

**EVOLVING INTRICACIES OF INDUSTRIAL  
RELATIONS: A STUDY OF SELECTED TEA  
ESTATES IN ASSAM**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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### **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the thesis entitled **“Evolving Intricacies of Industrial Relations: A Study of Selected Tea Estates in Assam”** is the result of investigation carried out by me at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, under the supervision of Dr Sambit Mallick. The work has not been submitted either in whole or in part to any other university / institution for a research degree.

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This is to certify that Ms Mridusmita Duara has prepared the thesis entitled **“Evolving Intricacies of Industrial Relations: A Study of Selected Tea Estates in Assam”** for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati. The work was carried out under my supervision and in strict conformity with the rules laid down for the purpose. It is the result of her investigation and has not been submitted either in whole or in part to any other university / institution for a research degree.

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**Sambit Mallick**

Supervisor

## *Acknowledgments*

I express my heartfelt gratitude at the outset to my supervisor Dr. Sambit Mallick, Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Guwahati, for his invaluable contribution, guidance and constant inspiration throughout the course of this study. His suggestions and foresightedness helped me in a big way in completion of this work for which I really feel privileged.

I also express my gratitude to the Doctoral Committee members, Professor Saundarjya Borbora, Professor Liza Das and Dr. Sawmya Ray for providing me all the inputs and needed directions for conducting research on the subject. I am thankful to Professor Archana Barua, Professor Rohini Mokashi Punekar, formerly the Head of Department and Professor Arupjyoti Saikia, present Head of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Guwahati for their help and support throughout the course of my Ph.D.

I express my sincere thanks to all the workers, trade union members and the management for their incessant support and co-operation during my data collection without whom this thesis would not have been possible. I am grateful to the Assam Branch Indian Tea Association (ABITA), Guwahati, Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS), Head Office, Dibrugarh, North East Tea Association (NETA), for granting me the permission to have access to the management and workers of the selected tea estates and provide me with secondary data to pursue the research study.

Last but not the least, I am thankful to my parents and sisters for their unwavering patience, belief in me and encouragement, as the present work is much because of their personal sacrifices and support for which I shall ever remain indebted.

IIT Guwahati

April 2015

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## *Abstract*

Production of tea (over 51 per cent of the total tea in the country and 13 per cent of the global tea production) has been one of the strongest economic growth contributors of Assam. Tea is one of the major foreign exchange goods for the state and the country with around 64,000 small tea estates spread over fourteen districts. The annual turnover of this industry in Assam is INR 50 billion and provides employment to a large section of people in the country (over 1,000 million workers). Historical backdrop of the growth of Tea Industry in Assam reveals an evolving dynamics of industrial relations both from its structural and operational perspectives. Though the apparent monopoly of upper class people to dominate the labourers of the tea estates has been diluted in the modern Indian scenario, the flavor of the class struggle and gender discrimination still persists in a subtle yet distinct way. Industrial unrest in the tea estates is on the rise and while the *Adivasi* workers are striving for their rights, the tripartite system of negotiation for dispute resolution falls flaccid. Pathetic labour conditions and recurrent incidences of workers' resistance may be attributed to the withdrawal of the State from its responsibilities and commitment towards effective social welfare activities. The utilitarian purpose of the liberalization and globalization policies of economic reforms adopted by the state somehow loses its significance in the hands of the different actors of industrial relations pertaining to tea industries of Assam. In-depth interviews with the management and the labourers reveal acute crisis of efficient and effective management of the tea estates in terms of ownership and control of the work. In this study, a sincere attempt has been made to analyze the intricacies of these relationships with a purpose to find out the latent contributing factors for industrial unrest and their impact on the tea industry as a whole.

In the current context of Indian industrial relations especially in the tea industries of Assam, intertwining of various socio-political factors across different periods adds to its complexity.

In this research work, the intricacies of Industrial Relations have been analyzed through

qualitative study with critical reflections on elements like class formation and emergence of trade unionism, gender discrimination and exploitative nature of the management towards the *Adivasi* workers. Theoretical arguments have been provided with the support of relevant theories like class formation, Marxist approach towards Industrial relations and Conflict theory, Standpoint Theory, Marxian Feminism. These theories are particularly concerned with analyzing the social effects of development on class relations and on social groups like peasantry and the working class. The various verbal and non-verbal cues of the workers and their managers observed during the field study confirm the pre-existent master- slave relationship between the two. Economic, social and sexual oppression prevailing across the generations of *Adivasi* workers is taking the form of violent flare-ups against the management of the tea estates.

The study comprises both primary and secondary data. The primary data include responses from a variety of category of respondents such as owners of tea gardens, management, trade unions and workers engaged in various activities. Responses from different strata of the workforce have been elicited through in-depth personal interviews. Content analysis has been deployed to analyze the interview materials. The field study has been conducted in selected tea estates situated in Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Golaghat, Sonitpur, Kamrup and Cachar districts of Assam. The present study is sociologically significant especially in the context of declining labour conditions in tea estates in Assam. This study on the changing industrial relations and its associated practices has implications on the necessary and immediate public policy reforms of the state for the welfare of the large population dependant on the tea industry for their livelihood.

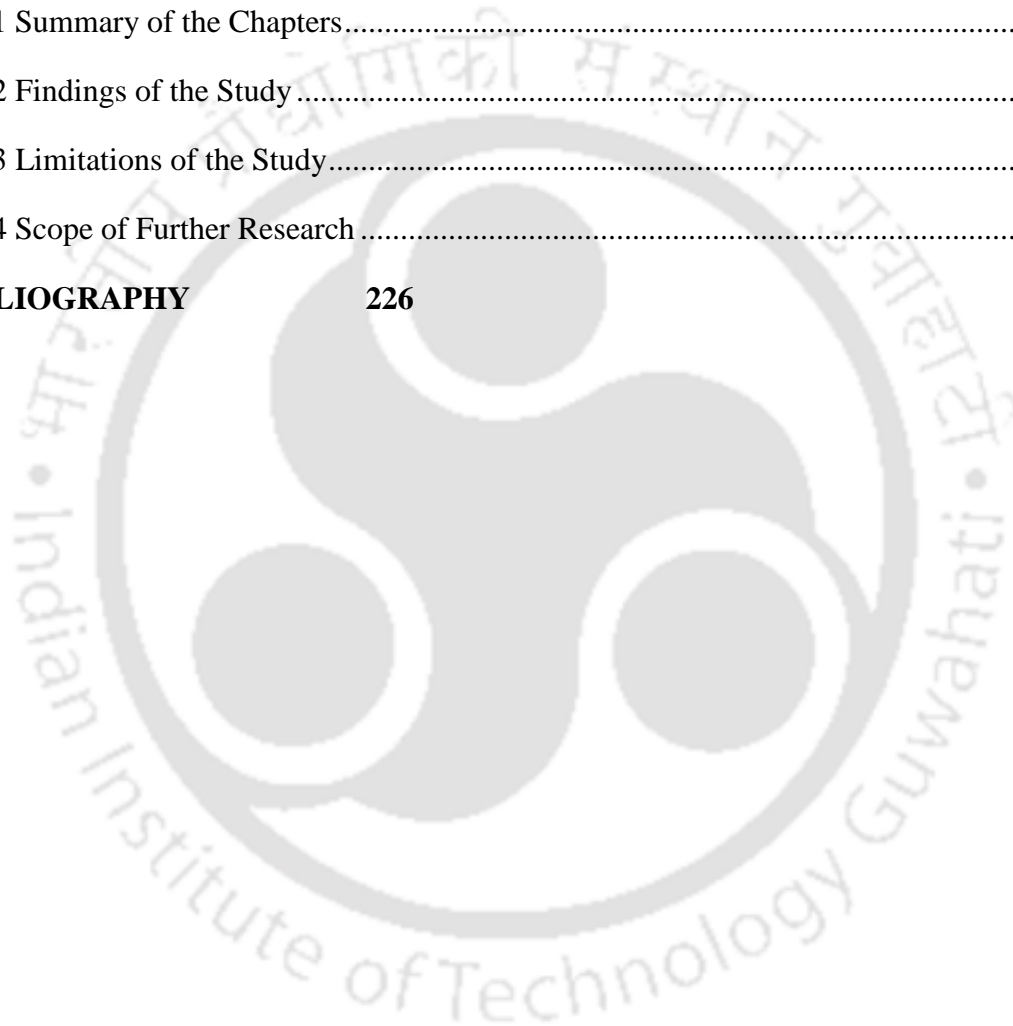
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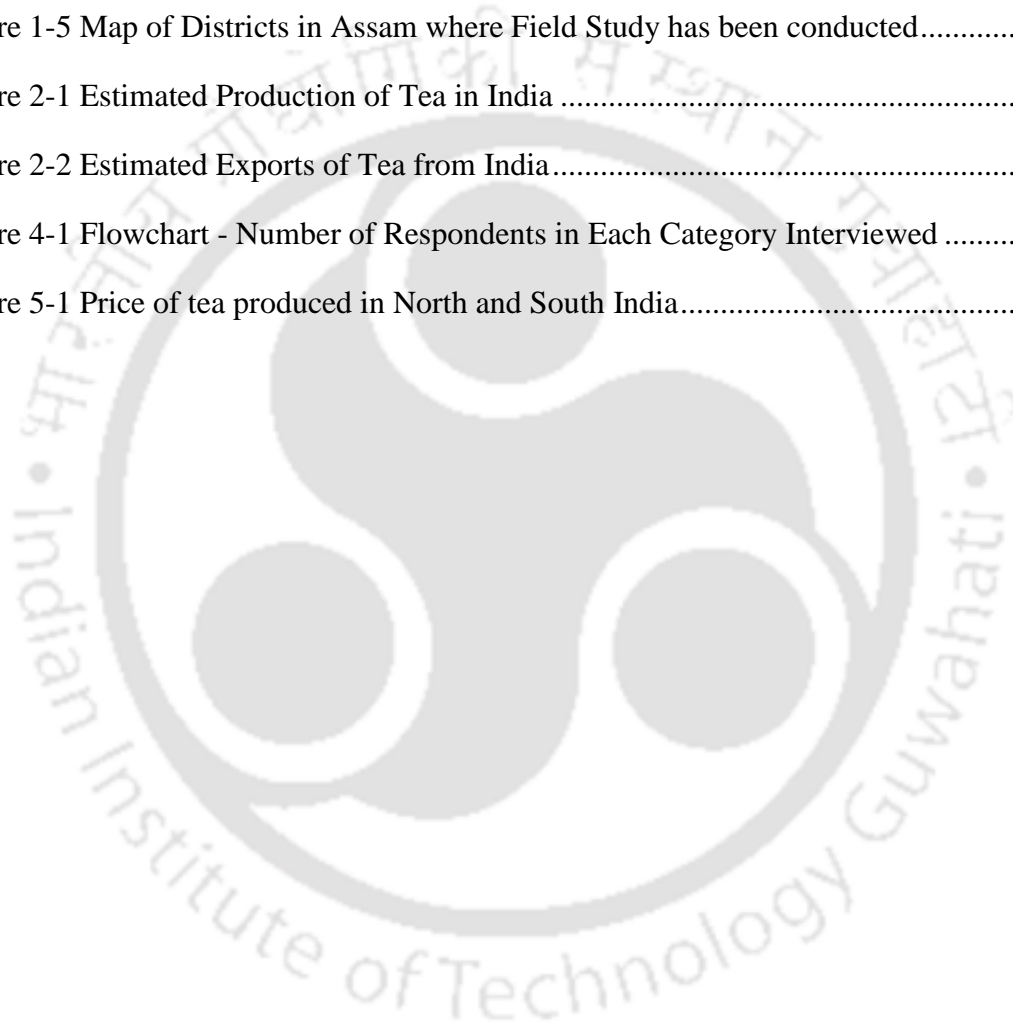
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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

Assam's biggest contribution to the world is its tea. Assam produces some of the finest varieties of tea in the world. Other than the Chinese tea variety *Camellia Sinensis*, Assam, a north-eastern state of India, is the only region in the world that has its own variety of tea, called *Camellia Assamica* (Sen 2008). Tea refers to the aromatic beverage prepared from the cured leaves. It has been found that tea is the most popular drink in the world in terms of consumption. Three types of tea are made, although they all come from the same plant, the difference being in the way the leaves are processed. The three varieties are called Black Tea, Green Tea and Oolong. Assam mainly produces Black Tea and apart from its domestic consumption, major part of it is exported.

The study embodied in the present thesis topic assumes greater significance in the current context of Indian industrial relations especially in the tea estates in Assam where intertwining of various socio-political factors across different periods adds to its complexity. The intricacies of industrial relations have been analyzed through in-depth qualitative study on some selected tea estates in Assam.

The historical backdrop of tea estates in Assam suggests an evolving dynamics of industrial relations both in its form and execution. Though the monopoly of upper class to dominate the working class has been diluted in the modern Indian scenario, the flavour of the class struggle and gender discrimination still persists in a subtle yet distinct way. Declining labour

conditions may be attributed to the withdrawal of the State from its responsibilities and commitment and social welfare activities. Withdrawal of the State from key responsibilities may be attributed to the policies of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation.

Such changes in policies have dithering influences on the management styles of the owners and working conditions of the tea estate workers. In-depth personal interviews with the management and the laborers indicate acute crisis of efficient and effective management of the tea estates in terms of ownership and control of work and the associated practices involved in it.

Assam produces over fifty one per cent of the total tea in India and thirteen per cent to the global tea production. Tea is one of the major foreign exchange goods for the state and the country. The state has 64000 small tea estates spread over 14 districts. The annual turnover of this industry in Assam is INR 50 billion and it employs 1,000 million workers (Baruah 2008). Thus, tea industry provides employment to a large section of people in the country. In India, Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala are the major tea growing states in India. They account for 98 per cent of the total tea production. Other traditional states where tea is grown to a small extent are Tripura, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar and Karnataka. The non-traditional states that have entered the tea map of India in the recent years include Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Sikkim. The Tea Board of India Report (2011) clearly indicates that in Assam, tea production increased by 7 per cent in August 2011. The tea production touched 85 million kg in August 2011, compared to 78.63 million kg in August 2010.

Baildon (1882) attempted to trace the origin of the Indian tea. In the early days of tea enterprise in India, indigenous plants were collected and formed into gardens and China

plants, propagated from seed, were planted in close proximity to the Indian species. The Chinese plants, having entirely changed from what they were in their origin, in the botanical course of nature imparted their altered condition, in some degree, to other plants around them; and the very obvious result of planting two varieties of tea came about in the production of a third the hybrid. As a growing plant Indian tea is superior to the Chinese counterpart in terms of manufacturing as well as medicinal qualities.

Greenberg (1951) stated that tea from China provided about one-tenth of the total revenue of England and the whole profit of the East India Company. China had monopoly over tea export to England for many years. Tea could be procured only from China. In the 1820s the Company began experimenting with tea cultivation in its own Indian territories. Shrubs were brought from China and transplanted in the Himalayas. But it was many years before Indian tea challenged China.

The tea industry in India was created to satisfy England's demand for higher quality black tea and hence the East India Company brought tea to India from China. Chaudhuri (2006) analysed the various trading relations that the Asian countries shared with each other under the colonial rule, mainly initiated and maintained by the East India Company. Chaudhuri discusses the trading of sugar and tea between India and China and various facets of it. Regular imports of tea were resumed from 1701 and continued until 1706, after which there was another brief period of discontinuity, for which no explanation has been offered. By 1713 the Company's right of access to the great commercial port of Canton was partially secured, and regular shipment of tea directly from China began in 1717. Further he analyses the trade of porcelain from China which is closely connected to serving of tea in these locales. Since then tea industry became one of the major driving forces of Indian economy.

Indian tea industry is well established in the global market in terms of production, consumption and export. India produced 966 million kg of tea in 2010, of which 76 per cent is produced in the northeastern states. Being the largest consumer of tea, it consumes 837 million kg in 2010. About 203.86 million kg tea is exported from India which brings about US \$ 413 million as foreign exchange for the country per annum. Tea industry is a crucial source of revenue for the country. Being a labour intensive industry, it plays a vital role in employment generation. A sizeable amount of staff and labour are directly engaged in tea industry (Baruah 2008).

In most of the agricultural produces, value addition is done at the downstream; in the higher processing and retailing stages of supply chain (Das 2009). Tea is no exception to this. Value is added to tea leaves at each stage of processing. As tea is ready-to-drink item, the downstream stages such as blending, packaging and ultimate marketing are the most profitable one. And here all the profit margins are collected by the big companies (Baruah 2008). Around 85 per cent of world tea production is sold by a few Multi National Companies (MNCs) with their enormous marketing skill. (Hazarika 2011)

The Multi-National Companies dominating the Global tea trade are Unilever (Brook Bond, Lipton/ Unilever Trading Company UTC, UK- The Netherlands), Van Rees (Trader/ Blender, supplying many packers, part of Deli Universal Corporation, Netherlands), James Finlay (Trader, Producer, Packer, UK) and Tata Tetley/ Stansand (Producer, Trader, Packer, UK). While the major Tea Packer in the world are Unilever (Lipton is a very strong brand with a world market share of 10%), Tetley, R. Twining (Associated British Foods), Ajeepay

Group (Typhoo tea), and Ostfriesche Tee Gesellschaft- OTG: (Major German company which also has activities outside Germany).

**Figure 1.1: Map of India**



**Source:** Google Maps (2014)

Tea drinking was widely practised in China in the 6th Century. In 793 AD the consumption of tea became so widespread that a tax was levied on it. The new drink spread to China's neighbour Japan quickly. From that time on a most elaborate ritual grew up round the

making of tea. When the European explorers returned from the Far East, tea had long been the national drink of both China and Japan but it was not until the end of the 16th century that the English first heard of it (Awasthi 1975). In 1610, the first consignment of tea reached Holland from where the first imports came to England. Gradually tea gained its popularity, not only as a drink but as a medicine that was reputed to have healing properties that it soon obliterated coffee; and by 1750 tea became the principal beverage of all classes. One of the main reasons for this was Britain's supremacy over the sea routes which made it easy for regular cargoes of tea to be brought from China. In Russia too, tea drinking became a national habit as its traders had direct access to China (Sen, 2008).

In 1833 the East India Company's monopoly over tea trade, which it had held for many years, was abolished. As a result, merchants began to look for faster transport. In 1865 the British Parliament began to tax the American colonies without the consent of their Assemblies and tea was one of the commodities which were taxed. The discovery of the Assam tea plant is attributed to Robert Bruce who is supposed to have seen the plant growing wild in some hills near Rangpur (near present Sibsagar), then the capital of Assam, during his visit in 1823 on a trading mission (Ukerls 1935). He made an arrangement with a Singpho (a tribe) Chief to supply him some tea plants during his next visit, though it did not materialize due to his death. Instead, C. A. Bruce, the brother of Robert Bruce, in charge of the British Gunboat division in the war with the Burmese occupying Assam in 1824 and posted at Sadiya (A town located in Tinsukia District of Upper Assam) met the *Singpho* (a tribe) Chief who supplied him some tea plants and seeds. Most of these seeds were planted in Bruce's garden at Sadiya and some were sent to Commissioner Jenkins at Gauhati. A few leaves of these plants were sent to Botanical gardens in Calcutta. Dr. N. Wallich, who was

then the Superintendent of Botanical Gardens, identified the leaves as belonging to the *Camellia* family but did not consider them to be of the same species as the China tea plant.

In 1826, the British East India Company took over the region from the *Ahom* (descendants of the *Tai* people settled in Assam) kings through the Yandaboo Treaty. In 1834 the then Governor General of India Lord William Bentinck appointed a Tea Committee to advise on feasibility of commercial tea cultivation in India. The committee issued a circular seeking for information on areas suitable for tea cultivation and sent its secretary Mr. G. J. Gordon, to procure tea seeds, plants and workers from China. It was this committee which recommended that the indigenous plant under proper management be cultivated for commercial purpose.

The experimental-site at Saikhowa near Sadiya in Upper Assam was not proper where many plants died. The surviving plants were shifted to a new site near Chabua about 25 kilometres east of Dibrugarh in 1837 and the first English tea garden was established. In 1840, the Assam Tea Company began the commercial production of tea in the region, run by indentured servitude of the local inhabitants. Beginning in the 1850s, the tea industry rapidly expanded, consuming vast tracts of land for tea plantations. In 1865 the British Parliament began to tax the American colonies without the consent of their Assemblies and tea was one of the commodities which were taxed. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Assam became the largest producer of tea.

In the Himalayan region, tea seedlings were planted near Bhimtal and Almora. Later on, experimental gardens were successfully established with China plants in Kumaon, Garhwal and Kangra districts on the Himalayan foothills. Of the plants sent to the South, a few survived in Nilgiris and a small lot in Wynaad on the western coast.

According to Sen (2008), Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) which was dependent almost entirely upon its flourishing coffee trade, fell a victim to the dreaded coffee blight and in ten years the coffee industry was entirely wiped out. The planters then turned to tea and in a very few years their tea production was rivaling that of India. Presently, India and Sri Lanka export millions of pounds of tea annually. India is the world's largest tea-drinking nation although the per capita consumption of tea remains a modest 750 grams per person every year. Turkey, with 2.5 kg of tea consumed per person per year, is the world's greatest per capita consumer. India is one of the largest tea producers in the world, though over 70 per cent of the tea is consumed within India itself.

#### **Assam Economic Survey, 2011**

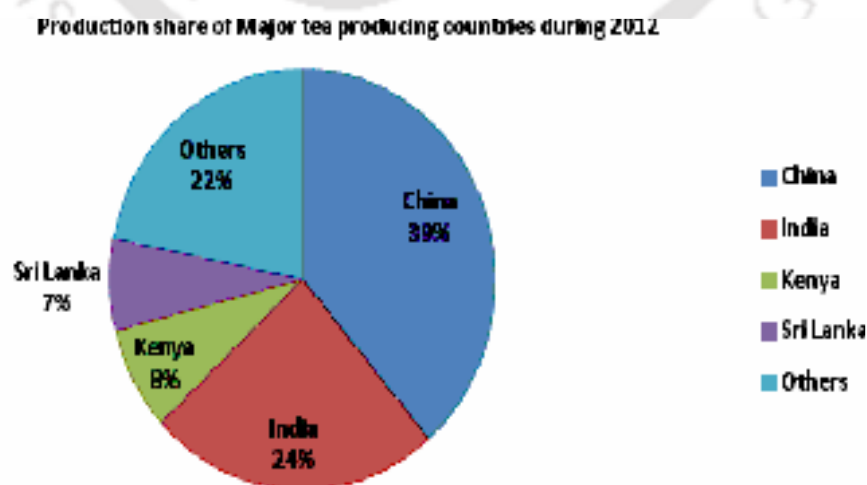
The total area under tea cultivation in Assam is accounting for more than half of the country's total area under tea. In addition to existing big & large tea gardens owned by reputed both Indian and multinational Companies, the profession of tea plantation in the State has been taken up by the common people as business venture at present, especially by unemployed youths. According to the Tea Board of India (2009), "there are more than 43000 small tea growers in Assam producing about nine percent of the State's total annual production." (State focus paper, Assam-2009-10 by NABARD). As per Tea Board of India information, there are 52000 small tea growers in Assam at the end of March 2011 out of which 4561 were registered with the Tea Board of India covering around 11757 hectare registered area.

According to the State Government reports, there are about 70000 small tea holdings covering approximately 117,000 acres of land in 14 out of 27 districts in Assam. It is important to note that 87 per cent of the cultivation is done in land area measuring less than

three acres. Major concentration of tea cultivation is in five districts in Upper Assam (64519) which is 94 per cent of the total number of Small Tea Growers in 14 districts of Brahmaputra valley. According to the All Assam Small Tea Growers Association (2009), the number of small tea growers has swelled to 65000 in the last two decades and it is on the rise. At present more than 900,000 people are involved in the small tea growing business in Assam. Almost 250,000 hectares of land is covered for such plantations. The small tea growers accounted for 30 per cent of the total tea produced in the State, which is 14 per cent of the total tea production of India .With this current growth, 50 per cent of the total tea produced in Assam is expected to come from the small tea growers by 2020.

Tea production, certification, exportation and all other facets of the tea trade in India are controlled by the Tea Board of India. It is against this backdrop that a comprehensive review of history of tea, extent of migration of labourers and the growth of the Indian tea industry, tea production in globalizing India and the sociologically significant questions pertaining to gender, management-labour relations paving way to class formation and trade unionism are discussed.

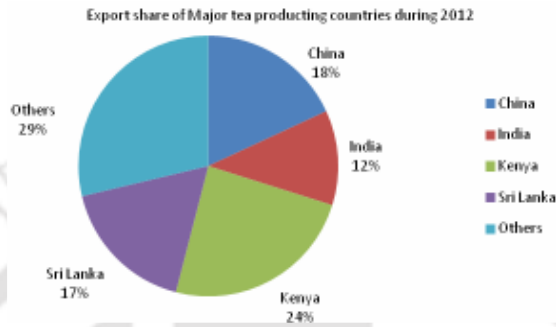
**Figure 0-2 Production share of Major Tea Producing Countries during 2012**



**Source:** Tea Board of India 59<sup>th</sup> Annual Report (2012-13)

Figure 1.2 shows that China is the highest tea producing country with 39 percent of total world production. Next to it is India with 24 percent of total world production. Kenya and Sri Lanka share 8 and 7 percent of total world production of tea.

**Figure 0-3 Export Share of Major Tea Producing Countries**



**Source:** Tea Board of India 59<sup>th</sup> Annual Report (2012-13)

Figure 1.3 shows that though China and India are largest producers of tea, they have lesser percentage of export compared to Kenya (24%). This is because there is high domestic consumption in India and China. While major portion of tea produced in Sri Lanka and Kenya is exported.

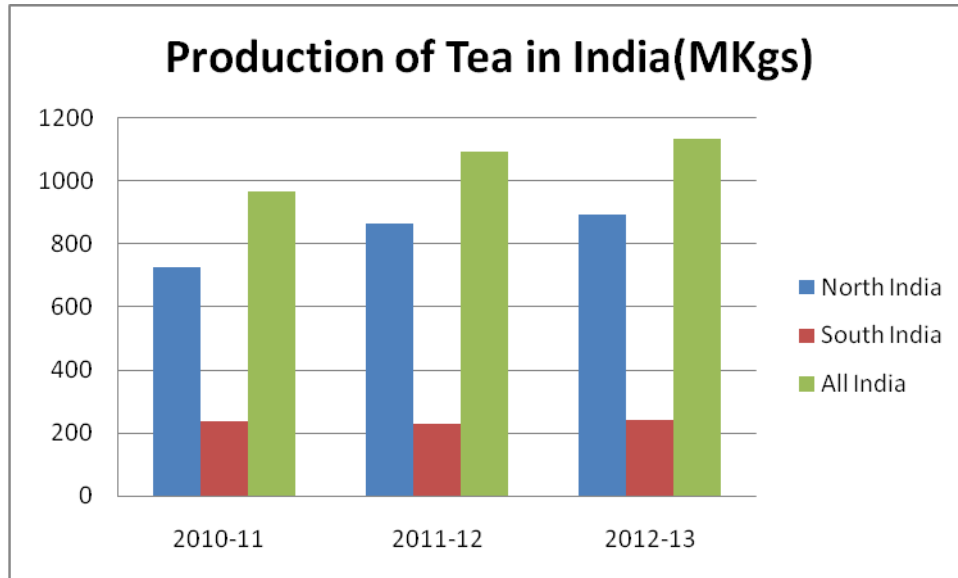
**Table 0-1: Production of tea in North and South India**

Year	North India	South India	All India
2010-11	728.52	238.21	966.73
2011-12	865.59	229.87	1095.46
2012-13	893.38	241.69	1135.07

*\*units are in million kgs*

**Source:** Tea Board of India 59<sup>th</sup> Annual Report (2012-13)

**Figure 0-4 Production of Tea in North and South India**



**Source:** Tea Board of India 59<sup>th</sup> Annual Report (2012-13)

Table 1.1 and Figure 1.4 show the production of tea in India as categorized into North and South India. The major states located in North India that produce tea are Assam, Tripura, some parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and North Bengal. In 2013 it produced 893.38 million kgs of tea. While in South India it produced 241.69 million kgs. The major tea producing states located in South India are Karnataka, Kerala and some parts of Tamil Nadu.

## 1.2 Review of Literature

In this section, we shall capture the relevant literature related to tea industry in Assam. There are various themes against the backdrop of which tea industry in Assam may be located. The themes include industrial relations, extent of sectoral and regional migration, women and work, class formation and class consciousness, trade unionism.

### 1.2.1 History of Tea

The history of development of tea in India, according to Mitra (2010), is relatively of recent origin and that the earnest efforts of the British Empire cannot be denied credibility in the cultivation of tea. According to Majhi (2002), tea consumption spread throughout the Chinese culture reaching in to every aspect of the society. In Japan too, the 'Tea Ceremony' has special significance.

Lafcadio Hearn, a journalist, defined the 'Tea Ceremony' as a 'complex art form':  
*"The Tea Ceremony requires years of training and practice to graduate in art...yet the whole of this art, as to its detail, signifies no more than the making and serving of a cup of tea. The supremely important matter is that the act be performed in the most perfect, most polite, most graceful, most charming manner possible"* (cited in Majhi 2002).

Since time immemorial, women have been closely associated with the plucking of tea leaves, preparation of tea and serving it. The Tea Ceremony in Japan is performed by the women. As seen in the above quotation, it is obvious that great feminine mannerisms are acknowledged in the act of making and serving tea.

Zen Buddhist missionaries are believed to introduce tea cultivation and service to Japan from China (Sarkar 1972). In Europe, Portugal with her technologically advanced navy was the first country to gain the right of trade with China. The Portugese developed a trade route by which they shipped their tea to Lisbon, and then Dutch ships transported it to France, Holland and the Baltic countries. By 1675, tea was made available in common food shops throughout Holland. The success of the Dutch navy in the Pacific made tea consumption a fashionable practice in the Dutch capital, The Hague. Gradually, in Europe, tea became a part of the way of life.

When tea reached America for the first time, it actually was brought to the colonizers in the Dutch Settlement of New Amsterdam (later renamed New York by the English). These settlers were tea drinkers. In case of England, it has been found that Great Britain was the last of the three powerful sea-faring nations to break into the Chinese and East Indian trade routes. The first tea samples reached England between 1652 and 1654. Tea became so popular that it could replace ale as the national drink of England. In 1600, The John Company was formed for the purpose of promoting trade with Asia. It was granted various rights to conquer land and property and also declare war. It was the largest, most powerful monopoly during that time. Its power was based on the importation of tea. The East India Company emerged as a competitor and it was later merged with the John Company in 1773. Later, total trade monopoly was given to the East India Company for India and China.

According to Sen (2008), the importance of tea in India was unknown before 1823 when Robert Bruce discovered that the *Sinphos*, settled in the Misimi hills in Upper Assam of the Brahmaputra valley consumed tea made in their own traditional method. The influence of the *Singpho* (a tribe) people has been very significant in the development of tea industry in Assam. Cultivation of organic tea was first practised by them. After Robert Bruce's discovery, Captain Jenkins decided to introduce tea plantations in the wastelands of Assam. Following the establishment of the first tea plantation in Chabua in Upper Assam, the number of tea plantations increased in the state. The formation of the Assam Tea Company in 1839, India's tea cultivation advanced from the experimental to a more extensive and commercial aspect.

Sharma (2012) states that the 'discovery' of tea and the establishment of tea plantations by the British colonialists resulted in a huge transformation in the demographic as well as the

overall social landscape of Assam. Even before Assam was merged into the British India, the colonial officials observed the possibilities of tea plantation in the province and this possibility was confirmed in 1831 when the existence of tea plant was ‘discovered’ in Assam *jungles* (forests). In 1834, the First Tea Committee was formed and the first tea plantation was launched in 1837. The author argues that the plantation workers did not migrate on their own will but were brought under repressive conditions.

### **1.2.2 Extent of Migration of Labourers and the Growth of the Indian Tea Industry**

Human migration implies physical movement by humans from one area to another, sometimes over long distances or in large groups. Historically this movement was nomadic, often causing significant conflict with the indigenous population and their displacement or cultural assimilation. Only a few nomadic people have retained this form of lifestyle in modern times. Migration has continued under the form of both voluntary migration within one's region, country, or beyond and involuntary migration (which includes the slave trade, occupational shift, trafficking in human beings and ethnic cleansing). People who migrate into a territory are called ‘immigrants’, while at the departure point they are called ‘emigrants’. In trying to analyze the migration of the *Adivasi* (indigenous people) workers in to the region, it is necessary to understand the adjustments that the migrant group and the host community makes as an after-effect of migration (Nath 1988). Labor migration, refugee migrations and urbanization takes place as millions of agricultural workers left the countryside and moved to the cities causing unprecedented levels of urbanization. This phenomenon began in Britain in the late 18th century and spread around the world and continues to this day in many areas. Choudhury (2010) unfolds the tale of injustice that the

Chinese origin people staying in Makum, a small town in Tinsukia district of Upper Assam had to face after China's attack in North East India in the year 1962 by the local people and the Indian Government. The author has given a holistic picture of the origin of the plantation workers and analysed the causes of large-scale migration of people to Assam in order to get engaged in this sector. The process of assimilation of the Chinese origin and Central India origin migrant workers has been extensively discussed.

Industrialization encouraged migration wherever it appeared. Globalization, which plays a key role in heightening mobility of goods, services and technologies, it has been found that it also accelerates labour migration (Ritzer 2007). In northeast India, the British rulers enacted the Assam Land Act 1834 followed by the Wasteland Grant Rules 1838 in order to get land easily for the tea estates. Once deprived of their livelihood, the *Ahom*, *Koch* and *Boro* (tribes) landowners of Assam would work in the plantations, the British had anticipated (Fernandes 2003). But they were not willing to become wage labourers on their own land. Also the Chinese whom the British brought to the Assam could not become the type of workers they needed (Guha 1977).

**Table 0-2: Annual Immigration of Labour (including children) into Assam Plantations**

Year	Number	Year	Number
1902-03	26,684	1919-20	1,02,089
1903-04	22,162	1920-21	25,472
1904-05	24,209	1924-25	33,727
1905-06	31,830	1925-26	33,009
1906-07	25,617	1926-27	45,694
1907-08	84,824	1927-28	42,845
1908-09	60,773	1928-29	68,900
1909-10	39,332	1929-30	59,796
1910-11	43,657	1930-31	53,519
1911-12	58,646	1931-32	50,997
1912-13	58,873	1932-33	39,901
1913-14	58,646	1933-34	47,960
1914-15	63,638	1934-35	19,968
1915-16	1,10,376	1935-36	23,876
1916-17	48,130	1936-37	27,842
1917-18	19,407	1937-38	32,335
1918-19	2,22,171		

**Source:** Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Reports of 1906 and 1921-22; Reports on Immigrant Labour in the Assam Valley Division for the year ending- 30<sup>th</sup> June, 1929; Annual Reports on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigration Labour Act (XXII of 1932). Other Reports of the Land Revenue Administration, Government of Assam. (Guha 1977).

Indentured labourers had to be continually brought in from outside the province to compensate for inadequacy of local recruitment, deaths, discharge, desertions and loss by way of repatriation under the relevant Emigrant Labour Acts. However, in recent years due to shortage of labour in the tea plantations, automation and mechanization has become an urgent need for the tea estates in Assam to increase production.

Gurinder's study (2008) analyses Assam's unrest beginning from illegal migration to the state, insurgency and its socio- economic and political aspects. The author discusses the phases of migration of people from various regions of the country and the neighboring nations, its impact of demographic change in Assam for the pursuit of work and land. The phases are divided into the pre independence and post-independence era. The separatist

ideology has been running strong among the people of Assam along with the other North-eastern states. The natural resources of Assam like tea, crude oil, coal and others have not benefited the local inhabitants of the place.

The tribals of Jharkhand, Orissa and Chattisgarh were thus the next choice. Because of their impoverishment they were compelled to emigrate mainly to tea gardens in Assam when they could not obtain justice from the government and could not bear to stay on in their newly transformed status as tenants. According to Baruah (1978), the establishment of the Assam Tea Company was part of the scheme of colonizing waste land in Assam to provide new avenues of investment for foreign capital. The tea industry required a regular supply of labour and so attracted a large number of labourers from Bihar, Chotanagpur, Uttar Pradesh and Madras. Thousands of labourers annually recruited for the plantations from outside provinces, most of who did not return home, formed the biggest migrant group in Assam's population. The next important stream of migration was that of peasants from East Bengal districts, some 85 to 90 percent of whom were Muslims. Together with children they numbered about three lakhs in 1921 and five lakhs in 1931 according to official estimates.

This rural immigration continued during the years 1901-1947 and was on such a scale that the indigenous component of the Assam valley population went down considerably in percentage terms by the middle of the 20th century. Though the process of assimilation of these migrant groups was extremely slow, they aspired to be on par with the Assamese in the valley. No doubt the immigrants contributed to Assam's economy by bringing large tracts of waste land under cultivation, but they affected Assam's social and cultural life adversely.

Nath's study (1988) on international migration discussed that of indentured labourers to the sugarcane plantations of Natal – contain long descriptions, which interfere to an extent with

analysis of trends, problems and policy issues. Furthermore, there is considerable similarity migration of tribals of Chhota Nagpur and the Santhal Parganas district of West Bengal to the tea gardens of Assam and north Bengal and to the forested (and other) areas of southern West Bengal. Since both migrations have had similar causes and not dissimilar end-results. Choudhury and Bhowmik's study, 'Migration of Chhota Nagpur Tribals to West Bengal', asserts that the tribals of Chhota Nagpur and the Santal Parganas began to migrate to the tea gardens of Assam and northern West Bengal in the latter half of the 19th century, and to the forested areas of Sunderbans and the adjoining districts of West Bengal somewhat later, during the 20th century after they had been dispossessed of their traditional lands by outsiders aided by the governments, first of tribal rajas and later of the British. The rajas conferred, after conversion to Hinduism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *jagirs* on *dikkus* (outsiders - priests, courtiers and others) on lands which had been cultivated by the tribals for centuries under the shifting cultivation system. The *jagirdars* were recognised by the British colonial government as owners of the *jagir* lands when the permanent settlement system was extended to the area at the end of the 18th century. Further-more, the British judicial system, as well as the field-level officials of the colonial government favoured the *dikkus* at the expense of the tribals. The *dikkus* were comparatively rich, understood the new laws and administrative practices, and could establish good relations with the officials, while the tribals were poor and ignorant of their rights as well as of the ways of the officials. They were therefore ruthlessly exploited. The numerous revolts of the tribals all through the 19th century against their dispossession and impoverishment were ruthlessly crushed by the government. Impoverished and alienated they finally saw in migration to the tea gardens an opportunity to rebuild for themselves a new life, which would provide them with adequate

subsistence. The prospect tea gardens, which had begun to be initiated and developed from the 1840s, needed the migrants because the local population was small and was also not willing to do plantation work. They were unwilling to work under the subordination of the British as most of the local people owned farmland. The forested nature, less population of the garden areas and the fact that besides the men, women and children could work in the gardens, made migration to the gardens particularly attractive. Whole families and communities could move together to re-establish themselves within the gardens. The difficult tasks in shaping the tea gardens such as clearing of land and planting of tea bushes had to be done by the men, other tasks like plucking the tea leaves were done by the women and the older children. It is a belief that with their nimble fingers and greater patience the women and the older girls were better at it than the men. And since land was plentiful, whole communities could move to establish their new villages within the gardens.

