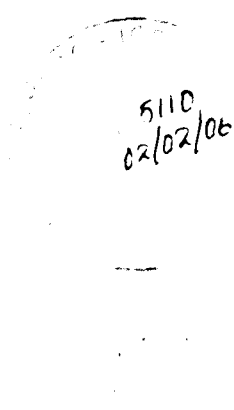
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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

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Many ornamental words and glittering epithets have been used in favour of tea as a beverage. William Cowper, an Eighteenth Century English poet depicts it as 'The cup that cheers but not inebriates'. De Quincey, a famous British writer starts with tea as a beverage of intelligency'. James Harnard opines "every good cause and every generous object gains strength and purpose and determination when it is heated over a cup of tea". These colourful observations clearly reflect that tea has been accepted as universal beverage and a little stimulant drink for mental relaxation. Every body feels freshness after sipping tea. Now a days, it has become the cheapest source of entertainment and a sign of a civilization. A survey conducted by the Indian Tea Board reveals that 89% of the people takes tea as their habit, 8% for refreshing their mind and 3% for appeasing hunger.<sup>1</sup>

Tea, as a stimulant beverage contains important ingredients like caffeine, protein, vitamins etc.\* it reduces mental tension and gives relaxation to the users. Cutting across barriers of class, creed and social strata, its ubiquitous presence is seen as a drink which is a symbol of conviviality, good will and harmony. This universal drink has now acquired an added dimension of health benefits. A celebrated scholar and philosopher of China, named Chin Nung has made his observation.

"Tea is better than wine, for it leadth not to intoxication, neither it causes a man to foolish things and repent in his sober

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\*Components (pc of dry weight) of tea.

Flavanis – 25%, Flavonols and flavonol glycosides 3%, Phenolic acids and depsides 5%, other polyphenois 3%, Caffeine 3%, Theobromina 0.2%, Amino acid 4%, Organic acid 0.5%, Monosaccharides 4%, Polysaccharides 13%, Celluloi 7%, Protein 15%, Lignin 6%, Lipids 3%, Chlorophyll and other pigments 0.5%, Ash 5% and Volaites 0.10%.

moments. It is better than water, for it doth not carry diseases; neither doth it act as a poison."<sup>2</sup>

In the same vein Confucius, another philosopher of China opined

"Be good and courteous to all even to the stranger from other land. If he sayeth into thee that he thirsteth, give unto him a cup of warm tea without money price."<sup>3</sup>

Tea plantation in India is the gift of the British colonial administration. The first major tea venture was started in upper Assam in 1839 by the Assam Company and within two decades, many more companies with British capital made their debut in different parts of Assam. Practically, they made 'mad rush' to clear the hill sides for new tea plantation between 1859-66. The success of the European planters in their attempt to develop tea plantation in upper Assam encouraged them to expand the plantation in other parts of Assam.

In Cachar, the first tea plantation started in 1855-56 by Williamson and Co. near Bursangun (near present Kathal Bagan) and its success opened the eyes of many planters and entrepreneurs who applied for a grant of land in Cachar. Captain Fisher, Lt. G. Verner and Capt. R. Stewart, the Superintendents of Cachar during middle of the 19th century took initiative to promote tea plantation in Cachar.<sup>4</sup> The 'wild rush' of the planters in this part of Cachar to receive liberal grant of land on easy terms led the expansion of tea plantation throughout the district, and by the end of the 19th century as many as two hundred tea gardens were opened in Cachar. Credit goes to the European planters who left no stone unturned to bring Cachar on the tea plantation map of the world. Cachar, at present is the 7th leading district of India in matters of tea production (42.44 mkg). The other districts are Dibrugarh, (Assam) (142.73 mkg), Dooars, (West Bengal) (129.90 mkg), Sibsagar, Assam (96.88 mkg), Darrang (81.85 mkg), Nilgiri, Tamilnadu (77.03 mkg), Idukki, (Kerala) (51.04 mkg), Terai, West Bengal (27.27 mkg), Coimbatore, (Tamilnadu) (26.25 mkg) and Darjeeling, (West Bengal) (10.85 mkg).<sup>5</sup>

Tea plantation is a labour oriented exercise and it requires huge manpower to run the plantation as well as the industry. The local labourers, initially thought by the planters and the administrators to be sufficient to manage the entire works, did not come true. So, the problem of importing labourers from the other neighbouring provinces arose. As a result, large number labourers from poverty and famine stricken areas of Chota Nagpur, (Jharkhand), UP, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Madras and Bengal were brought to the tea gardens of

Assam. The labourers were mostly illiterate, innocent, and poor. They came under contract system for three or four years but they were forced by the circumstances and other problems to settle in the garden permanently. Many generations have passed since then and the same gardens have now become their permanent abode. At present, labourers of the gardens in Cachar with their dependents hold an important place in the demographic map of the district and as such they play a dominant role in the socio-economic and political activities of the state of Assam in general and Cachar in particular. Keeping these important aspects in view, the study begins with a brief history of Cachar.

### **A Short History of Cachar**

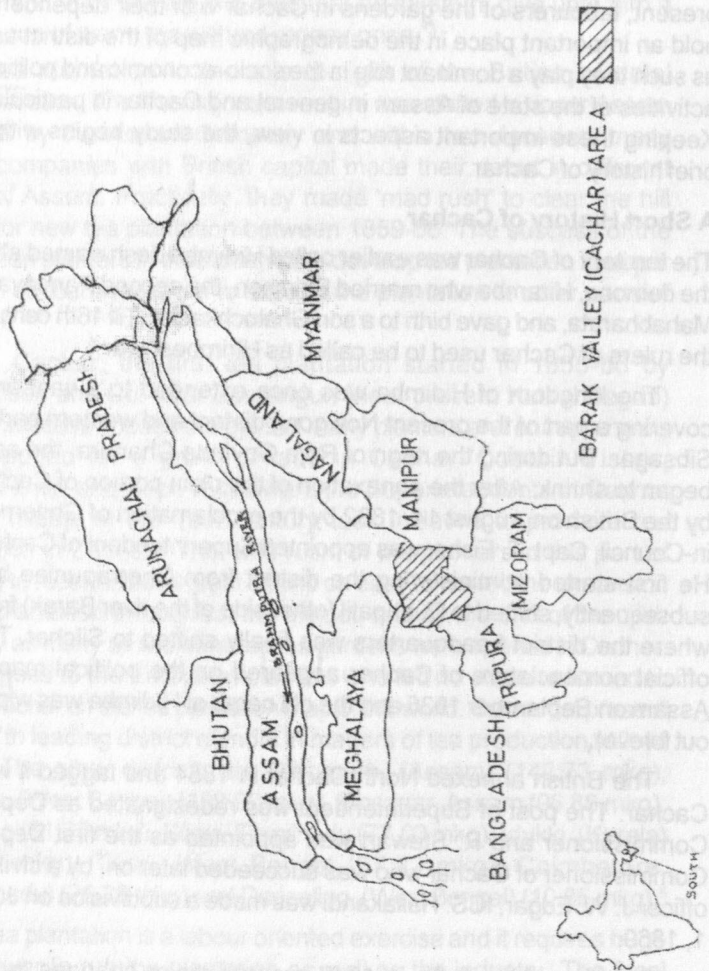
The territory of Cachar was earlier called Hidimba desh named after the demons, Hiramba who married Bhimsen, the second Pandava of Mahabharata, and gave birth to a son Ghatochkacha. Till 16th century the rulers of Cachar used to be called as Hirimbeshwar.<sup>6</sup>

