

Chapter-3

Ethnicity process and the Capitalization of Tea Community Identity

3.1 Question of Identity and Ethnicity:

Ethnicity and Identity is a very recent and ongoing phenomenon of the Tea Community in the history of Assam. Assam is known across the world for the Tea Industry. The growth of Tea industry and the economic development took place with the intensive labour of the Tea Community. It is mentioned earlier that the people of Tea Community were one of the most oppressed and poverty stricken people who were brought by the British Tea Planters by luring false promises. They are one of the most backward groups in terms of economy, socially, educationally compared to other social groups of Assam. The people never get any attention and there was always a contradiction about their identity since they have come to this land. For the tea planters who brought the new settlers to work in their newly established tea plantations more than one and half century ago, they identified them as 'indentured labourer'. And again a little later period these tea planters identify the labourers as tea garden labourers and ex-tea garden labourers- terminologies which are still in use. For the average dweller of Assam they are identified as *Baganias*, *Bongali*, *Coolie*, *Chah Bonua*, *Chah Jnagusthi* and *Chah Shramik*. For the Assamese middle class leaders they are *Chah Bagichar Asomiya* and *Notun Asomiya* in some critical periods of self interest like census operations and in case of some mass agitation, but none of these people are felt to be responsible at other times (Cited in Phukan and Deka 2001, 125). For a section of this social group they identify themselves as Adivasi also. Along with these controversial identities, at present they have mainly observed a three folded identity among themselves; these are Caste or Tribal identity, Adivasi identity and the Tea Community or Tea Tribe identity.

Being exploited by the *Zamidars* of Orrisa, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh etc. lives became worst and the needy people came to Assam to work in the tea gardens for betterment of their life. But, afterwards they realized that their situation remained the same in Assam also. Another misery was waiting for them in the tea gardens of Assam. They were let to live in small cottages which were actually covered with straws and

garbage on bamboo roofs. These cottage lines⁴ were in the deep forest areas of the tea gardens. There were no proper sanitation and medical facility. Staying in such an unhealthy situation they had to work whole day as well as in the night. For such physical labour they were paid a very less amount of wages. Even they cut their pay if they are unable to finish their estimated work for a day. They had to run their life with the limited money which was insufficient for them to run their livelihood.

This less payment of the Tea Garden Labourers resulted a very low living standard. In such situation the survival became the most important question for them. To increase the monthly income, for betterment of their life even the children started to work as a labourer in the gardens. There was no scope of education or a better future for these children of the Tea garden labourers and the tea garden management did not take any interest in this regard. There was no school or health/ medical facility in the Tea gardens. Moreover, there was no social connection of the labourers with the outside world. In the Colonial or even in the post Colonial period the Tea Community had no any social interaction with the wider society. The people spent their whole time inside the Tea plantation. There is a very limited scope to interact with others. The garden usually had their own markets or hospitals so the people did not have to go out from the garden for any purpose. Still male members had some connection with the outer world but in case of women they were restricted in the garden only. They did not even visit their relatives staying nearby gardens. Moreover the tea gardens were located in countryside and the Tea Planters also did not allow them to go out from the garden for fear of losing a skilled worker. So, this was the initial scenario of the tea garden labourer's life in the Colonial rule of Assam. The end of colonialism also did not bring any change in their life; their life remained same. For a group of poverty stricken and uneducated people, uprooted from their original soil, engaging in hard physical work and living in a captive life, the question of survival becomes all the most important. The identity question in such situation therefore remained an object of least attraction for them in at that time. As time passes, the people of the Tea Community have started to improve slowly. Primarily out of legal compulsions some schools were established in the tea gardens for the children of

⁴ Lines are the residential area of the Tea Community people who worked in the Tea Gardens.

the tea garden labourers⁵. Establishment of schools in the tea garden had produced a small number of students among the Tea Community.