Though the British planters wanted to engage local people in its expansion, but they were not willing to work in tea cultivation. Only people belonging to the *Bodo-Kachari* tribes were available as plantation workers. So, two firms *Arkatis* and *Sirders* were engaged as commissioned agents in Kolkata to supply labour from outside the state. They recruited labourers from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chota Nagpur area and Tamil Nadu. Many tea tribes also are of the origin from the state presently known as Jharkhand. They were almost forced to migrate as they were poor and uneducated. Baruah (2008), states that in the agrarian regions of Bihar, UP, MP and Orissa, famine, drought, flood and epidemics was very common during those days. Excessive exploitation of poor peasants and landless labourers by the big landlords and *zamindars* (landowners) was common. These factors led to migration of huge bulk of population to Assam in search of

bread. The colonial administrators had acknowledged the simplicity and docile nature of the tribals of Chotanagpur and the plain people of Bihar and UP. The Peasant unrest in Bihar and Bengal had also accelerated large-scale emigration. Apart from these “*push factors*”, certain “*pull factors*” like false assurances regarding easy work, ideal condition of work, better pay and unlimited land availability for cultivation were given to the workers which motivated them to migrate to Assam in large scale. Contractors were deployed to hire labourers for tea estates in different parts of the state. The transportation of the workers to these estates, covering sometimes a distance of 800 kms without any road or rail link was a hazardous task. The long journey mostly caused sickness and high mortality. In 1901, this population grew to 450000. They had their distinct cultural traits and the local community looked upon them as a single community of *Coolies*. This helped them in organizing themselves politically to fight for their rights. Thus, the first legislation which gave some degree of protection to the plantation labour was the Assam Labour and Emigration Act of 1901. Later, on the basis of the recommendations made on the basis of this act, the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act was passed in 1932 (Awasthi 1975). At present, as per the 59<sup>th</sup> Annual Report of the Tea Board of India, major tea producing countries are China, India, Kenya and Sri Lanka.

**Table 0-3 Major Tea Producing and Exporting Countries**

Country	2012			
	Production		Export	
	Million Kg	%share	Million Kg	%share
<b>China</b>	1789.75	39	321.79	18
<b>India</b>	1126.33	24	208.26	12
<b>Kenya</b>	369.56	8	430.21	24
<b>Sri Lanka</b>	328.4	7	306.04	17
<b>Others</b>	1010.59	22	510.21	29
<b>World Total</b>	<b>4624.63</b>	100	<b>1776.51</b>	100

**Source:** Tea Board of India 59<sup>th</sup> Annual Report (2012-13)

From Table 1.3 it is evident that China is the largest tea producer with 1789.75 million kgs per annum. While India is the second highest producer with 1126.33 million kgs per annum, there is more domestic consumption of tea leading to reduced amount of export.

According to Awasthi (1975), the major tea producing districts of Assam were Darrang, Goalpara, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh and Cachar. Table 1.4 shown below depicts the tea-workers population per hectare in the major tea-producing areas of Assam.

**Table 0-4 Tea Labour per Hectare in Assam**

<b>Districts</b>	<b>1960</b>	<b>1961</b>	<b>1962</b>	<b>1963</b>	<b>1964</b>	<b>1968</b>
<b>Darrang</b>	2.82	2.81	2.80	2.79	2.69	2.34
<b>Goalpara</b>	2.24	2.12	2.20	1.76	1.80	1.67
<b>Kamrup</b>	2.25	2.64	1.98	2.12	2.33	2.04
<b>Lakhimpur</b>	3.36	3.24	2.23	3.59	2.96	2.05
<b>Nowgong</b>	2.56	2.42	2.40	2.31	2.16	2.04
<b>Sibsagar</b>	2.88	2.73	2.74	2.62	2.64	2.18
<b>Dibrugarh</b>	2.80	2.71	2.74	2.60	2.59	2.17
<b>Cachar</b>	1.86	1.77	1.69	1.82	2.64	1.58
<b>Total</b>	2.80	2.70	2.69	2.78	2.57	2.20

**Source:** Tea Board of India Record, 1970 (cited in Mitra 2010)

### **1.2.3 Class Formation and the Growth of Trade Unionism**

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”. According to Marx (1887) the transformation of human society from its primitive and unstratified form to a fragmented form is based on its relative position with regard to the means of production. Bhowmik (1981) asserts that class consciousness is the basic factor which unites the workers to fight for their rights. Classes are generally defined as groups of people into which society is divided. While trying to define class in the Marxist way, the critics of Marx try to interpret him apart from his approach to history- historical materialism. For Marx, class is a historical phenomenon and hence its historical evolution must be considered. Bhowmik also cites the work of Dahrendorf here as he defines classes as “social conflict groups, the determinant of

which can be found in the participation in or exclusion from the authority within any imperatively coordinated association". Georg Lukacs in his essay on class consciousness describes the two classes- bourgeoisie and proletariat as pure classes in bourgeois society. The 'intelligentsia' comes into picture gradually with the development of industry, technology and culture. As class struggle spreads, a large section of these groups may join hands with the working class to fight for their rights. In the tea gardens too it has been found that there is an increase in the participation of white-collar workers in the labour movement. Class consciousness is not always the result of class formation. It is also linked with the polarization of classes. A class can exist without its being aware of its class interests. But without class consciousness, the working class is a class merely in relation to capital. It is a 'class in itself'. Durkheim's analysis of the concept of 'social order', contains material production, defines roles and relationships which is based on values and norms that forms a social order. The division of labour and differentiation of roles tend to be associated with inequality and ranking. Two roles may not be necessarily ranked, however, in a complex system, there exists hierarchy of roles. The tea plantation workers carry forward from their tribal background some of the social and cultural characteristics associated with a totally different kind of production system. Hence, in analyzing class consciousness among a section of the working class, one has to study their economic and social life.

### **1.2.3.1 The Social Dominance Theory:**

A variety of contemporary psychological theories have made use of classical sociological perspectives on the legitimizing functions of social attitudes. A more general application of this neoclassical approach in contemporary social psychology; one, that integrates many of the insights of the various theories into a single framework-is represented by social

dominance theory (Sidanius, Pratto, Martin, & Stallworth, 1991), two, this theory differs from the classical sociological approach in suggesting that traditional class conflict, rather than being the central form of conflict in human societies (as classical Marxists have long argued), is actually derivative of a much more general tendency for humans to establish relatively arbitrary ingroup-outgroup boundaries and to subsequently engage in various acts of ingroup favoritism and outgroup denigration on the basis of these distinctions. According to this perspective, conflict between economic classes derives from many of the same psychosocial forces driving conflict between different "races," genders, ethnic groups, religions, age cohorts, nationalities, geographical regions, and any other salient, socially constructed group divisions. Central to social dominance theory is the observation that socially constructed groups are almost always hierarchically organized, such that certain dominant or hegemonic groups can be identified that enjoy a disproportionate allocation of positive social value (e.g., wealth, power, privilege, good nutrition, good health), whereas a number of subordinate groups are burdened with a disproportionate share of negative social value (e.g., low status, poor health, poor nutrition, prison sentences). Following the classical political sociologists, social dominance theorists also suggest that ideologies or legitimizing myths play a crucial role in helping to maintain the structural integrity of these hierarchical relationships among social groups. Social Dominance Theory assumes that we must understand the processes producing and maintaining prejudice and discrimination at multiple levels of analysis, including cultural ideologies and policies, institutional practices, relations of individuals to others inside and outside their groups, the psychological predispositions of individuals, and the interaction between the evolved psychologies of men and women.

Bhowmik (1981) highlights the phenomenon of class formation among people who are tribal in origin and among whom the basic tribal distinctions still persist. His attempt was to unravel the conditions of the tea workers of Sonali Tea Estate of Jalpaiguri district also known as Dooars of West Bengal. The *Oraons, Mundas, Kharios* (sections of the *Adivasis*) and others who constitute the labour force in North Bengal are losing tribal attributes. It has been found that tribal societies transform through the operation of huge economic forces like globalisation and the growth of capitalism. Capitalism; a type of economic organization in its pure form may briefly be defined by: 1. Private ownership and control of the economic instruments of production, i.e. capital; 2. The gearing of economic activity to making profits.; 3. A market framework that regulates this activity; 4. The appropriation of profits; 5. The provision of labour by workers who are free agents. (Abercrombie and Nicholas, 2006).

The isolation of the plantation from the wider social system was to the disadvantage of the labourers but to the advantage of the management. If we refer to Fordism style of work pattern, Fordism referred to the mechanized, mass production manufacturing methods developed in the USA by Henry Ford between 1908- 1914. He divided previously complex work tasks into a number of simple operations, applying the principles of 'scientific management'. Special purpose machinery and moving assembly lines were its distinct features (Abercrombie and Nicholas, 2006). Labour costs were lowered, because work simplification increased output and also substituted cheaper, unskilled labour for expensive skilled workers, while production volumes were higher as a result of mechanization. The repetitive type of work brings a monotony of work pattern to the plantation workers.

Plantation pattern of work is different from organization of work on the farm. It has four categories of people involved in the system. They are employees, management, staff, sub-staff and labour whose members are clearly differentiated from each other and arranged in a strictly hierarchical order. The relation between the planter and the worker is of master and servant and not that of employer and employee, although the plantation is an industry. The relation between the owners and the workers is generally oppressive in nature. In the plantation, to a greater extent than in the factory, the management exercises direct control over the labourers not only at work but also outside work. It was so because the labourers have no choice but to live on the plantation; in accommodation provided by the employer as they were far off from their native place. It has been found that, since independence, the wages and level of living of the tea workers have been improving slowly through the workers' organized effort and intervention of external political forces. A disjunction between the 'homogenous economic activity' and 'heterogeneous social life' can be seen.

According to Munro (1991), trade union is an important social institution and performs significant social, economic and political functions. It constructed a body of rights for the working class using different methods of action such as political, legal and social action. Karl Marx believed that trade unions are perceived as a weapon through which working class revolution can be brought about.

According to Bhowmik (1981), classes are not found readymade, not even in the most advanced capitalist societies. They are created by conscious and organized human action.

Trade unionism, according to Mitra (2010), a worldwide movement, was borne out of industrialization. The trade union movement has a greater role in the revival and sustainability of the industry.

The workers were forced to work in an alienated, monotonous, unhygienic work environment where their activities are closely monitored and controlled by the managerial personnel. In most of the tea industries, there developed a tendency to exploit the workers and deprive them of their rights. Formation of trade unions can be accredited to this factor. As a result, the workers formed associations to protect their rights and to fight against the gross exploitation. These associations are generally known as trade unions. In India, the right to form union has been made statutory under the Trade Union Act, 1926.

Trade unions in the recent times have been going through major changes. There is a decreasing trend in the number of trade union members. With increasing awareness and education among the workers, trade unions have become more rational and realistic in their approach. Now, they do not oppose economic reforms but the adverse effects of the reforms. The growth of Trade Union Movement among the tea workers has broken down the isolation of the worker and helped in organized political action, within and outside the plantation. The workers are better aware of their rights as workers and more conscious of their identity as a class. But the main drawback seen is the division within the Trade Union Movement and rivalries between political parties. In order to emerge as a 'class for itself', there has to be unity not only in their work or economic activity, but it also has to extend to their social life.

*"The tea gardens are managed like an extreme hierarchy: the managers live like Gods, distant, unapproachable, and incomprehensible. Some even begin to believe that they are Gods, that they can do exactly what they like." – (Rolt, 1991)*

In the above given quote the author states down how the British tea planters or owners are looked up to; not in respect but with fear. The plantation workers perceive them to be extremely powerful, often closely to any superpower and that things happen as they want them to be.

#### **1.2.4 Industrial Relations in Tea Estates in Assam**

Industrial Relations denote the relationship between management and workers. Traditionally, the term 'Industrial relations' used to cover aspects such as trade unionism, collective bargaining, workers' participation in management, discipline and grievance handling, industrial disputes, labour laws and rules. In the words of Lester, Richard Allen (1908)- "Industrial Relations involves attempt at arriving at solution between conflicting objectives and values; between profit motive and social gain; between discipline and freedom; between authority and democracy".

The phrase 'Industrial Relations' comprises two terms: 'Industry' and 'Relations'. "Industry" refers to "any productive activity in which an individual (or a group of individuals) is (are) engaged", and by "relations" it refers to "the relationships that exist within the industry between the employer and his workmen"; the "relationships between employees and employers within the organizational settings" (Mitra 2010). the phrase covers the employment relationship and the institutions associated with it. It embraces the relationship and the institutions associated with it. It includes relations between workers, work groups, worker organizations and managers, companies and employer organizations. The study of industrial relations is an interdisciplinary enterprise, drawing heavily on

industrial sociology, labour economics and trade union history. (Abercrombie and Nicholas 2006).

According to Watson (2012), an analysis of the perspectives of industrial relations and the sociology of work and industry, collective bargaining, trade unions are important components. Sociology of work and industry analyses 'conflict' as it places conflict and bargaining activities in the wider context of the structure and the dynamics of the type of society. It can be either conflict of interests of the employers', employees' associations or between colleagues or subordinates and supervisors. However, for social life to continue at work, there must be co-operation. Both conflict and co-operation are indispensable to workplace.

Industrial dispute therefore is defined according to the 'Industrial Dispute Act, 1947'.

As per section 2(k) of the act, "Industrial Dispute" means any dispute or difference between employers and employees, or between employers and workmen, or between workmen and workmen, which is concerned with the employment or non-employment or the terms of employment or with the conditions of labour, or of any person.

The above definition of industrial dispute brings out the following essential ingredients:

- (i) There should be a dispute or difference;
- (ii) The dispute or difference may be between:
  - (a) Employer and employee, or
  - (b) Employer and workmen, or
  - (c) Workmen and workmen.

Disputes may relate to subject matters like, remuneration, compensation for wrongful dismissal. The field of industrial relations looks at the relationship between management and workers, particularly groups of workers represented by a union. Industrial relations are basically the interactions between employers, employees, government, institutions and associations through which such interactions are mediated.

Dunlop had given a significant theory on industrial and labour relations in 1950s. According to Dunlop, industrial relations system consists of three agents- management organizations, workers and their organizations and government agencies. The actors and their organizations are located within an environment defined in terms of technology, labour, product markets and the distribution of power in wider society and its impact upon individuals and workplace. Within this environment actors interact, negotiate and use economic and political power in process of determining rules that constitute the output of the industrial relations system. Dunlop proposed that three parties- management, labour and government are the key actors in the modern industrial relations system. These institutions cannot act in an autonomous or independent way. They are shaped by the market, technology and political context. Thus, industrial relations is a social sub system that are monitored by three environmental constraints- the market, technology and distribution of power in society.

Dunlops model identifies three major key factors be considered in conducting an analysis of the management-labour relationship:

- a. Environmental or external economic, technological, political, legal, social forces that impact employment relationships

- b. Characteristics and interaction of the key actors in the employment relationship- labour, management and government
- c. Rules that are derived from these interactions that govern the employment relationship

#### **1.2.4.1 Approaches to Industrial Relations**

Industrial relations can be analyzed from various perspectives. It can be understood in terms of class conflict, mutuality of interests and also as a consequence of interaction of various factors both within and outside an organization. Some of the significant approaches are Pluralists, Unitary and Marxist.

- a. Pluralist Approach:

In Pluralism the organization is perceived as being made up of powerful divergent sub-groups – management and trade unions. This approach sees conflict of interest and disagreement between management and workers over the distribution of profit as normal and indispensable. Trade Unions are deemed as legitimate representative of employees. Conflict is dealt by collective bargaining and is considered to bring about positive change if channeled in a proper way. Realistic managers should accept conflict to occur and try to resolve this by securing agreed procedures for settling disputes. This approach lays more emphasis on the fact that an organization is a collective of individuals and that common purpose achieved through debate, negotiation and conflict.

- b. Radical/ Marxist Approach:

This perspective is political philosophy of Karl Marx. It looks into the capitalist mode of production as an exploitative system whereby the owners of capital press on maximum output for minimum input. Safety and employee welfare take a backseat as profit making through exploitation and conspiracy is the primary concern. Marxist perspective focuses on

the fundamental division of interests between capital and labour and sees workplace relations against this background. It asserts conflict in employment relationship is reflective of the structure of society. Conflict is thus seen as indispensable and trade unions are natural response of workers to the exploitation by capital.

c. Unitary Approach:

The unitary approach is based on the sociological theory of functionalism. The main contributors to this approach are August Comte, Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons. This approach views the organization as machine or a living organism. Everybody plays a part in it.

Bhowmik (1985) asserts that in understanding the concept of Industrial Relations, it has to be believed that employers and employees are two separate classes. The relationships which arise at and out of the workplace generally include the relationships between individual workers, the relationships between workers and their employer, the relationships between employers, the relationships employers and workers have with the organizations formed to promote their respective interests, and the relations between those organizations, at all levels. Industrial relations also include the processes through which these relationships are expressed such as, collective bargaining, workers' participation in decision-making, and grievance and dispute settlement and the management of conflict between employers, workers and trade unions, when it arises.

Industrial relations in the tea plantation system's distinct characteristic is that the plantation industry provides employment for more than a million workers. However, there was no comprehensive legislation regulating the conditions of labour in the industry, as a consequence of which, the Plantation Labour Act was introduced in the year 1951. It was

applied in the first instance to tea, coffee, rubber and cinchona plantations, but the state Government could apply it to any other plantation. Provision was made in the Act for assuring to the worker reasonable amenities, as for example, the supply of wholesome drinking water or suitable medical and educational facilities or provisions for canteens and creches in suitable cases, or provision for sufficient number of latrines and urinals separately for males and females. Housing accommodation was also to be provided for every worker and standards and specifications of such housing accommodation would be prescribed after due consultation. The Act also regulated the working hours of workers employed in plantation. Children under twelve are prohibited for employment in any plantation and State Governments were empowered to make rules regulating payment of sickness or maternity benefits, canteen facility, fixed hours of working, age limit to be monitored (Misra, 2003).

However, the provisions of the Plantation Labour Act have not been met by the owners of the plantations. They have failed to provide for even the basic requirements of the workers which have given rise to grievances among them leading to disturbed situations. These grievances have adversely affected the industrial relations in the tea estates of not only Assam, but other regions as well. There are many cases of tea workers' violent outlet of grievances against the management and the owners of the estates, Misra's (2003) study on the industrial relations in tea estates of Eastern India, he cites the case of irate workers of a tea estate in Assam's Sonitpur district hacked and burnt to death the estate's deputy manager and senior assistant manager. Trade union leaders from the tea industry have unequivocally condemned the incident. But they have also drawn attention to the fact that tea garden managements in Assam have been systematically ignoring the demands of the workers, especially for welfare measures. Successive governments in Assam have failed to force

managements to implement the Plantations Labour Act of 1951. Managements claim that the industry is passing through a recession, but during the tea boom of the 1990s the same managements did not share even a minuscule part of their prosperity with the workers (Bhowmik 2005). Workers in West Bengal tea plantations recently struck work on the issue of a wage hike. Employers believe that wages in the industry are already high and productivity low; any increase in wages thus would increase production costs. However, certain studies reveal that it is the neglect of tea plantations and higher management salaries that have production expensive (Behal 2001). According to Guha (1977), in the year 1939, numerous strikes took place in 21 tea estates triggered in the Tinsukia district. The tea workers protested against exploitation and mainly the stoppage of water supply by the British owned trading Company.

### **Grievances**

According to Edwin B. Flippo grievance is “a type of discontent, which must always be expressed. A grievance is usually more formal in character than a complaint. It may be valid or ridiculous, and must grow out of something connected with company operations or policy. It must involve an interpretation or application of the provisions of the labour contract.”

There exists a fundamental difference between dissatisfaction, complaint, and grievance. Dissatisfaction arises from the unhappy condition of the employee regarding the job. This dissatisfaction leads to complaints when the individual discusses it with other coworkers or make it expressed. When the dissatisfaction related to work is brought to the notice of the management, the complaint becomes a grievance.

## **Causes of Grievance**

A grievance may be real or absurd and imaginary and often depends upon the mental state of the individual. However, there also may exist some common job or organizational related factors that may cause grievance of the employee. According to the National Commission of Labour, “the complaints affecting one or more individual workers in respect of their wage payments, overtime, leave, transfer, promotion, seniority, work assignment, or discharge would constitute grievances.” An effort may be made to identify the various causes of grievance:

- Dissatisfaction regarding wages, components of compensation, incentives, bonus payment, or benefits
- Dissatisfaction regarding career advancement, promotion, transfer, etc.
- Dissatisfaction arising out of superior behaviour
- Dissatisfaction due to the working environment of the establishment, behaviour of the coworkers
- Unhealthy and stressful working condition
- Lack of recognition for the job
- Denial of leave, overtime, or any other benefits
- External influence

## **Steps in Grievance Redressal Procedure**

The procedure for redressal of grievance may vary from organization to organization depending upon the strength of the trade union, size of the plant, and operating procedure of the management. However, for a standard size establishment with a strong and structured

union a five-tier grievance procedure is the most suitable one. The steps for the system are discussed below:

<b>Step 1:</b>	The employee(s) having grievances expresses the same to the immediate supervisor and the shop steward of the representative trade union. The grievance is handled by the supervisor and discussed with the shop steward representing the employee(s). The problem may be settled at this level.
<b>Step 2:</b>	If the grievance is not settled at the level one the matter is forwarded to the departmental head by the supervisor. On the other side, the chief steward of the union represents the grievance for the employee(s). The grievance may be settled by mutual agreement.
<b>Step 3:</b>	If the matter remains unsettled at the second level, the departmental head refers the grievance to the grievance redressal committee. This committee comprises of equal number of representatives from the either sides of the management and employee's trade union. The committee tries to settle the matter through mutual agreement. The grievance may be settled at the stage.
<b>Step 4:</b>	If the grievance issues are not settled at level three, the top management usually gets involved sending the managers from highest hierarchical level to discuss. Consequently, the matter is forwarded to the regional union level and the top level trade union leaders get involved in the process on behalf of the employee(s). The two parties usually try to come to a mutually accepted solution.

<b>Step 5:</b>	If the grievance is not settled in the fourth level, either any one or both the parties may raise industrial dispute and may ask for arbitration.
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### **Collective Bargaining**

Collective bargaining is a process of voluntary negotiation between employers and trade unions aimed at reaching agreements, which regulate working conditions. Collective agreements usually set out wage scales, working hours, training, health and safety, overtime, grievance mechanisms and rights to participate in workplace or company affairs.

The union may negotiate with a single employer (who is typically representing a company's shareholders) or may negotiate with a federation of businesses, depending on the country, to reach an industry wide agreement. A collective agreement functions as a labor contract between an employer and one or more unions. Collective bargaining consists of the process of negotiation between representatives of a union and employers (generally represented by management or by an employers' organization) in respect of the terms and conditions of employment of employees, such as wages, hours of work, working conditions and grievance-procedures, and about the rights and responsibilities of trade unions. The parties often refer to the result of the negotiation as a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) or as a collective employment agreement (CEA).

The term "collective bargaining" was first used in 1891 by Beatrice Webb. However, collective negotiations and agreements had existed since the progressive decriminalization of trade unions during the nineteenth century.

The right to collectively bargain is recognized through international human rights conventions. Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights identifies the ability to organize trade unions as a fundamental human right. Item 2(a) of the International Labour Organization's Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work defines the "freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining" as an essential right of workers.

### **Models of Collective Bargaining**

Different economic theories provide a number of models intended to explain some aspects of collective bargaining:

- Monopoly Union Model (Dunlop, 1944) states that the monopoly union has the power to maximize the wage rate; the firm then chooses the level of employment. (Recent literature has started to abandon this model.
- The Right-to-Manage model, developed by the British school during the 1980s, views the labour union and the firm bargaining over the wage rate according to a typical Nash Bargaining Maximin (written as  $\Omega = U\beta\Pi - \beta$ , where U is the utility function of the labour union,  $\Pi$  the profit of the firm and  $\beta$  represents the bargaining power of the labour unions).
- The efficient bargaining model (McDonald and Solow, 1981) sees the union and the firm bargaining over both wages and employment (or, more realistically, hours of work).

### **Definition and Concept**

Collective bargaining has been defined by different experts in different ways. Nevertheless, it is treated as a method by which problem of wages and conditions of employment are resolved peacefully and voluntarily between labour and management. However, the term

collective bargaining is opposed to individual bargaining. Sometimes, it is described as a process of accommodation between two conflicting interests Here, power stands against power.

The I.L.O. defines collective bargaining:

“As negotiations about working conditions and terms of employment between an employer, or a group of employers, or one or more employers' organizations, on the one hand, and one or more representative workers' organization on the other with a view to reaching agreement.”

This definition confines the term collective bargaining as a means of improving conditions of employment. But in fact, collective bargaining serves something more.

Perlman aptly stated, “Collective bargaining is not just a means of raising wages and improving conditions of employment. Nor is it merely democratic government in industry. It is above all technique, collective bargaining as a technique of the rise of a new class is quite different from the desire to displace or abolish” the “old ruling class” to gain equal rights as a class to acquire an excessive jurisdiction in that sphere where the most immediate interests, both material and spiritual, are determined, and a shared jurisdiction with the older class or classes in all other spheres.”

### **Collective bargaining in India**

Collective bargaining in India has been the subject matter of industrial adjudication since long and has been defined by the statues of the country. In *Karol Leather Karamchari Sangathan vs. Liberty Footwear Company* case the Supreme Court observed that,

“Collective bargaining is a technique by which dispute as to conditions of employment is resolved amicably by agreement rather than coercion.”

According to the Court, the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 seeks to achieve social justice on the basis of collective bargaining. In an earlier judgment in *Titagarh Jute Co. Ltd. vs. Sriram Tiwari*, the Calcutta High Court clarified that this policy of the legislature is also implicit in the definition of ‘industrial dispute’.

Before the days of ‘collective bargaining’, labour was at a great disadvantage in obtaining reasonable terms for contracts of service from its employer. As trade unions developed in the country and Collective bargaining became the rule, the employers found it necessary and convenient to deal with the representatives of workmen, instead of individual workmen, not only for the making or modification of contracts but in the matter of taking disciplinary action against one or more workmen and as regards of other disputes.”

Collective bargaining, being the order of the day in the democratic, social welfare State, legitimate trade union activities, which must shun all kinds of physical threats, coercion or violence, must march with a spirit of tolerance, understanding and grace in dealings on the part of the employer. Such activities can flow in healthy channel only on mutual cooperation between the employer and the employees. Dialogue with union representatives helps striking a delicate balance in adjustments and settlement of various contentious claims and issues.

Collective Bargaining machinery essentially is a reflection of a particular social and political climate. The history of the trade union movement shows that unions are affiliated to one or the other political parties. As a result, most of the trade unions are controlled by outsiders.

Critics say that the presence of outsiders, is one of the important reasons for the failure of collective bargaining in India.

Since the public sector, which is really the instrumentality of the State, has emerged as the biggest employer in this country, the collective bargaining between the union patronized by the party-in-power and the employer has become an important methodology.

There are also not many collective bargaining agreements, which have tried to link wages with productivity. Clearly, therefore, the basic idea of 'sharing the prosperity' which developed because of our commitment to the cause of 'social justice' is no longer current and the expected end product of the process of 'social justice' is no longer expected.

The process of collective bargaining is not likely to succeed unless the threat of strike/lockout is there in the background. Strike and lockout are the weapons used by both the parties during the collective bargaining process. Without having these weapons at hands, neither of the party to the dispute can defeat the claim of the other. The peculiar feature of our country while compared to the advanced nations of the world is that the economic conditions of the workers are very poor and as a result, they cannot afford a long-standing strike.

Indian industrial relations is characterized by multiplicity of unions and inter-union rivalry. Statutory provisions for recognizing unions as bargaining agents are absent. It is believed that the institution of collective bargaining is still in its preliminary and organizational stage. State, therefore, must play a progressive and positive role in removing the pitfalls, which have stood in the way of mutual, amicable and voluntary settlement of labour disputes. The labour policy must reflect a new approach. The State has been playing a dominant role in

controlling and guiding labour-management relation through its lopsided adjudication machinery. The role of the industrial adjudicator virtually differs from that of a judge of ordinary civil court. The judge of a civil court has to apply the law to the case before him and decide rights and liabilities according to its established laws, whereas industrial adjudicator has to adjust and reconcile the conflicting claims of disputants and evolve "socially desirable" rights and obligations of the disputants. In deciding industrial disputes, the adjudicator is free to apply the principle of equity and good conscience.

However, it is said that the impact of the romantic attitude of the judiciary towards workers has not proved conducive to the peaceful industrial relations. It is accepted that the end of judicial proceeding is pain and penalties. It cannot solve the problems of industries. Accordingly it is said that, "While statutes, rules, regulations, pains and penalties have their place in the ordering of industry, they do not touch the core of the problems of industrial relations."

Moreover, advocates of adjudication contend that as the collective bargaining procedure might end in a strike or lockout, which implies a great loss to the parties concerned and the country, so for the sake of industrial peace, the adjudication becomes necessary.

Industrial peace can be established by the adjudication for the time being. But the conflicts are driven deeper and it will retard industrial production. In the absence of effective collective bargaining, the anti-productivity tendencies are bound to appear. For an effective Collective Bargaining in India, the following suggestions are made:

- Recognition of trade union has to be determined through verification of fee membership method. The union having more membership should be recognized as the effective bargaining agent.
- The State should enact suitable legislation providing for compulsory recognition of trade union by employers.
- State has to play a progressive role in removing the pitfalls, which stand in the way of mutual, amicable and voluntary settlement of labour disputes.

Other aspects include wage-fixing by negotiated rules, reasons for state involvement, politics of employer-employee bargaining, the normative basis of wage-differentials, historical and contemporary reasons for industrial conflict and the relationships between the organized and unorganized sectors of the labour force, the relationship employment and wage-policy to social policy, training, skill and unemployment.

### **1.2.5 Tea Production in India**

India is one of the top producers of tea after China (Food and Agricultural Organisation Report 2006). Indian tea companies have acquired a number of iconic foreign tea enterprises including British brands Tetley and Typhoo. Tea is one of the industries, which by an Act of Parliament comes under the control of the Union Government. The genesis of the Tea Board India dates back to 1903 when the Indian Tea Cess Bill was passed. The Bill provided for levying a cess on tea exports - the proceeds of which were to be used for the promotion of Indian tea both within and outside India. The Tea Board set up under section 4 of the Tea Act 1953 was constituted on April 1, 1954. It has succeeded the Central Tea Board and the Indian Tea Licensing Committee which functioned respectively under the Central Tea Board

Act, 1949 and the Indian Tea Control Act, 1938 which were repealed. Functions of Tea Board:

Briefly the primary functions of the Tea Board are as under:

- a) Rendering financial and technical assistance for cultivation, manufacture and marketing of tea.
- b) Registering and licensing of tea manufacturers, brokers, tea waste dealers and persons engaged in tea business of blending tea etc.
- c) Export Promotion.
- d) Aiding Research and Development activities for augmentation of tea production and improvement of tea quality.
- d) Extend financial assistance to the plantation workers and their wards through labour welfare schemes.
- f) To encourage and assist both financially and technically the unorganised small growers sector.
- g) Collection and maintenance of Statistical data and publication.

The activities of the two previous bodies had been confined largely to regulation of tea cultivation and export of tea as required by the International Tea Agreement then in force, and promotion of tea Consumption. Assam is the largest tea producing State in the country. It produces nearly 53 per cent of the total production of the brew in the country.

**Table 0-5 Statistics on Tea Industry of Assam**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Tea estates</b>	<b>Daily average number of labour employed</b>	<b>Total production (in '000' Kg)</b>	<b>Area under tea cultivation(in hectare)</b>	<b>Average yield per hectare (in Kg)</b>
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<b>1999</b>	30942	596943	437324	258455	1692
<b>2000</b>	39151	602531	449219	266512	1686
<b>2001</b>	40795	NA	453936	268983	1688
<b>India 2001</b>	115264	NA	853923	509770	1675

**Source:** Tea Statistics 2000-2001, Tea Board of India

According to Dutta (2007), the first Assamese tea planter was Maniram Dewan who started tea plantation at Chinamora and Sonari in 1852. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a group of Assamese planters expanded the industry and increased tea production. However, since 1970 the tea planters of the state have been facing a lot of problems in sustaining the business. According to the Assam Tea Planters' Association (ATPA)'s report of 2010, only 90 of the 850 tea estates in Assam are in the hands of the Assamese people. Non Assamese and various other agencies have been on a teagarden purchasing spree in the state. The Assamese tea growers failed to survive in the competitive market that is characterized by rising production cost and brisk climatic changes across the state. On the import of tea from Kenya and Sri Lanka, the planters said that failure in quality control and garden management might be other reasons responsible for the fall in the industry in Assam. There are challenges that are there in the transition from being an unknown small tea grower to being transformed in a small but little established player in tea market. The challenges faced by a small tea grower, especially of North East India are greater. It is necessary for a network to be created and established by small tea growers with financial institutions present in their respective areas.

**Table 0-6 District-wise Number of Gardens, Area, Production and Average Yield of Tea in Assam**

Districts	Gardens (Number)			Area under Tea Cultivation in Hectares			Production (in '000' Kg)			Average yield (kg per Hectare)		
	2000	2001	2002	2000	2001	2002	2000	2001	2002	2000	2001	2002
Darrang	8 2 9	8 2 9	- -	41037	41233	41450	77030	78224	73,950	1877	1897	1784
Goalpara	2 4 9	2 4 9	- -	3460	3 4 5 4	3 4 5 4	6297	6 2 2 3	6100	1820	1802	1766
Kamrup	5 4	5 4	- -	3442	3 4 3 6	3 4 4 0	4302	4 5 8 5	4300	1250	1334	1250
Lakhimpur	3 2 6	3 2 6	- -	4815	4 2 2 7	4 8 0 0	9068	9 1 1 3	8950	1883	1928	1865
Dibrugarh	21388	22392	- -	93076	94080	94500	163426	166504	154550	1756	1770	1635
Nagaon	2 1 3	2 1 3	- -	7994	8 0 0 1	8 1 0 0	11788	11793	11100	1475	1474	1370
Sibsagar	15735	16375	- -	74807	75864	76200	119978	119626	113950	1604	1577	1495
North Cachar	2 0 6	2 0 6	- -	32008	32272	36350	49206	50296	51965	1537	1559	1609
Karbi Anglong	1 4 3	1 4 3	- -	1869	1 8 6 9	- -	6179	5 6 4 3	- -	1543	1394	- -
Total in Assam	39151	407795	- -	266512	268983	270163	449219	453936	432511	1686	1688	1601

**Source:** Tea Statistics, Tea Board of India (2000-01)

**Table 0-7 Category-wise Average Daily Number of Labour Employed**

Year	Field		Factory		Total
	Resident	Outside	Resident	Outside	
1998	365473	148418	52137	228686	588714
1999	371039	150628	52434	22842	596943
2000	370980	155953	52457	23159	602531
INDIA 2000	754416	339700	82095	33858	1210069

**Source:** Tea Statistics, Tea Board of India (2000-01)

**Table 0-8 Composition of Labour Employed in Tea Industry, Assam**

Year	Average Daily Number of Labour Employed			Total
	Male	Female	Adolescent	
1998	288287	263036	37391	588714
1999	292323	266714	37906	596943
2000	293656	270691	38184	602531
INDIA 2000	570267	593571	46217	1210055

**Source:** Tea Statistics, Tea Board of India (2000-01)

**Table 0-9 Number of Labour on Roll in Tea Industry, Assam**

Year	Number of Labour on Roll			Total	Number of Bona fide Dependent of Resident Worker
	Resident	Outside			
		Permanent	Temporary		
1998	451896	51261	95668	598825	689162
1999	423473	54187	11928	596942	652562
2000	423437	54463	124631	602531	652393
INDIA 2000	836227	85837	287659	1209723	1218505

**Source:** Tea Statistics, Tea Board of India (2000-01)

### **1.2.6 Government and the Indian Tea Industry**

Crouch (1979) has given an appropriate distinction between a state and a government: 'state' is a more encompassing term which includes institutions such as democracy, the armed forces, law, judiciary and politico-administrative (civil service) element. Government is one of the most active elements in the state that includes the role of the governing political parties within the state. The law could affect the level of wage escalation by penalizing strikes, making it more difficult and press down wage demands. Reducing strikes might also improve the efficiency of the economy of the state. The tripartite system of negotiation involving the representatives of workers' union, employers and state is supposed to be ideal. However, the state views this as a threat as it denotes distribution of power in the decision making process. The state often has a set of objectives and a primary one is to enhance the stability and productivity of the government. Liberalism refers to freedom from interference from the state in the economy meant allowing market forces to work without interference (Crouch 1979). The Industrial Trade Resolution, 1962 was incorporated during Chinese aggression of the country. This resolution was passed at a joint meeting of the employers' and workers' representatives. It generally emphasized various issues involving labour and management and settlement of the issues through various machineries.

The two policy resolutions, viz. the Industrial Policy Resolution, 1956 and the Industrial Policy Resolution, 1991 generally talked about the industrial peace and participation of

labour in the industrial development. The former one precisely emphasized on the improvement of living and working condition of workers and the raising of the standard of efficiency. The later resolution brought a drastic change in the organization and working of industrial system of the country and considerably influenced the labour policy.



## **National Commission on Labour and Industrial Relations Policy of the Government of India**

The Commission has given a number of recommendations on the different aspects of labour relations of the country. These are:

(1) Collective Bargaining – Various measures have been suggested to improve the growth of collective bargaining in the country.

- The compulsory recognition of union as sole bargaining agent,
- The strengthening of unions, and
- Definition of strike/lockout

(2) Recognition of Unions –

- Recognition should be made compulsory under a central law in all undertakings employing 100 or more workers. The union seeking recognition as sole bargaining agent should have a membership of at least 30% of the workers.
- The Industrial Relations Commission is to certify the union as representative union on verification of the membership.
- The recognized union should be statutorily given certain exclusive rights facilities.
- The minority unions should be allowed only the right to represent cases of dismissal and discharge of their members.
- The unions should be made strong, organizationally and financially.

(3) Strikes/Lockouts and Gheraos –

- In essential industries/ services the right to strike may be banned but with simultaneous provision for settling disputes.

- In non-essential industries/services, a maximum period of one month's has to be fixed.
- Every strike/lockout should be preceded by a notice.
- Gherao cannot be treated as a form of labour unrest since it involves physical coercion.

(4) Conciliation –

Conciliation has to be made a part of the Industrial Relations Commission.

The Officials using the machinery should have adequate training.

(5) Arbitration – With the growth of collective bargaining and the general acceptance of representative unions, settlement of disputes through voluntary arbitration will be accepted.

(6) The Commission also made a host of observations on the various issues such as a) Unfair Labour Practices, b) Works Committees and Joint Management Council, c) Settlement of Industrial Disputes, d) Grievance Procedures, e) Discipline Procedure, f) Industrial Harmony, g) Industrial Relations Commission, and h) Labour Courts.

The Labour Policy of the country takes its guideline from the Directive Principles of the State Policy of the Constitution of India. The policy has repeatedly been enumerated and reemphasized on various Plan documents, Industrial Policy Resolutions, and Recommendations of National Commission on Labour. However, from all the sources the basic objective of the Policy has remained the same, i.e. the requirements of planned economic development, social justice, and industrial peace in the country.

Tough the tea industry faced depression during 1865-67 due to over-production; it could recover well from it (Mitra, 2010). This was the result of the government and the planters took measures to provide a solid foundation of Indian tea in the global market. By 1870, scientific development started in tea industry. But again during 1915-20, the export of Indian tea was hard hit by the ongoing World War I. This was followed by the tea slump of 1921 and the Great Depression of 1929-33 which led to the annual growth rate of tea area, production and export as well.

The government passed resolutions supporting the industry domestically and has also lobbied extensively with organizations like the WTO internationally. Tea industry which contributes a substantial portion of tax to the State government has faced drought condition resulting in fall in production during 2008-09.

Export of tea dropped by 23.65 per cent and revenue from tea industry declined from 27 per cent to 14 per cent. Around 65,000 small tea growers have suffered due to adverse weather conditions, rise in prices of pesticides and agro-chemicals, which did not attract attention in the Industrial Policy Resolution of 1991.