The kingdom of Hidimba was once extended to a vast area covering a part of the present Nowgong district and western part of Sibsagar. But during the reign of Raja Govinda Chandra, the area began to shrink. After the annexation of the plain portion of Cachar by the British on August 14, 1832 by the proclamation of Governor-in-Council, Capt. T. Fisher was appointed Superintendent of Cachar. He first started administering the district from Cherrapunjee but, subsequently, shifted to Dudhpatil (other side of the river Barak) from where the district headquarters was finally shifted to Silchar. The official nomenclature of Cachar appeared on the political map of Assam on September 1835 and the old name of Hidimba was wiped cut forever.

The British annexed North Cachar in 1854 and tagged it with Cachar. The post of Superintendent was redesignated as Deputy Commissioner and R. Stewart was appointed as the first Deputy Commissioner of Cachar who was succeeded later on, by a civilian officer J. W. Edgar, ICS. Hailakandi was made a subdivision on June 1, 1869.

Partition of tea India in 1947 brought major changes in the political map of the country, particularly in the North Eastern region. A new state named Pakistan came into being, the eastern wing of which was known as East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Three and half police stations of erstwhile Karimganj subdivision of Sylhet district were amalgamated (under Cachar district of Assam) with India and rest

Map 1: North-East Region (India)



part of the district was attached to East Pakistan. In course of time, North Cachar, a subdivision of Cachar district was carved out on November 17, 1951 and was tagged with a newly constituted district of United North Cachar and Mikir Hills with headquarters at Halflong. Cachar district was again bifurcated on July 1, 1983 and Karimganj subdivision was upgraded to a separate district Hailakandi, the only subdivision of Cachar was later on taken away on October 1, 1989 and was made a separate district. Thus, the old political map of Cachar was changed under many political considerations and geopolitical compulsions. Now, the Barak Valley (the upper part of Surma Valley) comprises three districts, namely, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Since the area under present study includes old Cachar, the term 'Cachar' in subsequent descriptions includes all three districts of Barak Valley (see Map 1).

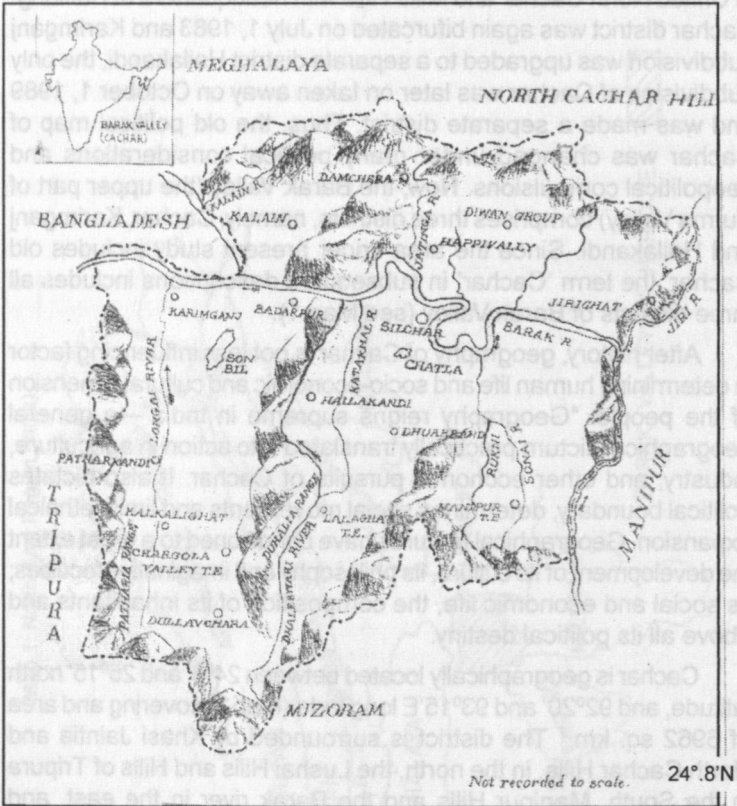
After history, geography of Cachar is not less influencing factor in determining human life and socio-economic and cultural dimension of the people. "Geography reigns supreme in India"—a general geographical dictum practically translated into action in agriculture, industry, and other economic pursuits of Cachar. It also dictates political boundary, determines social movements and limits ethnical expansion. Geographical features have conditioned to a great extent the development of its culture, its philosophy and imaginative faculties; its social and economic life, the composition of its inhabitants and above all its political destiny.

Cachar is geographically located between 24°08' and 25°15' north latitude, and 92°20' and 93°15'E longitude (Map 2) covering an area of 6962 sq. km.<sup>7</sup> The district is surrounded by Khasi Jaintia and North Cachar Hills, in the north, the Lushai Hills and Hills of Tripura in the South, Manipur Hills and the Barak river in the east, and Bangladesh on the west. In fact, Cachar is encircled by Hills from three sides; Borail Range in the north, Manipur range in the east, Chattachura range (Lushai range) in the south. Only the western part facing Bangladesh is the plain area (see Map 2).

