

Changing Nature of Labour Movement in the Organized sector industry: A Reflection on the Tea Plantations of Assam

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Purpose of the study: The purpose of the paper is to study the changing nature of Labour Movement in an Organized Sector industry of Assam i.e. Tea Plantation.

Methodology: The study is based on both the primary and secondary sources such as available archival materials, historical documents of different trade unions/labour movements etc. Moreover, the insights gathered through consultation of such materials along with already published literature, official reports etc.

Main Findings: The labourers of tea gardens of Assam during the colonial period mobilized mainly for the economic demands and for the oppressive nature of the colonial state but after independence their movement is converted into political (identity) movement.

Implications/Applications of this study: The changing nature of labour movement in an organized sector i.e. tea plantation is politically significant in contemporary Assam and the relation between the labour movement and the politics of the state is something that needs deep study to understand the overall nature of the organised sectors in the state of Assam.

Originality of this Study: No study has been done on this (above) title. Some research works have been done on tea tribe's ethnic identity and their movements but changing nature of tea garden's labour movement after independence is remained an unexplored area of research.

Key Words: *European-Capitalists, Colonial State, Labour Movement, Identity Movement.*

Introduction

The Treaty of Yandabo signed in 1826 marked the beginning of British colonial establishment into North-East India. The discovery of Tea, Coal and Oil extractions more particularly expansion of tea plantation manifested the beginning of industrialization in the colonial province of Assam and integrated the region with the global market economy. The working class (wage labour) was found in Assam in a period when it witnessed the evolution of her economy from agriculture to industrialization. The presence of working population could be seen in Assam since the Ahom period, but as the economy was self-sufficient, the concept of wage labour was missing at that time. After

the annexation of Assam province by the Britishers the colonial state had played a pivotal role in providing assistance for the setting up and growth of Tea plantations, Coal, Oil and some other industries in the valley from its inception till the end of the colonial rule and recruited a huge number of labourers from the densely populated areas of North India. Later, these recruited groups of working population formed 'labour class' in the province. But with the passage of time labour mobilization was recorded in the province and these mobilizations were basically against the planters supported by the colonial state. In 15th of August, 1947, the administration of India was shifted to the natives from the colonial government and the new welfare state was introduced to meet the basic needs of the general masses. However, the problem that persists with the organized sectors mainly the tea plantation remains same even under the post colonial state and the labourer's resistance continued in the post independence period. Having suffered injustices and oppression in colonial era, the tea-garden labourers have, in the post-colonial period, increasingly mobilized themselves at political level and have become conscious about their various rights. As a result, the changing nature of labour movement in an organized sector industry i.e. tea plantation is politically significant in contemporary Assam. Therefore, an attempt has been made in this paper with the help of some primary (memorandum, interviews with the tea tribe's students and trade union leaders, archival materials etc.) and secondary (already published books and research articles) data to study the changing nature of labour movement of the tea plantations of Assam.

Review of Literature

A group of notable writers and researchers have done extensive works on labour movement and different labour related issues. Scholars like *Amiya Kr. Bagchi, V.V.Giri, Sukomal Sen, V.B. Karnik, Rakhahari Chatterji, A.S. Mathur* and *J.S. Mathur*- who have made pioneering contribution towards labour research in India. In case of Assam, scholars like *AmalIndeu Guha, H.K. Borpujari, P. Griffiths, Rana Pratap Behal, Dipankar Banerjee, N.K. Das, Indrajit Sharma* etc. have done some remarkable works which provided a basis to understand the genesis and growth of organized labour movements along with the changing nature of labour movement in the tea plantation sector and its repercussions in the political discourses of the province.