**Table 0-10 Small Tea Growers of Assam Registered with Tea Board of India**

District	Number of Small Tea Growers	Registered area in hectare
Dhubri	1	1.04
Kokrajhar	7	37.04
Bongaigaon	7	29.33
Goalpara	1	6.25
Barpeta	1	1.51
Nalbari	5	22.57
Kamrup	7	26.95
Darrang	35	129.43
Sonitpur	207	497.57
Lakhimpur	21	75.24
Dhemaji	1	8.95
Morigaon	7	7.35
Nagaon	49	135.16
Golaghat	300	957.99
Jorhat	90	186.08
Sibsagar	89	261.05
Dibrugarh	115	358.94
Tinsukia	99	367.53
Karbi Anglong	130	1107.71
N.C. Hills	1	4.68
Karimganj	7	36.28
Hailakandi	4	23.84
Cachar	27	114.15
<b>Assam</b>	<b>17211</b>	<b>4396.64</b>

**Source:** Tea Board of India, Regional Office, Guwahati (2011)

Furthermore, the Indian government took cognizance of the changed tea and coffee market (Tea Board of India report) and set up an Inter-Ministerial Committee (IMC) to look into their problems in late 2003. The IMC has recommended that the government share the financial burden of plantation industry on account of welfare measures envisaged for plantation workers mandated under the Plantation Labour Act 1951. The Labour Welfare Department headed by Welfare Liaison Officer looks after the work relating to implementation of welfare schemes of the Board, which are not covered under the Plantation

Labour Act, 1951. Labour Welfare Committee. This committee comprising of 9 members including Chairman advice Board on issues relating to labour welfare measures which are not covered under the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. This committee guides the Board in implementation of various welfare schemes for the benefit of the plantation workers and their wards. Moreover, the IMC has recommended to introduce means so that the agricultural income tax levied by the state governments can be slashed and the tea industry be made competitive. It has recommended that sick or bankrupt plantation estates should be provided with analogous level of relaxation for similarly placed enterprises / estates as are available to industries. The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs set up the Special Purpose Tea Fund (SPTF) under the Tea Board on December 29, 2006, the aim of which is to fund Replantation and Rejuvenation (R&R) programme. In the same year, Tata Tea entered into an agreement to take over Jemca, which controls a 26 per cent market share in the Czech Republic.

### **1.2.7 Tea Industry: Questions of Gender**

The tea industry in India employs more than fifty per cent women workers. Smith (1977), a Socialist Feminist, propounded the 'Standpoint Theory', where she has stated that the standpoint or the position in which an individual stands in society determines his or her knowledge of the world. Our everyday experience, socially situated knowledge plays a key role in understanding the social reality. Socialist Feminism believes that women are exploited by the capitalist system both at workplace and at home (Smith, 1977). The subordination of the women workers is found in almost all sectors of work. Chatterjee's study (2001) based on the women workers of tea plantations in West Bengal, discusses the

politics of patronage and the construction of the “moral economy” to which the owners and the working class consent to. The patron system is understood to be extremely patriarchal in nature as the planter-manager-*sahib* (A word of Arabic origin used to refer to a European man in colonial India) symbolizes the father figure. She argues that the bodily distance the planter maintains with the workers is also the social practice of the upper-caste and the British rule. The supervision of the tea workers is usually done by the high-status men in the plantation villages and ‘labour lines’. The women’s work, i.e. tea plucking is usually underpaid. The plantation system dwells in the underlying belief on the subordination of women workers. According to Samarsinghe (1993), in China, history narrates that women who were involved in plucking tea, their hands and fingernails were carefully scrutinized to ensure cleanliness. Body oils, perspiration and heat were believed to contaminate the quality of leaf. Notions of purity, contamination and feminine virtue were associated with the brewing of tea. In the ‘Tea Ceremony’ of Japan also, women play a vital role. Sarkar and Bhowmik’s study (1998) argues that it has been found that women workers, who form fifty percent of the total workers, remain marginalized in Trade Union. Involvement of women is limited with membership and in some estates participation in rallies and demonstration. Sexual division of labour is highly prevalent in tea plantation system. The Oxford Dictionary of Sociology (1998) defines sexual division of labour as a term referring to the specialized gender roles of male breadwinner and female housewife. This particular division of labour by sex is usually associated with the separation of workplace from home which followed industrialization in the West. Research also shows that most pre-industrial societies also distinguish men’s tasks from women’s tasks. Again within Marxist feminism, domestic labour is sometimes referred to as ‘reproductive labour. Such division of labour is

considered as providing an important basis for inequality between sexes, entailing some degree of exploitation of women by men. Sex roles prescribe the different ways men and women are supposed to act and the different tasks they are expected to undertake. Feminists assert that sex roles are essentially a way of keeping women subservient to men and are the result of a patriarchal society in which men preserve their own self-interest by maintaining a status-quo.

Varma (2005) states that Assam tea garden was not a new avenue for the employment of women's labour and women constituted almost half of the workforce. The work in plantation had very neatly spelt out gender-specific domains where the crucial labour-intensive task of plucking tea leaves was said to be quintessentially feminine, requiring nimble fingers. The preference for 'families' in gardens of Assam was most clearly premised on the payment of what was called as the 'family wage', ensuring not just a body of cheap reproducing workforce but also effecting controls over the labour and sexuality of the large number women *Coolie* under the patriarchal structures of the family. 'However, the possibilities of single, uprooted and rejected women finding their way to Assam under the free recruitment system fuelled into the larger social anxieties about the norms of breakdown of the ideal family and the loss of patriarchal controls over women's labour and sexuality'. The provincial administration was extremely concerned by the criticisms levelled against it, made evident from the Chief Commissioner's position explicated in an annual labour immigration report: the increased facilities for emigration have led to kidnapping or fraudulent recruitment, and have loosened family and domestic ties, enabling wives and minors to desert their lawful guardians and any such loosening of ties is to be regretted, but it is not easy to see how such emigration is to be prevented. Special officers were deputed to

investigate into cases in the labour districts and detailed reports were submitted. These reports documented several instances of kidnapping and misrepresentation but also talked about cases of, 'wives who have quarrelled with their husbands', or 'women who led astray by an illicit passion', or young people who are discontented with parental rule, occasionally take advantage of the facilities offered by the emigration system.

Sarkar and Bhowmik's study (1998) carried out on three plantations in the Dooars and the Terai regions of North Bengal shows that despite forming half the labour force in plantations, women workers have remained marginalized in trade unions of plantation workers. The reasons of huge amount of employment of women in the plantation industry are: (a) the workers' migration from their native place to the plantation areas of Assam with their entire family: thus the members of the family, i.e. men, women and children were all engaged in the plantation work; (b) the plantation work is gender specific. While the women are engaged in tea plucking, the men and the children, including adolescents are engaged in the maintenance of the plantation, factory, giving pesticides and removing the weeds from the tea plants.

There is specific social and hierarchical division of labour that prevails in the plantation system. Sarkar and Bhowmik (1998) identify an important factor which prevents the women from taking part in the trade union activities. Though the tribal women are considered freer in comparison to the Hindu upper caste women, the common practice of women looking after the entire household prevents them from taking part in the activities outside the household work. After working in the field and again at home, there is hardly any scope for them to be politically conscious and take part in decision making. Thus their participation in the trade union activity is adversely affected. The inequality between sexes in the social life

is perpetuated in the workplace as well. Low literacy rate among the women workers could be another reason for them being less politically conscious and willingness to join the trade unions. Sarkar and Bhowmik's (1998) study reveals another important aspect of women joining trade unions: women usually are members to those unions to which their husbands or other members of the family belong to. Thus women do not have much say as to which union they would join. The females follow when the male workers change unions. Further, it is important to note that 'work' is a socio-cultural construct.

On the economic front, women workers are at a position of subordination. Based on the status of women workers in the tea plantations of Sri Lanka, Samarasinghe (1993) states that ninety-five percent of the female Indian Tamil plantation workforce is engaged in plucking tea leaves. It is an accepted fact that the female workers are economically far more important than the male workers in the plantation system. However, until 1978, the female workers were paid less in comparison to the male workers in Sri Lanka. In 1978, the government enacted legislation to equalize the pay of the male and the female workers. But, the control of the income was dominated by the male members of the family as the female workers did not collect their own wages. Their wages were handed over to the males (husbands/fathers) by the management. The study found that the women had to bear double burden of working in the field, as well as in the household. They toil from morning to night as the work load of a tea plucker is heavy and also they have to do all the household chores. The male members do not help them in any of the household work. The women workers occupy the lowest position in the hierarchy of the plantation sector. There is less participation of women workers in the trade union and thus issues relating to grant of flexible timings to tea pluckers, better access to basic needs and living conditions are never

put forward in the demands of the trade unions. In Sri Lanka, all the trade union leaders are males. Even when there is a representative for the women tea plucker in the labour union, she does not exercise any power.

### **1.3 Research Gap**

Certain research gaps have been identified through review of literature. Though there are number of studies on industrial relations in tea estates, a comprehensive study needs to be done on the factors that give rise to unrest in this sector with emphasis on ethnic identity of the workers, class formation, gender relations, role of the state and efficiency of implementation of the statutory obligations of the management towards the workers.

### **1.4 Rationale for the Topic**

The present study is sociologically significant especially in the context of declining labour conditions in tea estates in Assam. Declining labour conditions may be attributed to the withdrawal of the State from its responsibilities and commitment and social welfare activities. Withdrawal of the State from key responsibilities may be attributed to the policies of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. The study will shed light on the implications of the changes in the public policy of the State on changing industrial relations and associated practices. The study will be significant since a large proportion of the population of Assam depend on the tea industry for their livelihood.

## **1.5 Research Questions**

The present study centers on the following research questions:

- (a) What are the implications of industrial relations in tea industry in Assam against the backdrop of the norms of globalisation on work, ownership and control?
- (b) To what extent and in what ways do changing industrial relations in tea industry in Assam have significant implications for questions of gender and class?

## **1.6 Objectives**

The objectives of the study are to:

- (a) Historically situate the context of the origin of tea industry in Assam;
- (b) Understand the labour conditions in tea industry in Assam; and as a corollary, the extent of forced migration from other regions and sectors to tea industry in Assam;
- (c) Examine 'work' as a socio-cultural construct in the context of tea industry in Assam.

## **1.7 Methodology**

The present study, from the sociology of work and sociology of development perspective, adheres to the formal procedures of data collection. Sociology of development refers to the application of social theory and analysis to societies (usually in the Third World) which are undergoing a late transition of capitalist industrialization. It is particularly concerned with analyzing the social effects of development on class relations and on social groups such as the peasantry and the urban poor. In this context, tea industry in Assam is no exception.

Sociology of Work and Employment: this area of study is mainly concerned with investigation of the social relations involved in the production of goods and services,

broadly to determine whether these are cooperative, harmonious or conflictual in nature and determination of whether the tasks that people perform at work provide for the satisfaction of human needs (Abercrombie and Nicholas 2006).

Development studies emerged as a distinct area of research in the post-war period, and were associated with the growing concern for the political and economic development of the post-colonial world.

Sociology of Industry: The Oxford Dictionary of Sociology states that the term 'Sociology of Industry' is a loosely defined, but well established sub-specialism within sociology, whose expansion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was encouraged by the hope of certain company managements, notably in the US, that sociological and psychological research might yield a set of management and supervisory techniques which could be used to prevent workplace conflict and raise productivity. Later practitioners fought hard to establish the area as an independent field of academic study, which accepts the inevitability of a so-called pluralism of interests in industrial works situations and concerns itself with the consequences.

According to D.C. Miller and W.H. Form, Industrial Sociology is a substantive area of general sociology which might more accurately be termed the sociology of work organizations or the sociology of economy. (Mathur 2010). The study of social and interpersonal relationships of people related to industry, either directly or indirectly falls under the domain of industrial sociology, commonly known as Industrial Relations. The relations between employer, management, worker, government perpetuated through trade unions, collective bargaining are some of the important elements of Industrial Sociology.

A major problem for industrial sociologists is to define their central term-industry. A great deal of research in the subject has been about factory workers and factory works situations. But these cannot be generalized. Also under what circumstances the label 'industrial' is appropriately applied to non-factory work. The explanatory emphasis on technology and work organization has provided an important rationale for describing studies of non-factory work as industrial sociology. In recent years, the need for industrial sociologists to begin their inquiries outside the domain of the workplace has been emphasized since it is believed that the effect of technology, work organization and other work-place variables is itself culturally and socially specific. Industrial sociology also includes a historical and comparative research on patterns of industrial culture. Management of work force and Trade unionism also come under its domain.

Oxford dictionary of Sociology (1998) defines 'work' as the supply of physical, mental and emotional effort to produce goods and services for own consumption or for consumption by others. Productive work falls under three main categories: economic activity or employment, unpaid domestic and leisure activities, and volunteer community service.

Data collection has been done through indepth interviews and grounded theory and content analysis method has been used to analyse the data. The field study has been conducted in selected tea estates situated in Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Golaghat, Sonitpur, Kamrup and Cachar districts of Assam.

The study was conducted in the following estates:

**Table 0-11 Number of Tea Estates in Assam Selected For Field Study**

Sl. No.	District	Estate	Number of estates
1	Dibrugarh	Sessa, Chaulkhua, Muttock, Hazel Bank, Bokel, Ethel Wood and Borboruah	7
2	Sibsagar	Rajmai, Sepon and Lepetkata	3
3	Sonitpur	Ghogra and Rupajuli	2
4	Jorhat	Meleng and Koomtai	2
5	Golaghat	Halmira, Doloujan and Lattakoojan	3
6	Cachar District/ Barak Valley- Silchar	Pallorbund and Alipur Tea Estates	2
7	Kamrup	Mandakata Tea Estate	1
<b>Total</b>			<b>20</b>

Table 1.11 indicates the names of the tea estates where extensive field study has been conducted in seven districts across the state. The major tea producing districts are Dibrugarh, Sibsaigar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Sonitpur. Cachar is located in the Barak Valley which borders Bangladesh. The labour conditions in the tea estates in Cachar are worse in comparison to the other tea producing districts (Mishra, et al 2012). Kamrup district has fewer estates compared to the previously mentioned districts and they are facing crisis situation. The tea estates selected for the study have diverse industrial relations.

The selected tea estates as suggested by Assam Branch Indian Tea Association (ABITA), Guwahati and Dibrugarh office and Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS), Dibrugarh and tea workers have been facing unrests were found to be appropriate for the study. Interview schedules have been used to elicit responses from the four categories of respondents. In-depth interviews with open-ended questions have been found to be extremely helpful to get elaborate knowledge on the topic.

**Table 0-12 Categories of Respondents Interviewed**

Sl. No.	Categories of Respondents	Number of Respondents
1	Managers + staff	25
2	Male workers (permanent + casual)	20
3	Female workers (permanent + casual)	28
4	Members of the trade union (staff of ACMS + workers)	22
<b>Total</b>		<b>95</b>

### **A Brief Profile of Different Categories of Respondents:**

1. Managers and staff: consists of people representing the management of the tea estates. The managers, assistant managers, factory managers, welfare officers, the office staff and workers. They are salaried employees of the tea estates and companies.
2. Male workers: consists of male workers who receive daily wages for their work in the plantation areas and the factory premises. They may be permanent or casual. The permanent workers are legally entitled to certain benefits like housing, subsidized rates of food items, firewood, medical facilities, education facilities for the children, etc. They receive daily wages and come under the companies' payroll all throughout the year. On the other hand, the casual workers receive few benefits from the tea companies and their employment is seasonal in nature.
3. Female workers: the female workers who belong to both permanent and casual categories of workers. Their main job is tea plucking. They form the most exploited group of workers in the tea plantation industry.
4. Members of the Trade Unions: comprise of the activists who hold office in the ACMS as well as workers engaged in various categories of labour in the tea estates who are members of the trade unions representing the workers. The main union body of the tea estates is the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS). The unions play a major role in the negotiation process between the management and the workers. It consists of both male as well as female workers from the estates.

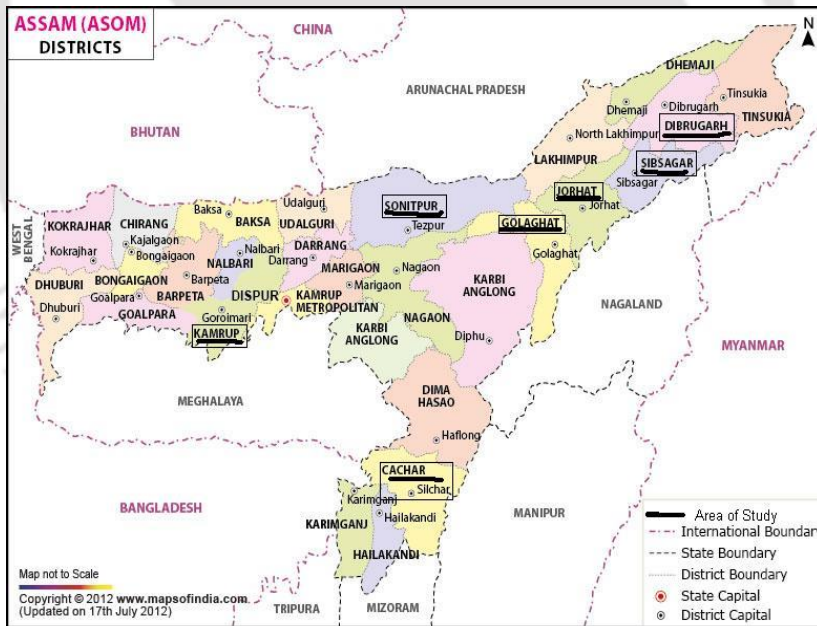
The four categories of respondents selected for the study are (i) Management and Staff, (ii) Male workers, (iii) Female workers and (iv) Members of the Trade Union. The rationale for choosing the four categories of respondents for the study is that they are the key stakeholders of industrial relations in the tea industry. The workers, both male and female are engaged in the production of tea; from planting, plucking and processing. The female workers constitute half of the total workforce in the tea industry. However, their wellbeing and rights are completely put down by the patriarchal workplace. The management is engaged in the administration of the industry and has control over capital, human resources and productivity. The trade union members should ideally represent the interest of the workers including collective bargaining.

**Table 0-13 Number of Respondents who are Casual Workers**

Serial number	Categories of Respondents	Number of casual workers
1	Male Workers	05
2	Female Workers	08
3	Trade Union members	07
<b>Total</b>		<b>20</b>

Table 1.13 shows that out of sixty seven respondents under the workers and trade union member categories interviewed for the study, there are twenty casual workers. The casual workers are not on the Company’s payroll and they are excluded from various statutory benefits from their employers. They are mainly engaged in the ‘season time’.

**Figure 0-5 Map of Districts in Assam where Field Study has been conducted**



Source: Google maps, [http://www.emexassam.in/state\\_profile.html](http://www.emexassam.in/state_profile.html)

Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Darrang and Lakhimpur are the highest tea-producing districts in Assam. On the other hand, Golaghat district has the highest number of Small Tea Growers. Thus the above shown districts have been selected for the study spread across upper Assam, lower Assam and Barak Valley.

The present study is an exploratory one. Exploratory Research is conducted in the interest of 'getting to know' or increasing our understanding of a new or little researched setting, group or phenomenon. It is used to gain insight into a research topic. Such researches produce qualitative data, i.e. evidence presented in words, pictures, or some other narrative form that captures that captures the research subjects' genuine understanding and experiences. (Ruane, 2005).

The study comprises both primary and secondary data. The primary data include eliciting responses from a variety of informants such as owners of tea gardens, management, trade unions and workers engaged in various activities. Responses from different strata of the workforce have been elicited through in-depth personal interviews. Interview schedule has been used to ascertain the responses from various informants. Content analysis has been deployed to analyze the interview material. Bernard Berelson (1952) defines Content Analysis as a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description. The secondary data include books, journals, reports, internet, etc. Buttolph, et. al (1989) asserts that to derive numerical measures from a non-numerical written record, researchers use the technique of Content Analysis. It enables a researcher to take a verbal, non-quantitative document and transform it into quantitative data. A researcher first constructs a set of mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories that can be used to analyze documents, and then record the frequency with which each of these categories is observed in the

documents studied. Das (2010) defines Content Analysis as a technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages. It is a method of analyzing secondary data, such as field records, articles, letters, etc. Content analysis is described as the scientific study of content of communication. It is the study of the content with reference to the meanings, references and intentions contained in the messages.

Data collection has been done through indepth interviews. Content analysis method has been used to analyse the data keeping *grounded theory* approach as the basis of this research methodological platform. Grounded Theory Approach focuses on the systematic collection of grounded data, theoretical sampling, focused coding and using reflexive approach to build theory. However, the present study does not aim to examine any specific case of industrial unrest.

## **1.8 Chapter Scheme of the Thesis**

### **Chapter I: Introduction**

The first chapter introduces various facets of the thesis: review of literature, rationale for the topic, objectives of the study, methodology, argument and chapter scheme of the thesis.

### **Chapter II: Tea Industry in Assam: A Historical Sociological Survey**

The second chapter discusses the evolution of the tea industry in Assam by making an analysis of growth stages of the industry, dividing it into mainly three phases:

- a) Phase I: Pre Independence India (pre 1947)
- b) Phase II: Post 1947 especially since 1951; after the introduction of the Plantation Labour Act 1951

c) Phase III: Since 1991; with the implementation of the New Economic Policy 1991, focussing on its impact on Labour, Work, Women, Consumption, Production and Conditions of labour.

### **Chapter III: Class Formation and Trade Unionism in the Tea Estates in Assam**

In the third chapter, the formation of the tea plantation workers' class, commonly known as the '*Coolies*' will be discussed, the discrimination faced by the casual workers, the conditions of work and living, their grievances with the management have been analysed.

### **Chapter IV: Work, Women and Tea: A Sociological Study of Selected Tea Estates in Assam**

This chapter deals with the phenomenon of gendered division of work in the tea plantation industry, the significance of the contribution of the women workers in the tea industry. Role of patriarchy, women worker's subordination, lack of political consciousness and their inactive participation in the Trade Union activities will also be analyzed.

### **Chapter V: Conflicting Perspectives on Industrial Relations in selected Tea Estates in Assam**

The third chapter captures the perspectives of the management personnel and staff on the tea industry in India, with specific reference to the tea industry in Assam; the problems that the management faces with regard to labour, productivity, profitability and market competition.

### **Chapter VI: Conclusion**

The last chapter summarizes the findings of the study, limitations of the study and scope for further research in the field.

## CHAPTER II

### TEA ESTATES IN ASSAM: A HISTORICAL-SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY

In Chapter I, we have discussed how tea was traditionally being consumed in the northeastern region by the *Singphos*. On discovering the enormous prospects of initiating and expanding commercial production of tea, British army personnel initially procured skills from Chinese experts and labour from local inhabitants and later from *Adivasi* migrants. The East India Company was the first British business enterprise to establish, manage tea estates and expand its commercial production. The *Adivasi* migrant workers were made to settle in the areas that could be transformed into ‘manicured landscapes’ producing tea. The migrant workers gradually formed closed groups; cut-off from the neighbouring local inhabitants. They had their distinct physical and cultural differentiations that gave birth to alienation from the other indigenous groups residing in the region. They were meek and exploited by the owners and the management of the estates. The employee- worker relation that existed and still continues to exist is one of exploitation. It has only seen variation in the dimensions of such exploitation. It is in this context that the present chapter captures the transition in the industrial relations of the tea industry in Assam in three different stages:

- a) Phase I: Pre-Independence India (pre-1947)
- b) Phase II: Post-1947 especially since 1951; after the introduction of the Plantation Labour Act 1951 (1947-1991)

- c) Phase III: Post-1991; with the implementation of the New Economic Policy 1991, focussing on its impact on labour, work, women, consumption, production and conditions of labour.

In Britain where industrialization first started, 'Industrial Relations' is commonly defined as the disciplinary and diffuse study of the institutions and rule-fixing processes of the labour market. Its core concern has been collective bargaining between trade unions or analogous organizations of employees, on one hand and employers and their associations on the other. Collective bargaining is a method of establishing wages, working conditions and other aspects of employment by means of negotiation between employers and representatives of employees organized collectively. Employee organizations are mostly trade unions (Abercrombie and Nicholas, 2006). Collective bargaining has played an important part in the regularization and institutionalization of conflict.

### **2.1 Phase I: Pre-Independence India (pre-1947)**

This phase was characterized by the development of state-led industrialization, based on import substitution and employment-intensive public sector enterprises. This was a period, which witnessed rapid growth of unionization. Their membership also trebled during this period. The public sector emerged as a major arena for unionization. The tendency towards collective bargaining was effectively curbed as tripartism rather than bipartism became the norm. This was the phase when wage setting was conducted through setting up of wage boards for several key industrial sectors. This phase was marked by comparative peace and relatively low levels of industrial disputes.

Guha (1977) mentioned that the idea of introducing British enterprise, capital and skill in agriculture caught the imagination of the Board of Revenue and the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal. Meanwhile the growing prospects of tea cultivation in Assam was backed by the formation of the Tea Committee in early 1834, the starting of the Government Experimental Tea Gardens in 1836 and the first successful manufacture of Assam Tea in December 1837 made colonization more acceptable. In 1840, two-thirds of the Government Experimental Gardens were transferred to the Assam Company, rent free for the initial years. To make the wastelands available for cultivation on certain terms, a set of rules were framed. Wastelands on a 45 years lease were offered to applicants on condition that a quarter of the area must be cleared within five years, failing which the land was liable to resumption.

A number of legislative measures were introduced by the British Government towards the end of the nineteenth century. These can be regarded as the beginning of industrial relations in the country. The establishment of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1919 had a significant impact on the labour policies in India. In the year 1920 the All India trade Union Congress was founded which is a significant event in the industrial relations scenario. The Royal Commission on Labour, 1929-31, made an elaborative report on the working conditions and labour problems in India. It focussed on the issues of health, safety and welfare of the workers.

On the front of employing workers, the Assam Company in its early years imported Chinese tea-garden workers. They were paid four to five times the wage rate paid to the corresponding categories of the indigenous labour. After the services of the Chinese workers were dispensed within 1843, the local people remained practically the sole source of labour for the industry till 1859. The most important source of recruitment was the

Kachari tribe of the Darrang district. Besides, peasants of the nearby villages were also employed through contractors.

Indenture, as a system regulating the relationship between 'labour and capital' has been a subject of historical enquiry and interest. Hugh Tinker's seminal work has interested a whole range of literature locating it as a 'new form of slavery'. It has been argued that in the wake of the abolition of the system of slavery and problems of supply of labour to the colonial plantations, there was collusion between the capitalist and colonial interests to devise a system akin to it. Not only was the labour procured under active patronage of the colonial state, using corrupt means and practices, but the labour process was also characterised by the unrestrained powers bestowed on the planters through legislative enactments.

The *Coolies* were 'indentured' to their employers by signing a contract after taking advances in the form of bonus amount. Breach of the contract could invite the intervention of the magistrate, who was empowered to order the person having taken advance to complete the contract, and to punish him/her with imprisonment if s/he declined to carry out this order. The planters prolifically used the legislation to 'bind' the time-expired *Coolie* and retard the growth of an 'incipient' labour market. Also, the original premise of introducing the Act was itself to curb the 'striking tendencies' of the local Kachari labour, working in the Company's tea estates. The sardars who received certain advances; recruited through their social and familial networks and arranging for their conveyance to the gardens without any governmental interference and outside the provisions of the Act. These *Coolies* generally contracted themselves under the Act XIII in the gardens, receiving the 'bonus' amount on signing the contract.

'Labourer' as defined by the *Coolie* Act was any emigrant who has been conveyed to a labour district under certain Bengal acts. Therefore a person employing time-expired *Coolie*, or *Coolie* not engaged under any of these Acts, would not be an 'employer' in the legal sense. Non Act *Coolie* going by the definition was not 'labourers' and the managers putting them to work were not 'employers'. There was a call for this "rectification" whenever Act VII of 1873 was to be amended because the 'basis of governmental interference was the assumption that in all transactions touched by law, the *Coolie* is the weaker party and needs special protection.'

From the late 1880s, a broader definition of labourer was employed by the state with respect to tea *Coolies* of Assam. In the case of one Mr. William Aitchinson, a tea planter of Cachar, a fine was imposed on him by the Deputy Commissioner for his refusal to submit returns of 'Non-Act labourers'. The government did not compensate for the trouble and expenses for making returns of free labourers, 'but needlessly interferes and does harm amongst the labour force of tea gardens'. The point of contention was whether the Non-Act *Coolie* was to be supervised and inspected as elicited in the *Coolie* Act. It was now argued that labourer is not used in the Act merely with reference to emigrant natives of India, imported into a labour district under the Act but included non-acts as well."

Grunning (2009) says that the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee made certain recommendations. The main objective behind this was to remove misconceptions on labour conditions in Assam. The author was placed in the recruiting districts of tea labourers with the same objective. These places included the provincial recruiting districts in Bengal, Madras, the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, the Central Provinces and also the Labour Districts of Assam and Surma Valleys. The author had drafted a report on

the various systems of obtaining labour in the different parts of the country. The author, after describing these systems, has given his views on the various policies and recommended certain modifications of the laws and rules.

Some of the modifications are prohibition of the free contractors' system of recruiting which existed in Bengal, grant of concessions to certain recruiting associations and the abolition of the local contract sections.

### **2.1.1 Systems of Recruitment**

For the purpose of establishing tea estates in the region, the British strategized systems of mass recruitment for procuring labor.

*The licensed contractor's system:* in this system, the contractor employs a number of licensed recruiters who go around the villages and convince people to consent to emigrate to the tea gardens and work there. The consented *Coolie* is then taken to a registering officer who questions the *Coolie* to ascertain that the *Coolie* is willfully doing the same. He is then taken to the contractor's depot where he has to stay for atleast three days before he can be placed under contract. The objective behind this was to acquaint him with the other *Coolies* and give him a chance in case he wants to change his mind. After that if the contractor succeeds in getting a good price for him, the *Coolie* is taken before a Government officer to execute a contract and is then sent to Assam. The *Coolie* has no right to choose which garden he is being sent to and he seldom gets a share of huge price paid for him, usually the contractor. The profit of this business was large. At that time, a *Coolie* was worth Rs. 80 to Rs. 150.

*The garden sardars' system:* Garden *sardars* are ordinary garden *Coolies* who recruit labour for the garden on which they work. The garden *sardar*, as a rule, recruits his relations and friends. Hence the *Coolies* who are the relatives of the *sardar* have some idea as to where they will be placed and what kind of work they will have to take up. They usually know whom to seek help from at times if difficulty and often they would meet their relatives in the gardens who had emigrated earlier from the same native place. Grunning states that garden *sardars* should be carefully selected if recruitment by them is to succeed. It is useless to send down a man who has been so long on a garden that he has lost touch with his country. *Coolies* who have been on a garden only for a few months are often the most successful recruiters as they have not been away long enough to be forgotten in their villages and the fact that they return so soon is a guarantee to would-be emigrants that Assam is not a place from which no one ever returns. It is, of course, possible that such *sardars* (head or authority) are more liable to abscond than if only men who have been for some time on a garden and have ties on it, are sent to recruit, but I do not think that the loss will be heavy, at any rate on gardens where the *Coolies* are prosperous and contented. Another mistake, which is sometimes made, is to send down the same *sardar* year after year. A garden *sardar* has only a limited connection in his own place of origin country and so it is not likely that he will do any good.

*The present state of the labour force and suggestions as the best method of recruiting:* the Author says that this may be called a period of transition. The Act, with the exception of a few sections, is no longer in force in the Surma Valley, Kamrup and Goalpara and the local contract sections (118 to 121) have been withdrawn from the Assam Valley. It

follows that no *Coolies* in the Surma Valley, Kamrup and Goalpara, nor persons recruited for gardens there can be placed under contract under the Act and also in the four districts of the Assam Valley all *Coolies* now under contract will become free on the expiry of the term for which they have engaged and cannot enter into new Act contracts. In addition, all labour recruited by garden *sardars* (head or authority) working under the control of local agents belonging to the Associations, which have obtained concessions, and all *Coolies* recruited by garden *sardars*, go up free to the Assam Valley. Only contractors' *Coolies* and *Coolies* recruited by garden *sardars* working under local agents, who do not belong to one of the privileged Associations, are now licensed under contract. In short, the whole of the labour force in the Surma Valley is not under contract under the Act. The author thinks that in a few years' time only a small percentage of the *Coolies* in the Assam Valley will be in the same position.

Gruning recommends that recruiting must be carried on through garden *sardars* holding certificates, the certificates being retained in order to prevent other persons from recruiting in the name of garden *sardars*. Provision would also have to be made for licensed local agents. It is probable that garden *sardars* belonging to the United Provinces may be able to work independently, but the aboriginal *Coolies* of Chota Nagpur or the people from the East Coast districts are not sufficiently intelligent to do so and require the help and control of a local agent. Thus, he believed that the interests of the tea industry will be best served by free labour and free emigration. J.F. Grunning had submitted this report in Shillong in 16<sup>th</sup> April, 1909- On Special Duty.

According to Colin (1979), the usual ways of classifying various kinds of worker and degrees of skill do not really enable us to make many strong generalizations about

differences of interests between different types of labour. There is believed to be a true unity between of interest among the whole class of labour; for example on such demands for employee protection as legislation on unfair dismissal and compensation for redundancy. There may also be a general interest in the reduction of unemployment, though this is probably a priority among manual workers who are more likely to face unemployment. It is often argued that there is a fundamental difference between the positions of manual and non-manual workers.

The exploitative practices of the tea planters can be traced back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century owing to which the *Chargola Exodus* can be said to be a significant outburst of it. As stated earlier, the wages of the tea workers have been extremely low, on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1921 a meeting had been called to raise the daily wage of the tea workers. The tea garden workers had attended a meeting on Non-Cooperation during those days held at Chargola Valley and linking the vision of 'Swaraj' and daily wage hike, which is their right was demanded in the meeting (Guha 1977). It is interesting to note that in this agitation of the tea garden workers of the Chargola and Longhai Valley in Karimganj subdivision of Assam, the railway workers extended their support. The denial of the wage hike of the tea garden workers, instigated the exodus of around 750 men, women and children as a mark of protest against the exploitative tea planters and owners from Anipur tea estate and others of the Chargola and Longhai Valley. Thousands of workers trekked to the nearest railway stations all bound homewards 'to where they belonged'. By 19<sup>th</sup> May, they were all stranded at Chandpur and on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1991, they were brutally chased out of the station by armed police. This incident earned public support and the railway workers got

involved in the strikes. It went on for a period of more than two months. Thus, agitation, strikes in the tea plantation industry can be traced down to pre independence era.

## **2.2 Phase II: Post 1947 especially since 1951; after the introduction of the Plantation Labour Act**

Class consciousness: in a transition from 'class in itself' to 'class for itself' the emphasis in Marxist analysis has been on the development of revolutionary class consciousness among the workers. Constituting this 'class in itself', there is a distinct way of life and distinct cultural activities, all of which bring the working class into conflict with other classes as a 'class against capital'. In the Marxian perspective, it is only when these objective features generate a consciousness of common interest rooted in the process of production and lead to practical action through political representation. John Elster (1982) has interpreted class consciousness as the ability of class organizations to pursue class objectives by controlling sectional struggles, and is therefore an attribute of organizations (such as trade unions) to mobilize members behind centrally organized initiatives on behalf of class rather than particular interests.

The tea industry was going through a lot of unrest and the workers did not have any assurance for security and welfare from the government though millions of workers are employed in this sector. Thus, The Plantation Labour Act was passed in 1951. It applies to the plantations of tea, rubber, coffee and cinchona or cardamom. The State government may also make it applicable in any other plantations. The Assam Plantations Labour Rules were passed in 1956. This act is very significant in order to have an indepth understanding of the tea plantation industry. Though this act is not effectively followed in most of the tea estates

in Assam, this act makes provisions for health, education, welfare and housing facilities to be compulsorily provided to the workers in the estates. Providing of crèche facility and maternity benefit is obligatory for the owners of the estates as per this act. Apart from other legislations like provident fund, workmen's compensation and bonus, formation of systematized processes of negotiation, trade unions, this act is specific to the plantation sectors like tea, coffee, rubber, cinchona and others. It was because the plantation sector is unique in its characteristics and tea industry falls within the purview of both factory and a plantation.

It is believed that new technology holds hope of abandoning 'class'; classlessness achieved by technical, not social revolution. As a concept causality of change, this is 'class rejected'. Technology merely strengthens the hand of the already powerful capitalist class, giving it a wider scope and tools for tighter social control. This is 'class reasserted'. Marx is now outdated, but not because classes are disappearing. The introduction of new technology tilts the balance of power in different ways, realigning classes and releasing new social movements. This is class reconceptualized.

This witnessed severe industrial stagnation and low rates of employment growth. This phase saw a dramatic increase in the levels of industrial disputes. Both strikes and lockouts increased, as did the number of mandays lost due to disputes. Centralized structures of industrial relation system showed signs of crisis.

It saw the beginning of liberalization and gradual withdrawal of the state from economic activities and the industrial relation scenario. While, no overt changes in the labour law and labour market policies were made (except for the 1982 and 1984 amendments to the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947), there emerged significant subterranean changes affecting the

industrial relations system at the level of individual firms, specific industries, and regions. This was also a period characterized by jobless growth “the best decade for economic growth but the worst decade in terms of employment generation”. This period also saw the beginning of a trend where firms engaged in the production of consumer nondurable began subcontracting and outsourcing their production to the unorganized sector.

In the sphere of industrial relations, the development of the Tripartite Consultative System was one of the most significant processes. It is based on the ILO’s philosophy and it was recommended in the Royal Commission on Labour in the year 1931. The objectives set forth by the main bodies are- promotion of uniformity in labour legislation, laying down a procedure for settlement and negotiation of industrial disputes and discussion of matters between management and workers to prevent grievances and disputes. Prior to this, the Trade Disputes Act of 1929 sought to provide a conciliation machinery to bring about peaceful settlement of disputes.

After Independence, an Industrial Truce Resolution was adopted at a Tripartite Conference in 1947. It laid importance on adopting methods of mutual discussion to maintain industrial peace without affecting the production of the industry. The intervention of the State in matters of industrial disputes was emphasized as it was believed this could help keep in check the growth of unrest.

Job Dissatisfaction in the 1970s can be related to this phase. Productivity of the workers were seen to be deteriorating. This low productivity was being measured by absenteeism, low turnover rates, strikes, poor quality products and demeaning dedication of workers

towards their tasks. Productivity is also affected by increased alcohol addiction and aggression (Braverman, 1988).

### **2.3 Phase III: since 1991; with the implementation of the New Economic Policy, focussing on its impact on Labour, Work, Women, Consumption, Production and Conditions of labour**

Division of labour was not only limited to that of work but was also that in society. This was termed as societal division of labour.

Economic development in India was ushered by India's Industrial Policy of 1991 which led to the drastic growth of industries. Industrial Policy Resolution of 1948 considered a blended economy of private and public sector. Industrial Policy Resolution of 1956 replaced that of 1948 and it put down three categories which precisely defined the participation of the state. Those were: a. Schedule A: Industries that were to be an exclusively responsibility of the state; b. Schedule B: that were to be progressively state owned and later private enterprises would add to this effort and c. Schedule C: Other than the previously mentioned categories, those which would be the enterprises initiated and managed by the private sector.

Liberalization was ushered mainly by the Industrial Policy of 1980 as it formulated licensing policy in favour of large business houses freeing them from the provisions of the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Policies Act (MRPT) and the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA). The Industrial Policy of 1991 aimed to initiate liberalization to amalgamate Indian economy with the world economy. In the perspective of the tea industry in Assam it has had a huge impact on the price of tea, export and import of tea. The

economic liberalization has brought about radical change towards market economy and globalization. Liberalization covers domestic and foreign industry, business and trade.

Globalization, rather global culture is brought about by a variety of social and cultural developments: the existence of a world-satellite information system; the emergence of a new consciousness of the world as a single place. Thus globalization has been described as ‘the concrete structuration of the world as a whole’ i.e. a growing awareness at a global level that the world is a continuously structured environment. The term "globalization" refers to an interrelated and mutually reinforcing complex: a material basis in technological change, increased trade, investment and financial flows, enhanced corporate power, an ideological shift in favor of free markets, and the imposition of laissez faire policies (Baker, et al 1998). The authors try to bring out an understanding of the impact on globalization on the environmental issues as the author says that uncontrolled growth is eventually leading to environmental disaster.