Physiographically, Cachar is a heterogeneous land of both high hills, low lands and level plains. The surface is broken into innumerable small hills (locally called tillah) which are more or less distinctly separated from each other. In fact, Barak Valley is the upward extension of Bengal plains. Almost the entire area of old province of Bengal deltaic region succinctly described as new mud, old mud and marsh including Surma Valley forms a common structural and very similar way of life, an historic entity, and linguistic and cultural

Map 2: Barak Valley (Physiography)

-25°.15'N



92°.20'E

93°.15'E

Reference

- 1. River
- 2. Stream
- 3. State boundary

Physiographically Cachar is a heterogeneous land of both high hills, low lands and level plains. The surface is broken into numerous small hills (locally called *tilla*) which are more or less distinctly separated from each other. In fact, Barak Valley is the upward extension of Bengal plains. Almost the entire area of old province of Bengal deltaic region suitably described as new mud, old mud and marsh including Sumas Valley forms a complex structural and very similar way of life, an historic entry and linguistic and cultural

unit.<sup>8</sup> The area is characterized by doubly plunging anticlinal and synclinal valleys. The general trend of the hills is from NNE-SSW to north-east south west. Most of the hill ranges are dissected, eroded along the dissection to form round topped small hillocks which are found scattered along the flanks of the hill ranges. These are separated by narrow valleys having poor drainage system leading to drainage congestion. The highest hill range of Barail group of ranges which connects the north Manipur hills and Khasi range along the north of Cachar district ranges between 762.20 m and 1829.27 m. The Jhiri hill range falling within the jurisdiction of Cachar in the north east side is about 766 m. Some hills on the eastern side are as high as 900 m. Bhuban hill is the important hill of Cachar running north-south direction falls between 213.41 to 914.63 m in height. The Regti Pahar range running north-south direction forms the watershed between Sonai and Dhaleswari river. The range breaks into innumerable spurs in the north due to which many small rivulets drain directly into Chatla hoar (a low-lying area forming a reservoir of water drained in by small rivers and rivulets). The Tilain range 33 to 160 m also runs north and south. The Sarispur or Sidheswar hill which once formed the boundary of Cachar and Sylhet before partition varies between 183 and 604 m only. Duhalia range divides Patherkandi and Ratabari area under Karimganj district. Rest of the land falling in Cachar is flat land of an average height of 30 m.\*

The river Barak is the life line of the district which originates from the southern slope of the lofty ranges of Nagaland (Japo Peak 300-350m) and forms the northern boundary of Manipur (locally called Kairong). The important tributaries originating from the northern hills are Jiri (which form the boundary line between Cachar and Manipur to a greater distance), Chiri, Badri, Madhura, and Jatinga. These are hilly rivers which have swift current during the monsoon period. They carry boulders, gravels, and sands. The rivers coming from the south and draining the southern portion of Cachar are Dhaleswari, Katakhal, Sonai, Rukni, Singla and Longai.

The river Barak and its tributaries deposit different layers of shales and mud which form hard sub-soil of the valley. It forms the thick blanket of mudstone that does not allow percolation of water downward. As a result, there is heavy run off water during the

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\*Height (MSL) : Silchar (26 mts), Karimganj (18 mts), Lalabazar (24.5 mts), Hailakandi (28-30 mts), Badarpur (19 mts), Patherkandi (26-28 mts), Kalain (17-18 mts).

monsoon season. The deep water table and abundant ponds throughout Cachar are the common characteristics of the district.

In short, the district consists of four categories of lands – the hill, plains, intermittent high land (tillah) and low land area full of water (locally called beels or haors). The plain land covers 45% of the total area followed by tillah land 30%, plateau area 20% and beels 5%.<sup>9</sup>

## Geology

The entire Barak Valley consists of massive bedded sandstones, silty stones, conglomerates and shales of tertiary age. This zone is the area of intensive geotectonic activities and there are major tectonic adjustments within its affected seismic zone. The valley has major earthquake experiences in past.\*

## Soil

The soil of Cachar comes under two textured classes – the plateau and flat area, and is covered by silty clay and loamy soil while coarse sandy loam is found in tillah lands. In fact, the soil of the district is the mixture of alluvial, sandy loam, muddy loam superimposed upon stones, gravels and conglomerates. The muddy soil is humus content lying on the river banks and low lying areas. The tillah land is having lateritic soil with high percentage of acidity. The PH value of the soil of Cachar ranges between 4.5 and 6.5 only.\*\* The best soil for tea cultivation must be friable, loamy with porous sub-soil which permits a free percolation of water. The tea is highly intolerant of stagnant water.\*\*\*

## Climate

The climate of Cachar, in general, is moderate but humid. It is neither hot nor too cold. The district is closed from hill ranges from three

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\*Earthquakes in Cachar – January 10, 1869 (Richter Scale 7.35), January 30, 1924 (Richter Scale 7.5), October 23, 1926 (Richter Scale 7), January 26, 1950 (Richter Scale 8.8), December 31, 1984 (Richter Scale 6.2). During 1984 earthquake, Sonai area was badly damaged.

\*\*pH value less than 7 leads to acidity and above 7 to alkalinity.

\*\*\*The tea leaf thrives in an upper limit of pH value of soil between 5 and 5.5 only.

Moderately good tea leaf can be found growing at pH value of 4.5 and 5.00.

However, in some cases it can thrive in case of low pH value at 4.00 also

**Table 1.1 : Annual Rainfall, Temperature and Humidity chart**  
(on average 10 years base) of Cachar

		Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Rainfall (mm)	Max	10.73	61.07	136.20	338.47	439.50	576.00	501.00	366.95	412.80	229.38	40.00	22.70
	Min	9.18	13.28	17.6	20.9	22.36	24.76	24.9	24.8	24.1	22.23	17.53	12.84
Temp (°C)		25.67	27.51	30.42	31.29	31.22	32.7	32.1	32.97	31.94	31.7	30.44	27.45
Humidity (%)		97.5	96.5	93.2	92.8	92.9	94.4	95.6	95.6	96.3	96.2	95.9	97.7
9.13 am													
1.13 pm		53.4	47.5	50.2	63.9	70.8	74.0	76.7	72.9	75.4	70.5	57.5	54.9

Source: Annual Scientific Report, Tea Research Association, Tocklai, R. S. Jorhat 1985.

sides which has great bearing on climate. The rainfall- temperature chart of an average 10 years of Silchar and other places (Table 1.1) indicate that the temperature varies between 32.84 °C maximum and 9.18 °C minimum. The rainfall chart reflects that the annual rainfall exceeds 3000 mm.