In his book ***Capital and Labour Redefined- India and the Third World***, *Amiya Kr. Bagchi* tries to provide historical background of the formation of the Indian capitalists' class from before the time of British colonial rule in India. The author also analyses the nature of that class and changes in it under colonialism and the state of independent India. The book also deals with the evolution of the conditions of the working class in India in

its dialectical interaction with global capital as well as Indian capitalism. The book challenges the view that the tensions caused within working class movements by caste or communal division or by gender discrimination are to be attributing to primordial loyalties and displays the influence of the purposeful strategies adopted by capitalists by dividing the workers on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity etc. Moreover, *Rakhahari Chatterji in Working Class and the Nationalist Movement in India- The Critical Years (1984)*, given a comprehensive analyses of the relationship between nationalist movement and working class politics. It raises crucial questions about the role of organized labour class in the national movement during the period of 1920 to 1925. In addition, in his book *Working Class of India-History of Emergence and Movement-1830-1990 (1997)* Sukumol Sen described the working class movement in India covered the period of 1830 to 1990. The first part of the book is basically based on the linkages of the national movement and working class movement. However, the later parts of the book are most essential as it illustrated the working class movement by linking the diverse political scenario of the country. In the context of Assam, *Amalendu Guha's Planter Raj to Swaraj-Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics of Assam-1826-1947 (1977)*, is one of the innovative works on the history of modern Assam where labour and the tea plantations received remarkable attention. Guha puts a lot of emphasis on the power and influence of the planters' around which the issues like labour, resistance and politics are discussed. The themes that have received immense attention in this book are region's plantation economy, the imperialism of opium cultivation, the problems of a steady influx of immigrants, peasants' and workers' struggles, the evolution of the ryot sabhas, the Congress, trade unions and later of the Communist Party etc. The first part of the book provides the background for an understanding of the colonial socio-economic structure. The last part of the book basically put emphasis on shift from the society and economy to the politics of anti-imperialism both in the legislature and outside it. *One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam (2014)* by Rana Pratap Behal is one of the ground-breaking works on tea plantations of Assam since the book represents the history of tea plantations in Assam more particularly Brahmaputra Valley during the Colonial rule with a special focus on their labour force. One of the significant arguments of this book is that it examines how the migrant agrarian communities were transformed into 'coolies'. The book also presents the history of labour force and the role of the Colonial state in Assam province. Along with these, *Dipankar Banerjee's Labour Movement in Assam- A Study of Non-plantation workers' strikes till 1939, (2005)* described adequately the labour mobilization in colonial Assam. One of the

important sides of this book is that it dealt with genesis, nature and growth of labor movement in Assam. The prime focus of this book is the period intervening the two World wars because during this phase the labour consciousness was grown in the province which later led to the number of labour mobilization in the different sectors. Although the book primarily focused on the Assam Oil Company Workers' strikes, 1939, however it has immense significance to understand the problems faced by the labor in the both plantation and non-plantation sectors in Assam. Moreover, *Rajen Saikia* in his book titled ***Social and economic History of Assam*** (2000), addresses the broad theme of the social and economic history of Assam from 1853 to 1921. The book is woven around the void created in the upper stair of the Assamese society by the complete erosion of the ruling elite as a result of the introduction of colonial administration. The book also dealt with the special economic issues like the decline of handicraft, changes in the pattern of agriculture, tea plantation, exploitation of natural resources and growth of communication. He has also discussed the survival of the handloom product in a lucid manner during colonial period. Moreover the author tried to trace the problems and prospects of agriculture and the socio economic condition of the peasantry during that period. The author opined that the Assamese Middle Class grew out of the colonial transformation of the economy of Assam. Hence, the book provided a background study over the socio-economic history of the region.

Indrajit Sharma in his article ***Tea Tribes of Assam- Identity Politics and Search for Liberation*** published in EPW, (2018) try to illustrate the nature of ethnic distinctiveness of the tea tribe population of Assam. Here, the author observed that the continuous disfranchisement of identity together with exploitative conditions of work and life for the tea tribes have contributed to the emergence and growth of identity politics among them. The author argued that the identity struggle of tea tribes has often carried a perceived sense of deprivation. In addition, *N.K. Das* in his research article ***Making of Tea Tribes in Assam: Colonial Exploitation and Assertion of Adivasi Rights*** (2016) describes in brief how the Adivasis from the neighboring states settled in the Assam tea gardens and were subjected to various types of exploitation and sufferings under the colonial regime. The author also describes in detail how the Adivasis fought for the recognition of their rights and status leading to much politicization of their problem after independence.

Although the above cited reknown researchers have done widespread work on the labour movement and over the issues related to the of tea plantations community, however, the changing nature of labour movement in

an organized sector industry of Assam i.e. tea plantation is remained an unexplored area of research.