### **2.3.1 Influence of Globalisation on Industrial Relations in the Tea Industry: An analysis of the problems and prospects**

The term “globalization” refers to the integration of economies of the world through mutual exchange of technology and knowledge. It indicates the movement of productive activity towards the international integration of national economies. It is generally so in the markets for goods, services, technology, finance and also labour. Globalization gained importance mainly after the collapse of socialism in the erstwhile USSR. In analyzing the nature of the state, Hamza Alavi says that it is thought to be an entity which stands outside and above society. It has the capability to initiate and pursue programs of development for

the benefit of the whole society. Social order is considered to be the primary objective of the state. It refers to the growth of ties that span life (Lechner 2009). It means spreading or diffusing things or information, greater interdependence among more people, new forms of organization and a wider awareness of commonalities. For example, rise of China helped to trigger the first wave of globalization (Lechner 2009). Globalization is the unintended consequence of the European pursuit of mainly Chinese products such as tea, silk and porcelain. Mitra (2010) in his book has explained the phenomenon of globalization as 'the upsurge in international economic activity'. The national economic functions are regarded as a mere unit of the world market. It means spreading or diffusing things or information, greater interdependence among more people, new forms of organisation and a wider awareness of commonalities. For example, rise of China helped to trigger the first wave of globalisation (Lechner 2009).

The Government of India introduced its New Economic Policy through promulgation of New Industrial Policy in July 1991. The New Economic Policy stood on the doctrines of Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG). The tea industry was flourishing from the period of 1991-98 (Mitra 2010). There was an immense growth of tea estates during this period and it was considered the golden period of the Indian tea industry. The effect of globalization, i.e. removal of tariff barriers, lifting the quantitative restrictions on tea from abroad and at times facing the problem related to non-trade barriers imposed by some developed European countries, started to put the Indian tea industry in severe crisis from 1999 onwards. Mitra (2010) examines the impact of globalization on industrial relations of the tea plantations of Dooars region in West Bengal. Since the introduction of the New Economic Policy in the year 1991 in India, there have been significant changes in

the industrial relations of various industries and the tea industry is no exception to this. The aspect of profitability of plantation economy in general and tea industry in particular has been affected by the New Economic Policy. Owing to the entry of multi-national corporations in the domestic market, many tea estates have been facing low profitability (Mitra 2010). They are not in a position to mitigate their responsibilities towards their workers as stipulated by the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. As with the introduction of the New Economic Policy, the government decided to gradually reduce tariff barriers and started to withdraw the quantity restriction on import. This has resulted in huge quantum of tea from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Kenya penetrating into the Indian market. The situation touched the lowest ebb during 2003-04 as the sale prices of tea have failed to cover the cost prices leading to lock-outs and abandonment of tea estates by the owners. These incidences have adversely affected the tea industry.

Assam tea was first auctioned in London in 1834. Das (2002) who was the Chairman of the Guwahati Tea Auction Centre (GTAC) during 1986-96, says that in that period GTAC became the largest CTC Tea Auction Centre in the world. However, in recent times, GTAC has gone through a crisis. A number of stakeholders of tea industry had been adversely affected by the fall of tea prices at the auctions during 2003-2005. In 1990-91 the average auction price of tea at GTAC was Rs. 42.16 per kg. Then it rose steadily to Rs. 76.67 in 1997-98 and to a peak in 1999-2000 to Rs. 79.03 per kg. After this rise, there was a downfall in the prices of tea. It fell to Rs. 58.24 in 2003-04. All production costs including wages, maintenance, taxes and costs of estate and factory running as well as sales at auction are provided from the auction price. Misra, et.al (2012), has pointed out that due to the fall in tea auction prices since 1990s, the tea industry in India has been

going through a crisis. There has also been a decline in exports. The retail price of tea has been almost stagnant from 1999 to 2008 between Rs. 100 to Rs. 150 per kg depending upon the quality of tea. According to Deb (2008), the middlemen in tea are the auction buyers, wholesalers and the retailers who have to incur the costs relating to transportation, marketing and other sales related operations. The biggest among the middlemen beneficiaries are Hindustan Lever, Tata Tea and Eveready industries. The three companies brought 30.70 per cent, 11.10 per cent and 2.39 per cent respectively of tea sold during 2006-07. They are also huge tea producers. Each of them own a number of tea companies in and outside Assam. They are packeteers and sellers of branded tea. Thus their functions include tea production, auction, marketing and retailing. Therefore, they get huge profit margins and surplus. The producers usually have no choice but to sell at whatever price the big buyers have fixed. Otherwise they will have to face great difficulty in transportation and storage in warehouses.

**Table 0-1 Quantity and Average Price of Tea sold in the Guwahati Tea Auction Centre**

Year	Leaf				Dust			
	CTC		Orthodox		CTC		Orthodox	
	Quantity (million Kg.)	Average Price (Rs. per Kg)	Quantity (million Kg.)	Average Price (Rs. per Kg)	Quantity (million Kg.)	Average Price (Rs. per Kg)	Quantity (million Kg.)	Average Price (Rs. per Kg)
2005	101.94	61.11	0.61	61.62	40.30	59.19	-	-
2006	100.75	67.96	0.72	78.18	40.90	68.27	-	-
2007	106.88	70.09	4.16	73.93	41.51	73.02	0.001	50.00
2008	110.14	90.20	0.56	92.39	41.99	95.73	-	-
2009	98.33	108.52	0.44	111.21	39.74	115.10	-	-
2010	87.33	113.06	0.36	122.09	38.94	116.26	-	-
2011 (up to July)	20.17	126.78	0.06	123.34	10.17	122.82	-	-

**Source:** Guwahati Tea Auction Centre (2011)

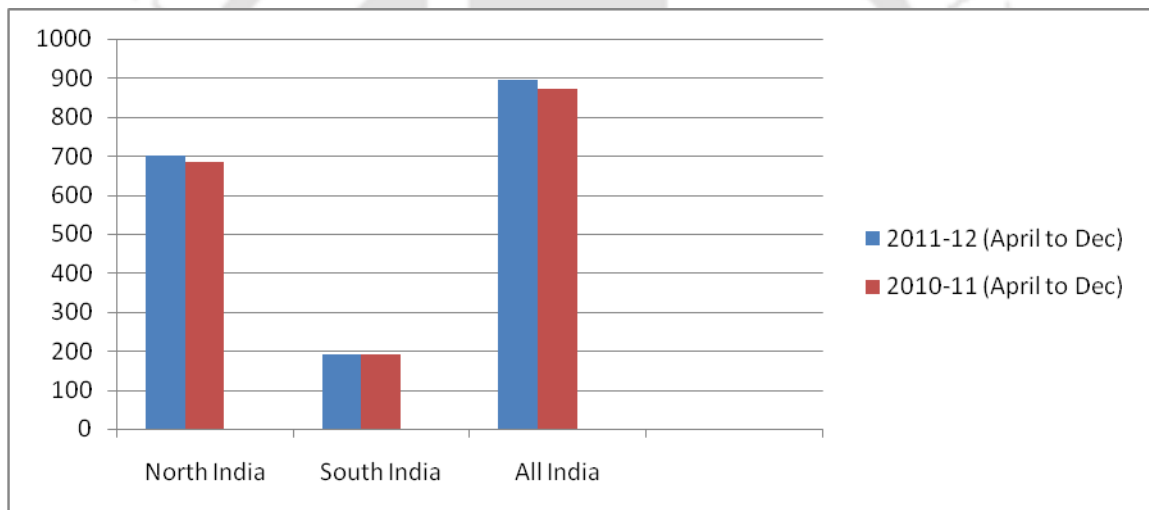
Table 2.1 clearly indicates the growth in the price of tea leaf and tea dust upto the year 2011. However, there is seen to be a gradual decline in the quantity of production of tea.

**Table 0-2 Estimated Production of Tea In India**

Estimated production of tea in india	North india	South india	All india
2011-12 (April to Dec)	701.89	192.04	893.93
2010-11 (April to Dec)	682.97	189.37	872.34

**Source:** Guwahati Tea Auction Centre (2011)

**Figure 0-1 Estimated Production of Tea in India**



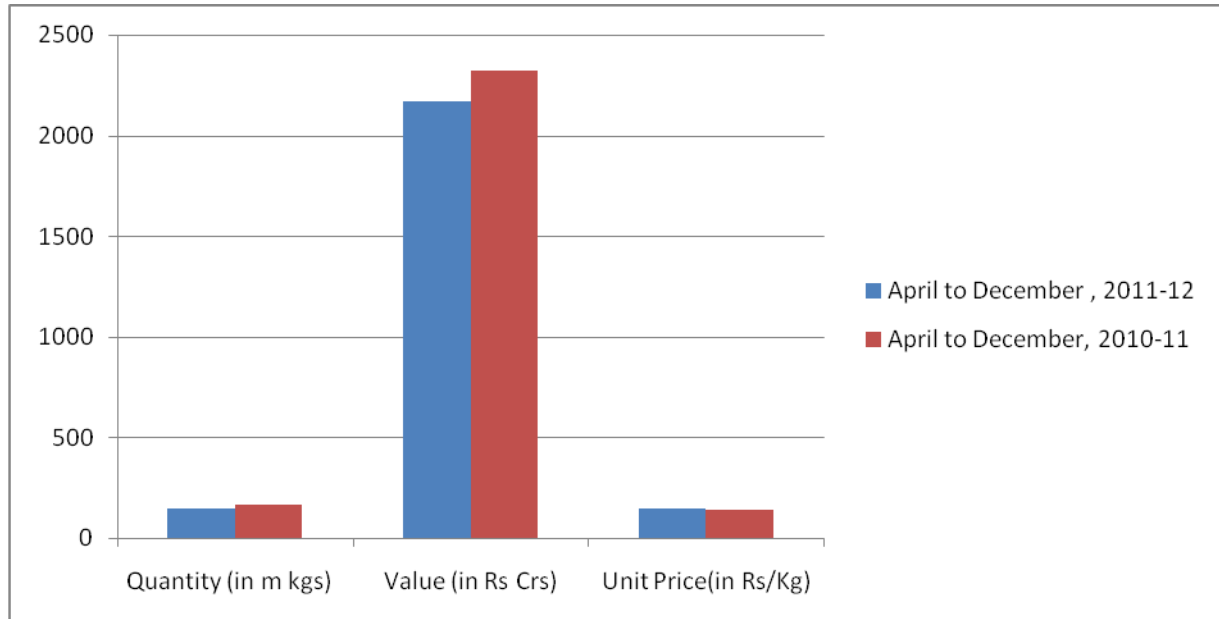
**Source:** Tea Board of India Report (2010)

**Table 0-3 Estimated Exports of Tea from India**

Estimated exports of tea from india	April to December , 2011-12	April to December, 2010-11
Quantity (in m kgs)	147.11	168.03
Value (in Rs Crs)	2167.76	2321.48
Unit Price(in Rs/Kg)	147.36	138.16

**Source:** Tea Board of India Report (2010)

**Figure 0-2 Estimated Exports of Tea from India**



**Source:** Tea Board of India Report (2010)

The compulsory auction of tea was abolished which has led to about half the quantity of tea being sold privately. According to Das (2002), private sales generate black money as per media reports. After abolition of 1984 Order the percentage of tea sold in auction in all the eight Indian centers (Guwahati, Kolkata, Siliguri, Coimbatore, Coonoor, Cochin and Amritsar) in 2005 was 53.43. The section of planters who are not able to sell tea privately and those whose costs are not covered by the auction price are reported to be in a bad condition. Owing to heavy loss incurred, some of them are compelled to sell their gardens and most of them are in debt. The small tea growers also face a financial crunch because of the reduction in the amount of auction. There are two categories of people who have gained in the crisis of the tea industry. The big producers deprive the medium and small tea growers from getting higher sales revenue as they are huge buyers in the auction and also control the packeting and retail marketing. The second category of people includes producers who sell privately and allegedly make black money by evading tax.

In the Dooars region of West Bengal, between 2002 and 2005, around 14 tea estates have been either lock-out or abandoned. In addition to this, some tea estates have failed to fulfill the statutory obligations such as housing, medical facilities, water, subsidized food items and others as framed by the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. Thus the workers started taking various agitational movements in order to create pressure on their respective management for securing maximum benefits which has put negative impact on the labour-management relations popularly known as Industrial Relations. The overall productivity and profitability of the tea industry faced a downfall due to such disharmony among its different units. The Indian Tea Industry has been going through major crisis. The workers, who are from the very beginning are dependent on the management for food, drinking water, housing, health and other basic facilities are hit hard. Closing down of tea estates in the Dooars region brought about crisis in the area with human tragedy; deaths due to malnutrition and poverty. Thus the workers resorted to violent means to deal with the management. Cases of gheraos and strikes have gone up. The workers have also lost their faith on the Trade Unions. Thus here the author has studied the changing pattern of industrial relations in the tea industry in the backdrop of pre and post globalization period. The situation of industrial unrest started when the planters saw their power gradually being eroded. There was large scale labour agitation in the form of strikes, lockouts, gheraos, confinements, retrenchment etc. The conflict between the labour and the management became more intense in the tea gardens of Dooars and Terai regions and changes during the pre and post globalization period.

The terms 'industrial relations' have been defined in many ways. Dunlop (2001) defines industrial relations as "the complex interrelations among managers, workers and agencies of the governments". According to Yoder (cited in Mitra 2010), "industrial relations is the process of management dealing with one or more unions with a view to negotiate and subsequently administer collective bargaining agreement or labour contract". Industrial relations, thus, include both 'industrial relations' and 'collective relations' as well as the role of the state in regulating these relations. Such a relationship is therefore complex and multidimensional based on economic, social, psychological, ethical, occupational, political and legal factors. There are mainly two set of factors that determine the state of industrial relations – whether good or poor in any industry. The first set of factors, described as 'institutional factors', includes type of labour legislation, policy of state relating to labour and industry, extent and stage of development of trade unions and employers' organizations and the type of social institutions. The other set of factors, described as 'economic factors', includes the nature of economic organization capitalist, socialist technology, the sources of demand and supply in the labour market, the nature and composition of labour force, etc.

Prior to 1991, the industrial relations system in India sought to control conflicts and disputes through excessive labour legislations. These labour laws were protective in nature and covered a wide range of aspects of workplace industrial relations like laws on health and safety of labours, layoffs and retrenchment policies, industrial disputes and the like. The basic purpose of these laws was to protect labours. However, these protectionist policies created an atmosphere that led to increased inefficiency in firms, over employment and inability to enhance effectiveness. Thus, there were various cases of

violence reported during the period in between the management and the workers. According to Das Gupta (1989), the agitation of the tea plantation workers in Jalpaiguri district with strong anti-colonial content had its origin from the Tana Bhagat movement that had originated among the tribal peasants, specifically the Oraon peasants who were engaged in agriculture in the Ranchi district of Chotanagpur. It reflected the aspirations of the Oraon peasants' grievance against the exploitation of zamindars and mahajans. This paper studies the short-lived agitation in Jalpaiguri. The after effects of the movement in Chhotanagpur soon came to be felt in the distant Duars. In the wake of the introduction of the tea plantations in the Duars in the mid-1870s, with the active assistance of the colonial state, large-scale migration of tribal, particularly Oraon peasants had been organized by the planters (mainly European) to the Duars tea gardens. The Oraon migrants in the Duars were almost double the number of the Munda and Santal migrants taken together. The migrant tribal peasants turned into wage-labourers on the tea gardens had a deep attachment for their homes and lands in Chhottanagpur and Santal Parganas. In his report (1989) on 'survey and settlement' work in the Ranchi district during 1902-1910 Reid, the settlement officer, observed: Large numbers of those who emigrate to Assam and the Duars, return if they are able to save little money and buy back the farms they had lost or some land which they once owned. The report also stated that a considerable percentage of emigration was periodic and non-permanent. The Oraons emigrated in large number during the cold weather when there was little or no work on the fields and returned home before the monsoon to begin cultivation on their fields. The impact of the Tana Bhagat movement fell on the British dominated plantation economy and the exploitation and the oppression of the plantation labour in the Duars. By 1916, the stir came to be viewed by

the planters and the colonial government with considerable alarm. It was referred to as ‘a new and dangerous movement amongst the *Oraons*’. Garden *sardars* were made special constables and held responsible for maintenance of peace in the gardens, and armed police pickets and police camps were set up in different parts of the Duars to keep watch on the restive *Oraons* (a sect of the *Adivasis*). Many protestors were arrested and a special tribunal was appointed under the Defence of India Act (1915). Some of the arrested *Oraons* were sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for varying periods. By late 1916 the agitation subsided.

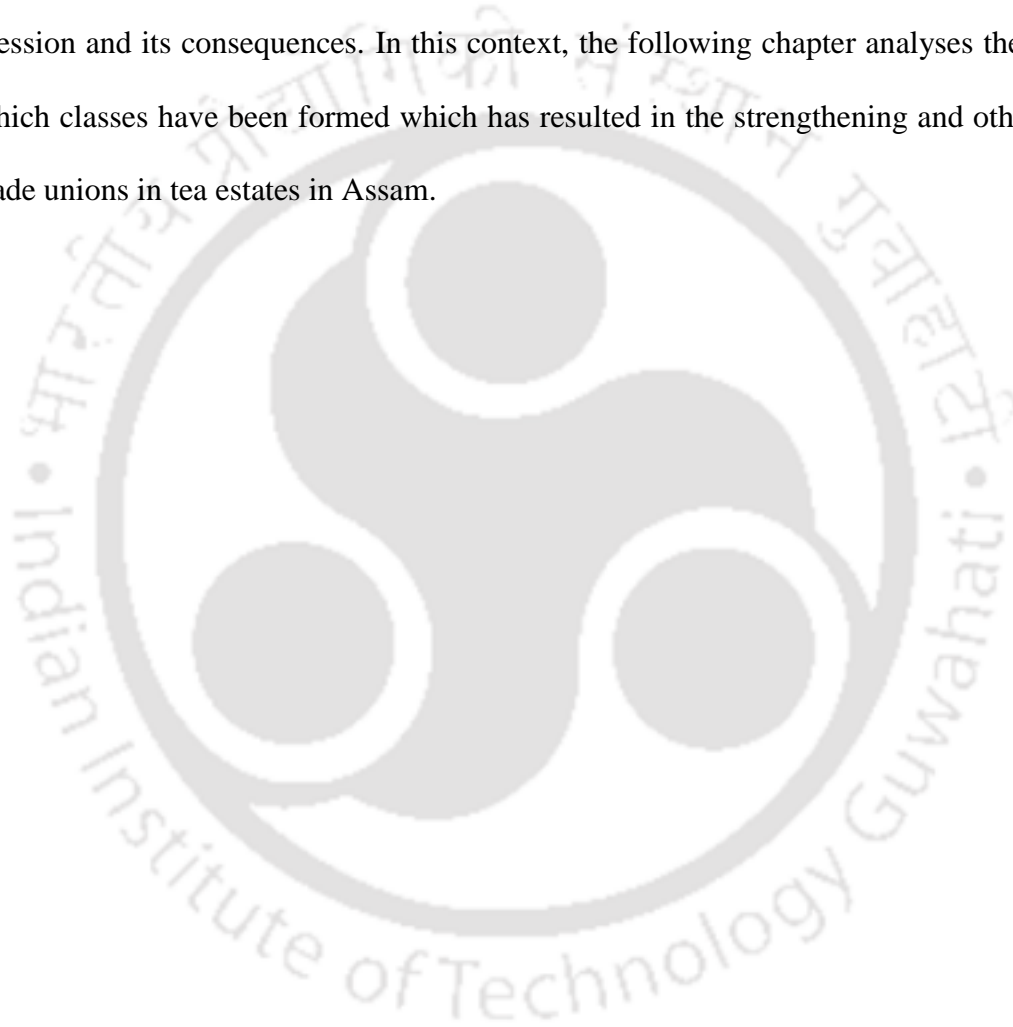
Bhowmik’s study (2005) analyses the various tea plantation workers’ strike in West Bengal and specifically the causes of the general strike that took place during July 5- 26, 2005. He asserts that this particular strike was a success, as far as gaining widespread support was concerned. In the tea growing districts of the northern part of West Bengal, nearly three lakhs tea workers, more than half of whom were women, took part in the strike that brought the entire tea industry to a standstill. It was estimated that the strike cost nearly Rs. 15 to Rs. 20 crore daily. The main demand of the workers was wage revision which was due since 2003. After immense bargaining, they were able to get an increment of Rs. 2.50 in their daily wage. This strike was least expected because during 2003-04, the tea industry was in bad shape financially. Several tea plantations were shut down and the workers faced starvation and death due to extreme poverty. Soon after the industry began to stabilize, the workers started with this general strike which was unexpected. The first strike in West Bengal undertaken by the tea workers was in 1955, then in 1969 and 1988. The demands varied from wage revision, bonus, to increase in number of employment in the tea industry, as also in the tea garden. The Indian Tea

Association, which is the main organization representing employers, commented in its annual report that India was the first and only country to provide a bonus for plantation workers.

Further, Bhowmik's study (2005) analyses the correlation between two crucial factors i.e. wages and productivity. He argues that as it is commonly believed that high costs of labour are mainly responsible for the high production costs, it is not the sole reason. It may appear so in a labour intensive industry, other factors must also be critically evaluated. Productivity can be improved if the material costs of production are improved which include expansion of the area under tea cultivation, improvement in the age of the tea bushes and replenishing of ageing bushes. A new tea bush matures after five years and yields good quantity of leaf. But the employers are not willing to wait that long even though in the long run the productivity would increase. Moreover, while wage costs have fallen, despite wage increases, the cost of management has increased. The vast difference between the workers and the management in any tea plantation is clearly visible. Thus it can be seen that establishment cost, which include costs of personnel, are higher than labour costs. Bhowmik (2005) asserts that by increasing labour welfare schemes and better maintenance of tea bushes, productivity will increase. Thus, the changes ushered in the economic policies in India in 1991 opened up new vistas for the Indian economy, but the industrial relations began to change to protect the interests of the employers. Employers opted for a reduction of the workforce, introduced policies of voluntary retirement schemes and flexibility in workplace also increased. Some of the changes may be summarized as follows: collective bargaining in India has mostly been unorganised, facing pressures to follow decentralization. The number of local and enterprise level

unions has increased and there is a significant reduction in the influence of the unions on collective bargaining.

This chapter has made a detailed discussion of various aspects of industrial relations. The analysis of the phases of industrial relations in the tea estates shows an evolving trend from the level of oppression of the workers to the agitations in revolt against such oppression and its consequences. In this context, the following chapter analyses the ways in which classes have been formed which has resulted in the strengthening and otherwise of trade unions in tea estates in Assam.



## CHAPTER III

### CLASS FORMATION AND TRADE UNIONISM IN TEA ESTATES IN ASSAM

The second chapter focused on the origin of the tea industry in Assam. The analysis was divided into three phases wherein Phase I discussed the initiation process of the tea industry in the state in British India i.e. pre-independence India (pre-1947), phase II highlighted post 1947 especially since 1951; after implementation of the Plantation Labour Act (PLA) and phase III discussed tea as a commercial product and its impact on labour, wages, industrial relations since 1991; with the implementation of the New Economic Policy, focussing on its impact on labour, work, women, consumption, production and conditions of labour.

In this regard, the third chapter attempts to analyse class formation among the tea plantation workers in Assam focussing on patterns of migration, retaining their ethnic identity and politics encircling the same. For the establishment and expansion of the tea industry in Assam, migration of workers of Chinese origin and '*Adivasi*' workers from different states within India were enforced by the Britishers. The *Adivasi* community in the state are the indigenous or 'first people' of the region who are popularly known as the 'tea tribes' or the 'ex-tea garden community' based on the profession traced down hereditarily. The immigrant workers have been facing discrimination on various grounds from the British rulers, the British plantation owners, the other indigenous groups of the region, the local plantation owners and the management. The state plays an ignorant role in the welfare of the workers. Though there are multiple labour laws that are to be ideally followed in the tea estates in Assam, they are not implemented efficiently. The workers

are exploited and this is where the role of the trade union becomes extremely significant. The trade unions in the tea estates in the state operate under the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS). There are various issues faced by the workers of the tea estates and they are ideally to be channelled through the trade unions.

The tea plantation workers have existed in the state since the time they were made to migrate into the region from the tribal belts of central and east India in order to establish the tea plantation industry under the British rule. Since their immigration, they have been considered to be 'outsiders' by the other indigenous groups of the region. They have remained alienated from the dominant groups of the region owing to their cultural, linguistic and physical characteristics. They are easily identifiable as 'non local' or *Adivasis*. Discrimination and exploitation of this group of people have brought about hostile relationships with the locals and especially the management of the estates.

According to Mac Iver and Page, 'a class is any portion of a community marked off from the rest by social status.' Class formation among the *Adivasi* group of people has been taking place and its manifestation is seen in the form of political and social unrest in the tea estates as well as in other rural and urban parts of Assam. In this context, Karl Marx's perspective on 'Social Conflict' can be closely associated to the unrest that exists in the tea estates. Marx believed that human society and history are shaped by social conflict that is caused by economic inequality among the people in the society (Mathur, 2010).

**The Conflict Theory of Marx** dwells upon the notion that there are two basic groups of people in the society- the wealthy and the poor. Gradually conflict arises as one group tries to rebel against the exploitation of the capitalists who own the 'means of production'.

Thus 'class conflict' takes place in the society. Marx stated that work is socially organized and technology used in production will have a strong impact on the society. The class relations of capitalism signify that both capitalists and workers are indispensable to each other but each have opposite economic interests. Thus such contradictions result in conflict and instability which is referred to as 'class struggle'. As a result of this struggle owing to contradictions, the working class will realize its exploitation in the hands of the capitalists. It is known as 'class consciousness'. The trade unions play an active role in the bargaining and negotiation process fighting for the rights of the workers revolting against their exploitation.

### **3.1 Migration**

The tea plantation workers in Assam commonly known as the *Adivasis* (indigenous people) trace their origin to the exploitative process of recruitment of indentured, immigrant labour brought in to work in the tea gardens. The flourishing tea industry in India is the result of the toil and struggle of the immigrant workers. The present generations of the tea plantation workers in Assam have their roots in the then undivided Chota Nagpur area- now Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, parts of Odisha; West Bengal, and Madhya Pradesh that constitute the tribal belt of central and east India. Their forefathers' generations were made to migrate to Assam in order to set up the tea plantations under the British rule under hazardous conditions and many of them had even lost their lives in the process of being transported to the remote areas of West Bengal, Assam and few other north eastern states of the country. It is evident that the plantation workers form the migrant group who has distinct cultural identities, practices and beliefs.

### 3.1.1 Ethnic Identity

It has been observed that the immigrant tea plantation workers in Assam have been striving to protect and uphold their ethnic identity though cultural assimilation. Sharma (2011) brings out a diverse picture of the tea industry in Assam by not only dwelling upon the origin of the tea plantation in Assam, but also by critically analyzing the role of the British Government, the planters, the elite Assamese class, the questions of identity of the migrant tea plantation workers mainly at the backdrop of the pre-independence era. The author analyses how the local non-tribal inhabitants of Assam have tried to do away with the tags of primitiveness by pushing it towards the tribal and the migrant tea plantation workers.

A person's identity is defined as one which is congruent to his or her view of the continuity and sameness of his or her personality. Individual's sense of their own identity becomes stronger over the years. In this sense of identity, there is a clear awareness about one's aspirations and characteristics (Kupiainen et al; 2004). The tea tribes in Assam form a distinct cultural group who has its own practices, beliefs and languages.

Karlson's (2010) work deals with a number of questions relating to politics based on "ethnicity" or community belonging among "tribal" or indigenous peoples in India's northeastern region. Question of indigenous peoples' right to self-determination, a right that most indigenous organizations in the world regard as crucial and that is central to the UN draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Autonomy or self-determination, in one form or another, is on the agenda of more or less all mobilized communities in Northeast India.

The *Adivasis* in India are traditionally known as the “first peoples” or indigenous people (Ananthanarayanan 2010). The immigrant tea plantation workers in Assam have been striving to protect and uphold their ethnic identity though cultural assimilation is seen to have been taking place. The concept of ‘assimilation’ was first used in American race relations research to describe the process by which immigrant groups were integrated into the dominant white culture (Abercrombie and Nicholas 2006). In R. Park’s (2003) ‘race relations cycle’, the social interaction between the host society and new immigrants was conceptualized in terms of four stages- contacts, competition, accommodation and assimilation. At the present time, assimilation is not only considered to be a oneway process but it is a reciprocal one involving mutual adjustments between host and migrant communities. A person’s identity is defined as one which is a person’s view of the continuity and sameness of his or her personality. Individual’s sense of their own identity becomes stronger over the years. In this sense of identity, there is a clear awareness about one’s aspirations and characteristics (Kupiainen et al; 2004). The tea tribes in Assam form a distinct cultural group who has its own practices, beliefs and languages.

In the Northeast, the British rulers enacted the *Assam Land Act 1834* followed by the *Wasteland Grant Rules 1838* in order to get land easily for the tea estates (Fernandes, 2003). They hoped that once deprived of their livelihood, the Ahom, Koch and Boro landowners of Assam would work in the plantations (Goswami 1999: 68-71). But they were not ready to become wage labourers on their own land alienated unjustly from them. Also the Chinese whom the British brought to the Assam could not become the type of workers they needed (Guha 1977). The tribals of Jharkhand, Orissa and Chattisgarh were thus the next choice. Because of their impoverishment they were “compelled to emigrate mainly to Assam tea

gardens when they could not obtain justice from the government and could not bear to stay on in their newly transformed status as tenants” (Chatterjee 1990: 159). Thus they and Dalits elsewhere formed a continuous flow of indentured labour that helped the worldwide expansion of the ‘plantation complex’ (Sen 1979: 8-12).

The differences in language in upper Assam and lower Assam *Adivasis* is clearly visible. *Sadri* and Assamese while in lower assam and cachar district its more of Jharkhand tribal language and Bengali. Their notion of self and identity is greatly influenced by their dependence on the tea industry for their sustenance and them being considered ‘outsiders’ by the other indigenous groups of the region

They are popularly referred to as the ‘tea tribes’ or ‘*saah janajati*’ by the *Assamese* speaking population of the state and other linguistic groups. The tea garden workers and the ex tea garden population are also referred to as tea tribes or ‘*Coolies*’ which is used derogatorily. They have remained cut-off from the other indigenous groups of the state. They exhibit the nature of a closed group. From the primary data collected during the field study, it was evident that all the respondents of workers’ category had their origin in the tribal belts of east and central India mainly.

They mostly speak *Adivasi* languages like *Shadri*, *Kharia*, *Kurukh*, *Santhali*, etc. at home and can speak a little *Assamese* for communicating with the other ‘local’ people. Language is a barrier that disconnects them from the other indigenous groups in the state. There is little communication with the other groups which makes them the ‘outsiders’ in the state. In the field study it has been found that majority of the plantation workers in upper Assam speak fluent *Assamese* while those in middle and lower Assam speak

*Shadri* and other tribal languages from the Chota Nagpur belt. Those in Barak Valley speak tribal languages with a lot of *Bengali* influence. Therefore, certain amount of language assimilation is seen to have been taking place among the tea plantation workers also referred to as the *Adivasis*. There are variations in the degree of assimilation of the tea plantation workers with the dominant linguistic groups in the region. When their previous generations were first made to migrate to the state in the late eighteenth century and more in the early nineteenth century, they were made to settle down in various areas spread throughout the state which were identified as prospect tea estates. Thus owing to the harassment and confusion that took place during the migration process, many family members got separated from each other and were made to settle in separate estates.

Historical migration of the tea tribes from other states to the tea estates in Assam has altered the design of traditional families. But this has not led to proper assimilation of the tea tribes into the indigenous groups in Assam. As mentioned above, they have always been considered as ‘outsiders’ who follow weird cultural practices and food habits. As most of the ‘tea tribes’ that consist of the tea plantation workers and the ex-tea garden population settled in villages and towns have stuck to their traditional beliefs and practices similar to the tribals of Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and other regions of Chota Nagpur area, the process of assimilation has not been taking place in a smooth way. The religious practices of puja, marriage, birth and death rituals are all performed in indigenous tribal ways. Discrimination existed in the ways people already dwelling in this region dealt with the *Adivasi* groups who were made to settle here.

During the field work conducted at various estates, it was often observed that almost every estate’s labour line had a small temple or a chapel within its premises. The missionaries

introduced education to these immigrant plantation workers and those who embraced Christianity are closely associated with the nearby parish for any kind of rituals to be performed and worship. The immigrant workers lead a life of exclusion in the labour lines. They have little interaction with the outside world.

### 3.1.2 Identity Politics

As discussed above, the *Adivasi* population in the state has been struggling for Scheduled Tribe status in the state opposed to the OBC status conferred presently. It is because outside the state i.e. in their states of origin- Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Odhisa, Madhya Pradesh, they are already conferred ST status. The phenomenon of identity politics cannot be ignored in the present study as it has been found that the *Adivasi* tea plantation workers are deeply impacted by the growing turmoil in the state. The tea tribes comprises of one of the most exploited groups in the country. The Government of Assam has conferred OBC status to the tea tribes, while there is ongoing struggle for ST (Scheduled Tribe) status in the state. There is growing unrest in the state owing to demand for ST status as they belong to one of the most downtrodden sections of the society and their history can be traced to chains of most exploitative events and processes. On November 24, 2007, a group of protestors comprising of the tea tribes assembled in front of the Assam Secretariat at Dispur, Guwahati. It was supposed to be a peaceful protest against the state government not granting ST status to one of the most exploited groups in the state. The agitation turned violent and the mob became uncontrollable with the other public attacking the protestors. It was one of the most horrific incidents where the public brutally attacked the *Adivasi* protestors. Some of them were beaten, hacked to death, women were

molested and one of them was stripped by the public. The police were either mute spectators to the incident or joined the public in attacking the protestors. In this democratic country, the state machinery was seen to crush down the demand of basic rights of one of the most downtrodden community and injustice is meted out every time whether or not they approach the government.

The Assamese locals who have little interaction with the *Adivasis* were agitated by the show of false power in the form of tribal weapons- arrows, bows, axes, which they usually do not showcase when going to festivals and feasts. The incident has been portrayed as deep rooted hostility between the Assamese locals and the *Adivasis*. Media is responsible for bringing up such an image of generations of hostility between the plantation workers and the Assamese gentry. The massacre which was ignited by few miscreants who fled the scene, took an ugly turn when the innocent rallyists were targeted and brutally assaulted. The political leaders from Assam and Jharkhand benefitted from the incident as they could play the blame game. The *Naxalites* have also tried to extend links to the tea estates in Assam and some extremist groups have formed. On this issue the government did not take any stern action against the culprits from the general public who were involved in manhandling the protestors.

Certain groups in the region formed by members of ethnic minority groups with specific objectives are losing ground because of their deviance from the set goals. The author critically looks at the concept of the 'other' which is a hallucinated image of an immigrant who needs to be controlled and submissive to the 'natives'. This is what guides identity politics in Assam. The *Adivasis* are looked at from the same perspective and thus directly or indirectly it is having the huge impact on the industrial relations in the tea estates.

The plantation workers have been continuously exploited across generations and sent to such levels of poverty that it has become a vicious circle from where it is extremely difficult to march forward. As the strategy of the British tea estate owners was to create generations of workers by not giving any opportunity to the tea labourers to emerge above the level of poverty they have been always living in. Here, the main issue of underdevelopment and inclusive development has been completely ignored. The Assamese middle class have had the attitude of considering the *Adivasi* immigrant plantation workers as outsiders while taking pride in the flourishing tea industry of the state. This feeling of being looked down upon among the plantation workers have further engraved disgust and condemn. Presently these are channeled through violent protests, struggles, strikes, lock outs and attacks meted out by the exploited tea plantation workers and the rest *Adivasi* people living in the state. Historically the plantation workers in the state, since their immigration have been in conflict with the management for various issues like wages, bonus, housing and other welfare facilities. At present times, the demands have taken rights based approach and developmental in nature. The workers' unions have been demanding for quality education and health facilities, justice for the workers and right to have political representation of workers. The statutory and the non statutory obligations of the management are to be met.

Political parties and the trade unions which are founded and based on the ideologies of the powerful political parties in the country are playing a crucial role in identity politics of the *Adivasis* in Assam. These unions have been succeeding in creating class consciousness among the plantation workers in the state. The *Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha* (ACMS) based on the principles of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) and the

Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) based on the ideologies of the Communist Party of India hold strong influence on industrial relations in the tea estates in the state. Apart from these political parties, many students' groups have also come into effect that interfere or control the issues faced by the Adivasis in the state. The most influential ones are: the Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (ATTSA) and the Assam Adivasis Students' Association (ASSA) formed in the 1990s have been demanding for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for *Adivasis* in Assam.

### **3.1.3 Present trend of Migration**

Apart from the historical migration of the plantation workers from other states of India to Assam's tea estates, at present times they are migrating to the urban settings in search of other occupations and avenues of earning. It is seen that the tea garden workers have another division who are known as the ex-tea garden workers settled in villages just outside the estates. These nearby settlements consist of mainly tea tribes who have migrated from other tea estates; either retired from work or people who have moved out of garden work. They are presently either working under contractors engaged in construction or as daily wage labourers. This migration pattern is seen in tea estates which are located in remote rural areas. With the expansion of education facilities, it is seen that the plantation workers do not want their children to work in the tea estates. There is migration from these areas to towns and urban settings in search of work. The management has said that this migration is leading to huge man power crunch in the tea estates.

There is growing migration of the plantation workers from the rural areas of the state's tea estates to the urban settings across the country. It has been reported that there is high

growth rate of absenteeism and outflow of workers to big cities like Guwahati, Kolkata, Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai, Delhi and others where the present generation of the plantation workers are migrating to in search of jobs. The step motherly attitude of the management meted out especially to the casual workers and low wages paid to the plantation workers in the state are the significant factors leading to the present trend of migration among them in the state. The other factors are discrimination and ignorant role of the government are also reasons for the same. The workers are discriminated on every possible front by the management, state and other 'indigenous' people in this part of the region.

### **3.2 Discrimination**

The *Adivasi* tea plantation workers who were made to migrate into the state faced various forms of discrimination. Keeping the daily wage rate of the workers extremely low resulting in rampant poverty, while the people from the management lead a contrasting lifestyle, a prosecutor decides to charge a defendant with a less serious offence, all due to the target individual's ethnicity, nationality, social class, or gender, while a person belonging to the management is easily acquitted for a serious offence are examples of some of the discriminatory practices against the workers in the tea estates. When number of such individual acts of discrimination is aggregated over time, it refers to group-based social inequality.

The *Adivasis* consisting of the plantation workers and the ex tea tribe population in the state are considered to be one of the most downtrodden sections of the society- socially, economically and politically. The tea industry is still found to have the characteristics of

colonial administration. The commercial production of tea in Assam was initiated and expanded by the Britishers. Low wages of workers, Systematic poverty- a term used by the author explaining the exploitative nature of the tea industry which creates generations of economically poor labour class. Since the time of the immigration of the *Adivasis* into the region, they have been facing discrimination in every aspect from the other indigenous groups of the region. As mentioned above, they are considered to be 'outsiders' or 'intruders' into the region. This attitude towards the plantation workers and the ex-tea garden population still continue to exist. Owing to the distinct physical features mainly belonging to the Negroid race and the cultural and linguistic differences, they are identified as outsiders.

Following are some of the major areas where discrimination of the plantation workers by the management of the estates is clearly identifiable.

### **3.2.1 Differential Wage Patterns**

There are wage differentials in the tea industry in India. Among the workers of the different states there are wage differences. The subsistence rate of wages that are provided to the tea workers in Assam are added with subsidized rates of ration, firewood, medical and educational facilities are provided to the workers. The workers however do not have access to all the statutory provisions that need to be given to them by the management of the estate. The tea plantation workers in West Bengal on the other hand, are provided with wages above the subsistence rate. They are always exploited since there are more temporary or casual workers as compared to the permanent workers to cut down on the fixed pay expenses of the company. It has been lately found that the productivity of the

permanent workers has reduced. The productivity of the casual workers is more comparatively but because they are not provided with the basic facilities like housing, medicines and education, there has been a grievance among the workers. Again among the casual workers and the permanent workers, there is wage differentials owing to continuous and year round employment of permanent ones while non-requirement of casual workers during the off season. The casual workers are discriminated and extracted the maximum amount of work without paying them bonus of giving any welfare facilities.