The uncertainty of monsoon throughout the country does not show uniform rainfall in Cachar too. It received 426.2 mm in March 1994 while in the preceding year, it was only 188.2 mm. The north western part of Cachar receives higher rainfall than other parts. The valley-wise rainfall figure indicates that the north Cachar Valley gets 4393 mm while Chargola Valley, Longai Valley, Happy Valley, Chatla Valley and Hailakandi Valley get 2774, 2665, 3469, 3145, 3085 mm respectively. The humidity varies between 92.8 and 97.5% (maximum) and 47.5 and 76.7 (minimum). During June, July and August, the high temperature accompanied with high humidity makes the climate unbearable and suffocating, and a feeling of lethargy prevails everywhere. There is severe hail storm followed by cyclonic rain causing destruction of man and material. Locally it is called 'Kal Baishaki'. This occurs during the month of April-May.

### **Vegetation**

The climate and soil condition determine the vegetation of a region. The lateritic soil with high acidity does not facilitate luxuriant growth of vegetation. The important vegetation includes trees like jarul, nageshwar, kurla, phuma, ratla, cham, gamari, sundi, jam, cham, simul and kathal. These trees are mostly grown in the hills of Cachar including southern part facing Mizoram. Other common trees like mango, pepal, neem, kadam and many other shade trees. Bamboo bushes, shrubs, reeds, banana, betelnut, coconut are found everywhere. Bamboo and reed (locally called 'Bent') are commonly used in cottage industries which employ large number of poor people.

### **Agriculture**

Normally, physiography, climate and soil determine the agricultural pattern of the Barak Valley, Paddy cultivation is the main agriculture of Cachar followed by mustard seed and sugarcane. Some vegetables like potato, brinjal, cabbage, sweet potato, beans and chillies etc. are also grown on raised lands (tillah) or on river bank slope (locally called char area). Among the fruits, papaya, pineapples, oranges, guavas, lemons are grown. In the low lying areas, beels, ponds, and rivers plenty fish farming is practised for both internal consumption and for sale in the local markets.

Before the annexation of Cachar by the British, the district was not a revenue district. Economically, it was not viable. The agriculture was not fully developed. Some indigenous people, fishermen, *namasudra*, *patni* and tribals (Nagas and Kukis) were living in certain plain areas of Cachar. The southern part of Cachar was the hunting ground of the Kukis and Lushais which was full of wild animals.

The deplorable economic condition of Cachar gradually improved due to hard labour of the early colonial administrators (called superintendent) who left no stone unturned to bring the district on prosperous footings. Many hard working Muslim immigrants from Sylhet and other districts were encouraged to settle in southern part of the district, of which they gladly responded. They shed their sweat and blood and made the district agriculturally sound. Many Manipuris were also brought to resist the ongoing Kukis atrocities on docile inhabitants of south Cachar plains. At present, Cachar has become agriculturally most prosperous. The plain fields of Cachar, particularly the Kaptanpur area of Sonai, Mangalpur (Bantarapur, Palanghat), Kazir bazar (near Swadin bazaar of Sonai), Barban area, Bakri hoar of Algapur (Hailakandi) and Suprakandi hoar of Karimganj are the granary of Barak Valley. In this valley, three kinds of rice – Sali, Ahu and Boro are grown. In the low lying area of hoars or beels, boro rice is grown during winter season. The other two varieties are grown in summer season. Besides rice, sugar cane is also grown in the plateau or tillah land. The important places for sugar cane cultivation are Gangapur (near Silchar), Jogiabasti, Attarah tillah (Dholai) Dullabcherra in Karimganj district. Vegetables like potato, cauliflower, cabbage, beans, etc. are sufficiently grown in 'Char' area (river slope or penplains) of Barak river and its other tributaries.

The development of pisciculture in the low lying hoars and beels of Cachar is a big landmark which increases the agriculture economy of Cachar. Chatla hoar, Son beel, Rata beel and beels of Suprakandi and Neelam Bazar of Karimganj district are famous for fish culture. The fish fry (*pone*) cultured in Neelam bazaar is supplied throughout Assam.

### **Demographic Pattern**

Before the annexation, the population of Cachar was less than fifty thousand with density of 11.38 per sq. km. Gradually the population began to expand with the development of agriculture. The colonial policy was also responsible for rapid demographic change. The partition of India and subsequent large scale influx of refugees from East Pakistan in different waves raised the population of the district,

which consequently, affected the socio-economic and political dimension of Cachar. The population of Cachar during 2001 census was 29,88,797, majority of which belonged to Bengali community. More than 15% of the total population of Cachar is constituted by the tea and ex-tea garden labour community. Tea and Ex-tea labour community has been split up in different groups, say Bhojpuri, Nagpuria, Santhali, Oriya, Hindustani and others. Many social activists have pointed out that their population has never been properly projected. Caste/community-wise classification as per 2001 census is reflected in the table 1.2.

<i>Name of the district</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Cachar	741580	700561	1442141
Karimganj	516408	487270	1003678
Hailakandi	280912	262066	542978
<b>Total</b>	<b>1538900</b>	<b>1449897</b>	<b>2988797</b>

<i>Community</i>	<i>Cachar district</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Karimganj district</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Hailakandi district</i>	<i>%</i>
Bengal	1089826	75.57	850015	84.69	446654	82.26
Hindi speaking	138157	9.58	76581	7.63	53863	9.92
Manipuri (Meitheï)	99796	6.92	3312	0.33	13954	2.57
Bhojpuri	19902	1.38	17765	1.77	4018	0.74
Dimasa	18748	1.30	NA	NA	434	0.08
Bishnupriya	14421	1.00	22483	2.24	543	0.10
Khasi	10528	0.73	2007	0.20	4127	0.76
Hmar	9230	0.64	-	-	-	-
Oriya	7643	0.53	6122	0.61	1846	0.34
Assamese	6922	0.48	3011	0.30	977	0.18
Nepali	4471	0.31	703	0.07	326	0.06
Rengna	3605	0.25	-	-	-	-
Santhal	2884	0.20	803	0.08	1628	0.30
Nagpuria	1298	0.09	903	0.09	-	-
Riang	1298	0.09	803	0.08	6570	1.21
Karbis	1154	0.08	-	-	-	-
Punjabi	-	-	301	0.03	-	-
Telegu	-	-	1004	0.10	706	0.03
Halam	-	-	401	0.04	-	-
Tripuri	-	-	4015	0.40	2498	0.46
Chakma	-	-	-	-	652	0.12
Lushai	-	-	-	-	977	0.18
Others	12258	0.85	13449	1.34	3203	0.59
<b>Total</b>	<b>1442141</b>		<b>1003678</b>		<b>542978</b>	

Source: Assam Census Newsletter, vol.1, 1995, p.5.