Organized Labour Movement in India

Labour movements were born out of the industrial revolution and originated in England. With the emergence of industrialization and development of capitalism, workers realized the fact that they could not withstand the power of the employer alone and have to bargain collectively. The Industrial Revolution created a congenial atmosphere for the growth of the Labour movement and gradually Trade Union Movement. The main element in the growth of Labour Movement in India is the setting up of large scale industrial units and use of machines, changes in working and living environments of workers and concentration of industries in large towns, all of which introduced a new class of workers who were dependent on wages for their livelihood. The period 1918-1921 was an epoch making period in the history of the Indian labour movement. During that time, some efforts were made to organize workers on modern trade union lines, which ultimately culminated in an All India Trade Union Organization called All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1920. In India, the first trade union for workers was started in Madras by the initiative of B.P. Wadia in 1918. After that a number of organized labour movement were occurred in the different industrial sectors.

In Assam, however, the first part of 1930's was comparatively peaceful, of course, that does not mean there was no problem in the labour front. Labour problem was there but the workers' movements were mainly confined to the tea gardens and their number was much less than the preceding years. Some of the major labour movement occurred in the organized sector industries of Assam. *The Dibru-Sadya Railways Workers' Strike (1920), The Assam-Bengal Railway Workers' Strike (1921), Assam Railway and Trading Company Workers' Strike, 1938-39, Assam Oil Company Workers' Strike, Digboi, 1939 etc.*

Nature and role of the Colonial State & growth of Tea Plantations in Assam

Industrial development occurred in Assam as a result of the integration of its economy with the world capitalist system through trade and capital investment by the Britishers. In Assam, the European capitalists- particularly planters and oil monopolies were enjoying immense support of the entire colonial state machinery in the form of legal framework (*Banerjee, 2005, pp.28-29*). The colonial state had played a pivotal role in providing assistance for the setting up and growth of different industries in the Assam valley.

During the initial stages of 19th century, Assam attained high economic growth primarily due to its tea industries (*Sharma, 2018*) and thus, the colonial state handing over the tea plantation establishment to British capitalists,

(Behal, 2014, p.141) and provided all possible assistance to them to further develop and expand it. The assistance of the colonial state was particularly important in the context of the mobilization and control of the labourers and building of infrastructure to promote the interests of the tea industry. It was since 1840's, the next few decades witnessed a global investment in remote Assam in the tea sector which gradually destroyed the Ahom's feudal institutions and economy and led to the growth of the capitalist economy (Das, 2016) under the banner of colonial state. Moreover, industrial manifestations in the province began by framing of a series of *Land Grant Rule* on 6 March, 1838 onwards, (Guha, 1977) that gave access to vast tracts of forest land or wastelands at extremely lucrative terms for commercial cultivation of tea in the province (Behal,2014,p.141). Thus, the industrial manifestation more particularly the tea industry (plantation) in Assam opened up new avenues for the investment of Britain's capital. But capital and management are just two aspects of an industry. Plantations, being labour intensive industry, required a constant supply of labour. But the planters' community faced an acute shortage of labour. At first, Chinese labourers were imported for plantation but they were too expensive and troublesome. They were dispensed with in 1843 and till 1859 the planters tried to recruit local indigenous labourers in the plantation (Bhowmick,2015,p.539). But the native workers proved too inactive and the remaining local agrarian communities did not find the terms of employment and wages to work on plantations attractive enough. As a result, the colonial authority gave serious consideration to the import large number of labourers from the densely populated areas like the Chota Nagpur and later also from other areas such as Bihar, Orissa, Central Provinces and as far as from the Madras Presidency (Borpujari,1980,p.48). In the meantime, the colonial state enacted a body of legislations to facilitate labour supply in the province, for instance, *Transport of Native Labours Act, 1863, The Inland Emigrant Act, 1893, The Assam Labour and Emigration Act, 1901 and 1915*, and finally *Tea Districts Emigrant labour Act, 1932 etc.* (Sharma,2009,p.1309). Therefore, in the midst of this process, with the advent of the British in the region, the concept of working class (wage labour) emerged in colonial Assam.