### **3.2.2 Living Conditions**

The workers are at a position of subordination to the management. Low wages, lack of welfare facilities like proper education, health facilities, housing and others are indicative of the exploitative intentions of the management. Extremely low wages result in rampant poverty in the labor lines and due to this the workers suffer from poor health conditions like malnutrition and others. The wages are too low to meet the expenses of the household. The contrasting difference between the posh, palace-like *bunglows* of the managers of the estates and the dilapidated labour lines and shoddily existing shelters of the tea plantation workers are clear cut examples of the discrimination that have been existing and still exist in the tea industry in India. The body language of the workers and the people from management still indicate the slave- master relations of power and domination. The tea industry in Assam has continued to carry forward the legacy of the master- worker relationship where the managers are considered to be 'God'. This in turn leads to the growth of grievances among the workers. There are many workers engaged in the *bunglows* as 'servants'. The plantation workers face problems in sanitation, access to

pure drinking water, non-maintenance of houses and no proper medical and education facilities. This leads to many diseases and ill health among the workers community. However, the management and the state play an ignorant role in intervening into the plight of the plantation workers. While the estate managers stay in *bunglows* which have luxurious items and lead a life of the British owners' trend set historically by the Empire. The tradition still continues to exist. The 'planter- manager- *sahib*' attitude is clearly visible in the relation between the management and the workers.

### 3.2.3 Work Hazards

The plantation workers have to work under harsh conditions. Health refers to general state of physical, mental and emotional well being. This wellbeing is affected by accidents ill-health- physical as well as mental.

Women workers who have come of age feel that leaves' plucking is non-hazardous in nature and those in practice for many years can do it without much of difficulty. Only when the leaves become a bit old and hard to pluck, the pluckers find it tough. Most of the times, the stems of the plant cut through the fingers of the workers. Thus it is said that the tea industry is sustaining on the blood and sweat of the *Adivasi* workers. It is a very difficult job because more than 30kgs is collected by the women workers and they have to work in the hot sun for long durations of time throughout the day carrying heavy baskets of tea leafs on a daily basis. The state plays a weak role in the eradication of capitalist exploitation as it is also dependent on the benefits from capitalistic production. Thus even the government schemes seem to pay little heed to the welfare of the weaker sections of the society which consists of the *Adivasis*. The MGNREGA scheme which allocated just

rupees ten thousand per annum to every household shows that the state has consistently ignored the malnutrition and insufficient aid given to the downtrodden as it is generally considered that the the *Adivasis* workers have minimal needs. The women are the most vulnerable to such ignorance from all sections of the society.

Industrial accidents may occur in a tea factory due to these major causes- chance occurrences, unsafe work assigned without adequate training given prior to taking up the work, inappropriate shielding equipments, disrupted machinery use, insecure storage, overloading, insufficient lighting, insufficient ventilation and recklessness of the workers. Accidents are more frequent in the tea manufacturing units mainly engaged in Cut-Tear-Curl (CTC) processes.

Chemical hazards are caused in the processes like spraying of pesticides and insecticides in the plantation area might cause skin diseases, inhaling chemicals on a regular basis usually results in lung related diseases and others. Working in tea factories and tea packaging units involves performing hard labour like shifting of heavy goods, equipments, working in heat generated environment in tea roasting units usually gives rise to health problems like injury due to muscle damage, cardiac issues, cuts and bruises, industrial accidents causing serious injuries. It causes tiredness, stress and burout. These are also some of the significant factors of absenteeism among the tea plantation workers.

The management is seen to show least interest in ensuring health and safety of the workers in the tea estates for those involved in garden work and factory work. The provisions of the Factories Act 1948 are not efficiently followed in the tea factories.

**Table 0-1 Indicators/ Factors of discrimination: Work Hazards**

Serial Number	Districts	Work hazards (%)		
		Machinery hazards	Chemical hazards	Difficulty of the pluckers
1	Dibrugarh	46	32	88
2	Sibsagar	38	45	73
3	Jorhat	53	28	67
4	Golaghat	57	36	74
5	Sonitpur	43	34	83
6	Cachar	39	28	79
7	Kamrup	34	22	87

Table 3.1 indicates that the plantation workers face various kinds of work hazards. The three most important ones are related to machinery, use of chemicals and those faced by pluckers. Machinery hazards have reduced comparatively to the previous times since most of the work has been automated recently. The workers engaged in the factories are assigned work to feed the tea leaves into the Curl-Tear-Crush (CTC) machines. Mostly men are engaged in these works. However lot of heat is generated in the factories and thus it is a hazard for the workers there.

As per Section 32 A of the Plantations Labour Act of 1951, 'where in any plantation an accident occurs which causes death or any bodily injury to a worker by reason of which the worker injured is prevented from working for a period of 48 hours or more immediately following the accident, the employer shall send a notice to such authorities in such form as prescribed.' Thus, the employer has to take precautionary measures to deal with the work hazards and ensure the safety of the workers at workplace. Usually it is seen that this aspect is ignored by the management. An even in cases of severe accidents, emergency medical facilities, staff and ambulance is unavailable.

There is lot of use of chemicals, pesticides and others sprayed on the plantation areas. Inhaling those on a daily basis causes cancer and other diseases among the workers. However, low percentage on the table shows the ignorance of the workers on the daily use of chemicals on the plantation area. There is no awareness on such hazard.

*“We have to work in the field from 7 to 11 a.m. and then again from 1 to 4 p.m. carrying huge baskets of tea leafs on their head. We carry a minimum of 30 kgs of leafs every day”.*

The pluckers face problems in working under difficult weather conditions on the plantations all throughout the day carrying heavy baskets on their head resting on their back. Most of the women pluckers develop worst back and spine related problems at a very early age. Moreover, in order to earn incentives, the pluckers try their best to accumulate extra kilos of leafs to earn incentives. Thus, carrying forty kilos and above weight per day during the season time negatively impacts the health of the workers.

#### **3.2.4 Law and Order**

Discrimination of power is clearly visible in the way the system supports the management in any case of injustice meted out to the workers. Woodiwiss (1998) analyses the nature of labour legislations with specific reference to Asia. He argues that the laws must reinforce the promotion of human rights of the workers. The human rights that pertain to labour are amongst the most deeply entrenched. They feature in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and are reinforced by the long-standing conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO), as well as by the more recent United Nations International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights, and Economic, Social and Cultural

Rights (1966). Moreover, they are enforced by the (admittedly rather weak) reporting systems of the ILO and the UN and are also very often repeated in state constitutions and labour laws with the result that they supposedly already enjoy legal protection at the national level too.

In some of the estates where field study has been conducted, it is seen that the police first approaches the management if a crime is reported from the estate. The manager of the estate is first consulted and then after taking permission from the manager, the police intervene into such issues that take place within the estate. If the workers file any complaint against the management of the estates, the police do not file an FIR immediately, they consult the managers first. But when a riot like situation takes place owing to any injustice to the workers, the police is apprehensive to control the mob because they are less in number compared to the agitated mob. The media also portrays the workers as ‘cannibals’ and ‘uncivilized’ when they resort to violent means of expressing their anger. The government usually prefers to remain silent on such issues and intervenes only when the situation goes beyond control.

Apart from the discrimination meted out to the *Adivasi* workers by the management, the state is playing a mute role in protecting the rights of the workers and ensuring that the provisions of the various labour laws are efficiently implemented.

*“In our estate in the year 2003, in a case of sexual abuse of a female worker, at the residence of the Assistant Manager at an estate in upper Assam, the person was not punished but only transferred. There was a case of sexual harassment of a female domestic worker by the Factory Manager at his residence. It instigated mob violence, strike and lock out took place in the estate. The Manager was*

*transferred and not suspended. No other disciplinary measure was taken against the offender. This clearly indicates the discrimination in giving justice to the workers”.*

The above given quote was stated by worker in Jorhat in which an Assistant Manager easily got away without being punished. Such cases are usually suppressed by the management and the convict is acquitted by the court. Thus, the *Adivasi* workers do not get justice and the legal system discriminates them.

The Forest Department of the Assam Government has been involved in extensive eviction drive without any plan of rehabilitation leaving number of *Adivasi* workers homeless, mainly after the enforcement of the Forest Rights Act 2006. The section of the tea plantation workers who are mostly affected by the eviction are the casual workers of the tea estates and the ex- tea garden population settled in the nearby '*bastis*'. Such *bastis* are sometimes situated in the fringes of the forest areas. Hence the Forest Department carries out the eviction drives and many of the families are rendered homeless. They burnt down houses and as the result the families are left with no avenue to seek shelter.

**Table 0-2 Indicators/ Factors of discrimination: Law and order**

Serial Number	Districts	Categories of respondents		
		Male tea estate workers	Female tea estate workers	Trade Union staff and members
1	Dibrugarh	8	10	7
2	Sibsagar	3	4	2
3	Jorhat	2	4	2
4	Golaghat	4	5	4
5	Sonitpur	2	3	3
6	Cachar	1	1	2
7	Kamrup	1	1	2

Table 3.2 highlights the degree of discrimination faced by the workers in matters of law and order especially in the premises of the estates. The management as well as the state play an equal role in oppressing the workers. When there is injustice done to the workers by anyone from the management, the workers are apprehensive to go to the nearby police stations to lodge a complaint. The reason being the police does not write FIR immediately on the other hand they contact the estate managers first and then reverse the case by finding fault with the workers. Thus, there have been numerous cases of workers taking law into their own hands. The media also mostly bring out an image of ‘savagery’ acts on the part of the workers. A deeper analysis would bring up the factors leading to the brutal attacks on the managers and other management staff of the estates.

Another crisis faced by the workers is that a huge amount of wages is deducted from the workers’ earning in the name of PF and electricity bills. There is no question to where their money is spent. The women workers, whose husbands are alcoholics, face great financial problems. All their earnings are spent on the household expenses and yet it is difficult to make ends meet. In the recent past, there have been cases of suicide of some

members residing in the labour lines due to some personal problems, sometimes also for financial burden. A number of estates witness various cases of theft, physical violence among the workers which are discussed and solved in the workers meetings. Some of them are reported to the police. In the case of sexual harassment of the women worker by the Assistant Manager, the case was taken to the management by the union. There is domestic violence in the labour- lines mostly caused by alcoholism.

Children of the *Adivasi* tea plantation workers, living in the nearby villages and *bastis* (settlements) are involved in cleaning some of the parts of the factory unit and the plantation areas. They receive half the wage- rate of what an adult worker gets. Child-labour exists in the tea plantation system, though the management declines such allegations. Children are exploited to a large extent. They prefer going to work than to school for earning a meager amount.

The managers live a luxurious life while the workers cannot afford two square meals a day. They have to live in poverty and hunger on a daily basis. In the year 2006, there was a major conflict for an incident of death of a worker while trying to break a wall. It was a fatal accident of a worker who was involved in work in the factory. The wall collapsed on the worker and he died on the way to hospital. The ambulance did not reach on time. The workers were agitated at the irresponsibility and ignorance of the management and the workers group started attacking the *bunglows* (An expanded independent house with a villa-like architectural design) of the Manager and the Welfare Officer. They somehow managed to escape. There was strike and lock-out was ordered from the management. This led to loss of pay of the workers. This leaves no scope of demanding their rights.

### 3.3 Plight of the Casual Workers

The management exploits them during the season time when they have to pluck leaf but are not given any facility. 'Casual workers' are non permanent workers in tea estates who are employed seasonally in large numbers; especially during the 'season time' i.e. when production of tea is at its peak (approximately from May to October every year). They do not receive any benefits from the estates except few kilos of subsidized ration from the management and daily wages for the period of engagement at work. The casual workers are referred to as '*faltu*' and they feel discriminated both by the management and the permanent workers mostly look down upon them. The casual workers are usually family members, relatives of some or the other permanent workers of the estate or sometimes not. Therefore they stay either at the labour lines in the quarters or are settled in nearby *bastis* (settlements). Even the basic necessities like quarters, firewood and medical facilities are not provided to these casual workers. It is extremely difficult when some casual worker or his/her family member is seriously ill.

**Table 0-3 Indicators/ Factors of Discrimination faced by Casual Workers**

Serial Number	Categories of respondents*	Indicators/ Factors of discrimination faced by casual workers		
		Lack of welfare facilities- housing, medical, firewood, ration, etc.	Lack of casual workers' representation in trade unions and issues unattended	Discrimination in getting work and pay
1	Male casual workers	05	05	03
2	Female casual workers	08	02	04
3	Trade Union members	07	05	07
	<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>14</b>

\* The respondents have given multiple answers

Table 3.3 highlights the major areas of concern for the casual workers. They are found to be discriminated on the above given areas. The respondents who are employed as casual workers have discussed the various issues faced by them. They have brought up a set of similar problems and therefore some of the most repeated and widely faced problems are shown in table 3.3.

### **3.3.1 Lack of Welfare Facilities**

The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences defines labour welfare as ‘the voluntary efforts of the employers to establish, within the existing industrial system, working and sometimes living and cultural conditions of employees beyond what is required by law, the customs of the industry and the condition of the market.’ Welfare refers to the adoption measures to promote physical, social, psychological and general wellbeing of the working population. The main purpose of labour welfare activities to bring about increased efficiency and productivity among the workers, provide a healthy work environment and promote a congenial industrial relations scenario. It is an established fact that labour welfare activities foster harmonious relationship between the management and workers. Ignorance of this aspect leads to industrial unrest, low productivity of the workers, absenteeism.

There are around 333 labour laws in India and a major setback in its efficient implementation is that almost 90 per cent of Indian labour is in the informal sector which is not protected by the labour laws.

The Tea Industry in Assam employs huge number of Child labourers and it remains non-intervened. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986, bans employment of

children in dangerous occupations like factories, mines and others. Children are engaged in cleaning and other factory related work in the tea estates.

The Workmen Compensation Act, 1923 aims to provide workmen and their dependents compensatory payment in case of accidents arising out of and in course of employment and causing either death or disablement of workmen.

The Minimum Wages Act, 1948 aims to provide for fixation, review, revision and enforcement of minimum wages both by Central and State governments, in respect of scheduled employments. To protect the wages against inflation, the Central government has introduced a component of Variable Dearness Allowance, which is linked to Consumer Price Index.

Industrial accidents may occur in a tea factory due to these major causes- chance occurrences, unsafe work assigned without adequate training given prior to taking up the work, inappropriate shielding equipments, disrupted machinery use, insecure storage, overloading, insufficient lighting, insufficient ventilation and recklessness of the workers. Accidents are more frequent in the tea manufacturing units mainly engaged in Cut-Tear-Curl (CTC) processes.

Chemical hazards are caused in the processes like spraying of pesticides and insecticides in the plantation area might cause skin diseases, inhaling chemicals on a regular basis usually results in lung related diseases and others.

Working in tea factories and tea packaging units involves performing hard labour like shifting of heavy goods, equipments, working in heat generated environment in tea roasting units usually gives rise to health problems like injury due to muscle damage, cardiac issues,

cuts and bruises, industrial accidents causing serious injuries. It causes tiredness, stress and burout. These are also some of the significant factors of absenteeism among the tea plantation workers.

The management is always under pressure from the company heads to cut down the cost of production and 'casualization' of the workforce is the most frequently used strategy apart from keeping wages to the minimum, providing next to nothing welfare and medical facilities. Housing facilities are not provided to the casual workers. There is lack of provision for easy access to basic medicines and limited supply of subsidized ration. Dearth of supply of firewood for cooking and other purposes is a major problem faced by the workers. Due to limited supply of subsidized rates of ration to the workers, most of them sell off the procured items in retail prices at weekly markets and shops and the extra money earned by them is spent on purchasing food and other basic goods for the household.

Most of the estates do not provide free of cost medical services to casual workers. There are more causal workers employed in the tea estates in Assam compared to the permanent workers, especially in the season time. The casual workers work equally as the permanent workers, yet they do not get what their basic rights are. Employing more casual workers and keeping the number of permanent workers to the minimum is a cost- cutting strategy of the management of tea estates and companies. The tea companies have to bear less cost of production if they engage casual workers during the season time only and rest of the months they can manage without the additional number of workers. The casual workers can earn only during the season time and save little for the rest of the months in a year.

The management does not have to take care of their medical expenses or provide houses and firewood. Thus the cost of production automatically cuts down. This is a major cause

of developing grudge against the management among one of the most exploited and downtrodden sections of the tea plantation workers- the casual workers. Ration, firewood, housing and medical facilities are provided to the permanent workers only but not to the casual workers who are more in number compared to the permanent workers. The casual workers are involved in various kinds of work like the permanent workers in plucking, pruning, sowing and other factory and garden work mainly during the season time. Few of them are employed during the off- season when there is no production but more of maintenance work. It is the same story in all the tea estates. There was a case of sexual abuse on a Manager who ill-treated a casual woman worker.

*“Few casual women workers were collecting firewood from the tea garden premises when the manager came and started assaulting them; accusing them of uprooting tea bushes for firewood”.*

The women went and complaint to the trade union of the estate. Next day some workers gathered and started attacking the manager accusing him of sexually assaulting the women workers. There was a strike first and then followed a lock-out of around two days. Because of the lock out, the workers had to suffer loss of way. This incident brings out the picture of a larger problem that the casual as well as the permanent workers are facing in the tea estates. There is either no or very less supply/ availability of firewood for cooking. The casual workers are not to be provided with firewood whereas, the permanent workers also complain of non-availability of firewood which is one of the basic necessities of the workers. The management is not doing anything to tackle with this problem. On the other hand, the estate manager assaults workers who are trying to manage on their own.

### 3.3.2 Lack of Representation of Casual Workers in Trade Unions

The casual workers believe that they are discriminated not only by the management, but also by the trade union and the permanent workers. Usually most of the casual workers are family members of the permanent workers staying in the labour lines. However some casual workers who are not relatives of the permanent workers feel left out from rest of the others. They face problems in staying in the labour lines and look after their families since they are not provided with any housing facility. The tea industry in Assam employs more casual workers than permanent ones as discussed above. However, they are not represented in the trade unions in a justified way. Even in the table given previously shows that there are very few casual workers who hold membership to the trade unions. The permanent workers are found to have greater affiliation to trade unions compared to the casual workers. (Sen and Dasgupta, 2009). A probable reason for this could be that since most of the casual workers stay outside the labour lines in nearby settlements, they do not have easy access to organize meetings and discussions. Most of the casual women workers are almost unaware of what is occurring in the estate premises. It is seen that sometimes the casual workers are apprehensive to approach the trade unions to discuss their problems with the management. In the previously mentioned case of abuse on a casual woman worker by the estate Manager, the workers first approached the union and then the mob turned violent and directly attacked the Manager. However it was found that the trade union came to negotiation and the manager was not suspended. Most of the casual workers have to seek work outside the estate for about half the year. They become completely detached for a long duration of time and thus lose interest in actively participating in the affairs of the estate.

During the season time the workers; permanent as well as casual are involved in the production process and are extremely busy. The pluckers earn incentives if they are able to collect more than the minimum quantity of leafs fixed by the management. At that point of time there is hardly any scope for the workers to discuss the issues and problems faced by them. It is during the off season that the workers are more involved in discussing their issues. Most of the unrest between the management and the workers is found to be occurring during the off season. But the casual workers have to seek other employment or work for their sustenance. Some are involved in smaller tasks within the estate, while most of them move out of the estate for work. Thus, the casual workers lose out on the opportunity to actively participate in the affairs of the union. The cause for this can be said to be for their mobility and non-permanency of work and stay at the estate. Few of the casual workers also complained that the trade unions in the estates are dominated by permanent workers. The needs and issues of the casual workers are hardly discussed in union meetings. Therefore, the casual workers feel ignored by other workers and members of the trade unions. They are apprehensive to approach the union and this is reflected on the limited number of casual workers seeking membership to the estates unions. As a result of this, the casual workers are forming a class of their own, where their conflicts are not only with the management, but also with the other permanent workers and trade union members.

### **3.3.3 Discrimination in Engagement in Work and Pay of Casual Workers**

As discussed earlier, there is pressure on the management to cut down on the cost of production and extract maximum amount of work from the workers at low wages. The

process of casualization is taking place at a rapid pace to reduce the expenses of paying wages to the permanent workers. The casual workers are said to be more productive than the permanent workers. The casual workers get a limited period of time to earn for the entire year during the season time and rest of the months they have to either sit idle or explore other avenues of earning so that they can sustain themselves for the rest of the year. Thus, during the season time the casual workers try their best to earn as much incentives as possible, especially the women workers who are involved in plucking leaves. The casual workers contribute immensely to the production of tea while they receive no recognition or benefits from the management for their toil. On the other hand the permanent workers receive regular pay and employment and other benefits like housing, medical and other provisions. As a result of this, the casual workers have identified themselves a class which is one of the most exploited among the plantation workers in Assam.

### **3.4 Implementation Deficiency of Social Security Measures**

The Government of India stepped into the scenario of the exploitation that was and is still being meted on the tea plantation workers especially in Assam after the independence of the country. The Plantations Labour Act of 1951 was first formulated and passed in order to intervene into the various issues faced by the workers and make statutory provisions for the welfare of the workers. The tea plantation industry in Assam in paper makes various provisions for the workers and ideally the management should ideally follow the labour laws and the statutory and non- statutory social security measures. Some of the most significant labour acts that are applicable to the tea industry in Assam are the Plantations

Labour Act 1951, the Factories Act 1948, the Employee State Insurance Act 1951, Maternity Benefit Act, Employee Provident Fund Act, Payment of Bonus Act, Workmen's Compensation Act 1923, Trade Union Act, Industrial Disputes Act and few others. However, these provisions are hardly followed in the estates. The management usually exploits the workers who are ignorant of their rights.

**The Plantation Labour Act of 1951** is applicable to any land used for growing tea, coffee, rubber, cinchona or cardamom with admeasures 5 hectares or more and in which 15 or more persons are employed. It states that it is mandatory for the estates' management to provide the workers with adequate housing, health facilities, education facilities, proper toilets and washing provisions separately for male and female workers, canteen and recreational facilities for the workers and various other welfare related provisions. However, these are not efficiently provided by the management and the workers have to settle down for the minimum that is given to them. The quarters are provided only to the permanent workers while there are more casual workers than the number of permanent workers. Even the permanent workers are provided with houses in bad conditions where their previous generations have been settled down. These houses have no maintenance apart from those of few estates where they are repaired when complaints are lodged by the workers. Drinking water is a major problem in the labour lines in almost all the estates where field study has been conducted. The workers said that in general, there is problem in having access to clean water. The management gives a deaf ear to their demands even when there is an epidemic in the labour lines.

The subsidized rates of ration are provided to the workers to the minimum limit which is insufficient to meet the expenses of an entire family for a week/ month. Because of the

subsistence rate of wages being too low, the workers are bound to procure their share of ration at subsidized rates and sell it at retail prices in shops to earn extra amount of money. Though it is stated as a statutory obligation for the management to provide the workers with firewood, it is hardly provided. In turn, a few estates choose to pay the workers a minimum amount to buy firewood which is inadequate. Most of the estates give excuses of non-availability of firewood stock to be given to workers. Thus, they are forced to consume way less food than what is needed. These factors lead to poor health conditions among the workers. The women are not provided with any separate toilet or washing facilities as stated in the acts.

At present there are chances of the central government to amend the Plantations Labour Act of 1951. The wage component in the Brahmaputra Valley is Rs. 89 per day. There is discriminatory wage structure even within the state. The workers of the Barak Valley tea plantations receive Rs. 72 per day only as their daily wage. The proposed modification for the act is that the wage rate should be enhanced to above the minimum wages. As stated earlier, the management has always been violating the plantations labour act, there is a proposal for enacting a Central Tea Plantations Workers' Wages Act which must be adhered to by all state governments and minimum wages should be fixed by them.

**The Factories Act 1948** advocates mainly three aspects: health, safety and welfare including setting standard on working hours, incentives for overtime, inspection staff and leave. In most of the estates, there are poor medical facilities for the workers. There are insufficient medical and para-medical staff, medicines and other medical facilities. The workers most of the times do not have access to the government hospitals outside the estate. In cases of emergency, the patients are referred to other hospitals rather than being

treated in the estate hospital. In the case of safety, the management appears to be extremely irresponsible. With the growing mechanization of the tea industry in Assam, the management takes little interest in training the workers who are least educated and unaware of the machinery hazards that can occur. Thus, there are numerous cases of accidents that take place and the management is usually unwilling to take up responsibility for the same. Some safety measures like masks, apparels are provided to the factory workers. Welfare facilities are provided to the workers in a limited way. Health Insurance is not provided to the workers by the management. As mentioned above, the workers suffer from poor health conditions and even in cases of emergency, they are not taken care of by the management of the estate.

The section 28 of the Minimum Wages Act gives directions to the state government to give a minimum of the fixed wage structure to the workers. However, it is at their discretion whether the minimum wage is granted or not. The management of the tea estates hardly follow these instructions and thus a central law is required that guarantees a fixed minimum rate of wages for the workers.

**Table 0-4 Implementation of important Labour Laws**

Serial Number	Districts	Statutory Obligations (%)		
		PLA (Housing, education, medical)	Factories Act (health, welfare, safety)	Maternity benefit
1	Dibrugarh	63	65	38
2	Sibsagar	66	70	47
3	Jorhat	53	64	55
4	Golaghat	69	62	34
5	Sonitpur	64	76	53
6	Cachar	57	53	32
7	Kamrup	55	47	38

Table 3.4 shows the loopholes in implementation of the most important labour laws in the estates. Be it multinational companies or Indian owned estates, the workers get very little of what their right is.

The Maternity Benefit leave which should ideally be for minimum 12 weeks is hardly allowed to the permanent female workers. They work upto few days before the delivery of a child and then resume work immediately preceding that when they are supposed to avoid carrying loads and work under the hot sun for long hours. There are numerous cases of miscarriage among the women workers owing to the burden of work they have to undergo to earn for the family. The delivery of the child should ideally be carried out in the estates' hospitals but mostly these cases are referred to outside civil hospitals. The doctors do not want take up the responsibility of taking care of the pregnant women. Ambulances are hardly provided to the workers to need to seek emergency help from the civil hospitals when such cases are referred. Their health and safety is completely ignored by the management of the estates. Only in a few of the TATA and Williamson Magor tea estates, there are proper health, sanitation and education facilities for the workers.

Provident fund is a major issue of clashes between the management and the workers. There is weekly deduction of certain amount from the daily wages of the workers as provident fund. Though the fund is collected and accumulated, it is found that the workers never have access to it even when they are in dire need of it. In cases of huge medical expenses or marriage of the workers' children, when the workers demand for the provident fund amount, the management refuses to give away the amount. These become major causes of grievances among the workers. The workers are of the opinion that the provident fund of the workers are consumed and spent by the management. The management is also supposed to contribute

a certain percentage to each worker fund. Though it has been said that it is done that way, there is hardly any transparency in the financial transactions of the estate. The workers are not aware of what happens to the amount deducted from the subsistence wage. They just undergo the hardship of financial crisis due to heavy deduction from their wages in the name of PF and electricity charges.

During the festive season, usually twice a year, it is mandatory for the management to pay bonus to the workers under the provisions of the Payment of Bonus Act of 1965. As per this act, the minimum percentage of bonus to be paid is 8.33 of the wages upto a maximum 20 per cent. There are numerous cases of unrest during the bonus time as the workers are denied bonus sometimes or are paid less than 8 percent of the wages. Strikes and lock outs are common during this particular time of the year. There is grave exploitation of the workers since the management tries to pay as minimum as possible even if the company incurs huge profit. There is no system by which the workers are given their share of profit earned by the company. On the other hand, they are denied their basic rights of bonus and incentives.

Thus it is seen that though there are various welfare and social security acts that are to be implemented by the tea estates, they are not efficiently enforced by the management. The workers have to somehow exist on the subsistence wage that is provided to them. Due to such exploitation there is growing grievances among the workers and it is necessary channel them through some proper mechanisms of settlement. Here, the role of the trade union becomes indispensable. The trade unions consist of members of the workers' class who represent them in the bargaining process of the estate between them and the management.

### 3.5 Trade Unionism in the Tea Estates in Assam

There was no concept or possibility of workers' expression of grievances earlier. The workers were brought to the plantations in Assam and made to settle down in the estates as groups completely cut off from the neighborhood and other indigenous groups already existing in the state. Exploitation was and is still taking place but the workers were not aware of the extent of the problem. They were submissive in nature, somehow surviving on the subsistence wages provided by the then British estate owners and later the Indian owners. The workers could hardly come in contact with each other and discuss their problems.

#### **Origin of the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS):**

The ACMS came into being under the All India Trade Union Congress. After the Trade Union Act was passed in 1926, post-independence, there was a felt need for a strong labour union among the in factories and other organized as well as unorganized sectors in India. The Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), entered into the plantation sector when on November 1947, trade unions were formed under INTUC in almost 200 tea estates and then expanded beyond. Representatives from tea gardens met in a labour conference in Jorhat in December 1947 and the *Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha* was formed. M.N. Sarma and J.N. Bhuyan were its Joint Secretaries (Guha 1977). The AITUC came into existence on 4<sup>th</sup> May, 1947 in New Delhi. The party took interest in organizing the tea workers into a formal union to safeguard their rights and protection from hazardous work conditions. Congress members like Kamakhya Prasad Tripathi, Bijoy Chandra Bagowati, Omeo Kumar Das, Mahendranath Sharma, took up the first initiative to register the body under the Trade

Union Act of 1926. On 9<sup>th</sup> August 1958, the The ACMS extended its branches to a place named Bordubi in 1958 and later to Tinsukia, Margherita, Moran, Nazira, Sonari, Nagaon, Tezpur, Dhubri, Kamrup and many other places. There are 22 branches, around 150 members of the trade union from each district in Assam and around 600 members in total. It is the main body for initiating the process of bargaining and negotiation between the management and the plantation workers.

The ACMS has certain set of objectives: 'On the applied principles of Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) to establish an order of society which is free from hindrances in the way of an all-round development in its individual members which encourages the growth of human personality and education in all its aspects and goes to the utmost limit in progressively eliminating social, political and economic exploitation and inequality.' Thus, ensuring all round development of the plantation workers, protecting their rights and fighting against injustice and exploitation meted out towards the workers are some of the major objectives of the ACMS.

Apart from the ACMS, the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU) on the ideologies of the Communist Party of India, have influence over some tea estates in Upper Assam.

The Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 also directs and emphasizes the role of the Trade Unions. The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 is the major legislation that guides the administration in the tea estates. Other legislations which are supposed to be followed in the Tea industry are The Provident Fund Act (1952), Bonus Act, Maternity Benefit Act.

Mr. Dileswar Tanti, Secretary, Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha, Head Office in Dibrugarh believes that the management has provided with many facilities though there was excessive

exploitation of the workers earlier. Nowadays the workers class is gaining education and exposure and they are becoming aware of their rights. The workers put forth their demands and complaints usually through the ACMS and the union takes up the issue with the management. The management representative organizations are Assam Branch Indian Tea Association (ABITA), Bharatiya Chah Parishad (BCP) and Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha (ACKS) for the staff workers. The ACMS also analyses and considers the managements' problems and constraints and comes to a mutual understanding after collective bargaining process. A major problem faced by the workers is no good educational facility for their children. The Primary schools are nearby but the M.E. schools are quite far off from most of the Labour lines. So the ACMS has put forward a demand to the management asking for bus facility for the workers' children to have access to higher education. Education among the tea workers brings about a lot of change in the workers' attitude and creates awareness about their rights.

The ACMS has a good rapport with the managements' organisations and grievances are settled through discussions and meetings usually. The All Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (AAT TSA) also instigates the workers to fight for their rights. The management usually tries to meet the demands of the workers as much as within their capacity. It is not like how it used to be earlier. Nowadays there is better understanding between the management and the workers though some level of unrest still exists. The management listens to the ACMS members and tries to solve the problems that crop up. Sometimes both the sides compromise and come to a mutual settlement of grievances. In case of major conflicts between the management and the workers, when it does not get settled through discussions, the case is referred to the Labour Court.

Collective bargaining: This is a method of establishing wages, working conditions and other aspects of employment by means of negotiation between employers and representatives of employees organized collectively. Employee organizations are mostly trade unions. Collective bargaining has played an important part in the regularization and institutionalization of conflict.

Trade Unionism is not encouraged by the management. There are few workers who are members to the ACMS in the estate. The membership to the union is not encouraged in the estate. The workers of this estate are not much involved or active in the trade union matters. Few members go to the meetings held by the trade union. Usually there is no ill-treatment from the management. In case there is any problem among the workers, they directly go to the management. The women in the estate do not take active participation in Trade Union activities. The women workers usually only attend meetings whenever called upon by the TU members. The Trade Union finally took side with the management. She feels that they were bribed to take their side. Women's issues are not dealt with separately. Any kind of grievance taking place is usually settled in a collective way. Collective action takes place in such cases. They approach the management with the problems. Therefore, she feels that the TU is unable to protect their rights and the members are corrupted. The workers put forth their demands and complaints usually through the ACMS and the union takes up the issue with the management. The management representative organizations are Assam Branch Indian Tea Association (ABITA), Bharatiya Chah Parishad (BCP) and Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha (ACKS) for the staff workers. The ACMS also listens to the managements' problems and constraints and comes to a mutual understanding and bargaining. The ACMS has a good

rapport with the managements' organisations and grievances are settled through discussions and meetings usually. The All Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (AATTSA) also instigates the workers to fight for their rights. He says that the management usually tries to meet the demands of the workers as much as within their capacity. There is a trade union in the estate and the matters go through the same. She is a member of the trade union in the estate. There are around 20 members in the trade union of which 7 are women. The Estate Managers are usually under the pressure of the workers' union. The trade union members are active in dealing with the matters of the union. But the management is quite diplomatic while dealing with the problems of the workers. They first assure the union that things will be done according to the agreement but finally issues remain pending and problems of the workers are hardly solved.

The Trade Union ideally has to have a powerful hold over the management. Equal participation of women is encouraged in the Union but the female workers hesitate to become active members of the same. They feel shy to talk in public and also hardly get time for any other work than working in the estate and doing the domestic chores. Five to six members represent the union in times of negotiating with the management. The present members are quite active.

In the recent past, there have been cases of suicide of some members residing in the labour lines due to some personal problems, sometimes also for financial burden. The estate witnessed various cases of theft, physical violence among the workers which are discussed and solved in the workers meetings. Some of them are reported to the police. In the case of sexual harassment of the women worker by the Assistant Manager, the case was taken to the management by the union.

There are monthly meetings of the ACMS members- held in the major towns of Assam and discussion of the various problems of the workers take place. Some cases are also referred to the Labour Courts and others are settled through formal Negotiation process between the workers and management. Another view is that the Trade Union is inactive and usually do not initiate the dialogue between the workers and the management. For the trade union, the president, secretary and other important positions, elections are not held and the management chooses them as per their liking and convenience. There is interference from various political parties and ATTSA. A union should be formed to take up the issues of the workers and act as a medium of communication between the workers and the management. However, the main problem with the trade unions in the tea sector in Assam is that they become instruments of gaining political power and forget that they have to work for the cause of the workers. Many trade union members also come under the influence of the management and become their puppets. Hence, they cannot play any significant role in the bargaining process in the meetings with the management.

Women have always been discriminated in the tea plantations and most of the times they used to be treated as only cheap labour. The managers and the supervisors always have the tendency to exploit and abuse the women workers. The main issue in the management labour conflict is they try to bribe the leaders of the trade union to settle the dispute internally and wash their hands off. She was rigid to stand against these cases of abuse and exploitation of the workers. If the case would have been referred to the labour court, legal action would have been taken on the manager. But most of the times irrational actions of the agitated workers make the situation out of control.

The women are less active in the affairs of the trade union and only few come up with their problems in the meetings of the union. Work in the plantation and at home takes away all the time and energy. The women are also discouraged at home to go out and attend the meetings or any other public gathering for that matter. Many are found to quit the union's memberships due to 'dirty' politics within the union members. The management also pressurizes the members of the trade union to suppress the problems of the workers. There is always a tussle between the management and the workers in which the union members are left stranded.

At present though a union exists, it is less active and the grievances are not settled well. Many workers from the labour lines have joined the Communist Party of India (CPI). Some years ago they gave a *Bandh* and it was accompanied by a strike. The estate was on a lock-out and the workers suffered loss of pay and bonus. At present no other political party operates in the estate. It is the ACMS that is there for namesake. The union body does not function in a transparent way. Mostly, the workers are not at all aware of the union's activities. The members are greatly influenced by the management and do not serve the purpose of the workers.

### **Conclusion**

The immigrant workers from the tribal belts of mainly central and east India have been surviving as a closed group since time immemorial. There are mainly two reasons identified from the data collected from the field study: firstly, they form a group with distinct languages and cultural identity. There has been and still exists a lot of communication gap between the *Adivasis* and the other indigenous groups of the state who consider them to be 'outsiders'. There is lack of empathetic understanding of the

immigrant group of workers as well as indigenous people of the state with regard to the workers. Language difference has been a major block for proper development of communication between these groups. Prior to the massive migration that took place beginning in the eighteenth century, the previous generations of the workers have been undergoing poverty and exploitation because of drought and the land owners. They have always remained at a disadvantaged position without having access to a better way of life. Thus they have always been looked down upon as an 'uncivilized group' and considered to be intruders into the state to take over the fertile land. That notion still continues to exist. The managers of the estates who mainly belong to the dominant groups are usually hostile to the workers and consider their needs and demands as illogical.

The plantation workers have developed so much of grievances against the management of the estate because of the continuous exploitation and discrimination, there is a tendency to violently attack people from the management who symbolize the exploitative figures of the past and present. The growth of the ACMS, AATTSA, CPI in the estates and other parties clearly indicate the present and the ex- tea plantation workers' struggle for identity as a separate class who are far beyond having access to their basic rights and privileges.

## CHAPTER IV

### WORK, WOMEN AND TEA: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF SELECTED TEA ESTATES IN ASSAM

The third chapter titled “Class Formation and Trade Unionism in the Tea Estates in Assam” focused on the class formation among the tea plantation workers in Assam focussing on patterns of migration, retaining their ethnic identity and politics encircling the same.

Tea plantation industry is a labour intensive one which employs lakhs of workers for almost all facets of tea production: planting, plucking leaves, pruning, spraying pesticides, functioning of machines in the factories, feeding the leaves into machines, upto transferring, packaging and others. Employment patterns of most women workers clearly reflect a sexual division of labour that gives men and women different roles in relation to the family and domestic organization.

Since the time of migration of the *Adivasi* workers into the region, the plantation workers have been made to settle in the tea estates in the state. The process of migration of the *Adivasi* community that has been taking place since the colonial era into the prospect plantations was based on factors of pull and push. They were lured into the region with false assurances of good pay and better living conditions. In understanding class in the tea industry in Assam, it is important to understand the gender relations existing in this sector of work and also in their domestic front.

Thus, the present chapter attempts to analyse the gender relations existing in the tea estates in Assam, rigid sexual division of labour at work place as well as at home,

efficiency of the trade unions in dealing with women's issues, lack of welfare and health provisions and legislation for women workers. Women form more than fifty percent of the total workforce of the tea plantation industry in Assam. They are mostly entrusted with particular set of work mostly plucking and pruning which are tagged as requiring feminine attributes and skills; thus establishing gendered division of work in the tea plantation sector. Patriarchal dominance is seen in the plantation industry. The 'planter- manager- *sahib*' symbol is clearly visible among the plantation workers. Discrimination in pay between the male and the female tea plantation workers was prevalent for a long duration of time. Women face various kinds of harassment at work and in the labour lines. Their issues are hardly dealt with by the members of the trade unions or the 'line supervisors'. The unions play a less significant role in seeking justice for the women workers when there is violation of their rights or in cases of abuses. Generations of oppression have almost brought about an acceptance of the gendered injustices prevalent in the plantation industry. There are huge numbers of casual and permanent women workers in this sector.