Also Directorate of Statistics, Assam (Cachar Branch, Silchar).

Assam came into prominence and secured a prominent place on the commercial map of the world due to tea plantation initiated by the British administrators and the experienced European entrepreneurs. The enterprising skill, commercial interest, political will, and forward looking colonial policy laid the economic foundation of Assam. The tea plantation was established in Assam Valley during 1840s by the colonial planters. In Cachar, the first tea plantation started much later in 1855-56 at Bursangon and Gungurpar, a few kilometers south of Silchar. Subsequent chapters dealing with historical background and recruitment respectively would reflect the development of tea plantation and labour problem in Cachar.

In the initial stage, the European planters had a mind to manage the tea plantation in Cachar with the help of local labourers readily available in Sylhet and Jyanteah, the inhabitants of which came willingly to Cachar and settled down in it. Some Kukis were also pressed into services for the plantation purposes, but later on were found unfit for the hard work of the plantation. They were lazy, loathsome and physically weak and therefore, were reluctant to work in the plantation which required regular work without any break. The local labourers were found absent on simple pretext of illness, stomach disorder, religious festivals, domestic works or other ritual functions.

Moreover, in their opinion, the employment in the garden was below their dignity and status. Their self sustained economy discouraged them to join tea plantation. This is evident from the folksong of the people of both vallys. Thus, their absence during pick season compelled the planters to make other alternative arrangements.

Tea plantation, like other plantations, is agro-based and labour-oriented enterprise. The tea industry includes agricultural part which supplies raw material to the industry. The industrial phase comes afterwards; which is primarily concerned with preparation of tea in bulk and its export to different destinations. Hence, the industry requires constantly a labour force at every stage, from nursery to final dispatch of tea chest to the market. Moreover, the manufacturing process was not mechanized in the beginning and everything was done manually. Thus, physical inability and disinterestedness of the local workers in tea plantation marred the progress of tea plantation in Cachar. There was urgent requirement of hard working labourers who could be readily available without any break. As a result, the planters and the colonial administrators thought to bring labourer from outside Assam. They thought that the uprooted labourers, could be easily controlled, if they are housed within the garden.

Though the climate was favourable for the tea plantation it was not favourable for the planters. The high temperature, extreme humid climate, diseases like malaria, cholera, kala-azar, small pox, dysentery and typhoid were widespread. These negative factors hampered the pioneering plantation work in Assam, in general and Cachar, in particular.<sup>10</sup> However, frantic efforts were made by the adventurous European planters, despite inhospitable climate for them, who shed sweat, gave blood to give a profitable shape to the plantation upon which everyone is proud of in India.

While the planters and others were contemplating to import labour from neighbouring provinces, there was famine in many parts of India<sup>11</sup> and the poor people were dying out of starvation.\* The colonial administrators immediately thought to harvest the situation. The deplorable condition of the poor, illiterate and famine stricken people who were worst victim of circumstances, compelled them to fall into the trap of agents of the government. The agents induced them to come to Assam and to enjoy better life. This is reflected in the folksongs of the tea labourers in most of the gardens.\*\* Thus, labourers from famine stricken areas of Bihar (Chota Nagpur, Gaya, Palamu, Bhagalpur, Monger, Orissa (Ganjam, Kalahandi, Behrampur), Madhya Pradesh (Raipur, Baster, Bilaspur, Rewa, Raigarh, Balaghat), UP (Deoria, Balia, Basti, Mirzapur, Gazipur, Azamgarh, Gorakhpur), Bengal (Medinipur, Purulia, Bakura, Burdwan), Madras (Vishakapatnam, Guntur) were recruited by the agents (called Arcuttee), appointed by the Government and sent to different tea gardens of Assam.

The agents (also called Arkattees), in order to have a gainful employment, infiltrated into the remotest villages wherever, a suitable opportunity occurred. They resorted to all sorts of nefarious and fraudulent practices for tempting or forcing men and women of rural countryside to make them ready to go to Assam. An 'Agreement', i.e., a contract to serve for at least three years time was signed. This was, in reality, a trap for reducing them to slavery. These labourers

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\*Famine of occurred in N.W. Provinces (1860-61), Bihar, North Bengal, Orissa, Madras (1865-66), N. Wn provinces, Central Provinces, Rajputana (1968-70). Bengal & Bihar (1873-74).

\*\* Asomer jabo Aar Harir Karane

Bellpatra Torbo Aar Aram Kore Khabo

Chal Sarada, Chal Mini, Desher Baro Dukh Go

(English translation:-

We shall go to Assam and pluck leaves of hard apple and would live comfortably.

O Sarada, O Mini let us go to Assam, There is discomfort in our place.

were dumped at various depots, from where they were sent to Assam by country boats. The journey took more than a month; and while on journey the indentured labourers had to face indescribable difficulties. They were virtually packed up in the boats like animals and no human consideration was even thought of regarding the privacy of the women. The long journey without proper food and other comforts accompanied with unfamiliar climate was most horrible and painful. Many ill-nourished labourers and their small children died en route due to their inability to withstand the hostile climate of North East India. The dead body was not given proper burial honour and were thrown in the river water like animals. No human consideration was even thought of in respect of privacy of the women while answering natural calls from the plank of country boat moving against the river current.