In Assam, imperialist (capitalists) development got accelerated and shot up to a considerable high level on the eve of First World War. There are two basic means of imperialist exploitation of the country- *one directly by the colonial government and the other through the immediate operations of British Private capital* (Sen, 1997, pp.107-08). Colonial state is the determinant institution for both of these two means. Thus, the role of the colonial state had to be expanded in the field of industrial establishments. For the development of the tea industry under the monopoly of European Capital, the state utilized

public revenues in order to construct necessary infra-structure like roads, railways etc. and to promote the marketing of tea and scientific research on tea plantation. Besides, as mentioned above that the state assistance was most crucial in the matter of mobilization of labour and regulating labour relations. However, in the long history of labour relations in the Assam tea plantations, the colonial state, most of the time, did not act as a fair authority between capital and labour while regulating labour relations (*Behal, 2014, pp.329-33*). The most significant aspect of the role of the state was its attitude towards the planters vis-a-vis the labourers, as reflected in the different labour laws that gave rise to the indenture system in the Assam valley plantation that was an integral part of capitalism in the colonial context.

During the initial decades of this indentured regime, the working conditions of the workers were similar to slavery, with beating, rape, torture and even the throwing of dead workers in the rivers (*Sharma, 2018*). Another important feature of the indentured plantation regime was the immobilization of mobilized labour i.e. the labourers were confined within the tea gardens. Their freedom of contact with the outside world was curved out by using legal and economic coercion as means to control and immobilization of the labour force. Besides, during the time of indentured regime the labourers had no liberty to withdraw his or her labour power in bargaining over the terms of the contract or for higher wages. All these rules and regulations of the indentured regime led to the initiation of new type of slavery. Moreover, the empowerment of planters with the right to private arrest of labour under the panel system (*Behal, 2017*) became an important tool in containing labour mobility. In most cases the labourers were given very ruthless punishments even for minor offence, and sometimes even death sentences for violence against the planters. The planters on the other hand, were mostly awarded small monetary fines or released even when the charges were serious, as in some cases that involved the killings of labourers. Unbearably heavy loads of works, poor wages, and forced to work even when ill due to the fear of ruthless punishments characterized the working conditions of the tea garden labourers. These resulted malnutrition, high rate of sickness, mortality among the migrant labour force under indenture regime.

Therefore, all these deplorable conditions of the wage earners as well as exploitation against labourers and the authoritarian nature of the indentured regimes supported by the colonial state led them (labourers) to resist against their employers in particular and against the oppressive role of the colonial state machinery in general.

Early Phase of Labour Movement in the Tea plantations of Assam

The Indian labour movement in its initial stage confined to the organized industries like factories, plantations, transports, oil and mines. In the context of Assam, it was in the plantation sector, the earliest capitalist enterprise, which witnessed the initial labour resistance in the province. But, it developed as an unorganized and spontaneous protest; because plantation workers could not organize themselves into unions because of their miserable socio-political and economic conditions (*Banerjee,2005,pp.24-25*). From the very inception of the tea garden workers' interaction as indentured labourers, they challenged the brutal violence of the planters supported by the colonial state. Labour struggles in the initial periods were linked to the issue of low wages, deplorable working and living conditions, physical and sexual coercion, defending social and cultural rights and preservation of human dignity (*Behal,2014,pp.331-33*). Plantations, which started growing as an industry quite steadily since mid-nineteenth century under British capital, engaged a huge amount of the working force. The immigrant plantation labourers were the main wage-earning population of the province. The tea garden labourers spent their days in a pathetic and inhuman condition. "*The Coolies were in a state of quasi-slavery, no state of recognized slavery could be worse*"(*Banerjee,2005,p.27*). The exploitation of these 'coolies' by the planters could be characterized by 'slave owners' relationship. These exploited plantation workers first raised their voice against their employers and authorities and the history of the working class movement in the state started with the struggle and sacrifice of the tea garden labourers (*Banerjee,2005,pp.27-28*).