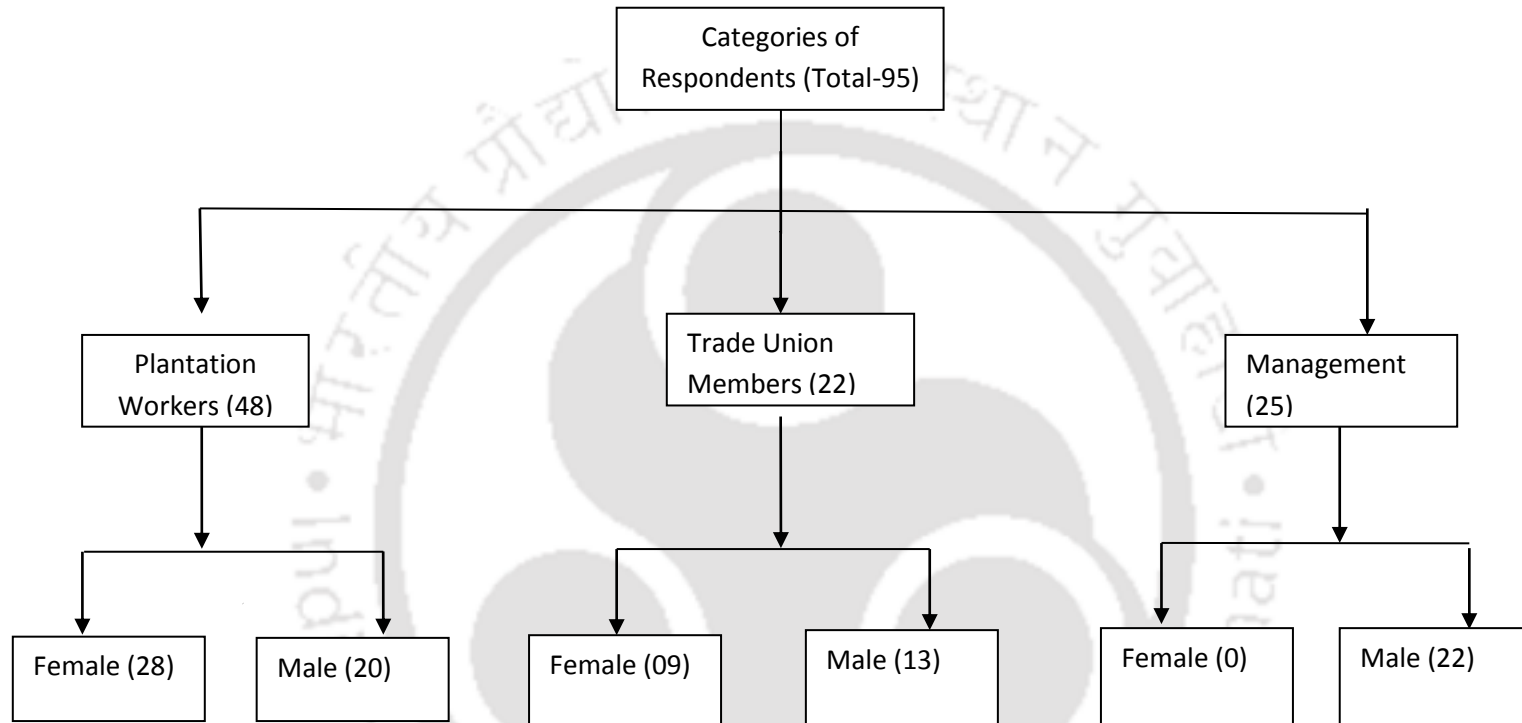
**Table 0-1 Number of Women Workers Interviewed**

<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Districts</b>	<b>Number of women workers interviewed</b>
1	Dibrugarh	13
2	Sibsagar	5
3	Jorhat	4
4	Golaghat	6
5	Sonitpur	4
6	Cachar	3
7	Kamrup	2
<b>Total</b>		<b>37</b>

Table 4.1 shows the number of women workers interviewed for the study from each district. The total number of women workers is 37 of the total 95 respondents interviewed for the study. Women workers who are temporary as well as permanent workers in the tea estates or the factory and hold no membership to the trade unions are 28. There are a total number of 9 women respondents who are members of the trade unions in the estates.

The tea industry employs both skilled and unskilled workers. According to Munro (1999), the concept of 'skill' is a socially defined one. It has been historically witnessed that even in sectors where men's and women's jobs were technically on the same skill level, women's jobs were ranked lower on grading structures. Male workers, employees have a vested interest in maintaining superiority over women in a system where they are already subjected to domination by owners of the estates. It is kind of unacceptable for a male worker to be answerable to a woman supervisor.

**Figure 0-1 Flowchart - Number of Respondents in Each Category Interviewed**



In Figure 4.1, it is seen that there are only male respondents in the Management category interviewed for the study. There are no female employees at the management level and the tea industry is a male dominated sector of work. Very few women workers hold membership to the trade unions though they form a major workforce in this sector and thus their issues are hardly represented in the meetings of the trade unions. Women workers are engaged in the plantation work both as permanent and casual workers.

#### 4.1 Sexual Division of Labour in the Tea Plantation Industry

The plantation industry in general is one which has structured division of labour based on gender. The tea industry in Assam is also no exception to this. Scott and Marshall (2009) define sexual division of labour as a term referring to the specialized gender roles of male breadwinner and female housewife. The work in plantation had very neatly spelt out gender-specific domains where the crucial labour-intensive task of plucking tea leaves was said to be 'quintessentially feminine, requiring nimble fingers'. This particular division of labour by sex is usually associated with the separation of workplace from home which followed industrialization in the West. Research shows that most pre-industrial societies also distinguish men's tasks from women's tasks. Moore's (1995) study on occupational sex segregation highlights two major issues in connection to this. Firstly, that this sex based division of labour prohibits women's participation in certain work sectors that are considered 'stereotypically male jobs'. These jobs are usually highly paid compared to other jobs. Secondly, women's work usually goes unrecognized and unrewarded. Again within Marxist feminism, domestic labour is sometimes referred to as 'reproductive labour'. Such division of labour is considered an important basis for inequality between sexes, entailing some degree of exploitation of women by men. Feminists assert that sex roles are essentially a way of keeping women subservient to men and are the result of a patriarchal society in which men preserve their own self-interest by maintaining a status-quo. In the plantation industry too there has been and still exists sex-based division of labour.

**Table 0-2 Number of Respondents who are Casual Workers**

<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Categories of Respondents</b>	<b>Number of casual workers</b>
1	Male Workers	05
2	Female Workers	08
3	Trade Union members	07
<b>Total</b>		<b>20</b>

Total number of respondents of workers and trade union members' category is 67 including permanent, casual workers and ACMS workers.

The given table shows that out of sixty seven respondents under the workers and trade union member categories interviewed for the study, there are twenty casual workers. The casual workers category includes male, female workers who hold no membership to trade unions. Thus, there are thirteen respondents in this category. The remaining seven are male and female workers who hold membership to trade unions in the estates. There are very few casual workers who are employed during the off season. In- depth interview with the casual workers have brought to the forefront core issues that are faced by the casual workers.

Plantation work is gendered and it is generally seen that tools and machinery used in work are gendered too (Munro, 1999). The use of machinery is a major factor in gendered division of work where segregation takes place on gendered lines. The job titles become very evident of patriarchy in defining the hierarchy of the plantation system. Titles- '*Bura Sahib*', '*Mohouri*' and other similar terms indicate the gendered roles of domination and control. The women workers are primarily entrusted the role of tea leaves plucking. The plucking of tea bud along with the two leaves attached is considered to be an art which requires practice. The speed and the accuracy with which

they pluck the bud and the two leaves is an art which they master over time. In China, history narrates that women who were involved in plucking tea, their hands and fingernails were carefully scrutinized to ensure cleanliness (Samarsinghe 1993). Body oils, perspiration and heat were believed to contaminate the quality of leaf. Notions of purity, contamination and feminine virtue were associated with the brewing of tea. In the 'Tea Ceremony' of Japan also, women play a vital role. The speed of the workers matter to a great extent on the amount of leaves they are able to pluck in a day. The minimum kilo of twenty two is to be collected by the pluckers on a daily basis. Only then they are able to earn the daily wage of Rs. 80 per day. An additional kilo of tea leaves plucked can make an additional income of Re. 1 or a little more only. Most of the women workers are recruited as temporary or casual workers and are engaged in the plucking process. It is done to cut down on the cost of production as they are engaged only during the season time and paid on daily wage basis.

According to Choudhury (2010), when the migrant workers in thousands reached Assam, the local workers along with the tea workers of Chinese origin were surprised that women would also be working for the first time in the plantations. Managers gave a sigh of relief since the women workers could be used like slaves and would be paid much less than the Chinese counterparts. They would be submissive and could not threaten to stop work, like the Chinese and the local workers used to do. Indian prospective tea workers from Central India who are popularly known as *Adivasi* workers or *Coolies* were brought in vessels where rice was transported; in very bad condition with no food, proper stay and basic amenities. Choudhury's study (2010) mentions that most of the times the Chinese were forcibly paired in with the *Coolie* and the local Assamese as well, especially the single men and women. They would produce

children, hence the population would increase, a strategy of British to cut down on the expenses of providing the basic facilities to the migrant labourers and create generation of workers.

Thus family migration was encouraged by the British planters so that the women workers would be beneficial not only as part of the huge workforce but also as reproducing workers who could be employed as cheap labour in the tea estates. The subordination of the women workers is found in almost all sectors of work, according to Chatterjee (2001). Politics of patronage and the construction of the “moral economy” to which the owners and the working class consent to are clearly visible. The patron system is understood to be extremely patriarchal in nature as the planter-manager-*sahib* symbolizes the father figure. The women’s work, i.e. tea plucking is usually underpaid. The plantation system dwells in the underlying belief on the subordination of women workers. As per data collected through interviews in selected tea estates of Upper and Mid Assam, during season time, i.e. during the monsoons when production of tea is at its peak, the women workers are able to earn a lot of incentives based on the amount of extra kilos of tea leaves they are able to pluck in addition to the minimum kilos required to get their daily wage.

The planter-manager-*sahib* symbol is clearly visible through the version of some of the workers interviewed by the researcher. An old retired lady, who worked in Ghogra Tea Estate of Sonitpur district, said “I don’t approve of the misbehavior on the part of the workers to the manager. Earlier people had much patience in work. The managers used to call us by the colour of the blouse we were wearing but we didn’t mind”. This shows owing to lack of education and awareness among the workers. They had very low self-esteem and dignity. The owners and managers were and are still considered to be Gods and the workers are bound to obey whatever they order.

The reasons of huge amount of employment of women in the plantation industry are: (a) the workers' migration from their native place to the plantation areas of Assam with their entire family: thus the members of the family, i.e. men, women and children are all engaged in the plantation work; and (b) the plantation work is gender specific. While women are engaged in tea plucking, men and children, including adolescents are engaged in the maintenance of the plantation, factory, giving pesticides and removing the weeds from the tea plants.

A significant perspective in the *Chargola Exodus* can be said to be a significant outburst of it. As stated earlier, the wages of the tea workers have been extremely low. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1921 there was a gathering for demand of enhanced daily wages of eight annas for men and six annas for women plantation workers. It highlights the discrimination in wages between the male and the female workers in the tea estates.

Responses collected from the field study shows that the control of income is dominated by the male members of the family as the female workers did not collect their own wages. On the economic front, women workers are at a position of subordination. Their wages are handed over to the males (husbands/fathers) by the management. The women worker has to bear double burden of working in the field, as well as in the household. They toil from morning to night as the work load of a tea plucker is heavy and also they have to do all the household chores. The male members do not help them in any of the household work. There is less participation of women workers in the trade union activities and thus issues relating to grant of flexible timings to tea pluckers, better access to basic needs and living conditions are never put forward in the charter of demands of the trade unions.

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they are able to earn a lot of incentives based on the amount of extra kilos of tea leaves they are able to pluck in addition to the minimum kilos required to get their daily wage. An old, retired lady said that she doesn't approve of the misbehavior on the part of the workers to the manager. She said earlier people had much patience in work. The managers used to call them by the colour of the blouse they were wearing but they didn't mind.

The system of recruitment that the British Government adopted as stated earlier were strategized in such a way that could ensure a continuous flow of the *Adivasi* workers from their native places. They were often referred to as '*junglis*'. Therefore, the industrial unrests that are witnessed in the tea estates are a result of such racial discrimination that the *Adivasi* workers undergo in the region and especially at the workers in the hands of the planters, managers and the other supervisory staff at the estates. The dignity of their work is missing as they are continuously subjected some or the other form of discrimination, exploitation and even abuses- both physical and verbal.

Hodson (2001) analyses the importance of dignity when he says that meaningful work is essential for dignity. Dignity is the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect of others. Dignity is realized in the political sphere by striving toward democracy and justice. In the economic sphere, it is realized in the demand for a living wage and equal opportunity. In the workplace, dignity is realized through countless small acts of resistance against abuse and an equally strong drive to take pride in one's daily work. Even where abuse is commonplace and chaos and mismanagement make pride in accomplishment difficult, workers still find ways to create meaning in work and to work with dignity. Failure in this gradually leads to developing grievances against each other and against the management.

That the *Coolie* is ignorant and is easy to manipulate is an inherent belief of the local people inhabiting the place as well as the British planters.

*I am not aware of any other statutory and non-statutory obligation of the management. With the change of the management, there is no change in the functioning of the estate. It does not matter to us at all. 'We' don't even know who the manager is.*

The above given quote was obtained from a women interviewee who worked in an estate in Jorhat District. She says that most of the women workers are hardly aware of what is going on at the management and union level. Lack of awareness owing to educational backwardness of the *Adivasi* workers is one of the key factors that have caused their exploitation in the hands of the planters and the management.

#### **4.2 Patriarchy and Oppression**

Patriarchy in general refers to the power relations by which men dominate women (Munro 1999). The tea plantation industry in general employs more than fifty percent of women workers for its production process. The terminology commonly used by the *Coolie* is *maai-baap* meaning mother and father to refer to the planters, owners or the managers of the tea estates. Chatterjee (2001). Socialist feminism postulates that women are exploited by the capitalist system both at workplace and at home (Smith 1977).

Family recruitment policies were adopted by the British Government which initiated migration of *Adivasi* women and children into northeastern India. However, it was found that most of the single women, unidentified by any relative were viewed to have come separate ways from family ties due to various issues. Gradually a patriarchal system of recruitment of women was adopted whereby only married women or relative of men group

were recruited and if the relative did not approve the woman worker would not be allowed to get into contract of work at the tea estates. This policy reflected a paternalistic control over the *Adivasi* women workers and at the *Coolie* depots, only married women were to be registered that allowed entry to the tea estates in Assam. Even the Tea District Labour Association (TDLA) was instructed to enquire about single women who wanted to work in the tea estates. They were immigrants who were unaccompanied by any relatives (Chatterjee 2001).

Until 1922, the death rate of the immigrant *Adivasi* workers exceeded their birthrate. This was due to hazardous conditions of living, epidemics like cholera and malaria, malnutrition, anemia mainly of women workers (Chowdhury 2010).

The women workers contribute immensely to the growth of this particular industry. However, their problems remain marginalized and they are mostly unable to voice out their grievances. It has been found that the planter-manager- sahib symbol firstly denotes the male dominant management of the plantation industry. Secondly, it has been seen that the exploitation that the workers, especially women folk are considered legitimate most of the times. Chatterjee (2001) defines this as patronage of the workers which is seen to be rolling on for generations. Chaudhuri's study (2014) on witch hunting in the tea estates in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal clearly indicates that oppression of the *Adivasi* women working in the tea estates is not only from the employers or the management, but also equally from the male co-workers, neighbours in the labour lines, line supervisors, family members, *panchayats* and the legal system. The perpetrators of crime roam about freely in the labour lines even if the victim lodges complaint in the nearby police stations or panchayats. Most of the times they are asked to compromise and do not get justice. The perpetrators continue to harass the victims. Many vulnerable women do not get justice be it from the panchayat, police or the

courts. Witch hunting practices are common among the adivasi workers in the plantations in the Jalpaiguri district. It can be assessed that male dominance is even channeled through accusations of witch craft. Thus, for any illness in the labour lines and other settlements, they usually accuse some woman of practicing witchcraft and attack. There are numerous cases of rape and violence against women. A respondent who is a member of the trade union in a tea estate in the Dibrugarh district says that...

*'Women have always been discriminated in the tea plantations and most of the times they used to be treated as only cheap labour. The managers and the supervisors always have the tendency to exploit and abuse the women workers.'*

The women are of the opinion that they have complete control over their wages. This is questionable as it has been found that they have to ultimately end up spending most of their hard earned money on the family's sustenance leaving almost nothing for themselves. The women workers who are mostly employed as pluckers in both permanent and temporary category can earn incentives from the amount of extra kilos of tea leaves that they are able to collect. Earlier the male members of the family exercised direct control over the wages of the income of the women workers, ie their wives', sisters' and mothers' wages as the female workers did not go to collect their wages due to various social restrictions and taboos. They were usually apprehensive to collect their wages and believed it was the male members' right to control their wages. Their wages were handed over to the male members of the family, ie. husbands, fathers, brothers of the women workers by the management. Most of the women workers whose husbands, brothers or fathers are alcoholics have to spend their wages in sustaining the family since the male members spend their wages on procuring alcohol and sometimes even

snatch away the wages of the women workers. Thus, it is seen that the notion that the women workers have complete right over their wages would be a wrong one. The women worker has to bear double burden of working in the field, as well as in the household. They toil from morning to night as the work load of a tea plucker is heavy and also they have to do all the household chores. The male members do not help them in any of the household work. There is less participation of women workers in the trade union and thus issues relating to grant of flexible timings to tea pluckers, better access to basic needs and living conditions are never put forward in the demands of the trade unions.

Linking the history of oppression of the women workers it has been found that there is a sense of acceptance of getting exploited by the workers, especially the women workers. The women even if ailing, were forced to go to work by the *sardars* and sometimes after few days of delivery. Thus, there are a lot of health hazards that are being faced by the women workers. The welfare legislations are not efficiently implemented in the tea estates.

There is rampant poverty among the tea plantation workers in Assam. As mentioned earlier, the *Adivasi* immigrants were made to settle in the tea estates or the nearby *bastis*. In earlier times the women workers were expected to offer sexual favours to the British planters or the managers of the estates. In Chatterjee's study (2001), she mentioned a case where a poor estate worker left his teenage daughter at the steps of the manager's *bungalow* who wore a flower in her hair. It was a symbol of offering to the manager. Many entertainment media also has clearly indicated intimate relationships between the White managers and the *Adivasi* women in the estates. Women and objects of sex have been exploited by the management since history and this trend still continues to exist. Even in the case where the teenage girl has been 'offered' to the

manager, patriarchal dominance cannot be ruled out apart from the exploitation of the working class.

*“Earlier the Sahibs used to call us by the colour of the blouse that we were wearing but we never got offended. Nowadays our people have become very intolerant. I don’t approve of such rebellious behaviour against our Sahib.”*

The above quoted words have been said by an old female worker who has retired from work at a Williamson Magor tea estate in Sonitpur district. This is where a few female casual workers were sexually assaulted by the manager as he tried to stop them from uprooting tea bushes for firewood. A group of workers manhandled the manager as the women complained to the union members. She says that earlier it was fine for the women workers to be (disrespectfully) called by the colour of the blouse they were wearing. However the old lady refers to it as an inappropriate behaviour on the part of the workers while she is attaching no significance to the act of sexual assault on the female workers by the manager. It is seen that due to decades of oppression, it was almost an accepted norm to be treated with no respect by the people from the management and the supervisors at work. Verbal abuse on the women workers is a common phenomenon.

The plantation industry in Assam has been a rule of patriarchy both at the workplace as well as in the social front. Data collected from the field study clearly shows that there is not a single woman who is placed above the supervisors’ level in the tea estates. Though it is seen that most of the labour of tea production is carried out by women workers, there is hardly any scope for them to move up the ladder. Apart from the *Adivasi* workers, the people in the management consist of mainly local Assamese speaking qualified men. At this level there is no single management personnel who is a woman. The vertical mobility of the male workers is visible in the tea industry in Assam

while that of the women workers is rare. The *Adivasi* women get recruited in the work of the estates either as temporary or permanent workers; mostly as pluckers. Some of them are also involved in the pruning and cleaning processes. They have hardly any scope for promotion to an upper level like supervisor or any other. At best a women worker can get to a level of a plucking supervisor in the field whereby she has to supervise the plucking process of the workers engaged in the work. However, it is seen that there is rigidly no scope for women workers to supervise or give orders to the male workers engaged either at the field or in the factory. It is against the patriarchal norms ruling the plantation system to work under the orders of a women supervisor or a manager.

**Table 0-3 Forms of Abuse faced by Women Workers**

<b>Forms of Abuse</b>	<b>From Family Members</b>	<b>From Co-workers and Supervisors</b>
<b>Physical Abuse</b>	47%	05%
<b>Verbal Abuse</b>	40%	83%
<b>Both Verbal and Physical Abuse</b>	13%	12%

Table 4.3 depicts the percentage of women workers who have faced physical and verbal abuses at work and at home. Violence against women is almost an accepted norm in the plantation industry. Of the respondents interviewed for the study, the women workers have nodded to either physical or verbal abuse at work or at home. The table below depicts the forms of abuses that the women workers have to face almost on a daily basis. 83 per cent of the respondents have said that they have faced verbal abuses like use of slangs, indecent comments about their appearances and other abusive words at the workplace. While, 47 per cent of the respondents have accepted that they have faced physical abuses in the form of domestic violence from their spouses or other male

authoritative figures at home. Most the women workers are exploited by alcoholic husbands and usually the control over their wages is a primary reason of conflict.

Violence against women is almost an accepted norm in the plantation industry. Women and honour can be used synonymously among the plantation workers and erotic relations between the women workers and the managers/planters have been condemned in general. Historically erotic relationships between the planters and the *Adivasi* women workers have been almost an accepted yet tabooed fact. Power of the *sahibs* over the workers engaged in his estate would penetrate into every sphere of the workers' lives. There were incidences where to escape the lustful gaze and clutches of the *sahibs*, the women were sent to their native villages in Orissa and Jharkhand to get them tattooed. It was believed that tattoos were considered to be scars by the Englishmen and thus it would keep them away from the women workers who were perceived to be objects of sexual desire. It is a norm in the tea plantation industry that the workers are not supposed to meet the gaze of the managers. Eyelid should be downcast and the distance that is to be maintained between the women workers and the *sahibs* connotes the vast disparity of status and power.

However, there have been incidences whereby plantation workers tried to extract benefits from the managers/planters by offering women as gift or bribe. Certain favours like upgradation of their position at job, other economic benefits were lured through the people in the management by use of *Adivasi* women as objects of sexual desire. In the pre-colonial era as well as following decades post-independence, the British planters and later the Indian counterparts deemed it their right to demand sexual favours from the *Adivasi* women. In Chatterjee's study (2001), the author has elaborately discussed the stigmatized relationships that existed between the planters and the women workers in the tea estates. There are 'white' children living in the labour lines who had British fathers and *Adivasi*

mothers. The women workers were timid and obliging to the instructions of the supervisors and the *Sahibs*. Thus, the planters could claim their sexual rights over them. It was a relation of oppression where the women were objects of desire and exploitation.

Regarding women being the 'honour' of the family and the community, the male members were obliged to offer their 'honour' to the planters in many instances. It could be either the planter's demand or the worker seeking a favour from the planter. Thus, the *Adivasi* women were considered to be objects of sexual desire of the planter/ manager as well as male workers' objects to gain favour from the management. This was an accepted practice in the earlier times though it was stigmatized. In cases of abduction or violence committed by the planters/ managers, they were easily acquitted. Even if they commit murder, they could easily get away with it.

The words 'women' and 'honour' are often used synonymously among the plantation workers and erotic relations between the women workers and the managers/planters have been condemned in general. However, historically there have been incidences whereby plantation workers tried to extract benefits from the managers/planters by offering women as gift or bribe. Certain favours like upgradation of their position at job, other economic benefits were lured through the people in the management by use of *Adivasi* women as objects of sex/ desire. In the pre-colonial era as well as following decades post-independence, the British planters and later the Indian counterparts deemed it their right to demand sexual favours from the *Adivasi* women.

*'There are many women workers in our estate who try to lure the supervisors to escape work. Many casual workers do illicit favours to the supervisors and other sahibs to get permanent jobs at the estate.'*

It is an inherent belief among the plantation workers and the personnel from the management that the women workers are available or open to get into erotic relationships in exchange of certain benefits from the workplace. The above given quote is given by a women worker from Sivsagar district who is currently engaged as a casual worker. She has been striving to get into the permanent payroll of the estate. According to her, there are various politics of work in the estate and usually only those who have close ties with the authoritative individuals working in the higher rung of the estate.

Thus, the *Adivasi* women were considered objects of sexual desire of the planter/ manager as well as male workers' objects to gain favour from the management. There have been instances in other studies and media (movies) where such stigmatized relationships between the planters and the women workers have been showcased. In an Assamese movie named '*Chameli mensaab*' this is clearly evident. This was an accepted practice in the earlier times though it was stigmatized.

### **4.3 Ownership of Property**

Since the time the tea plantation workers in Assam have been made to migrate to this region, they have been residing in the labour lines in the estate owned quarters or are settled in the villages or *bastis* closely situated to the tea estates, in the forest areas or near the borders of the state. They have no land *pattas* (a *patta* is a legal document issued by the Government in the name of the actual owner of a particular plot of land) in their name and thus the concept of land ownership is historically neglected. They trace their roots to the Jharkhand, Chattisgarh areas where their ancestors belonged to. The 'geographical space' to which they relate to for their identity within the state of Assam is limited to the quarters in the labour lines or the small huts in the nearby *bastis*. The workers are made to live in a certain level of poverty from which it is not easy to elevate.

It has been found that there is no concept of ownership of property by the female workers. Geographical space for land ownership is hardly available for the plantation workers. The plantation workers since the time they were made to migrate to the prospect tea estates in this region, they were made to settle in the labour lines. Generations of the workers have been living in the quarters in the estate premises or settled in the nearby settlements popularly known as the *bastis* where they live in small huts or houses. The tea estates extend to vast tracks of forests and the workers live either within the estates or in the *bastis*. Thus they were not aware of property or land *patta* (a *patta* is a legal document issued by the Government in the name of the actual owner of a particular plot of land). The *Adivasi* workers form a patriarchal group and therefore there is no practice of ownership of immovable property share by the women of the family.

Varma (2005) shows that Assam tea garden was not a new avenue for the employment of women's labour and women constituted almost half the workforce. The preference for 'families' in gardens of Assam was most clearly premised on the payment of what was called as the 'family wage', ensuring not just a body of cheap reproducing workforce but also effecting controls over the labour and sexuality of the large number women *Coolie* under the patriarchal structures of the family. However, the possibilities of single, uprooted and rejected women finding their way to Assam under the free recruitment system fuelled into the larger social anxieties about the norms of breakdown of the ideal family and the loss of patriarchal controls over women's labour and sexuality. The increased facilities for emigration led to kidnapping or fraudulent recruitment, and have loosened family and domestic ties, enabling wives and minors to desert their lawful guardians.

#### **4.4 Work Hazards faced by Women Tea Plantation Workers**

The plantation workers have to work under hazardous conditions and there is dearth of safety and health protection amenities in general in the tea industry at large. Women and children face health problems due to rigorous manual labour that they are involved in under hazardous conditions. As mentioned earlier, women workers are mainly employed as pluckers of tea leaves. Thus they have to be in the field from dawn to dusk. A respondent commented:

*'We have to work in the field under the sun from 7 to 11 a.m. and then again from 1 to 4 p.m. carrying huge baskets of tea leaves with its strands resting on the head and weighing on the back. We carry a minimum of 22 kgs of leaves every day'.*

It is evident that the women workers are involved in hard manual labour. Such workload takes toll over their health and therefore most of them face health issues like back problem, weakness due to anemia, malnutrition and others. They develop back and joint pains which gradually takes a toll over their health. Compared to the amount of work they have to perform on a daily basis, consumption of food is almost next to nothing. Most of the times they survive on starch of rice prepared by less quantity of rice boiled in higher proportion of water. The subsidized ration that is ideally to be provided to the workers is usually insufficient to feed the family for an entire week. Thus, the *Adivasi* workers working in the plantations face acute problem of malnutrition and anemia.

The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 aims to provide 12 weeks wages during maternity as well as paid leave. It regulates employment of women in certain establishments for a certain period and after childbirth and other benefits. However, there were instances where women workers were given full pay and a bonus of one rupee per month just before the

period of childbirth to pregnant women. Miscarriages were and are still common among the women tea plantation workers.

The Factories Act 1948 directs the employer to provide for crèches in the vicinity of the factory for looking after infants and young children while lactating mothers can visit them during breaks.

#### **4.5 Health and Welfare Provisions for Women Workers in Tea Estates**

Health and welfare facilities are basic rights of the workers which are to be provided by the management or the owners of the estates. However, it has been seen that the management has been completely ignoring their responsibilities of providing the workers with the basic facilities and health care. One of the primary reasons for non availability of the welfare facilities for the workers is to cut down on the cost of production of tea. The workers are mostly uneducated and are unaware of their basic rights. Thus, they are vulnerable to exploitation in the hands of the management.

The women workers face great problems at workplace due to non-availability of separate washroom within the estate premises, there are no restrooms or shades for them and no drinking water provision for the plantation workers in almost any of the estates where field study has been conducted. Most of the women plantation workers are anemic and there is high percentage of malnutrition among all the family members of the workers. The estates' management along with the medical staff takes no initiative to provide for health supplements like vitamins and iron tablets. There is this underlying belief among the estate owners and the management that if the workers suffer ill health and gradually become unable to perform their duties, there are others available who would take their place.

The Maternity Benefit Act passed in 1961 ensures that women get a minimum of three months of leave prior to post delivery of child. This rule is hardly followed in the tea estates and mostly workers are ignorant of their rights. There are no proper medical facilities and staff in the hospitals of the estates. The workers claim that in times of urgency, there are no doctors available in the hospitals. Even cases of delivery are referred to civil hospitals outside the estate premises and in such times of emergency it becomes extremely difficult and uneconomical to arrange for transportation of patients to town which are usually far away from the estates.

The casual or temporary women workers are the most exploited group. Casual workers in the estates are not provided with any facilities or even the basic medical necessities. There is no provision for housing, firewood and other basic amenities. This indicates a clear sense of lack of responsibility

Health Hazards: tea plucking can be a hazardous work due to the long time duration in which the pluckers have to keep standing with heavy baskets on their back supported through strands on their head. A large number of women workers who are pluckers develop back ache and other related problems and retire at an early age. However they have to undergo financial crisis due to these health problems and therefore strive to continue with work even in worst health conditions. Their health deteriorates and the management is not concerned to provide the workers with adequate treatment. The idea behind this ignorance can be said to be that there are others who would take their place when they are in a condition of discontinuing their work.

#### **4.5 Conditions of Labour:**

Discrimination regarding the rates of daily wages- *haziri* between the men and women workers was practiced till very recent times. While the men working in the factories 36.80

rupees for working in the factory, the women workers would get their daily wage of 44.80 rupees only if they could collect a minimum of 25 kilos of tea leaf per day. It is an extremely strenuous task in hard weather conditions to collect the said amount and more. Even in the cases of leaf pluckers, the men were paid two rupees higher wage compared to their female counterparts (Chatterjee, 2001).

Women workers perform hazardous work in the tea plantation industry. There was a case of sexual abuse on a Manager who ill treated a casual woman worker. Respondents who witnessed the incident confirmed the same.

*“Few casual women workers were collecting firewood from the tea garden premises when the manager came and started assaulting them; accusing them of uprooting tea bushes for firewood”.*

The women went and complaint to the trade union of the estate. The following day some workers gathered and started attacking the manager accusing him of sexually assaulting the women workers. There was a strike first and then followed a lock-out of around two days. Because of the lock out, the workers had to suffer loss of way. This incident brings out the picture of a larger problem that the casual as well as the permanent workers are facing in the tea estates. There is either no or very less supply/availability of firewood for cooking. The casual workers are not to be provided with firewood whereas, the permanent workers also complain of non-availability of firewood which is one of the basic necessities of the workers. The management is not doing anything to tackle with this problem. On the other hand, the estate manager assaults workers who are trying to manage on their own.

#### 4.6 Trade Unions and Women Workers

Trade unions should ideally uphold the rights of the workers. However, it is seen that politics of unionism tends to work in favour of the interests of only few powerful individuals. With regard to the participation of women there has always been an apprehension historically as well as in the present to step into public space. Sharma (2011) in her study on the creation of Assam during the colonial and the pre-colonial period has elaborated on the restricted participation of middle and elite class in the Assam movement. During the early twentieth century women's associations (*Mahila Samiti*) women were encouraged to take part in the Nationalist Movement that started to uproar during that time. However, the *Adivasis* women were considered to be outsiders and thus they were not involved in such activism with the other groups residing in the state. Coming from an isolated existence in the state, it is seen that the *Adivasi* community especially the women workers had an apprehensive attitude towards active involvement in the matters of the union which is male dominated. As mentioned earlier, though the women form major part of the workforce employed in the tea industry, their issues remain marginalized and are hardly represented in the discussions and meetings of the trade unions. Of the total number of 37 women respondents, there were only nine women who hold membership to the trade unions. Thus, male dominance or rule of patriarchy is seen in the functioning of the trade unions. The growth of trade union movement among the tea workers has broken down the isolation of the worker and helped in organized political action, within and outside the plantation. The workers are better aware of their rights as workers and more conscious of their identity as a class.

*“Sangha is a very important and strong body to fight for our rights. However, there is hardly any political participation of women workers in this estate. They*

*are apprehensive to come out of their homes and attend meetings after their hard work at the garden”*

Women’s issues mainly revolve around inadequate health and welfare facilities at the workplace as well as in the labour lines, non-availability of medical staff during emergencies like delivery, harassment faced at work or labour lines by management, supervisors or any male worker, cases of domestic violence which hardly gets reported, work hazards. Involvement of women is limited with membership and in some estates participation in rallies and demonstration. The factors behind this can be said to be lack of time of the women workers, their unwillingness to take part in activities outside their homes and place of work, male dominance in such meetings.

Women workers who constitute more than 50 per cent of the workforce in the tea estates have limited representation in the trade unions. Sarkar and Bhowmik’s study (1998) argues that women workers, who form fifty per cent of the total workforce, remain marginalized in Trade Union. Women’s issues mainly revolve around inadequate health and welfare facilities at the workplace as well as in the labour lines, non-availability of medical staff during emergencies like delivery, harassment faced at work or labour lines by management, supervisors or any male worker, cases of domestic violence which hardly gets reported, work hazards. Involvement of women is limited with membership and in some estates participation in rallies and demonstration. The factors behind this can be said to be lack of time of the women workers, their unwillingness to take part in activities outside their homes and place of work, male dominance in such meetings Munro (1999).

A permanent women worker who is a member of the trade union in her estate under the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) commented:

*'The women are less active in the affairs of the trade union and only few come up with their problems in the meetings of the union. Work in the plantation and at home takes away all the time and energy. The women are also discouraged at home to go out and attend the meetings or any other public gatherings'.*

Women workers consider approaching the trade unions as their last option when other ways do not work out in solving their issues. They prefer to approach the unions only in extreme situations. The trade unions are mostly seen to serve the motives of the political parties, while ideally it should have been the other way round. The unions are dictated by powerful political leaders and the ideologies of the respective parties. Thus, workers' issues are marginalized and given less importance while the primary objective becomes to politicize workers' issues to gain power. The voices of the women workers are few in number and they remain oppressed. And if at all they are recognized, it will be mostly for some political gain.

The issues of the women workers hardly get represented in the meetings and the discussions of the trade unions. Women's issues largely comprises of harassment at work either by the management, line supervisor or any other male worker, domestic violence, non-availability of medical facilities and staff in cases of emergency like during delivery, non-availability of welfare facilities for the women workers at the workplace, issues pertaining to maternity benefit and others. An analysis into what restricts the women workers' active participation in the trade union activities shows that the trade unions are male dominated institutions. It is inherently patriarchal in nature. Thus, the women's issues are not given much significance in the trade unions and the

women workers have an apprehension in going out to attend union meetings in the public sphere.

Though the tea industry employs more women workers and the production process can be accredited to them, the female workers remain marginalized. They undergo both verbal and physical abuse both at workplace and at home. The plantation work is gendered and the women workers remain under hazardous conditions.



## CHAPTER V

### CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES ON INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN SELECTED TEA ESTATES IN ASSAM

Commercial production of tea was initiated and established by the British. When import of tea from China became expensive, the British rulers sought for options of brewing of tea in colonial India. Robert Bruce discovered tea cultivation among the *Singphos*. The East India Company first started initiating the extensive cultivation of tea in Assam. At the beginning tea experts were brought to the region to teach the 'art of making tea' to the local inhabitants. When migration of the *Adivasi* workers started taking place in the late nineteenth century, they were made to settle in the prospect tea gardens and to establish the industry. Chapters III and IV discussed the perspectives of the workers, union members on the process of class formation, trade unionism and how sexual division of labour continue to discriminate women workers in the industry in Assam. The present chapter analyses the management personnel's perspective on labour, control, industrial disputes and employer- employee relations. The estates owned by the British planters, a few were later sold to the local budding entrepreneurs and a majority is still owned either by multinational companies or owners who belong to other Indian states. Thus, the tea estates in Assam and in other states are managed by a hierarchical order which is rigidly defined and is still ruled by the prejudices and management techniques of oppression that existed during the British rule.

*"Managers have anything up to a dozen labourers as their personal, domestic servants. They are made to tie the managers shoe laces to remind them that they are under managerial control and that they are bound to do whatever they are asked."* –(Jones, 1986).

The *Adivasi* population in the region have been referred to as *Coolies* which is considered to be a derogatory term by them. They form one of the most exploited communities in the country and inhumane treatment was meted out to the workers by the British owners, the managers and this trend still continues to exist.

*In 1911 the Head of Government in Assam spoke out against a labour system that, "treated its workers like medieval serfs." Every few years new laws were drawn up in an attempt to impose minimum standards to protect the labourers on the plantations but these laws were largely ignored and unenforced, particularly as the local magistrates were planters. Companies used beatings, fines and imprisonment to keep their workers in line. Under British imperial laws trade unions were forbidden on the estates. Organizers who attempted to contact tea pickers were seen as trouble makers and accused of trespass.*

There appears a sense of fear and apprehension among the planters, owners and management to grant permission for research in their respective estates; especially when it comes to the researcher interacting with the workers. Shifting of ownership of the tea estates from the British planters to the other Indian, local owners, the aspect of welfare of the workers was completely ignored. The provisions of the various legislations to protect the basic rights of the workers were not practically enforced.

### **Ownership and Control**

As discussed earlier, the tea estates in Assam were an initiative of the British Government to curb their dependency on China for procuring tea. Thus, historically tea estates were owned by British army personnel and mostly by the East India Company. The wage agreement made by the Consultative Committee of Planters' Association (CCPA) and the ACMS, was opposed by the All Adivasi Students' Association and is demanded to be

repealed. The AASA has questioned as to how only the afore mentioned two parties can take such a decision. Employers' associations are ABITA, TAI, ATPA and the North Eastern Tea Association (NETA). Workers' associations are- ACMS, Barak Chah Sramik Union, Assam Chah Karamchari Sangha (ACKS), Akhil Bharatiya Chah Mazdoor Sangha and Assam Sangrami Chah Sramik Union.

### 5.1 Racial and Cultural Discrimination

Throughout the history of establishing and working in the tea plantations in the country and the state in particular, the *Adivasis* have been looked down upon and discriminated by the British and simultaneously other indigenous groups in the region. They were and still are considered to be intruders into the region who are originally prejudiced to be uncivilized.

*“The Adivasi workers are savage and thus they need to be tamed. If not kept under control, they will sit on the managers’ head. It is crucial to keep a close supervision on the workers”.*

It is an inherent belief that the *Adivasi* workers are inferior and ‘uncivilized’. The coercive measures of control over the immigrant workers were brutal corporal punishments. There exists certain practices which are categorized as mark of respect towards the *Sahibs* like if a manager is approaching a worker who is riding a cycle need to get off and stand until he passes by.

*“Historically, the British planters and managers of estates exercised coercive powers over the Adivasi tea plantation workers. They were treated inhumanely.*

*Corporal punishment was the mechanism of disciplining the 'Coolies'. There are cases in this estate when a few 'white' managers used to whip those workers who tried to flee away from the estate. At present, the management cannot even think of using such ways of control on the workers”.*

This has been stated by a respondent who is the manager of an estate in Dibrugarh. It is an inherent belief that the *Adivasi* workers are inferior and ‘uncivilized’. The coercive measures of control over the immigrant workers were brutal corporal punishments. The migrant workers were and still are considered to be meek and ignorant. Unlike the Chinese counterparts, the *Adivasi* workers were oppressed and made to survive in minimal wages. At present, the managers are apprehensive to practice such measures of control as it can easily ignite violence and attack from the workers.