Somehow or other these indentured labourers came to Cachar tea gardens with hungry stomach and empty bowls. The moment these uprooted labourers put their feet on the soil of Cachar, their hopes and aspirations were shattered by the blow of misfortune. They were disheartened, and tears started tickling down to find a typical geographical environment. Being victims of circumstances at both places, they consoled themselves putting blame on their fate. They were sent to an isolated area having no human settlement and no communication line. It was inaccessible jungle infested with wild animals. They were asked to clear the jungle first and then to erect a common barrack for their dormitory life. In a small space both male and female groups were put in barracks without any sense of women's privacy. Many labourers did not like to stay in such inhuman milieu and tried to run away from tea gardens. In their attempt, many lost their lives. The tea planters had placed watchmen to have round the clock surveillance of the garden labour.<sup>12</sup> After detection of the labourers trying to get out of garden, they were whipped mercilessly by the managers. The outraging of the women modesty was also not rare. They were treated as an object of 'hire and fire' at par with men.<sup>13</sup> The planters enjoyed extra-authoritarian power over the labourers. They were not only the masters of the labour but also magistrates to decide disputes, arrest and punish them for breach of contract. The European managers in past, were the representatives of the colonial rulers. They were vested with powers to arrest and imprison the labourers on flimsy grounds. They arbitrarily exploited the labourers and beat mercilessly, if they tried to escape from the garden. The labourers were not given any human treatment. In the eyes of European planters, the labourers were looked upon as 'beast in a menagerie'.<sup>14</sup> They occasionally ridiculed them as black

feather to be used for their selfish end. The sorrowful and heart burning feeling forced the labourers, particularly the women workers to shun their tears in the isolated and most secluded part of the tea gardens. The folklore of tea gardens women workers reflects the feeling of the workers.\*

The plantation workers were rootless and had no social stability. They were between two minds, either to go back to their original places from where they had come, or to live under such slave like condition. Under such unstable condition they were living without minimum respect for their individual life. The life, as a whole, was miserable. This transpires from the observation of N.C. Bordoloi, a petty planter and lawyer turned politician of Assam.

"A tea garden is like a small town by itself, with the barracks for the labourers and stately bungalows of the managers and their assistants. Nobody, not even the policemen can enter this kingdom without the managers permission. A manager may assault a labourer, insult him, and take girls after girls from the lines as his mistress, yet there will be none to dispute his action or authority. It is only at sometime when the managers cruelty surpasses all bounds that the labourers set upon him and assault him. Had it not been for the fear of Britishers and the guns and pistol they possess, and the fact that of their beck and call all the constabulary and magistracy of the district would come over there and punish the labourers, rioting would have occurred pretty frequently in these small dominions." (Bordoloi, N.C, in "condition of labour in the tea garden of Assam", India (London) 14 Nov 1919 pp. 187-88).

The present position, status as well as economic condition of the plantation workers have slightly improved no doubt, but no major changes in the outlook of the managerial staff have come into sight. However, the social and little political awareness backed by labour organizations have compelled the management to change their outlook towards labour.

In the annals of tea plantation in Assam, instances of atrocities perpetrated on men and women are abundant, which can be said to be a slur on human race. Women labourers were occasionally tied up to a tree and their clothes lifted up to the waist and were beaten on bare buttocks with leather trips or boots.<sup>15</sup>

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\* Hai re nirmohi shyam  
Faki dia onlo Assam  
(English translation:-

O' Cruel God, agents brought us here by giving bluff)

Our head is down with shame to hear or read the story of occasional sexual atrocities committed on helpless and rootless women workers by the European planters and managers. Many women committed suicide as they could not conceal their physical assault. Lamenting upon such inhuman behaviour of the planters, it has been remarked

"It is very painful to contemplate that those who call themselves Christian even by name should so far forget the most solemn injunction of the Bible that they should not feel the least compunction to tempt away by the glitters of gold, a class of ignorant and simple hearted women and rob them of a treasure which is even more precious than the richest diamond that may adorn a throne."<sup>16</sup>

Inhuman treatment and physical exploitation of the tea garden women workers during the colonial days has been written in the pages of the history of tea plantation and newspapers of those days. The colonial hangover of the past has not subsided in some respects, particularly red tapism, and use of filthy languages. Taking undue advantages of their poverty, ignorance, illiteracy and callousness of the labour union, the managers and other supervisory staff exploited them to their desired extent. Women, working in the plantation were often dishonoured and demoralized. Their chastity was frequently violated. This resulted into the birth of Eurasian children reflecting slur on Indian tradition and culture which drew the attention of Nationalist leaders. Mahatma Gandhi in 'Young India' had expressed a serious concern and had warned both Indian and European managers of the tea gardens to refrain from dishonouring womanhood.<sup>17</sup>

The sensational Khoreal shooting case during April 1920 in which Reginald William Reed, Assistant Manager of the garden shot down from his revolver to Gangadhar, a garden worker and his son Nepal for not allowing him to exploit the chastity his daughter named Hira, who was also a female worker in the garden. This heinous crime aroused sensation among the plantation workers.<sup>18</sup>

Another European manager named Mr. Dowson of Badarpur T.E. used to dance in his bungalow along with women workers in a romantic fashion. Drinking and dancing with them was his style of living at his residence. Those women who put objection or resisted, were harassed and removed from job on simple pretext. As there was no union of the workers in those days, the women had no alternative but to surrender unwillingly. The European planters were so powerful at that time that none could dare to protest them.<sup>19</sup>

The Baladan murder case of Manager and a native woman Sadi in Bungalow on 11th April, 1893, is another glaring example of atrocity perpetrated on women by the European managers. The manager used to call beautiful women workers in his bungalow and asked to share bed. This had aroused feeling to assault him. The case of murder of the manager was given different colours and many innocent persons were falsely implicated.<sup>20\*</sup>

The labourers uprooted from their ancestral moorings came to this part of Assam in search of life, but even after lapse of more than a century, the descendants of these labourers, in general, are still object of hatred, and are socially segregated. They are economically starved, culturally ruined and under developed, and socially cut off from the mainstream of national life. They are looked down by the local inhabitants living outside the periphery of the tea gardens. The workers are treated as outsiders though they are living here from many generations. The local inhabitants always use a derogatory term 'coolie' to them.

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\*On the night of Tuesday, the 11th April 1893 the bungalow of Mr. Cookburn, the manager of Balladhun T.E. was attacked by a body of men, who first of all, killed the chowkidar who was sleeping in the veranda, then killed Cookburn and afterwards pursued the labour woman, said with whom he was cohabiting and mortally wounded her in the adjoining jungle so as to cause her death a few days afterwards, and finally carried off a huge sum of money and various articles from the house. The woman Sadi in her dying declaration made to Mr. Hawell, Asst. Commissioner and Magistrate on the 14th April stated that they were Manipuris who attacked the bungalow and a Kabuli and some of the Mussalmans. There were 12 or 13 men in the groups. Some kacharis were too. On 8th of May the police enquiry was taken up by Joy Chandra Bhadra, Inspector of police of Sylhet who was specially deputed for the purpose. The proceedings commenced before the Magistrate at Silchar on 3rd of August and the prisoners were committed for trial by the session court to 17th August.