Over the years along with the growth of education among the young generation, there emerged a number of trade unions and students organizations within the group. The educated group along with the trade unions and student organization started to work for the welfare of these people. They have taken various initiatives for increment of wages, health facility, better housing, and schools in tea garden etc. Even they have submitted various demands for their development to management of the tea gardens as well as to the Government of Assam also. But very soon they have realized that without having a common identity, it will not be possible to get benefit from the Government. So the economic, education, social backwardness and lack of social interaction have brought the question of having a proper single identity or identity consciousness among the Tea Community of Assam.

One of other important reasons behind their feeling of having a common identity is not availing of Schedule Tribe (ST) or Schedule caste (SC). The people of Tea Community in Assam is categorised as Other Backward Class(OBC) and More Other Backward Class (MOBC) while in other states including the neighbouring Tea growing states Tripura and West Bengal, they enjoy the status of ST and SC depending upon their actual status in the states of their origin. They genuinely feel that their recognition as OBC and MOBC cannot be considered as a proper and acceptable substitutes for their recognition as SC or ST because the later gives statutory and constitutional reservation in job, education institution, representation in state Legislature etc while the former does not. They feel that to get the ST status will only be possible when they will have their common identity. They have a strong feeling that they have not given their due rights and privileges as they have not been recognized as ST or SC and which will help their development. So in these circumstances they are now trying to construct or demand a common identity.

⁵ The Assam Plantation Labour Rules, 1956 (Section 52 to 57) enacted in pursuance of powers conferred by sub-section (i) of section 43 of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 provides for maintenance of primary schools for children between the ages of 6 and 12 in each tea garden if their number exceeds 25.

In the regard of a common identity a Sahitya Academy Youth Award winner (2012) poet Kamal Kumar Tanti an insider opined on having a common identity amongst the greater Assamese culture as follows:

'I want to say that, even we are active partner in greater Assamese nation-building process, Tea Community and Adivasi of Assam have an independent history, cultural heritage which will never be assimilated to elite cultures of Assam. It conceives that in future Tea Community and Adivasis will only keep a cordial, amiable coexistence with the Assamese mainstream; they will never assimilate themselves to the Assamese mainstream. It is impossible for any community or race living with self identity and self respect. So I think it is not enough only to labelling the Tea Community or Adivasi as Assamese but, Assamese society with the generous attitude has to give them self-identity recognition and proper respect. From last 150 years the Tea Community is interested to live with greater Assamese society accepting Assamese language, art-culture without any conflict, they introduce themselves as a part of greater Assamese race; with the generous attitude they introduce themselves to the world as truly Assamese. So, I request the Assamese race/society to accept the dual identity of the Tea Community and Adivasis from now itself. We Tea Community and Adivasi are eager to introduce ourselves firstly as Tea Community or Adivasi and secondly as Assamese' (Dated 10/06/2015).

So with the expose to education and the recent politics in the state after independence a gradual trend of identity consciousness is observed among these people. They believed that members of this social group must develop a common identity. So in this chapter an attempted has been made to study the growth of various trade unions and students' organizations and their impact in the identity formation and also about the multiple identities faced by them and finally how they capitalizing the Tea Community identity.

3.2 Ethnic Boundaries of Tea Community:

As discussed in the Chapter 2 that to distinguish an ethnic group, Fredrik Barth mentioned that it is the 'boundary that makes it distinguishes other but not the cultural markers or descent'. He mentions that 'A group maintains its identity only when the members of the group interact with others; that he introduces the concept of 'Us' and 'Them' in terms of ethnicity. While in the case Tea Community of Assam perpetual state

of poverty and the claims of the plantation system tied the people to their new home. Most of the youths of the community while enquiring about their native place have no idea at all and could only provide conjectures about their possible place of origin. A few people who claimed to be native Assamese descent were also found to follow the plantation way of other than the traditional Assamese rural lifestyles and did not maintain links with their native places.