In the course of field study it was evident from the body language of the workers that they were fearful of the managers and obliged to their orders like slaves. It was more of a slave- master relationship than an employee- employer one. This leads to grievances among the workers and it erupts in the form of mob attack on the management personnel in various instances in the tea estates of Assam and other tea producing states.

*“The 'Coolies' have no common sense. In a fatal accident occurred when a worker was breaking a wall while he was sitting at it and the wall collapsed. In no time a crowd gathered trying to attack the management officials who were present at the estate office. They could not make a rational analysis of the cause of the accident while they blamed the management for the death of the worker.”*

It has been found that one of the major causes of unrest between the management and the workers is the managements’ ignorance in the times of emergency. In the particular incident mentioned above by the Welfare Officer of an estate in Dibrugarh district of

upper Assam, it can be understood that worker was not given proper training before the worker was instructed to do the demolition of the wall. It is a failure on the management to provide proper training and safety measures to the workers. It was reported that the worker had died as there was no ambulance to the worker to the hospital in this emergency situation. The worker was not wearing any safety gear. Thus, it is evident that the management played an irresponsible role in ensuring the safety of the workers.

The migrant workers were and still are considered to be meek and ignorant. Unlike the Chinese counterparts, the *Adivasi* workers were oppressed and made to survive in minimal wages. Traditionally they were bought through contractors and the owners/ planters made sure that none of the bought labourer could escape from the estates. Thus, they were brutally punished when they attempted to exit the exploitative system in the plantations. Earlier the managers or the *sahibs* of the estates used whipping and other brutal forms of corporal punishment to keep the workers under their foot. The practice of inhuman treatment meted out to the workers continued for decades and even when the Indian nationals took over the estates as Managers, they continued to treat them in the same way. The rise of unionism in the estates however, brought about a leash that controls the behavior of the management towards the workers. Thus, the management staffs, in the present scenario have in their back of their mind, the consequences of abusing any worker. This however, cannot wipe away the inherent tendency to behave discriminatorily against the 'Coolies'.

*“These workers are involved in spending a whole lot of their income on religious and cultural activities. They ask for their provident fund to bear the expenses of pujas, birth and death ceremonies and ‘phool vivah’ which refers to the rites performed when a girl attains puberty. While they spend their hard earned income*

*on these ‘insignificant’ rituals and celebrations, they are left with almost nothing during the times of emergency like illness or for education of the children.”*

A major cause of conflict between the management and the workers is the non grant of provident fund amount when demanded by the workers. It gives rise to a lot of grievances among the workers. The *Adivasis* in the state have their distinct cultural identity and practices. The prejudiced and discriminatory attitude of the other ethnic groups and local inhabitants of the region towards the plantation workers were evident in making a mockery of their cultural norms and rituals. It is the workers’ basic right to practice the ‘rites of passage’ that they hold great significance; while the management rationalizes the non grant of the provident fund amount for such rituals saying that they should not be spending their savings on such unnecessary ‘merry- making’. Rather they should focus on saving for their children’s education or emergency medical situations.

Keeping in mind the discriminatory attitude of the management personnel towards the tea plantation workers, the next section analyses the patterns of conflict and industrial relations scenario in the tea estates in Assam.

## **5.2 Patterns of Industrial Relation in the Tea Estates in Assam**

The term industrial relations commonly denotes ‘employer-employee relations’, in both organized and unorganized sectors of the economy. Industrial relations consists of both conflict and cooperation. In the case of the tea industry in Assam, factors like technology, labour policy, politicization of trade unions, basic management philosophy etc. laws, rules, regulations, agreements, verdicts or decisions of the judiciary, customs and traditions, as well as the policy framework provided by the government dictate the norms of industrial relations.

Arnold's study (1980) on industrial violence in Colonial India argues that the phenomenon of industrial violence has been occurring despite laws being formulated and implemented. However, the cases have been mostly ignored putting the blame on the workers as their acts of irresponsibility and immaturity. The author tries to analyse the factors behind such violence in the industries. The author says that it is not surprising that an attitude of racial contempt so widespread among the European community, so ineffectively punished by the courts, should infect industrial relations. Across this linguistic and cultural divide, it was more than usually difficult in early industrial capitalism for workers to communicate their grievances and receive a tolerant response. These notions can be perceived in the violent industrial relations in Assam's tea industry as well.

This employer- employee relation in the tea estates include collective bargaining, disciplinary procedures, grievance redressal machineries, dispute settlement machineries, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, adjudication, etc. At the same time some other methods such as strikes, lock-outs, suspension of works, lay-offs and retrenchments are also some of the methods of industrial relations. Keeping in mind the discriminatory and exploitative attitude of the exploitative nature of the management towards the tea workers, include matters pertaining to employment conditions like pay, working hours, leaves, health, safety and disciplinary measures, etc. The contents also include the voluntary and statutory welfare activities, workers' participation in management, and finally a healthy and cooperative working environment.

The consultative management system is not applicable to the tea industry of Assam. The growth of labour movement, various legislations in favour of the workers and consolidation of the trade union movements have led towards this style of management. This system believes in the communication with the workers and their unions. This system also undertakes considerable welfare activities and allows considerable degree of

independence, rights, and privileges to the workers. The workers and the unions are considered matured enough to express their views and are also given considerable importance.

### **5.3 Parties of Industrial Relations in the Tea Estates in Assam**

An industrial relations system is made up of certain institutions, which are popularly known as parties or 'actors' of the system. In all developed and developing economies, these 'actors' are the workers and their associations (trade unions), employers and their federations (represented by management), and the government. The collective efforts of these actors determine the output of the industrial relations system, which largely consists of the rules, regulations, procedures, statutes, relating to industries. In the context of the tea industry in Assam, the three key players in the phenomenon of industrial relations are:

#### **5.3.1 Workers and Trade Unions**

The Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) is the main body under which the trade unions of the estates are registered. Apart from ACMS, some unions are influenced on the ideologies of the CPI (M). Historically, since the advent of tea industry, the workers were forced to work in an alienated, monotonous, unhygienic work environment where their activities are closely monitored and controlled by the managerial personnel. In most all the estates, there is a tendency to exploit the workers and deprive them of their rights. As a result, the workers formed associations to protect their rights and to fight against the gross exploitation. Unionism in the tea estates is a common phenomenon. However, the efficiency of the trade unions is being questioned by the workers. In India, the right to form union has been made statutory under the Trade Union Act, 1926. These unions have

become the part of the political institutions and they usually operate under the ideological guidance of the political parties with which they are associated.

### **5.3.2 The Management**

Another party in the system of industrial relations is the employers who are represented by the management. The owners and the management personnel of the tea estates constitute the management as a whole. The owners, Managers, Assistant Managers, Factory Managers, Welfare Officers and Assistant managers of the estate are considered to be a part of the 'Management' category. They not only provide jobs to the workers but also decide the terms and conditions for doing the job. There are number of systems through which they may run the industries. The nature of the industrial relations is generally influenced by these systems.

The tea industry in Assam functions under the Exploitative Authoritative System – In this system the workers are treated more like a commodity. Their activities were strictly monitored and controlled. In the extreme cases, the workers were tremendously exploited which results in a lot of workers' grievances against the management. Though the tea industry has undergone changes in the ownership of estates, the authoritarian system of management continues to exist. It is because of the underlying belief that the *Adivasi* workers need to be kept under control otherwise they would either flee the estates or not do their duties efficiently at work. This management system has often led to the unhealthy labour-management relation and even conflict between the parties. Evidently, this style has encouraged the growth of revolutionary trade unions. Thus, in the case of the tea industry in Assam, the workers united to fight against the exploitative authoritarian system of management.

The relationship between the management and trade unions is indispensable in understanding the industrial relations scenario in the tea industry in Assam. According to the Marxist perspective, (Bhowmik, 2012), there is a basic contradiction between labour and capital. Labour is usually at a disadvantaged position whereby it had to bargain for their wages with the employer. Trade unions are a product of Industrial Revolution. Industrialization in India started under the British rule by 1850. Allan Flanders (1970) stated that trade unions arose out of the need to protect workers. Theory did not play a role in its formation. They have always played key role in production and distribution process.

Trade Unions and Interference from political parties: Trade Unions Political parties assert great influence on the trade unions of the tea estates. From the field study it has been found that the estates situated in Upper Assam's districts like Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Sivsagar and Golaghat have major influence of the political party at power in the region. For instance, during the field study, Congress was at power in the selected districts and it was seen that the local leaders of the party exerted pressure on the tea estate managements to employ the wards of the tea workers as office staffs, demanded welfare facilities and other educational schemes for the children living in the labour lines.

The style of management in the tea estates in Assam is authoritarian in nature. However, in the present times there seems to be turmoil and the oppression of the management is being rejected by the workers' unions vehemently. The consultative management system – The growth of labour movement, various legislations in favour of the workers and consolidation of the trade union movements have led towards this style of management. This system believes in communication with the workers and their unions. This system undertakes considerable welfare activities and allows considerable degree of independence, rights, and privileges to the workers. The workers and the

unions are considered matured enough to express their views and are also given considerable importance.

### **5.3.3 The State or the Government**

In the system of industrial relation in any country, the government plays a very crucial role. Historically, it has been observed that till 19<sup>th</sup> century the government used to adopt the policy of *laissez faire*, i.e. it did not interfere in the relationship between the employers and the employees if it did not become the law and order problem of the society. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the government was forced to introduce some legislations regarding working conditions, wage payment, compensation arising out of the work related accidents, injury and deaths.

In the early forties of the last century, the government started to emphasize on the need for intervention on the industrial relationship in the form of various legislations and also through the presence of government officials on the various bodies formed to maintain the relationship. The two interested parties of the industrial relation i.e. the management and the workers should work together with cooperative attitude for the mutual benefit. However, due to the involvement of economic interests, the goals for the two parties sometime become conflicting and at that point, the government of the country must intervene to reach an amicable settlement. Moreover, the workers are assumed as the weaker of the two parties and in a developing country like India, there exist many examples of the exploitation of the workers. The government has the sacred duty of protecting the citizens of the country from any kind of exploitation. It is interesting to note that with the liberalization and globalization, the regulatory role of the government is becoming more complex and crucial with the passage of time.

In regulating the conditions of work in the tea plantations, the State has always played a minimal role. In British India, the tea estates were established for large scale commercial production of the product in the region under the East India Company. Huge quantity of tea was exported to Britain. While the conditions of work were pathetic, the government focused only on the quantity of production and completely ignored the welfare aspect of labour. Aspects such as occupational hazards, occupational diseases, basic medical facilities, housing, sanitation, education and protection of human rights of the workers were not at all considered as important issues to be dealt with by the government. Pre Independence India witnessed the passing of the Plantations Labour Act in the year 1951. However, provisions like housing and medical facilities were completely ignored. The Maternity Benefit Act which regulates the working conditions and leave of expecting mothers compulsorily provides for a total of twelve weeks of leave before and after the delivery of a child. It is evident from field study that the amount of actual grant of leave under the maternity benefit is quite lesser. The management violates the rules/ provisions of the act. In most cases, the women workers get back to work immediately after delivery or continue to get engaged in burdensome work upto the later stages of pregnancy resulting in miscarriages. In the cases of abusive treatment of the workers in the hands of the management personnel hardly any action is taken against the offender.

### **Disciplinary Action**

Misconduct or indiscipline in any establishment may occur due to a number of reasons such as economic, political, psychological, or social. The disciplinary action taken against such misconducts must be based on certain principles.

- (i) All enquiries and disciplinary actions must follow the principle of natural justice. Persons who have direct or indirect interest in the outcome of the enquiry should not

conduct the enquiry. An individual should not be held guilty unless proved through the enquiry.

- (ii) The enquiry or disciplinary action should follow the principle of impartiality or consistency. In case of identical types of misconducts and indiscipline in identical circumstances there should not be any difference in the disciplinary actions taken.
- (iii) The disciplinary actions must follow the principle of impersonality and consistency. The actions based on such principle are objective, rational, and not taken on emotional ground.
- (iv) The disciplinary action must have provision for defending the offender.

#### **5.4 Problems faced by the Management in the Tea Estates in Assam**

It is a crisis situation in the tea estates in Assam as the management is facing huge manpower crunch. It is a growing problem in the tea industry in Assam. As mentioned earlier, the *Adivasi* workers who were made to migrate into to the prospect tea estates in the region under hazardous conditions and were made to settle in the forest areas. The migrant groups were engaged in cleaning the jungles and cultivate tea for export to Britain and consumption in British India.

##### **5.4.1 Shortage of Quality Labour**

Earlier it was a system of family recruitment where families were made to migrate so that there are fewer tendencies of the *Adivasi* workers to leave the job. It was also a strategy of the British to cut down on the cost of production as they introduced the system of 'family wage'. However, in the recent times the tea industry in Assam has been facing acute shortage of workers due to high level of attrition among the plantation workers. There is

both absenteeism and attrition in the tea estates. The permanent workers who are provided with housing facilities in the labour lines, have their bases there while they move out of the estate in search of work and get engaged in daily wage work outside the estate. The various avenues of earning daily wages out of the plantation work include construction related work, getting engaged in domestic work in households of nearby towns and other help them earn more in comparison to what they could by working in the plantation, either in field or in the factory. Thus, this is leading to high absenteeism of workers in the tea estates. It is resulting in low productivity of the workers; especially the permanent workers who are in the company's payroll. The casual workers on the other hand, are extensively engaged in the plantation work mainly during the 'season time'. They are said to be the more efficient in their work compared to the permanent workers as they are burdened by the obligation that they have to earn maximum during the 'season time' so that they can sustain for the entire year. This is true mainly for the workers who are engaged as pluckers during the said period of time as they get incentives for plucking extra amount of leaves per day, i.e. beyond 22 kgs. Per day, they get 1.50 per kg. The respondents from the management category believes that the government provides with various welfare schemes for the BPL families and thus the workers extract maximum benefits from the same. The various construction projects that is being carried out in the towns close to the tea estates are opportunities for the tea workers to get engaged in and earn much more compared to the daily wages in the plantations.

There is a trend of 'reverse migration' that is being witnessed in the tea industry in Assam. The tea estates in Assam have been facing major economic crisis since almost a decade. As stated earlier, the *Adivasi* workers were made to migrate into the region to establish the tea estates in the nineteenth century. Since then they have been settled in the state in the tea estates, i.e. in the labour lines or in the nearby settlements known as *bastis*. Their

standard of living is low and there is rampant poverty due to the minimal wages that they are entitled to. It has been found that even the statutory welfare measures are not taken by the management of the estates as put forth under the Plantations Labour Act 1951 and the Factories Act 1948. Even basic medical and educational facilities are ignored by the management. After the growth of unionism among the tea plantation workers in Assam, the owners and management have been pressurized to take care of the basic facilities that need to be provided to the workers. As there is seen to be a slight improvement in the educational facilities that are provided to the children of the workers, like establishment of primary schools within the estates, transportation to schools and colleges situated outside the estates, etc, there is seen to be a change in the perspective of the workers' children. Even most of the plantation workers do not wish to engage their children in the estates' work. The All Assam Tea Tribes Students Association and other students' body try to exercise control over the recruitment of staff for official work in the estates. Their demand is that the educated children of the plantation workers should be given priority to be recruited as staff in the estates. In most of the cases they are given preferences as stated by the management. However, there are unrests taking place in the estates if and when such demands are not fulfilled. The argument that the management places is that in most of the cases they do not fulfill the educational qualification that is required to suit a particular job profile. Also it is seen that most of the workers children prefer to work outside the plantation system and seek opportunities in other sectors. Thus, there is that there is a trend of reverse migration whereby the present generation of the s are undergoing occupational mobility and shifting to urban areas within as well as outside the state. They are seeking avenues of earning outside. This is contributing to the labour crunch that the tea industry in Assam has been facing.

## ***Retrenchment***

Organizations in order to cut down excessive overhead expenses to continue their operations or sustain in the competitive market, reduce manpower through new policies and strategies.

### **5.4.2 Reduced Productivity of the Industry**

The management is of the opinion that the permanent category of the tea plantation workers is showing a declining trend in their productivity level. Absence of adequate motivational factors like monetary and welfare are impacting the productivity of the workers. The permanent workers who are in the company payroll are at an advantaged position as they get all the welfare facilities like housing, medical, subsidized ration, firewood, bonus and others. On the other hand, it has been seen that the casual workers are more productive and efficient in their work. Casual workers, as mentioned earlier, are temporary workers who are not in the company payroll but are mostly employed in the season time when production is at the peak. They try to earn maximum during their engagement at the estate work for the few months. It is so mainly because they have to look for alternative sources of revenue during the off season. Thus, the casual workers are more productive and they try to earn maximum incentives during their engagement at the estate work.

Reduced productivity is one of the major causes of retrenching workers. The management is of the opinion that the permanent category of the tea plantation workers is showing a declining trend in their productivity level. Absence of adequate motivational factors like monetary and welfare are impacting the productivity of the workers. The permanent workers who are in the company payroll are at an advantaged position as they get all the welfare facilities like housing, medical, subsidized ration, firewood, bonus and others.

### 5.4.3 Problem of Absenteeism among the Plantation Workers

It is a crisis situation in the tea estates in Assam as the management is facing huge manpower crunch. It is a growing problem in the tea industry in Assam. As mentioned earlier, the workers who were made to migrate into to the prospect tea estates in the region under hazardous conditions and were made to settle in the forest areas. The migrant groups were engaged in cleaning the jungles and cultivate tea for export to Britain and consumption in British India. Earlier it was a system of family recruitment where families were made to migrate so that there are fewer tendencies of the *Adivasi* workers to leave the job. It was also a strategy of the British to cut down on the cost of production as they introduced the system of ‘family wage’. However, in the recent times the tea industry in Assam has been facing acute shortage of workers due to high level of attrition among the plantation workers. There is both absenteeism and attrition in the tea estates. The permanent workers who are provided with housing facilities in the labour lines, have their bases there while they move out of the estate in search of work and get engaged in daily wage work outside the estate. The various avenues of earning daily wages out of the plantation work include construction related work, getting engaged in domestic work in households of nearby towns and other help them earn more in comparison to what they could by working in the plantation, either in field or in the factory. Thus, this is leading to high absenteeism of workers in the tea estates. It is resulting in low productivity of the workers; especially the permanent workers who are in the company’s payroll. The casual workers on the other hand, are extensively engaged in the plantation work mainly during the ‘season time’. They are said to be the more efficient in their work compared to the permanent workers as they are burdened by the obligation that they have to earn maximum during the ‘season time’ so that they can sustain for the entire year. This is true mainly for the workers who are engaged as

pluckers during the said period of time as they get incentives for plucking extra amount of leaves per day, i.e. beyond 22 kgs. Per day, they get 1.50 per kg. The respondents from the management category believes that the government provides with various welfare schemes for the BPL families and thus the workers extract maximum benefits from the same. The various construction projects that is being carried out in the towns close to the tea estates are opportunities for the tea workers to get engaged in and earn much more compared to the daily wages in the plantations.

There is a trend of 'reverse migration' that is being witnessed in the tea industry in Assam. The tea estates in Assam have been facing major economic crisis since almost a decade. As stated earlier, the *Adivasi* workers were made to migrate into the region to establish the tea estates in the nineteenth century. Since then they have been settled in the state in the tea estates, i.e. in the labour lines or in the nearby settlements known as *bastis*. Their standard of living is low and there is rampant poverty due to the minimal wages that they are entitled to. It has been found that even the statutory welfare measures are not taken by the management of the estates as put forth under the Plantations Labour Act 1951 and the Factories Act 1948. Even basic medical and educational facilities are ignored by the management. After the growth of unionism among the tea plantation workers in Assam, the owners and management have been pressurized to take care of the basic facilities that need to be provided to the workers. As there is seen to be a slight improvement in the educational facilities that are provided to the children of the workers, like establishment of primary schools within the estates, transportation to schools and colleges situated outside the estates, etc, there is seen to be a change in the perspective of the workers' children. Even most of the plantation workers do not wish to engage their children in the estates' work. The All Assam Tea Tribes Students Association and other students' body try to exercise control over the

recruitment of staff for official work in the estates. Their demand is that the educated children of the plantation workers should be given priority to be recruited as staff in the estates. In most of the cases they are given preferences as stated by the management. However, there are unrests taking place in the estates if and when such demands are not fulfilled. The argument that the management places is that in most of the cases they do not fulfill the educational qualification that is required to suit a particular job profile. Also it is seen that most of the workers children prefer to work outside the plantation system and seek opportunities in other sectors. Thus, there is that there is a trend of reverse migration whereby the present generation of the *Adivasis* are undergoing occupational mobility and shifting to urban areas within as well as outside the state. They are seeking avenues of earning outside. This is contributing to the labour crunch that the tea industry in Assam has been facing.

### ***Absenteeism***

There is growing absenteeism among the workers and productivity is being adversely affected. Absenteeism in the plantations can be attributed to various factors like seeking employment in other sectors outside the plantations, alcoholism among the workers, health issues caused due to ignorance and others. The workers reside in the estate quarters but prefer to work in other sectors outside the estate where they earn more than what they would earn working in the estate. The population in the estate; labour line has increased but the productivity has remained stagnant. Thus, there is growth in the human resources but not in production. When there arises some problem in the estate, it usually takes the form of strikes, gheraos and lock-outs.

**Alcoholism** is leading to various problems and absenteeism at work is one of the most significant one. There are mainly three reasons for this: poor health, alcoholism and preference to work outside the estate as daily wage labourers. Mal nutrition due to poverty is

a major issue. They are unwilling to spend on food items but spend on other items and alcohol.

*“Alcoholism is a major issue among the tea plantation workers. It is one of the main causes of their absenteeism at work. Domestic violence in the labour lines is a common phenomenon cause of which is again alcoholism. It is extremely dangerous for the management and other staff members to go around the estate premises late in the evening. Under the influence of alcohol, the workers have the tendency to attack us.”*

Absenteeism is a growing problem at the estates and alcoholism is one of the major factors of the workers remaining absent. Health deterioration and illness form a major cause of absenteeism among the plantation workers. The workers have very poor nutritional habits. It adversely affects the health and performance at work thus negatively impacting the productivity of the estate.

### **Attrition**

The management fails to understand and accept the fact that it is their obligation to take responsibility of the workers' health, welfare and safety measures statutorily as well as on non-statutory grounds. This ignorant attitude of the management towards shirking statutory as well as non- statutory compliances contributes to the stagnancy of the workers' "quality of work-life". The natural cause for this low employee concern by the management gives rise to workers job dissatisfaction. Lack of competitive wage acts as a catalyst to the job dissatisfaction among the mass workers in tea plantation which results into high attrition.

Government policies and schemes have negatively impacted the productivity and commitment of the plantation workers with regard to their work. The NREGA and Below Poverty Line (BPL) facilities have been responsible to pull out workforce from the estate's

work and they seek opportunities outside. This is a consequence of low wages given to the tea plantation workers in Assam compared to their counterparts in the neighboring state. Thus, they look for avenues of earning outside the state.

It is a crisis situation in the tea estates in Assam as the management is facing huge manpower crunch. It is a growing problem in the tea industry in Assam. As mentioned earlier, the *Adivasi* workers who were made to migrate into to the prospect tea estates in the region under hazardous conditions and were made to settle in the forest areas. The migrant groups were engaged in cleaning the jungles and cultivate tea for export to Britain and consumption in British India. Earlier it was a system of family recruitment where families were made to migrate so that there are fewer tendencies of the *Adivasi* workers to leave the job. It was also a strategy of the British to cut down on the cost of production as they introduced the system of 'family wage'. However, in the recent times the tea industry in Assam has been facing acute shortage of workers due to high level of attrition among the plantation workers. There is both absenteeism and attrition in the tea estates. The permanent workers who are provided with housing facilities in the labour lines, have their bases there while they move out of the estate in search of work and get engaged in daily wage work outside the estate. The various avenues of earning daily wages out of the plantation work include construction related work, getting engaged in domestic work in households of nearby towns and other help them earn more in comparison to what they could by working in the plantation, either in field or in the factory. Thus, this is leading to high absenteeism of workers in the tea estates. It is resulting in low productivity of the workers; especially the permanent workers who are in the company's payroll. The casual workers on the other hand, are extensively engaged in the plantation work mainly during the 'season time'. They are said to be the more efficient in their work compared to the permanent workers as they are burdened by the obligation that they have to earn

maximum during the 'season time' so that they can sustain for the entire year. This is true mainly for the workers who are engaged as pluckers during the said period of time as they get incentives for plucking extra amount of leaves per day, i.e. beyond 22 kgs. Per day, they get 1.50 per kg. The respondents from the management category believes that the government provides with various welfare schemes for the BPL families and thus the workers extract maximum benefits from the same. The various construction projects that is being carried out in the towns close to the tea estates are opportunities for the tea workers to get engaged in and earn much more compared to the daily wages in the plantations.

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work. The All Assam Tea Tribes Students Association and other students' body try to exercise control over the recruitment of staff for official work in the estates. Their demand is that the educated children of the plantation workers should be given priority to be recruited as staff in the estates. In most of the cases they are given preferences as stated by the management. However, there are unrests taking place in the estates if and when such demands are not fulfilled. The argument that the management places is that in most of the cases they do not fulfill the educational qualification that is required to suit a particular job profile. Also it is seen that most of the workers children prefer to work outside the plantation system and seek opportunities in other sectors. Thus, there is that there is a trend of reverse migration whereby the present generation of the *Adivasis* are undergoing occupational mobility and shifting to urban areas within as well as outside the state. They are seeking avenues of earning outside. This is contributing to the labour crunch that the tea industry in Assam has been facing.

#### **5.4.4 Increased Competition**

Expansion of the market for Assam tea has been taking place since the commercial production of tea in the nineteenth century by the British Empire. Globalization refers to the cross-national flows of goods, services, capital, people, technology, ideas and culture (Ritzer, 2007). Since the period of New Economic Policy of 1991 in India, Assam tea has been facing tough competition from countries from other tea producing countries from which tea is being exported in lesser price. The synergy of sociology and economics takes an important place here. Beteille (2010) has brought up significant relationship between the two disciplines. He has stated that perception of the Indian economy and society has been analyzed in connection to the changes in the society. Assam tea majorly contributes both to the domestic as well as international consumption of tea. Traditionally tea estates

in India were owned by the British and gradually few local entrepreneurs started establishing tea estates. At present tea estates in the state are owned by multinational companies and individual owners residing within or outside the state; mostly based in West Bengal. They own tea estates in West Bengal as well as in Assam. The major multinational companies that own multiple numbers of tea gardens in Assam are the Brook Bond India Pvt. Ltd., Amalgamated Plantations Pvt. Limited (TATA Group), Williamson Magor- Mc Leod Russel, Hindustan Lever Ltd., Lipton India Export Ltd., Duncan Tea Company etc.

Globalization, which plays a key role in heightening mobility of goods, services and technologies, it has been found that comparatively there is slower pace of labour migration. Migration in the context of globalizing forces: Traditionally, the forces that regulated migration flows were conveniently categorized as ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. The ‘push’ factors are in relation to motivations of migrants and difficulties faced in the place of habitat. Example are- wars, flood, famine, political, social and economic disruptions. In the case of tea industry in Assam, migration of labour was instigated by the shortage of workers which is a ‘pull’ factor long before the phenomenon of globalization started. They were lured with false assurances to migrate into the region.

**Table 0-1 International Price of Tea Exported From The Major Tea Producing Countries**

Year	International price (US\$/Kg)					
	India	Bangladesh	Sri Lanka	Indonesia	Kenya	Limbe
2010	2.29	2.61	3.28	1.82	2.54	1.58
2011	2.23	2.14	3.25	1.61	2.72	1.61
2012	2.28	2.40	3.07	1.97	2.88	1.70

**Source:** Tea Board of India 59<sup>th</sup> Annual Report (2012-13)

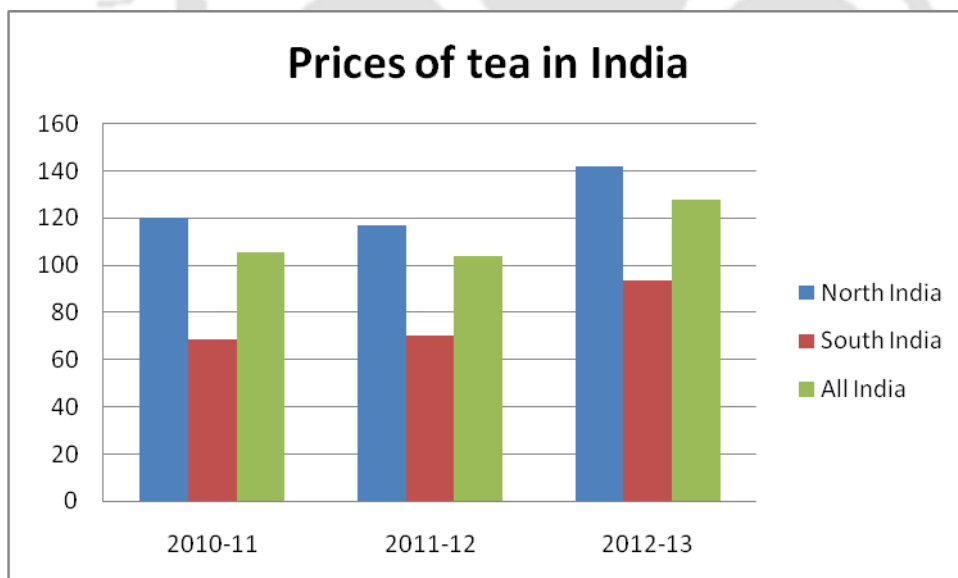
Price of tea is impacted by the quality of tea that is exported. It is seen from Table 5.1 that the price of India tea for exporting has gone down since 2010, while it became extremely low in the year 2011. The price of tea exported from Indonesia and Kenya, on the other hand has increased from the year 2010 to 2012.

**Table 0-2 Price of tea produced in North and South India**

Year	North India	South India	All India
2010-11	120.18	68.37	105.4
2011-12	117.01	70.26	103.94
2012-13	142.09	93.75	127.91

**Source:** Tea Board of India 59<sup>th</sup> Annual Report (2012-13)

**Figure 0-1 Price of tea produced in North and South India**



**Source:** Tea Board of India 59<sup>th</sup> Annual Report (2012-13)

Table 5.1 and Figure 5.1 show that there has been an increase in the prices of tea produced in North India and South India since the year 2010.

Tea Board has been extending support towards certain Labour welfare measures to tea plantation workers and these measures are confined to those areas which are not covered under the Plantation Labour Act and Rules made there under. The welfare measures of the Board are in the form of grant of educational stipend to the wards of the garden workers for pursuing studies as well as providing financial assistance for imparting scouting and guiding activities amongst students in the tea garden areas, purchase of Ambulance and medical equipments for specialized treatment etc. Assistance is also being provided to tea gardens workers for safe drinking waters and safe and clean toilets at their houses.

### **The Small Tea Growers**

They form an integral part of the tea industry in Assam. A Small Tea Grower as defined by the Tea Board of India is one whose holding does not exceed ten hectares. The STGs started its formations around 1920 when the large tea estates encouraged small farmers to engage themselves in tea cultivation. The main intention behind this of the large estates was to expand the area of tea cultivation. However, they failed in their attempt since the government started limiting the area under tea cultivation of the large tea estates (Bhowmik, 1991). The formation of STGs was encouraged by the state government to reduce the problem of inflation in the price of tea. There was increase in the internal demands as well as for export but there was problem of supply. Thus tea production had to be expanded. The government encouraged unemployed youths and landless labourers to unite together and establish themselves as STGs. The bought leaf factories are owned by many local people of the region. Demand for green tea has also escalated and thus small land holdings are getting converted into private gardens. The produce is exported to foreign countries that have demand for green tea. Some of the retired tea estate managers, mainly in the Upper Assam districts of Dibrugarh, Sivsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat are getting involved in the business of cultivation and exporting green tea.

There are about 850 tea estates in the state owned by the STGs. The STGs do not own factories of tea processing. Thus they are bound to sell the tea leaves to the Factories or the big tea companies/ estates at 'throw away' prices. The prices range from Rs. 13-19 per kg. The STG's incur heavy loss due to less selling cost. While the cost of procuring tea leaves by employing workers and paying them daily wages remain constant. This year many of the STGs threw away kilos of unprocessed tea leaves as a mark of protest for getting such less amount of rate in exchange of the tea leaves. The Government of Assam assured the STG's earlier this year to fix the rate of selling tea leaves at minimum Rs.20 per kilo. However, no such initiative has been undertaken by the government and it has failed in its commitment to the upliftment of the STGs. Thus, the STGs form an exploited group in the tea industry in Assam. The big and multinational owned tea estates have their own factories for processing raw leaves. Thus, they are not much dependent on the STGs for procuring raw tea leaves.

### **5.5 Industrial Disputes in the Tea Estates in Assam**

The process of negotiation and collective bargaining takes place between the management and the workers' union. The problems be discussed through the union is preferred by the management. Otherwise it becomes difficult to control a mob or a large gathering.

Industrial dispute therefore is defined according to the 'Industrial Dispute Act, 1947'.

As per section 2(k) of the act, "Industrial Dispute" means any dispute or difference between employers and employees, or between employers and workmen, or between workmen and workmen, which is concerned with the employment or non-employment or the terms of employment or with the conditions of labour, or of any person.

The above definition of industrial dispute brings out the following essential ingredients:

- (i) There should be a dispute or difference;
- (ii) The dispute or difference may be between:

- (d) Employer and employer, or
- (e) Employer and workmen, or
- (f) Workmen and workmen.

Disputes may relate to subject matters like, remuneration, compensation for wrongful dismissal.

A dispute arises in an industry, when the workmen make some demands and the employer rejects the demand. It is important that the demands made by the workmen should be legitimate and the employer should be capable to fulfill the same. In the tea estates in Assam Industrial disputes mainly take place for the following reasons:

The plantation workers and students union demand jobs in the estates and when matters get escalated, it takes a violent turn and strikes, lock-outs are declared.

*“There is growing unrest among the workers and they feel that minimum education would get them a job at the estate as office staff. But it is impossible to prove or create jobs for every youth belonging to the estate who have studied till high school. The workers demand for jobs at the staff level because of which there are always tension between the management and the workers’ union.”*

Disputes related to the determination of the terms and conditions of employment for the general body of workers. The dispute usually originates from the trade union demands for proposals for improvements in wages, fringe benefits, job, job security or other terms or conditions of employment. If the management agrees with the demands or both the parties

arrive at a mutually agreed solution, the dispute is over. Otherwise, the demands take the direction of interest dispute.

These disputes generally arise from day-to-day working relations in tea estates. The grievances may arise on the issues of disciplinary measures taken against any worker, payment of wages and other allowances, working-time, over-time, fringe benefits, promotion, demotion, transfer, and any other routine issue. Usually when a worker is working inefficiently or is absent for a very long duration of time and disciplinary action needs to be taken against him, then the union members interfere and give threat for strikes.

### **Disputes over Unfair Labour Practices**

The most common unfair labour practice in industrial relations are attempts by the management of an undertaking to discriminate against workers on the ground that they are union members or have active participation in union activity. The National Commission on Labour has identified various unfair labour practices and recommended the Labour Court as the appropriate authority to deal with such disputes.

**Conciliation** is also defined as a process by which the representatives of workers and employers are brought together before a third person or a group of persons with a view to persuading them to arrive at an agreement by mutual discussion between them.

**Arbitration** is a means of securing an award on a conflict issue by reference to a third party. It is a process, in which a dispute is submitted to an impartial outsider who makes a decision, which is usually binding on both the parties. In compulsory arbitration process, the parties are required to accept arbitration with or without their willingness or consent. By the statutory provision, any one or both the parties to the dispute may apply to the appropriate government through a process known as “involuntary” or “compulsory”

reference. The appropriate government can exercise discretion whether to refer the dispute for compulsory arbitration or not apprehending the nature of the dispute.

### ***Adjudication***

The final provision for settlement of any industrial dispute is through the process of adjudication. It involves intervention by the third party appointed by and representing the government for the purpose of deciding the final settlement and awards.

In case of adjudication, the reference of the dispute is made to the appropriate government without or with the consent of either or both the parties to the dispute. The appropriate government decides to refer the dispute to any one of the settlement machinery for adjudication. The Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 has made the provision for a three-tier system of adjudication. These are:

<b>Name of the Body</b>	<b>Nature of the dispute for adjudication</b>
1. Labour Courts	Adjudicate upon disputes listed in the Schedule II of the Industrial Dispute Act, 1947.
2. Industrial Tribunal	Adjudicate upon disputes listed in the Schedule II or III of the Industrial Dispute Act, 1947.
3. National Tribunal	Adjudicate upon disputes which are of national importance or when the dispute may affect the industrial establishments situated in more than one states.

**Source:** The Industrial Disputes Act (1947)

The cases that remain unresolved at the bipartite system of reconciliation are referred to the labour courts.

## 5.6 Causes of Grievances among the Workers

Dissatisfaction arises from the unhappy condition of the employee regarding the job. This dissatisfaction leads to complaints when the individual discusses it with other coworkers or make it expressed. When the dissatisfaction related to work is brought to the notice of the management, the complaint becomes a grievance.

In the recent past, there have been cases of suicide of some members residing in the labour lines due to some personal problems, sometimes also for financial burden. The estate witnessed various cases of theft, physical violence among the workers which are discussed and solved in the workers meetings. Some of them are reported to the police. In the case of sexual harassment of the women worker by the Assistant Manager, the case was taken to the management by the union. There is also sometimes domestic violence in the labour- lines mostly caused by alcoholism.

Children are involved in cleaning some of the parts of the factory unit and the plantation areas. They receive half the wage- rate of what an adult worker gets. Child- labour exists in the tea plantation system, though the management declines such allegations. Children are exploited to a large extent. They prefer going to work than to school for earning a meager amount.

The managers live a luxurious life while the workers cannot afford two square meals a day. They have to live in poverty and hunger on a daily basis. In the year 2006, there was a major conflict for an incident of death of a worker while trying to break a wall. It was a fatal accident of a worker who was involved in work in the factory. The wall collapsed on the worker and he died on the way to hospital. The ambulance did not reach on time. The workers were agitated at the irresponsibility and ignorance of the management and the workers group started attacking the *bunglows* of the Manager and the Welfare Officer. They

somehow managed to escape. There was strike and lock-out was ordered from the management. This led to loss of pay of the workers.

### **5.7 Trade Unions and the Management**

The management of the tea industry is of the opinion that there is undue interference from the unions. Traditionally it was believed that trade unions are barriers to production. It was Individualistic style of management that was bureaucratic in nature. There was no participation of the workers in the decision making process.

*“It is obvious that the management does not encourage trade union activism in the plantations. Unionism disrupts industrial peace and is a waste of time and resources when there is political interference in the affairs of the estates.”*

There has been always been an incessant tug-of-war between the Management and the Trade Unions. This tension filled relationship has its deep root in the ideologies or interests both parties' possess for the fulfillment of their short term or long term needs. Over the past few decades there has been a gradual transformation of some dimensions of the strenuous relationship existing between the parties.

The power play between Management and TUs has been manipulated by both through their coercive or persuasion techniques. From the management perspective, the style of governing or controlling the TUs has witnessed a paradigm shift from bureaucratic to participative style where strong emphasis is on employees /workers empowerment. The organizations have realized the essence and strength of human capital and the need for their joint-participation in management decision making.