In this case seven persons Sagal Samba Sajo, Chouba Singh, Nasiba Negthonba and Madan Hijapa, Chaubangbang Sajao, Amar Feberi and Sarba Singh were charged under section 396 of penal code with dacoity in course of which murder took place.

In the judgment by the session judge, the first four mentioned above were sentenced to death for taking prominent part in the offence, and the rest three were sentenced to transportation for life.

However, the legal acumen of a renowned criminal lawyer of Silchar, Kamini Kumar Chanda saved the accused for lack of evidence and the persons involved in the case were honourably acquitted and the conviction quashed. The court observed serious irregularities in the proceedings at every stage of it before the police, before two magistrates, who at various times interposed during the police investigation, before the committing magistrate and at the trial in the session court. The evidences, in the opinion of the court seemed to be altogether unreliable. sorts of harassment, physical torturing, exploitation and ill-treatment in past, and are facing the same treatment even today with low intensity.

## Area-wise Distribution of Tea Plantation in Cachar

The river Barak is the life line of Cachar for all practical purposes. From tea plantation point of view, tea estates are located on both north and south of the river. The Planters' Association (Surma Valley Branch, Indian Tea Association of India) has divided the entire Cachar plantation area into seven circles. The tea circles lying north of Barak are North Cachar, Happy Valley, and Lakhipur circle; the southern circles are Chatla Beel, Hailakandi, Chargola and Longai. Area-wise distribution of these seven circles are<sup>21</sup>:

<i>Name of the circles</i>	<i>Area</i>
1. North Cachar Circle	10830 acres
2. Happy Valley Circle	8140 acres
3. Lakhipur Circle	9950 acres
4. Longai Valley Circle	11800 acres
5. Chargola Valley Circle	7650 acres
6. Hailakandi Circle	11760 acres
7. Chatla Beel Circle	10970 acres
<b>Total</b>	<b>71100 acres</b>
North of Barak river	28920 acres
South of Barak river	42180 acres

Source : I.T.A (Surma Valley Branch) Silchar.

Cachar, with sun kissed valleys and undulating topography, doomed shaped tillah carpeted with green bushes and green vegetational covers is the nesting pot of various cultures and ethnic characteristics. The Dravidians, Kols, Bhils, Austrics, Aryans and non-Aryans living together have formed a unique cultural assimilation. The tea garden labourers belong to different ethnic and linguistic groups. Prominent cultural and ethnic groups of tea garden labourers are the Santhals, Munda, Bhumij, Kol, Oraons, Khonds, Kishan, Nageria, Savors, Godvas, Karmakars, Proja, Bouri (Ree), Rikhiasan, Pankhas, Tanti, Madrası (Mal). The first generation of these labour groups used to speak in their mother tongue, but subsequent generations began to forget their original languages and adopted the local language in perverted form under socio-economic environment. They have lost their link with their ancestral places. There are also some non-tribal groups in the tea estates of Cachar. Some caste Hindus like Goala, Koiri, Kurmi, Teli, Kahar, Pasi, Ghatwar and some Muslims are also living with them in plantation area. They share

common pleasure and pain and are at par with other labourers. However, there is caste hierarchy among them and their position and rank in the caste hierarchy is significant in deciding their status in plantation society.

The plantation workers live in different labour lines within the jurisdiction of the tea estates. Each labour line has either mixed ethnic demographic structure or predominantly occupied by a single tribe/caste or community. The workers living together in the plantation milieu have developed a culture of their own which is different from the local culture beyond the jurisdiction of the tea estate. In the eyes of outsiders these workers are looked inferior and below standard. Even the planters, executive staff including field and office staff maintain social distance from them. They occasionally use harsh words and behave roughly which gives birth to a poison tree in their heart. Even the census commissioner, Assam held poor opinion about them. "In Assam a coolie is always a coolie whether he works on a garden or whether he has left the garden and settled down as an ordinary agriculturist, his social position is nil. Indeed from many points of view, the social position of a coolie or ex-coolie was worse than any class in the province."<sup>22</sup> However, the position of labour, particularly ex-tea garden labour settled in nearby villages has significantly improved, and they are at par with others.

The labourers, in past, were not allowed to go outside the precincts of tea estates. Even, the outsiders were not allowed to enter into the garden without permission from the manager. Consequently, women workers did not get exposure to the modern life. A middle-aged woman worker named Sukia of Labac tea estate, 30Km from Silchar, in course of field study informed the author that she had not seen rail or traveled by train, and visited any town. In matters of education and political awareness too, their condition, even at present, is deplorable. The rays of modern civilization has not gone beyond the managers bungalow. The labour lines remain always under rain shadow zone.

Women workers are the most potential labour force in the tea industry. They are the victims of circumstances and they are struggling for their existence. Socially, they are less exposed, economically hard pressed and hand to mouth, educationally and culturally dwarf which cast gloomy picture on their posterity.

The tea garden workers of Cachar like Assam Valley tea gardens have been acclimatized socially and culturally in the soil of tea gardens and have forgotten their ancestral identity. They have become now

part and parcel of Cachar. The present generation of the garden labour has forgotten their ancestral places. A small percentage simply knows the names of their ancestral places but have not visited any time. Now, they consider the tea estates as their permanent abode, a golden temple, and centres to provide bread and butter for their descendants.<sup>23</sup> The labourers, particularly the women consider that wherever tea bushes grow, either on tillah or plain land, the place is sacred and the workers are proud of it. They respect the tea plantation and tea bushes. Any one speaking against tea plantation and dishonouring tea bushes is seriously viewed by the labourers, and other supervisory staff.\*

At present, the problems of inadequate need based wages-including other fringe benefits, education, increasing unemployment and socio-economic backwardness are the most burning which can bring healthy working atmosphere, if properly and sincerely handled. The workers, at present, get Rs.38.50 per day in Cachar whereas the same workers get minimum Rs.50.00 outside the garden in the agricultural or other non-agricultural works consequently, the number of absentees is mounting up in the garden. This has posed a great problem these days in the plantation world. A seasoned tea magnet of Cachar namely, I. B. Ubhadia argued that the total emoluments including free housing, water and medical facilities and other fringe benefits are much higher than the amount received by the workers from outside work. The work here is of permanent nature which cover social security. Thus, to argue like poor or low wages and exploitation of the workers economically, is baseless and without reasoning.