There are three major cultural differentiations that differentiate the Tea Community from the other social group of Assam; these are commensality, language and festivals. Other cultural or social parameters are not played an active role. The Tea Community prolong living in the labour lines set up by the Tea Planters with the people of various ethnic origins has created a commonness or indifference towards various social values associated with different ethnic group. They have experienced a common type of housing, economy, administration and social environment. Their residential quarter are same; their dress, hair style, food habits also do not show any readily differentiation. In the tea garden they have to follow an identical routine; very minimum difference observed in day-to-day life of the members of the different group. It can be said in a way that for all practical purpose the ethnic identity seem to have dysfunctional for the people, at least in the affairs of day to day life (Kar 1975,11-15). The tea garden has ignored the various ethnic identities of these people. Within the tea garden, a member or individual of the Tea Community never take account of their ethnic identity instead of that they are always treated as 'labour'. Even outside the tea garden in the so called Assamese society the people of the Tea Community never treated by their different ethnic group like Oriya, Munda, Tanti, Kurmi etc. For the Assamese society they are an 'undifferentiated labour group' which they identify by various names. It is observed that the people of Tea Community are always regarded as a low status people by the other social groups of Assam. Choudhury who observes that these people have always been looked down upon by the Assamese people who put them in a very low status in social estimation. Then the Census Commissioner of Assam of 1931 census had observed about this segment of immigrant population as follows. "In Assam, a coolie is always a coolie, and together he works on a garden or whether he has left the garden and settled down an ordinary agriculturist, his social position is nil. From the point of view of the Assamese society, a person belonging to a coolie caste or tribe is complete outsider and is as

'exterior' as any of the outsider caste I have classed as 'exterior'. Indeed, from many points of view the social position of coolies and ex-coolies is worse than any class in the province,....(Cited in Chaudhuri 1982, 35). So this ignorance by the Assamese society and Tea Planters has created a boundary between the Tea Community and the other social group of Assam and makes them to feel that they are different from the so called Assamese people. Thus commonness has come into the heterogeneous group and they become one single ethnic group and this commonness has differentiated them from the other social group.

The various ethnic group of the Tea community had their distinct language or dialects in their native place. But after coming here and living in ac-residence with other ethnic group they need a common language to communicate each other. So, they evolve a new lingua franca which is known as *Sadri* or *Sadani*. *Sadri* is an intermingling of languages of Hindi, Bhojpuri, Oriya, Bengali etc. So living more than a century here the Tea Community people now use the *Sadri* language as their first language.

Creating commonness the Tea Community not only evolving a lingua Franca but they have also started to celebrate a host of common festivals like *Karam Sanmilan*, *Jhumoir Sanmilan*, *Sahatai Parav*, *Kali Puja* etc. In these community festivals every individual of Tea Community are found to participate equally. Thus they have maintained a boundary between them and the other social group of Assam.

3.3 Impact of Trade unions and Student Organization in Identity Consciousness:

Even after many years of migration of these people to this land, their plights have not been changed. Education, health-care or living standards etc. never got any importance. Only the increment of salary gets importance among them. Demanding increment of wages sometimes lead to various protest, cordon off, strikes etc. These strikes and protests which occurred in 1840's took place independently. At that time there were no organizations which could lead those strikes and protests. Though in the 1890's there was some endeavour to form some union during 1890 but the managements of the tea gardens did not let them to be successful. At that time, to form unions, was regarded as an unlawful act. But the freedom movement of India had ended this system. Remarkably, that the Non-Cooperation Movement of Mahatma Gandhi had influenced

the tea garden labourers lot. In the year 1921 when Mahatma Gandhi came to Assam to spread the Non-Cooperation Movement (1921) and *Khilafat* Movement (1922) he also raised voice for the tea garden labourer's rights. So it is said that by participating in the freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi their mental strength to demand justice increased to a great extent. In 1926 response to the continuous demands of the labourers of various sector, the Government of India passed a law 'Indian Trade Union Act' to recognize the labour unions. But even after 10 years of the Act in the tea gardens no union had come up. Though the Indian National Congress entered the tea gardens through the Non-Cooperation Movement and did some work for the betterment of the tea garden labours but they did not give any effort to form any unions. Instead of that they tried to keep them away from the strikes and protests made by the labourers against the management. But some of the Marxist leaders of All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) have trying to establish some labour unions and as a result in 1973 the first labour union was established as 'Silhet-Kachar Tea Labour Union' (Das 2015, 258). This was the first labour union that was established in the tea garden. After this till 1939 there were some other labour unions grew up as- Upper Assam Tea Company Labour Union, Rajmai Tea Company Labour Union, Makum Tea Company Labour Union etc.