The gradual weakening of Trade Unions conservative approach towards the management decisions has somewhat weakened due to the dynamic interplay between the social,

economic and political factors existing in the region. The strong support of the political parties towards some trade Unions is under pressure which in turn put TUs in back foot. The vested interest of some political parties is towards the fundraising for their electoral or promotional campaigns where they need a strong financial support from the management body. The need for sustainable economic growth in the country is a prior concern of the government where strong collaboration between organizations –government will act as an enabler. In today's competitive market scenario, the gap between current consumer price index and the wage of laborer's leave a deep impact on the psyche of the workers. The rapid development in technological areas poses a threat to the low-skilled workers. In this context, 'Fordism' is described as a whole way of organizing industrial societies which follows such scientific management principles as the use of a rigid division of labour, intensive management work planning and close supervision (Watson, 2012). The tea industry in Assam can be closely associated to the Fordist mode of production. Automation of the production of tea dust has the tendency to give rise to high level of retrenchment of the plantation workers. The excessive demand for low cost quality products remain a deep concern for management and lot of investment is made to make organizations lean and efficient. This led to an implicit fear among the workers of losing their jobs. As there are layoffs and retrenchment strategies adopted by Management, TUs bargaining agendas are being shifted from mere wage hikes to employee job guarantee. Both parties prefer integrative style of bargaining which aims for a "Win-Win" situation.

The cumulative effect of the above factors led to the dilution of trust in the union leaders-members relationship. Lack of leadership abilities of the TU leaders to motivate members and the dearth of transparency of the entire organizational system have brought down the trust to a large extent.

The respondents from the management feel that the women workers are more efficient compared to the male workers. They are disciplined and hard working and the tea industry is heavily dependent on the women workers for they are the pluckers who procure leaves for further processing. They are 'easy to control' and earlier there was discrimination in pay which made the management employ more women workers. They are controlled and supervised by supervisors and usually abide by their orders. The managers of the estates do not get directly involved in controlling or ordering the workers. Authority of command flows downward in a hierarchical order. Thus, supervisors engaged in the field and in the factories of the tea estates are entrusted with the authority to even use coercive measures to control and extract maximum amount of work from the workers. The women workers, because of the inherent notion of being subordinated by male workers, are treated derogatorily by most of the supervisors, managers and other co workers at workers well as in the labour lines. It is the primary responsibility of the management to provide welfare and health benefits to the women workers

*“The workers mostly put forth irrational demands in front of the management that cannot be fulfilled and thus come in conflict with the staff and more often the Welfare Officer of the estate is directly targeted. During the time of payment of bonus there is unrest created by the union members and strikes take place if the percentage of bonus is lesser compared to that of the previous time. Non grant of provident fund when demanded for gives rise to conflict situation in the estate.”*

In most of the cases of unrest in the tea plantations reported so far, one of the major causes has been to be related to compensation and bonus. The percentage of bonus, according to the Bonus Act should be minimum 8.33% of the basic wages. It usually goes up to 12-14 %. However, according to the management personnel since the tea industry is facing a slump due to increase in import of tea and lesser export, there has been decrease in the

profitability of the industry. Thus, the bonus amount keeps fluctuating over the period of years. Bonus is given to the workers during the autumn festival season like Durga Puja in the state. There exists conflict situation between the management and the unions if and when the demanded amount of bonus is not granted to the workers. Strikes are ignited in the tea estates during the time of bonus and ultimately it results in further loss to the industry.

*“Usually in the ‘season-time’ when permanent as well as huge number of casual workers is involved in the production process, their time is occupied with a lot of work. They hardly get the scope to discuss their grievances against the management with each other. However, a lot of industrial unrest takes place during the ‘off-season’ when the production process of tea halts for a few months. The workers get time to discuss issues in regard to work with each other and the trade union activities are accelerated during this time. Strikes, lockouts and gheraos usually occur when demands of the workers are not met.”*

The tea industry is fully functional during the monsoon season and is at its peak of the production process. It is called ‘season time’ during which along with the permanent workers, additional huge numbers of casual workers are engaged in the production process. The workers are extremely busy with the work at the plantation. They tea leaf pluckers and the other workers in the factory are burdened with a lot of work and hardly get the spare time to discuss issues at work with each other. While during the ‘off season’ i.e. mainly in the autumn and winter season, the work load of the tea production process is minimal. The casual workers are hardly engaged in any work and they are left with no avenue to earn their living during the ‘off-season’. In the course of the halt in the tea production process, union meetings are held as they can afford to take out to time to discuss the grievances. The workers come forward to discuss and put forth their demands.

According to the management, most of the demands of the workers are irrational and cannot be granted keeping in mind the loss of the tea industry that continues to exist.

### **5.8 Process of Collective Bargaining**

Collective Bargaining can be defined as a method by which problem of wages and conditions of employment are resolved peacefully and voluntarily between labour and management. The I.L.O. defines collective bargaining:

“As negotiations about working conditions and terms of employment between an employer, or a group of employers, or one or more employers' organizations, on the one hand, and one or more representative workers' organization on the other with a view to reaching agreement.”

The process of collective bargaining is not likely to succeed unless the threat of strike/lockout is there in the background. Strike and lockout are the weapons used by both the parties during the collective bargaining process. Without having these weapons at hands, neither of the party to the dispute can defeat the claim of the other. The peculiar feature of our country while compared to the advanced nations of the world is that the economic conditions of the workers are very poor and as a result, they cannot afford a long-standing strike.

A grievance procedure forms part of integrated scheme intended to promote satisfactory relations between employers and workers. This procedure should be designed to supplement the existing statutory provisions and it may, where practicable, make use of such machinery as is already provided by legislation. The grievance machinery can be availed of on the receipt by the worker of the order causing a grievance. The operation of the order, however need not be held up till the grievance procedure is completely

exhausted. Whatever possible, attempts should be made to complete the grievance procedure between the time of the order is passed and when it is acted upon.

If the phrase is taken for the industrial behaviour purpose, discipline may be defined as “employee self-control, which prompts him/her to cooperate with the organizational standards such as policies, rules, procedures etc.”

Misconduct is the disobedience of some established, definite, and known rules of the organization. It is simply violation of rules. Any breach of rules and discipline may amount to misconduct. Misconduct is essentially an act, which is prejudicial to the interest of the employer, or is likely to impair the reputation of the employer, or create unrest and can be performed even outside the premises of the establishment, and even beyond duty hours. The misconducts related to any industry or establishment is determined by the Standing Orders followed by the industry. The Standing Orders define what shall constitute acts of misconduct and also to define the quantum of punishment for them.

### **5.9 The Security Question of the Management Personnel**

It has been found that though the management personnel control the workers in an authoritarian manner, they constantly live under fear for their life and security of their family members as they reside in the Managers *bunglows* (An expanded independent house with a villa-like architectural design) located in the vast expanse of the estate's property. Many managers of tea estates own licensed revolvers or other weapons for self-defense. There have been many cases of attack on the management personnel of the estates mainly because of the built up grievances of the workers against them for the exploitation meted out to them. Such an incident took place in Rupajuli tea estate in Sonitpur district.

*“The Manager of the estate was assaulted by a group of workers on July 2011 when he was taking his usual rounds at the garden in the evening. He saw a group of women pulling up tea bushes for firewood. He approached them and tried to move them away. He wanted to recognize the women so that the matter could be taken up officially. The women fearing legal action went and complained to the trade union members that one of them have been sexually abused by the manager. The workers at the labour line gathered and hurried to the manager’s bungalow and started assaulting him physically. The police were also apprehensive to control an agitated mob and they refused to come for rescuing.”*

In this incident the women workers approached the trade union accusing the manager of sexual harassment. Thus, a mob gathered and they attacked the manager. Some workers and union members were suspended. However, the manager still feels insecure to go for field inspection alone till date. On the other hand, the version that was given by the management personnel was different. It was said that the women workers were uprooting tea bushes for firewood and when the manager caught them red-handed they presumed that disciplinary action would be taken against them the next day. Thus, they created a scene and accused the manager of sexual harassment. The workers from the labour lines gathered and attacked the manager without listening to both sides of the story.

In another incident in Bokel tea estate in Dibrugarh district of upper Assam, a fatal accident occurred when a worker mounted up a wall and was trying to break it. The wall collapsed and the worker died.

*“A violent mob gathered near the estate’s office and started assaulting the Assistant Manager accusing the management responsible for a worker’s death in an accident within the factory premises. His family was attacked at the residence.*

*Apart from the estate workers, the residents of the nearby villages constituted the huge gathering. When Mr. Buragohain (Welfare Officer) called the local police for help, the police refused to come seeing the violent mob which outnumbered the police personnel.”*

Under such crisis situation, it is usually seen that even police is apprehensive to extend protection. Mob fury results in destruction of estates property and the management personnel are brutally attacked. In the incident cited above, even the family members were attacked by the violent mob and they attempted to set the quarter on fire with the wife and child locked inside. Many cases of fatal attack on the management personnel have been reported in the last decade.

#### **5.10 Welfare Activities labeled under Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**

The multinational companies, who own major tea estates in the state, have been said to be involved in many CSR activities for the workers' benefit and the neighborhood. CSR has been the buzzword in the corporate management in recent times. Though it is considered as a philanthropic activity, the real essence of it can be explained through social exchange theory where primary focus is to bring social change and stability through negotiated exchanges between both parties. The corporate utilizes human capital as an input for the generation of economic profit and voluntarily engages in activities to distribute the same for the betterment or welfare of the society.

Somehow there are a lot of criticisms on the very purpose of CSR pursued by the management. It is considered as a PR (Public Relation) stunt by the corporate to enhance their brand building exercise. Through this a psychological brand image is established in the minds of the consumers which help in building brand equity. Thus the philanthropic

value is lost and an ulterior motive can be perceived. There are instances where mandatory welfare compliances are booked by the corporate under the head of CSR. In the name of CSR, in some cases companies go beyond the purview of “social responsible” behavior by violating some established norms of the government.

*“Awareness on health, birth control, mother- child care, against early marriage, about environment is given to the workers. Protective/ safety gears, glasses, masks, gloves, etc is provided to the workers from the company especially for those who are involved in spraying pesticides.”*

The tea companies in Assam are to be ideally guided by the Plantations Labour Act, the Factories Act and others which focus on providing the basic facilities like health, welfare, safety, housing, educational and security of job to the workers. However, establishing hospitals, schools, recreational facilities in the estates are often showcased as CSR activities while they form a major part of the statutory obligations of the management of the estates. The company takes up certain activities labeled under Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) for the workers. They provide with school bus facilities for the workers’ children and encourage cultivation. The workers are encouraged to maintain cleanliness in the labour settlement areas and recycle bio degradable things. Cultivation of organic vegetables is promoted in and around the residential areas. Management explains it stating that altruistic behavior or motives cannot always follow legal jurisdiction.

The management personnel have always had prejudiced views against the *Adivasi* workers. It is explicitly expressed in the discriminatory treatment meted out on the laborers. The Administrative set-up and the employer-employee relations still showcase the colonial hangover of British India. Generations of exploitation have given rise to grievances leading to industrial unrests and disputes in the estates. The reconciliation

machineries need to be efficient to ensure smooth functioning of the industry and increase its productivity.



## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Having discussed the evolving intricacies of industrial relations through different material and discursive agencies, the present chapter provides a summary of the chapters as well as findings of the study, limitations of the study and then will go on to explore the scope for further research in the field.

#### 6.1 Summary of the Chapters

The first chapter gives a holistic view of the concepts, review of literature, research gaps, rationale of the topic, research questions, objectives of the study, methodology used for the study and the area of field study and categories of respondents selected for the research work.

The tea industry in Assam is one of the most important contributors to the economic growth of the region. However declining labour conditions and years of exploitation of the *Adivasi* workers and various other factors linked to these have given rise to industrial unrest in the tea estates in Assam. Migration of groups into the region has been taking place into the region. This has a tremendous impact on the management styles of the owners and working conditions of the tea estate workers. In-depth interviews with the management and the laborers reveal acute crisis of efficient and effective management of the tea estates in terms of ownership and control of the work. a comprehensive review of history of tea, extent of migration of labourers and the growth of the Indian tea industry, tea production in the era of globalisation, sociologically significant questions pertaining to gender, management-labour relations paving way to class formation and trade unionism, etc. has been discussed.

The tea industry required a regular supply of labour and so attracted a large number of labourers from Bihar, Chotanagpur, Uttar Pradesh and Madras. Thousands of labourers annually recruited for the plantations from outside provinces. In the agrarian regions of Bihar, UP, MP and Orissa, famine, drought, flood and epidemics was very common during those days. Excessive exploitation of poor peasants and landless labourers by the big landlords and *zamindars* was common. These factors led to migration of huge bulk of population to Assam. The workers were forced to work in an alienated, monotonous, unhygienic work environment where their activities are closely monitored and controlled by the managerial personnel. In most of the tea industries, there developed a tendency to exploit the workers and deprive them of their rights. Formation of trade unions can be accredited to this factor. As a result, the workers formed associations to protect their rights and to fight against the gross exploitation. These associations are generally known as trade unions. The field of industrial relations looks at the relationship between management and workers, particularly groups of workers represented by a union. Industrial relations are basically the interactions between employers, employees, government, institutions and associations through which such interactions are mediated. Indian industrial relations is characterized by multiplicity of unions and inter-union rivalry. Statutory provisions for recognizing unions as bargaining agents are absent. It is believed that the institution of collective bargaining is still in its preliminary and organizational stage.

There have been industrial unrest in the tea estates in the form of strikes, gheraos and other violent protests for various issues regarding hike in daily wage, bonus during festival time, issues of regularizing work of the contractual workers, cases of sexual harassment of women workers, The tea industry in India employs more than fifty per cent women workers. The supervision of the tea workers is usually done by the high-status men in the plantation villages and 'labour lines'. The women's work, i.e. tea plucking is usually

underpaid. The plantation system dwells in the underlying belief on the subordination of women workers. They were meek and exploited by the owners and the management of the estates. The employee- worker relation that existed and still continues to exist is one of exploitation. It has only seen variation in the dimensions of such exploitation.

The second chapter captures the transition in the industrial relations of the tea industry in Assam in three different stages: Phase I: Pre Independence India (pre 1947), Phase II: Post 1947 especially since 1951; after the introduction of the Plantation Labour Act 1951 and Phase III: Since 1991; with the implementation of the New Economic Policy 1991, focussing on its impact on Labour, Work, Women, Consumption, Production and Conditions of labour.

In the first phase, Indenture, as a system regulating the relationship between 'labour and capital' has been a subject of historical enquiry and interest. System of recruitment of tea workers was first through the Licensed Contractor System. the contractor employs a number of licensed recruiters who go around the villages and convince people to consent to emigrate to the tea gardens and work there. The consented *Coolie* is then taken to a registering officer who questions the *Coolie* to ascertain that the *Coolie* is willfully doing the same. The exploitative practices of the tea planters can be traced back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century owing to which the *Chargola Exodus* can be said to be a significant outburst of it. As stated earlier, the wages of the tea workers have been extremely low. Thus, forms of protests by the workers against the exploitation of the workers had been gradually rising.

Second phase i.e. Post-independence India, Industrial Disputes Act and the Plantation Labour Act was passed. The tea industry was going through a lot of unrest and the workers did not have any assurance for security and welfare from the government though millions of workers are employed in this sector. Thus, The Plantation Labour Act was passed in 1951. This act makes provisions for health, education, welfare and housing

facilities to be compulsorily provided to the workers in the estates. This phase saw the beginning of liberalization and gradual withdrawal of the state from economic activities and the industrial relation scenario. The intervention of the State in matters of industrial disputes was emphasized as it was believed this could help keep in check the growth of unrest.

The third phase witnessed economic development in India ushered by India's Industrial Policy of 1991 which led to the drastic growth of industries. The Industrial Policy of 1991 aimed to initiate liberalization to amalgamate Indian economy with the world economy. In the perspective of the tea industry in Assam it has had a huge impact on the price of tea, export and import of tea. The economic liberalization has brought about radical change towards market economy and globalization. Liberalization covers domestic and foreign industry, business and trade. The tea industry was flourishing from the period of 1991-98 (Mitra 2010). There was an immense growth of tea estates during this period and it was considered the golden period of the Indian tea industry. The effect of globalization, i.e. removal of tariff barriers, lifting the quantitative restrictions on tea from abroad and at times facing the problem related to non-trade barriers imposed by some developed European countries, started to put the Indian tea industry in severe crisis from 1999 onwards.

The third chapter analyses class formation among the tea plantation workers in Assam focussing on patterns of migration, retaining their ethnic identity and politics encircling the same. The tea plantation workers in Assam commonly known as the *Adivasis* (indigenous people) trace their origin to the exploitative process of recruitment of indentured, immigrant labour brought in to work in the tea gardens. The flourishing tea industry in India is the result of the toil and struggle of the immigrant workers. The phenomenon of identity politics cannot be ignored in the present study as it has been

found that the *Adivasi* tea plantation workers are deeply impacted by the growing turmoil in the state. The tea tribes comprises of one of the most exploited groups in the country. At present times, the demands have taken rights based approach and developmental in nature. The workers' unions have been demanding for quality education and health facilities, justice for the workers and right to have political representation of workers. The statutory and the non-statutory obligations of the management are to be met.

Political parties and the trade unions which are founded and based on the ideologies of the powerful political parties in the country are playing a crucial role in identity politics of the *Adivasis* in Assam. The *Adivasi* tea plantation workers who were made to migrate into the state faced various forms of discrimination. Keeping the daily wage rate of the workers extremely low resulting in rampant poverty, while the people from the management lead a contrasting lifestyle, a prosecutor decides to charge a defendant with a less serious offence, all due to the target individual's ethnicity, nationality, social class, or gender, while a person belonging to the management is easily acquitted for a serious offence are examples of some of the discriminatory practices against the workers in the tea estates. When number of such individual acts of discrimination is aggregated over time, it refers to group-based social inequality.

The contrasting difference between the posh, palace-like *bunglows* of the managers of the estates and the dilapidated labour lines and shoddily existing shelters of the tea plantation workers are clear cut examples of the discrimination that have been existing and still exist in the tea industry in India. The plantation workers face problems in sanitation, access to pure drinking water, non-maintenance of houses and no proper medical and education facilities. This leads to many diseases and ill health among the workers community. However, the management and the state play an ignorant role in intervening into the plight

of the plantation worker. The workers also face various forms of machinery, chemical and other health hazards engaged in the tea industry in Assam.

The discriminatory practices of the state have been discussed in the third chapter whereby the workers hardly get justice if the people from the management commit any offence against them. There are various instances in which after sexually assaulting women workers, managers have been only transferred without taking any legal action against them.

The management exploits the casual workers during the season time when they have to pluck leaf but are not given any facility. 'Casual workers' are non-permanent workers in tea estates who are employed seasonally in large numbers; especially during the 'season time'. They stay either at the labour lines in the quarters or are settled in nearby *bastis* (settlements). Even the basic necessities like quarters, firewood and medical facilities are not provided to them. The management is always under pressure from the company heads to cut down the cost of production and '*casualization*' of the workforce is the most frequently used strategy apart from keeping wages to the minimum, providing next to nothing welfare and medical facilities. Their participation in the affairs of the trade union is minimal. They are inadequately represented in the trade unions of the tea estates. Thus, their problems remain marginalized and unresolved.

There is dearth of effective implementation of the statutory and non-statutory obligations in the tea estates in Assam. The provisions of the main statutory obligations like the Plantation labour Act of 1951, the Factories Act of 1948, the Maternity Benefit Act of 1961, Minimum Wages Act and others are not implemented. Various factors are contributing to the industrial unrest and trade unionism is one of the most significant aspects of the tea industry that strives to keep a check on the exploitative practices of the

management. Trade Unionism among the tea plantation workers was initiated after India's independence in the year 1947 when the All India Trade Union Congress was formed. The Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) was formed under the ideologies of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC). The trade unions in the tea estates are to ideally protect the rights of the workers. However, responses elicited from the workers show that the trade unions are less effective in the negotiation process.

The fourth chapter attempts to analyse the gender relations existing in the tea estates in Assam, rigid sexual division of labour- at work place as well as socially, efficiency of the trade unions in dealing with women's issues, lack of welfare and health provisions and legislation for women workers. Women form more than fifty percent of the total workforce of the tea plantation industry in Assam. They are mostly entrusted with particular set of work mostly plucking and pruning which are tagged as requiring feminine attributes and skills; thus establishing gendered division of work in the tea plantation sector. Patriarchal dominance is seen in the plantation industry. The 'planter- manager- *sahib*' (A word of Arabic origin used to refer to a European man in colonial India) symbol is clearly visible among the plantation workers. Erotic relationships between the planters and the women workers are tabooed ones yet their prevalence to a great extent cannot be overlooked. Discrimination in pay between the male and the female tea plantation workers was prevalent for a long duration of time. Women face various kinds of harassment at work and in the labour lines. Their issues are hardly dealt with by the members of the trade unions or the 'line supervisors'. The unions play a less significant role in seeking justice for the women workers when there is violation of their rights or in cases of abuses. Generations of oppression have given rise to grievances among the plantation workers. At present times the management personnel have to be extra cautious as there are instances of violent clashes in matters of sexual assault on *Adivasi* women workers.

The fifth chapter analyses the management personnel's perspective on labour, control, industrial disputes and employer- employee relations. The estates owned by the British planters, few were later sold to the local budding entrepreneurs and majority is still owned either by multinational companies or owners who belong to other Indian states. Thus, the tea estates in Assam and in other states are managed by a hierarchical order which is rigidly defined and is still ruled by the prejudices and management techniques of oppression that existed during the British rule. In the course of field study conducted throughout the major tea producing districts of Assam, it has been implicitly found that there is a sense of fear and apprehension among the planters, owners and management to grant permission for research in their respective estates; especially when it comes to the researcher interacting with the workers. Shifting of ownership of the tea estates from the British planters to the other Indian, local owners and the aspect of welfare of the workers was completely ignored. The provisions of the various legislations to protect the basic rights of the workers were not practically enforced. The practice of inhuman treatment meted out to the workers continued for decades and even when the Indian nationals took over the estates as Managers, they continued to treat them in the same way. The rise of unionism in the estates however, brought about a leash that controls the behavior of the management towards the workers. This employer- employee relation in the tea estates include collective bargaining, disciplinary procedures, grievance redressal machineries, dispute settlement machineries, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, adjudication, etc. The management personnel have always had prejudiced views against the *Adivasi* workers. It is explicitly expressed in the discriminatory treatment meted out on the laborers.

## 6.2 Findings of the Study

The findings of the study are as follows:

- The plantation workers have been facing discrimination on various grounds for generations; since the time of establishment of the tea estates in the state. Discrimination is meted out to the workers not only by the owners, management, but also by the government. The social security measures are not implemented efficiently and the daily wage is extremely low to sustain a family. Owing to their distinct cultural practices connected to their place of origin, they are looked down upon by the other ethnic groups in the region.
- The tea plantation workers in Assam form a distinct cultural group who has its own practices, beliefs and languages. They are popularly referred to as the 'tea tribes' or '*saah janajati*' by the Assamese speaking population of the state and other linguistic groups. The tea garden workers and the ex tea garden population are also referred to as tea tribes or *Coolies* which is used derogatorily. They have remained cut-off from the other indigenous groups of the state. They exhibit the nature of a closed group.
- The workers are at a position of subordination to the management. Low wages, lack of welfare facilities like proper education, health facilities, housing and others are indicative of the exploitative intentions of the management. Extremely low wages result in acute poverty in the labor lines and due to this the workers suffer from poor health conditions like malnutrition and others.
- Class consciousness among the plantation workers led to formation of unions among the tea plantation workers in order to protect the rights of the workers, apart from the first initiation of the Congress Party to organize workers. Trade unions in the tea estates are ideally to be able to voice out the grievances of the

workers. However, it has been found that unions are inactive and usually do not initiate the dialogue between the workers and the management.

- A lot of politics is involved in molding the unions of the estates in favour of the management. Thus, it is seen that for the trade union, the president, secretary and other important positions, elections are not held and the management chooses them as per their liking and convenience. The unions play a less significant role in seeking justice for the women workers when there is violation of their rights or in cases of abuses. There is interference from various political parties and All Assam Tea Tribes Student Associations.
- In the case of the tea industry, caste, as a social institution; as a basis of social stratification plays an extremely imperative role. The social hierarchy that surrounds the workers not only at the workplace but also otherwise, is an important determinant of the industrial relations scenario of this industry.
- The tea tribes comprises of one of the most exploited groups in the country. The Government of Assam has conferred OBC status to the tea tribes, while there is ongoing struggle for ST (Scheduled Tribe) status in the state. There is growing unrest in the state owing to demand for ST status as they belong to one of the most downtrodden sections of the society and their history can be traced to chains of most exploitative events and processes.
- The plantation workers have developed grievances against the management over of the estate because of the continuous exploitation and discrimination, there is a tendency to violently attack people from the management who symbolize the exploitative figures of the past and present.
- The statutory and the non-statutory obligations are not fulfilled by the estate owners and management. Health and welfare facilities are basic rights of the

workers which are to be provided by the management or the owners of the estates. The provisions of the Plantations Labour Act and the Factories Act which constitute the main social security acts that protect the basic rights of the workers are not implemented efficiently. Provisions like housing, food at substituted rates and maintenance of proper working conditions are ignored by the management of the estate.

- There is rigid sexual division of labour in the tea plantation industry in general. Plucking planting and pruning are mainly considered to be 'female' jobs. Patriarchal dominance on the women workers is very much visible though women form half the total plantation workforce. Women have been exploited by the management since history and this trend still continues to exist.
- Women's issues are not dealt with effectively by the trade unions. Their representation in the trade unions is also limited. Participation of the women workers in the activities of the trade unions is restricted due to domestic and social factors. Occupational health hazards among women workers could be seen in the form of cuts, fractures, workload, psychological problems, miscarriages and anaemia.
- The management of the estates consisting of owners, managers and other staff, like the rest of the population in the region has an inherent belief that the *Adivasi* workers are inferior and 'uncivilized'. The coercive measures of control over the immigrant workers were brutal corporal punishments. The migrant workers were and still are considered to be meek and ignorant.
- It is a crisis situation in the tea estates in Assam as it is facing acute crunch of labour. As mentioned earlier the daily wages rate of the plantation workers is extremely low. Avenues of earning beyond the waged work in the tea estates is

leading to a trend of reverse migration whereby the present generation of the *Adivasis* are undergoing occupational mobility and shifting to urban areas within as well as outside the state.

- Since the period of New Economic Policy of 1991 in India, Assam tea has been facing tough competition from countries from other tea producing countries from which tea is being exported in lesser price. The aspect of profitability of plantation economy in general and tea industry in particular has been affected by the New Economic Policy. Owing to the entry of multi-national corporations in the domestic market, many tea estates have been facing low profitability. They are not in a position to mitigate their responsibilities towards their workers as stipulated by the Plantation Labour Act, 1951.
- The causes of this crisis are emergence of new growers like Vietnam, Indonesia and Kenya in international market results oversupply of tea. So Indian tea is facing tough competition.
- Indian tea is losing its position in the export market on account of higher production cost and poor quality. Tea is mostly sold through auction. But this is one sided operation which is manly controlled by brokers. Proper price realization is doubtful in this system because it is said that brokers have a good cooperation with big buyers in auction to keep the price low.
- Existence of higher percentage of ageing bushes is a major problem faced by the industry. It leads to low rate of production and degradation in quality.
- Higher production cost is another problem faced by the industry. Around 80 percent of the cost of production goes towards fixed expenses like fuel, power and labour.

The *Adivasi* tea plantation workers in Assam confronted with social bigotry not only by the owners, management, but also the government. The social security measures are not executed proficiently and the daily wage is extremely low shoving the workers to live in unremitting poverty. The provisions of the Plantations Labour Act and the Factories Act which are the chief social security acts in India that protect the basic rights of the workers are not implemented efficiently. The social hierarchy that environs the workers not only at the workplace but also otherwise, is an important determinant of the industrial relations scenario of this sector. Class consciousness among the oppressed plantation workers led to the formation of unions among the tea plantation workers in

order to protect their rights. However, the unions are dormant and usually do not initiate dialogue between the workers and the management. Women have been subjugated by the management historically and this trend still continues to exist. The problems confronted by the female workers are not dealt with effectively by the trade unions. Their representation in the trade unions is also restricted. Since the period of New Economic Policy of 1991 in India, Assam tea has been facing tough competition from other tea producing countries from which tea is being exported at a lesser price. The aspect of profitability of plantation economy in general and tea industry in particular has been affected. Higher production cost is another problem faced by the industry. Around 80 per cent of the cost of production goes towards expenses like fuel, power and labour. Thus as a 'cost-cutting' strategy of paying below subsistence wages to the workers have been adopted by the tea industry since its inception. Mounting grievances of the workers against the management for tyrannizing them have been taking violent flare-ups leading to industrial unrests.

### **6.3 Limitations of the Study**

The present study is limited in terms of its scope and application. The framework of the study is apt for the tea estates in Assam, and may not be suitable for studies elsewhere in India or abroad or in the context of other industries. The study undertaken may not be applicable in the context of other formal and non-formal industries. Analysis is not done on longitudinal data. Therefore some findings may vary across time and space. The intellectual and political precursors to industrial relations differ from state to state.

### **6.4 Scope of Further Research**

The problem of ethnic identity and the role trade unions and their implicit political agenda needs to be further explored. The impact of liberalization, privatization and globalization policies on Assam tea estates needs to be examined from socio-economic perspective.

More variables like economic condition of the state, policy formulation and implementation processes, etc can be explored as antecedents of unrest. Occupational mobility of the *Adivasi* tea plantation workers can be analyzed in the light of liberalization, privatization and globalization.

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## Annexure I

**Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati**

**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Interview schedule for Trade Union members**

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Sex: (a) Female (b) Male
4. Type of employment: (a) Contract (b) Regular
5. Nature of work involved in:
6. Place of residence: (a) Labour Line (b) Nearby settlement/village
7. Since how long have you been working in the estate?
8. Name of the Trade Union to which you hold membership:
9. Since how long have you been a member of the Trade Union?
10. How many members are there in the Trade Union that you belong to?
11. How many female workers are members to the TU that you are member of?
12. Do all the members take active participation in the activities of the Trade Union? (women workers ?)
13. If not, what do you think are the reasons behind this?
14. How many Trade Unions are there in this part of the region of tea estates?
15. How do you and other workers in your estate reconcile with the management?
  - (a) Personally
  - (b) Trough Trade Unions
16. How do you assess the role of the Trade Union of the estate in negotiating the demands for the workers with the management?
17. Usually who represents the TU or the labour class in the 'negotiation processes'?
18. Has there been any incident of strikes, lock-outs, protests in the estate? If yes, how have the strikes been organized?
19. What were the main causes/demands for these incidences?
20. Has the estate had any change of ownership?
21. Would you kindly reflect on the implications of changes in ownership on the estate?

22. Does the management encourage the participation of trade unions in the decision making process of the estate?
23. Would you kindly tell us the nature of work that male and female workers are engaged in your estate?
24. Why do you think that female workers contribute less as compared to male workers?
25. Has there been any case of exploitation or manhandling of the workers by the owner?
26. What was the reaction on this from the labour class?
27. What was the reaction on this from the management, owner of the estate?
28. Have you seen any change in productivity and profitability of the tea industry? Kindly elaborate this by forging a relationship with the tea industry of Assam.

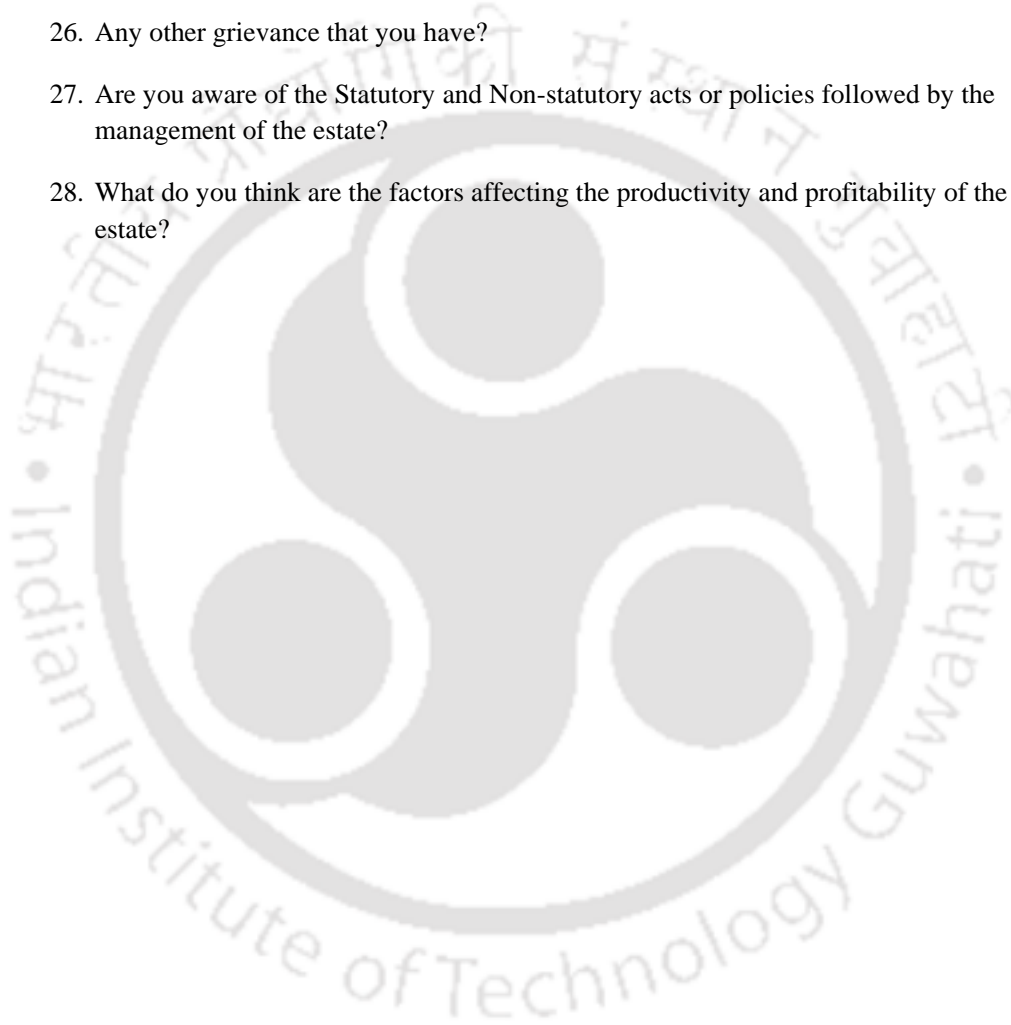


## Annexure II

**Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Interview schedule for Tea Workers (Male)**

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Sex: (a) Female (b) Male
4. Type of employment: (a) Contract (b) Regular
5. Nature of work involved in:
6. Place of residence: (a) Labour Line (b) Nearby settlement/village
7. Since how long have you been working in the estate?
8. Where have you been working before joining this estate?
  - (a) Afresh
  - (b) Different economic activity
  - (c) Different locales
9. Would you kindly tell us your experience about the kind of transition/shift that you have made from the earlier sector/locale to the present one?
10. What are the benefits given to the workers by the management?
11. Is there a (a) Hospital/Dispensary (b) School within the estate's premises?
12. What is the wage-rate per month/ per week/ per day that you earn? Would you kindly elaborate?
13. Are you able to make ends meet with the current wage rate?
14. If not, has the issue been taken up with the management?
15. What is the management's response to your needs and demands?
16. Do you have the membership to any Trade Union? (a) Yes (b) No
17. How do you and other workers in your estate reconcile with the management? Personally or through Trade Unions?
18. How do you assess the role of the Trade Union of the estate in negotiating the demands for the workers with the management?
19. Has there been any incident of strikes, lock-outs, protests in the estate? If yes, how have the strikes been organized?

20. What were the main causes/demands for these incidences?
21. Do you feel a sense of discrimination as tea-garden workers? Give reasons for your answer.
22. Has there been any case of exploitation or manhandling of the workers by the owner?
23. What was the reaction on this from the labour class?
24. What was the reaction on this from the management, owner of the estate?
25. Are both male and female workers paid equally in the estate? If not, why?
26. Any other grievance that you have?
27. Are you aware of the Statutory and Non-statutory acts or policies followed by the management of the estate?
28. What do you think are the factors affecting the productivity and profitability of the estate?



### **Annexure III**

#### **Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati**

#### **Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

#### **Interview schedule for the Management and Staff**

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Sex:
4. Designation:
5. Since how long have you been employed in the estate?
6. Has the estate had any change of ownership?
7. If any, what are the changes that have been brought about in the estate due to the change of ownership?
8. Would you kindly reflect on the implications of changes in ownership on the estate?
9. Have you seen any change in productivity and profitability of the tea industry? Kindly elaborate this by forging a relationship with the tea industry of Assam.
10. Do you think the management is providing the workers with adequate wages? Give reasons for your answer.
11. What are the facilities provided to the workers in your estate?
12. What are your views on the labour as a class with distinct characteristics?
13. Does this view determine the behaviour of the owners/management towards the labour class?
14. How do you view labour unrest in your estate?
15. What are the means of the workers in your estate to deal with the demands/ grievances against the management?
16. What are the grievances / demands of the workers usually? Kindly elaborate.
17. Do you think the demands are legitimate?
18. How does the management respond to the demands of the workers?
19. What are the settlement machineries that are used for handling the grievances and demands of the workers?
20. Does the management encourage the participation of trade unions in the decision making process of the estate?

21. Would you kindly tell us the nature of work that male and female workers are engaged in your estate?
22. On what basis do you order or rank different work positions?
23. Why do you think that female workers contribute less as compared to male workers?



## Annexure IV

### Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

#### Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

#### Interview schedule for the Female Workers

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Nature of work involved in:
4. Do you think your work is hazardous and too strenuous?
  - (a) Yes (b) No
5. Do you think you are paid enough for your work?
  - (a) Yes (b) No
6. Are the male and the female workers paid equally in the estate?
  - (a) Yes (b) No
7. If not, do you think it is justifiable?
8. Are you able to make ends meet with the current wage-rate?
9. Do you have complete right over your wage or is it handed over to some other family member? Give reasons.
10. Are there any schemes, benefits provided specially for women workers at the estate by the management? Explain in detail.
11. Do you feel the benefits and facilities provided for the women workers are adequate? Give reasons for your answer.
12. Does the estate follow the provisions of the Maternity Benefit Act?
13. Are you aware of the statutory and non-statutory obligations of the management towards the workers?
14. Has there been any change in the work culture with respect to gender after the change of ownership (if any) in the estate?
15. What is the attitude of the owners/management towards the women workers of the estate?
16. Do feel a sense of discrimination based on gender at the workplace? If yes, from whom?
17. Have you or any other women worker ever experienced any verbal, physical or sexual abuse at the workplace? If yes, by whom?

18. Are such incidences common in the tea industry? Kindly elaborate.
19. Are these issues taken up by the management and any action taken against those who are guilty?
20. Are you a member of any Trade Union? Give reasons for your answer.
21. If yes, are you able to take active participation in the activities of the Trade Union? Explain in detail.
22. Do you think the Trade Unions bring to light the problems and demands of the women workers or your needs are always sidelined? Kindly elaborate.
23. What are the other means to settle the disputes arising out of women's rights and political participation?



## Annexure V

### Meaning of Indian words

*Adivasi* - indigenous people; heterogeneous set of ethnic and tribal groups considered the aboriginal people of India

*Arkatis* and *Sirders*- two main labour recruiting firms for the establishment of tea estates in India

*Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha* - Assam Tea Workers Union

*bandh*- strike

*basti* – a sort of residential settlement; a slum inhabited by poor people

*Bodo-Kachari*- An ethnic group, predominantly in Assam, of the Indo- Mongoloid Family.

*bunglows* - An expanded independent house with a villa-like architectural design

*Bura Sahib*- The senior-most manager

*coolies* -a historical term for indentured labourers and a contemporary racial slur

*faltu*- term used to refer to casual workers in the tea estates

*gherao*- a protest in which workers prevent employers to leave a place of work until certain demands are met.

*haziri* - literally the word *haziri* means presence. Thus here it refers to being paid for being present at work as daily wage

*jagirdars*- the owner of a land in a feudal system

*junglis*- wild or uncivilized

*maai-baap*- my father

*Mahila Samiti*- Women's Association

*mohouri*- supervisor

*Oraons, Mundas, Kharios* - sections of the *Adivasis*

*panchayats*- village council

*patta* - a legal document issued by the Government in the name of the actual owner of a particular plot of land

*phool vivah*- the rites performed when a girl attains puberty

*sangha*- Union Body

*sardars* -head or authority