In the early phase of industrialization in the province, the labour movement was recorded in the tea plantation sector in 1848 and 1859 (*Guha,1977,pp.12-13*). The earliest labour resistance in the province surfaced in the form of 'absconding', 'desertions' (*Guha,1977,pp.267-68*) and a little number of strikes in the Assam Company's tea estates. The opening up of new plantations in remote and isolated locations in Upper Assam caused great deal of hardship in the daily lives of labourers which was made worse by low and often delayed wage payments. These experiences built up discontent among the local kachari labourers and led them to the strike in the tea garden in 1848 (*Guha,1977,p.269*). In 1859, serious trouble started again when kachari labourers who had been recruited from Darrang district demanded an increase in wages, failing which they demanded that they would be allowed to leave the company's service and refused to serve the period of their contract. But, the Company used military to control the situation. Besides, desertion in a huge number was found in the indentured regime in the tea plantations in the province from 1860 onwards. As mentioned above that large number of

migrants were recruited from among the tribal, aboriginal and lower-caste communities of the agrarian districts of West Bengal – Chota nagpur, Santhal Paraganas and Ranchi to work in the tea plantations of Assam. Confronted with the severity of their travel experiences, disease, and high mortality, and the brutalities of daily life on the tea gardens, these migrants found desertions to be the only means of escaping the plantation regime (*Guha,1977,pp.269-270*). According to the official report of 1904 (*Behal,2014,pp.278-279*) on the relations between planters and labourers in the tea gardens during the past fifteen years (from the report period) submitted by the Govt. of Assam to the Govt. of India, showed the continuous friction between the planters and labourers in the tea gardens. A closer scrutiny of the report reveals that the involvement of labourers in acts of violence against the employers and officials was mostly retaliatory as well as collective in nature. Most of the resistance often occurred in solidarity with fellow labourers who were subjected to public indignity and physical coercion by the planters (*Behal,1977,pp.278-79*). In several cases the issues of resistance were economic i.e. low wages, denial of rice as a part of wage in kind, extraction of excessive work etc. and in other cases, it was anger against the physical coercion, confinement, indignities occurred upon labourers and sometime even children, causing injury and occasional death. Thus, before the beginning of the 1900s, more particularly First World War labour unrest was recorded in the province. But these movements were not in an organized way. Illiterate, ignorant, unorganized and isolated from their homes as they were, the plantation workers were weak and powerless against the planters. Alongside, the workers of that period of time fought back at the individual garden level. The forms of struggles varied from desertion and occasional litigation to strikes and violent mass attacks on the planters. Nevertheless, the resistances of the labourers were occurred against the authoritarian nature of the indentured regimes supported by the colonial state.

Changing nature of Labour Movement in the Tea Plantations

The state (colonial) policies towards capital and labour during the British period proved that colonial state provided all possible aids to the planters in nurturing plantations and other industries in Assam. The growth of labour movement in the state is closely attached with the nature and role of the colonial state. Legislative interventions of the colonial state to regulate '*planters-labourers*' relations led to the emergence of dissatisfaction among the labourers in some aspects. The colonial state also provided indirect support to form the nexus between bureaucratic officials and planters. Later, all these attitude and nature of the colonial state towards the labourers led to the

growth of labour mobilization in the different tea gardens of Assam. If we see the conditions of labourers in post independent India then it can be said that they have also been facing same problems as they faced in the pre-independent period.

Remarkable changes occurred in the political context of India after the independence. The administration of the country was transferred to the natives from the colonial government and the new welfare state was introduced to meet the basic needs of the general masses. However, the problem that persists with the organized sectors (more particularly tea) of Assam remains same even under the post colonial state. In both periods (colonial & post colonial), the state advanced the interest of capital at the cost of labour. The labourer's resistance in Assam continued in the post independence period. But the nature of the tea plantation labour movement has changed and it converted into more political i.e. identity movement. Therefore, it is important to understand the changing nature of labour movement in an organized sector industry of Assam i.e. tea plantation.