In 1943 the first State conference of AITUC was held in Dibrugarh and in the same year under the leadership of Professor P.M. Sarwan a social organization 'Assam Chotanagpuri Chatra Sanmihan' was formulated and in 1945 it was renamed as 'Assam Tea Labours Association' (ATLA). But all these labour unions could not play active role in the tea gardens. In 1946 under the leadership of Dr. Binoy Chakraborty and Shyam Choudhury a union was formulated as 'Assam Tea Garden Mazdoor Union' under AITUC. The union said to be the strongest union compared to the other unions and had taken various initiatives for the welfare of the people. Under the banner of this Trade union in 11 August, 1947 the tea garden labourers of Maizan Tea Estate of Dibrugarh District had submitted a 22 chapter chartered to the company. After that for the benefit of the employee of tea gardens in 9th February 1947 another union was established in Tinsukia as 'Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha'. At the same time 'the Indian Tea Employees Union' was formed in Borak Valley of Assam. On the other hand on 4th May 1947 under the banner of congress 'Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC)' came into existence in Delhi (Das 2015, 259). After independence in the same year a

branch of this union was established in Shillong, Meghalaya. In the later period with independence and beginning of the new political process, there were developed various trade unions under the banner of various political parties. Some of these trade unions were 'Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (Indian National Congress), Assam Bagicha Mazdoor Union (Communist Party of India); Bharatiya Chah Mazdoor Sangha, Assam (Bharatiya Janata Party); Akhil Bharatiya Chah Mazdoor Sangha, Assam (CPI-M); Assam Sangrami Chah Shramik Sangha (CPIML); Assam Tea Workers' Union (Assam Labour Party), Assam Chah Shramik Parishad (Assam Gana Parisod) etc. But these Tea trade unions could not able to influence the tea garden labourers like as Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS). ACMS was the only one Tea Trade unions which had a hold among the tea garden labourers which is still continuing. 'Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha which was formed on 9th August 1958 at Dibrugarh. ACMS played a very active role. From beginning, the ACMS is trying with the help of the government to form trade unions in the various districts of Assam. The main aim of the ACMS was to bring out the tea garden labourers from the influence of the AITUC and ATLA and to unite them under Congress. The ACMS was more or less successful in their aim.

These Tea trade unions were mainly organized to improve the working conditions and emancipate them from, what they called, 'exploitation' by the tea planters. These unions were mainly engaged in welfare of Tea Garden Labourers of Assam like increment of salary, improvement of their habitation and food, to protest against injustice of the management etc. These trade unions in the later period more concentrated on their political benefit of the parties than of the labourers. These unions never gave any attention for the betterment of the socio-economic, socio-cultural and education sectors of the tea garden labourers. At the initial stage most of the Tea trade unions only restricted to the enhancement of the working condition of tea garden labourers. They did not take any interest of the Tea trade unions in maintain or to bring consciousness about their distinct identity of the Tea Community of Assam.

With the gradual spread of enlightenment small number of educated youth of Tea Community had appeared who eventually led in the formations of students and socio-cultural organizations. Some of these organizations were- Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (1947); Asom Chah Janajati Yuva Chhatra Parishad (1972); Asom Chah Janagusthi Pragati Samiti (1993); All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam (1996);

Assam Labour Students' Union; Asom Chah Janajati Samiti; Chah Janajati *Sadri* Bhasa Sahitya Vikas Mancha, Asom and so forth (Cited in Sengupta,2009, 49). Though all of these were not so functional but All Assam Tea Tribe Students' Association (ATTSA) is regarded as the pioneering organization in concerned with identity consciousness. Recently All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam (AASAA) has played an important role on the issue of identity of the Tea Community. In view of the problem of identity of the Tea Community the role of ATTSA is mainly being discussed below as it is one of the strongest Students' Organizations in upper Assam.