Despite this defensive argument, many acute problems are in sight. House problem is most horrifying. Majority of the workers are housed in one or two roomed houses with their dependents. The houses are in general, mud built or bamboo plastered with mud and cow dung. The ground is damp and infested with white ants. The Royal Commission on Labour in India in 1931 observed.

"The average number of persons per room is four, which judged even by India standard of city life must be called bad. Thirty three per cent of the population live in rooms occupied by more than five persons at a time and one per cent in room occupied by over 20

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\* Once L.M. Dhar, a plantation supervisor of Pathini T.E. of Karimganj District in South Assam took serious view of the manager, Longhurst for putting his leg on pruned tea bushes. L. M. Dhar became furious and dragged him with his stick. The matter went up to Mr. S. C. Wallace, the superintendent of the garden who warned Longhurst not to wound the sentiment of the workers.

persons at a time. The number of persons living in rooms containing from 8 to 9 persons which is more than 50% of the labour line."

The workers of Cachar live in most unhygienic condition. They suffer from various diseases and are ill-nourished. Their general appearance is sickly and lusterless. In general, their living condition is poor. The entire family with average 5-8 members is housed in small one/two roomed houses. In most of the labour houses, hardly one or two cots are found. The furniture is scanty. The cloths are minimum and it becomes more pathetic during winter. Articles of modern amenities like radio, TV, electricity etc. are also not available to the majority of tea workers as compared to the Assam Valley or south Indian plantation workers where majority is leading a comfortable life with modern amenities. These are rare commodities in Cachar workers and major portion of their income goes to procure food articles. But these problems and short coming, as opined by the tea planters and managers are self made. The workers are themselves responsible for that as they never move in a planned way. The size of the family is increasing day by day and economic burden is mounting up.

They are still hand to mouth, and are victim of bad habits. Whatever cloths and other things are provided by the management to protect their body, are sold out for purchasing liquor, and intoxicants. The limited utensils, broken cots, torn cloths, lacerated faces are the indicators of poor living standard of the workers. They are, in fact, victim of their own habit. They can manage everything in a decent way like others within their limited resources. Their daily earning is sufficient to maintain minimum standard of living.

Generally, the immigrant labourers in Assam were from agricultural background. Some of them who were landless in their places of origin came on allurement of getting plenty lands for agriculture. But the plantation work restricted them from going outward for non-plantation work. However, many workers acquired agricultural lands and became independent of plantation life. In some gardens, immigrant labourers, were allured by the Arkattis to get plenty of cultivable lands in Assam where sufficient crops would be grown. In Cachar, unlike the Assam Valley the general topography favoured the immigrant labourers to acquire paddy land in low lying areas, which were otherwise unfit for tea plantation. Such beel land (hoars) was fit for paddy cultivation or fisheries. During spare time these labourers were engaged in paddy cultivation for their

requirements. This engagement was also viewed by the planters as a safety valve during depression period in industry.\*

The tea garden labour community forms an important social segment of society and polity of Assam. These uprooted workers from their own native soil by the greedy dictates of economic history of colonial India and transplanted here are not allowed to have new roots in present soil and have been denied the scope of natural branching out even after independence. They are still treated as outsiders and are discriminated in respect of social, economic and political matters.

The ethnic diversity, linguistic and cultural barriers kept them disorganized and isolated, as a result, a homogeneous labour society could not develop easily. Their economic base was without any solid foundation which made their life most sorrowful. The economic development could not take place, consequently, development in other socio-cultural segments remained stagnant for long.

The idea of economic development, being a determinant of socio-cultural development is implicit in Marxian literature. Many economists and social anthropologists, although rejecting the Marxian economic views, have also accepted the Marxian approach that economy proceeds the society. This has been articulated in the plantation labour society.

The plantation all over the world is successful and commercially profitable on imported labourers who are comparatively more cheaper than the local labourers. The local labourers are uncontrollable, talkative and indisciplined. The immigrant labourers who live within

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\* In this respect it would not be out of place to cite the example of Indian labourers imported to Trinidad in connection with sugar plantation, were encouraged to settle on crown land, and by the year 1873, a considerable number of time expired labourers commuted their return passage for allotment of crown land. The matter was discussed in Bengal Council with a view to giving similar encouragement to the time expired labourers. In 1874 when Keatinge became the first Chief Commissioner of Assam, the matter received serious consideration of the Government. Through his initiative, a definite policy was formulated for encouraging the time expired labourers either to get settled in the crown land or in the land belonging to the garden. By the year 1879 about 2457 acres of land was allotted in the province to such labourers. Thus, a good number of such labourers got themselves settled in the province either as traders, craftsmen or cultivators and some of them again renewed their contract. Due to many other reasons, the labourers belonging to Bihar, UP and other places acquired a large portion of waste land of the province and started cultivation, being detached from the garden work. Use of waste land under tilla specially in Cachar district increased very rapidly (Assam immigration Report, 1885, para 10).

the plantation are more reliable and dependable. They are inseparable part of plantation system and remain more committed to plantation work.

The tea plantation in Assam including Cachar is surviving mainly on immigrant labourers. The sugar plantation in Mauritius or the Fiji islands by the Indian labourers under the indenture system resulted into the legacies of societies which consisted of totally transplanted people. The immigrant labourers of Cachar like Assam Valley have formed a society of their own whose socio-economic and cultural life has added feathers in the multi-coloured cap of Assam in general and Cachar in particular.

Tea industry may be considered as blessing for the economy of Assam and the country as well, but in terms of human problems of the workers, it is certainly not. The mounting socio-economic problems arising out their illiteracy, poverty, ignorance, isolation from sophisticated life have not been anxiously thought upon and no efforts have been sincerely made to drag them out from the pools of poverty and other evils.

Finally, many colourful expressions have been made regarding democratic set up at grass root level in the far flung area of the country. But the rays of democracy have not penetrated in real sense of the term to the tea estates where illiterate and politically unconscious labourers are living from many generations. The fruit of participatory democracy has not been tasted by these poor labourers in any form, in the real sense of terms. They have no voice or say in the decision making process at grass root level even. The level of political information in respect of tea garden workers is less as compared to those of neighbouring villages. The degree of political awareness and involvement of the illiterate workers including women workers in the political process is miserably poor and it is a blot on the Indian democracy. The political and voting behaviour of the tea garden women workers is not in consonance with the general masses.

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