Assam is known for its tea industries, but plantation work needed significant human power. For this, the tea tribes were brought in as indentured labour from various provinces of India. Historically, the tea tribe migrated to the mainland of Assam prior to India's independence. Their migration can be traced back to British Raj, when the colonialists started to exploit the economic potential of the region through tea plantations in the early 1820s (*Sharma, 2018*). As mentioned above, initial labour movements in tea gardens were caused by some reasons like low wages, inhuman working conditions, working hours etc. There were occasional clashes between the management and the tea garden labourers in Assam. Although issues of clash between the management and the labourers in the past were mainly regarding the wage and bonus, however, in the 80's it shifted to other developmental issues among the tea garden labourers in the state. Since the 1980's Assam has been witnessing a series of movements where people have been fighting for their rights over land, language, civil liberties, rights (both political & economic) and special reservation status for development. The tea garden labourers also, who mostly live in the tea garden coolie line, which has been more or less isolated from the development process of the state, have gradually started participation by creating several types of organizations for establishing their demand for the development of the community.

Demographically, the tea tribes form around 20% (approximately 5 million) of the total population of Assam (*Mishra,2005*). The tea and ex-tea tribe community are found scatteredly living throughout the state although there are a few pockets where their population are concentrated, more

particularly in the districts of Darrang, Sonitpur, Nagaon, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Cachar, Hilakandi, Tinsukia Sivasagar etc. Despite of their numerical strength, the tea labour community remained utterly poor, illiterate, disorganized and hence diametrically backward during the colonial era and even today their politico-economic and social plight remain unaltered. While expressing similar sentiments, *Anthony Xalxo*, an Adivasi advocate allegedly maintained:

“Unlike their kith and kin living in Chotanagpur plateau and other parts of India, the Adivasis of Assam are not recognized and called by their common and popular name ‘Adivasis’, instead they have been branded with many character-assassinating names like Kuli, Bongali, Mazdoor, Bonuwa, Sah Shramik, San Janajati (Tea Tribe), Sah Janagosthi, Lever (Labour), Ona-Asomiya, Na (natun)-Asomiya, Bagania and so on. Do they not have identity of their own? Are they not Adivasis belonging to different tribes and castes? Do they not have social status of their own? Then why should they be branded with a social stigma?” (Xalxo, Anthony, Plight of the Adivasis in the Tea Land of Assam: Jagron, Souvenir of the Third Adivasi Mahasabha held at Dibrugarh on 24-26 March 2000,p.4).

Such sentiments of the tea and ex-tea tribe population obviously contributed greatly towards their mobilization and organization for the cause of asserting their generic identity. Moreover, the tea garden labourer’s community in Assam has been experiencing a sense of deprivation, suppression and exploitation, arising out of their identity and plantation work. The combination of deprivation and lack of a tribal identity has led to a situation of identity crisis (*Sharma,2018*). Now a day, the tea tribe population has been continuously demanding the ruling government to grant them the status of ST so that they can avail their essential needs under the mandate of the Indian Constitution and alleviate the exploitation and discrimination they have been facing over the years.

Besides, in most of the tea gardens political parties have their unions. But the activities of these unions have mostly been confined to immediate economic demands and there has been little attempt over the years to give an ideological orientation to Adivasi politics (*Mishra, EPW, 2007, p.13*). It is only in recent years that under the influence of the educated sections of Adivasi youth

a new dimension is being added to Adivasi politics which not being satisfied merely with short-term economic demands and narrow groove of vote banks, is trying to relate itself to the broader issues concerning all segments of the Adivasi community (*ibid,p.13*). So, with growing dissonance with the trade unions of the tea garden labourer and the failure of trade unions to bring various welfare measures is one of the reasons for the formation of a number of socio-political organizations under the leadership of their Adivasi elite who have launched a variety of movements during the course of time. Since their inception more particularly since mid 90's(Sharma,2018,p.77), these organizations (of the tea and ex-tea labour community), for instance, the *Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (ATTSA)*, *Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS)*, *Assam Chah Janajati Yuva Chatra Parisad (ACJYCP)*, *Assam Chah Janagosthi Samanoy Jatiya Mahasabha (ACJSJM)*, *Assam Adivasi Student Association (AASA)*, *Federation of Tea Labour Union (FTLU)*, *Adivasi Council of Assam in 1958*, *Adivasi Socio-Educational and Cultural Association of Assam(1981)*, *All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam (1996)*, *Adivasi People's Party of Assam(1996)*, *Promotion and Advancement of Justice, Harmony and Rights of Adivasis (2002)* etc. have been persistently exerting pressure upon the ruling authorities of the day seeking adequate constitutional safeguards for the protection of the interests of the tea labour and ex-tea labour community in Assam (*Thapa,2004,pp.87-88*). Moreover, these organizations more particularly Adivasi Council of Assam (ACA), ACMS and ATTSA submitted memorandum to the Prime Minister of India in different course of time. ACA in collaboration with ACMS, a premier tea worker's trade union of the Chah Mazdoor jointly submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India seeking the ST status on 9 September, 1978 in which they forcefully urged:

About 40 lakhs of tribals now permanently settled in the state of Assam for over 70 years are deprived of their legitimate rights and privileges extended by the Central Government as well as the state government of Assam as they have not been listed as Scheduled Tribes/Scheduled Castes through throughout the rest of India they are treated as the Scheduled Tribes/Scheduled Castes. As a result of this policy, the Adivasis of the State of Assam who have been given the umbrella name Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Labour are languishing in all respects i.e. educationally, culturally, economically and politically even after this thirty years of independence. (The copy of the

memorandum presented to the President and Prime Minister of India jointly by the ACA and ACMS on 9 September, 1978 which was signed by all the then MLAs belonging to the Tea and Ex-Tea Tribes. *Source: Thapa, 2004, Journal of Politics: Dibrugarh University).*

Along with these, AASAA, one of the prominent student organizations of the community organized many mass rallies to press the demand for ST status. A few number of AASAA leaders and members sacrificed their lives. *"In July, 2003 some leaders were shot dead and many other injured and crippled for life" (Das,2016).* In spite of relentless efforts of the tea gander community, the Government of India has not come forward to confer ST status to the tea garden labour community. In addition, the All Assam Tribal Sangha which is an umbrella body representing the ST communities of the state, has also opposed the demand of tea tribes saying that neither the Adivasis nor the five other communities claiming Scheduled status- the tai ahom, moran, muttuck, chutia and Koch-rajbanshi-fulfill the requisites laid down for qualifying as a ST *(Mishra, 2007).* Now a day, the Adivasi organizations have repeatedly been pleading like their counterparts in other parts of India such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, West-Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh etc. who are enlisted as the Schedule Tribe (ST) status as a matter of constitutional right. But in case of Assam the Adivasi tea tribes are not recognized as STs as they are not indigenous to the state, *(Hussain, 1992)* which, the leading advocates of the tea-tribe communities believed, was quite insufficient for their all round development. What is more worrying here is that the Tea Garden Tribes had enjoyed the ST status before 1947 in Assam. It was only after independence that they were again descheduled that became a great motivating factor for the Tea and Ex-Tea Tribe to revive the ST status as an effective means to protect their constitutional rights *(Thapa,2004,p.88).* Thus, the issue of non-recognition of the Tea garden community as the ST in the state, in course of time acquired such momentum that all the Adivasi or tea tribe organizations are seen giving the utmost priority to this (inclusion in Schedule) demand. Apart from these, the apathy of the mainstream Assamese society towards the development of the tea garden labourers put the community at the war path. Reluctant attitudes of the mainstream Assamese society towards the tea garden labour community to include cultural assimilation of greater Assamese nationality building process made them the worst victim of underdevelopment in the 21st century *(Saikia,2008,p.308).* Living in enslaved habitats with

distinct cultural identity, is preventing the community to identify themselves as part of the greater Assamese society.

Conclusion:

In view of these (above mentioned) contemporary developments in the context of tea and ex-tea garden labourers, the nature of the labour movement in the organized sectors of Assam more particularly tea plantations has changed. Earlier, the labourers were mobilized mainly for wages and their movements were confined within the fulfillment economic demands. But, in the post independence period, it is converted into identity movement and now, the community has been demanding political or constitutional safeguards. At present, the demand for scheduling has been the primary concern of the tea labour community (in Assam) and the labour community has persistently been struggling for the assertion of their generic ethnic identity as a strategy of not only dispelling their backwardness but also asserting their identity. Therefore, this changing nature of labour movement in an organized sector i.e. tea plantation is politically significant in contemporary Assam and the relation between the labour movement and the politics of the state is something that needs deep study to understand the overall nature of the organised sectors in the state of Assam.

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