3.3.1 All Assam Tea Tribe Students' Association:

The ATTSA which was initially known as 'Assam Chotanagpuri Chatra Sanmilan' (ACCS) was born on 28th December 1947 at Tengakhat near Dibrugarh, Assam. The founder Secretary and President of the student union were Saimon Singh Hara and Santosh Kumar Tapna respectively.

The impact of Christian Missionaries in establishing this student union was immense. The maximum members of the union belonged to Christian Religion. Though belong to the same social group the students of Hindu religion regarded the Christian Students to some extent different from them. As a result the ACCS had confined in to boundary. On the other hand the Hindu religion student had formed another student union in 1954 in Golaghat as 'Assam Tea Labour Student Association' (ATLSA) under the leadership of Dinanath Chaudhury and Satragopal Karmakar. But, in a convention in 1958, at Bamunipahar, Tezpur in joint collaboration of both the student unions, they decided to unite in to a single union as 'All Assam Tea Garden Student Association'. This student union in 1968 renamed as 'Assam Chah Mazdoor Sampradayor Chatra Santha', in the year of 1970 as 'Assam Chah Mazdoor Janajati Chatra Santha and finally in 1984 as 'Assam Tea Tribe Student Association'. This student union body was renamed as 'Asom Chah Mazdoor Sampradayor Chatra Santha in 1968, 'Asom Chah Mazdoor Janajati Chatra Santha in 1970 and finally in 1984 it was renamed as All Tea Tribe Students' Association. According to Tasa, the decision to use the term 'Tea Tribes' in place of 'Tea Labour Community' was taken in the eighth annual conference of the Assam Tea Labour Community Students' Association held at Sepon, Sivasagar in 1970 (Tasa 1982, 95).

As part of their strategy for safeguarding their 'legitimate interest', the ATTSA started to identify the Tea (Labour) community with a novel nomenclature, i.e., 'Tea Tribes' and 'Ex-Tea Tribes'. While justifying the new identity the ATTSA maintained that their ancestors were recognised as Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the original lands for which they too deserved to be constitutionally recognised as Scheduled Tribes. Hence there could be no justification, they asserted, for the people belonging to the same stock and the same country being deliberately discriminated and deprived of the constitutional status (Cited in Deka and Phukan 2001, 134).

As per the declaration of Assam Chotnagpuri Chatra Sanmilan the main aim and objectives were;

- (i) To unite all the Tea and ex-Tea Community students together and provide a common platform.
- (ii) To inculcate a sense of socio-economic consciousness among them; and
- (iii) To eradicate various social prejudices prevailing within their community (Cited in Phukan and Deka 2001, 134).

The main subjects of resolutions of the meetings, conferences held by ATTSA are education, unity and progress. To extend education to the new generation youths of the Tea Tribes, to set up unity between all caste and sub-castes and to work and take various measures for socio-economic development of the Tea Tribes and to raise demands to the government in these regards, these are the main work plans of the organization.

In the 3rd yearly conference of ATTSA, in 1963 as per the announcement of Chairperson, the then Education Minister of Assam Devakanta Baruah, announced merit scholarship for the students doing higher education was arranged and made effective from that year. After this continuance of merit scholarship the interest of higher education was seen to be increased among the students from Tea Community. Earlier, due to financial hardship the students could not carry on their study even till High School leaving Certificate (HSLC). But this merit scholarship inspired the students and motivated the parents to allow their children for higher studies. ATTSA built a 'Chah Mazdoor Hostel' for the college students in Shillong in the year 1968. It was another achievement of them. Now-

a-days there are reserved seats for Tea Community students for medical education in Medical Colleges of Assam.

With the awareness created by the leaders of ATTSA, a fighting run of establishing self identity has started among the Tea Community or Tea Tribes. In 1948 the then student leader Uday Areya published a magazine named '*Chotanagpuri Sanskaar*'. Another ringleader Santosh Kumar Topo wrote a book '*Munda Jatir Somu Porichoi*'. From 1963-64 '*Seuji Paat*' was published as the mouthpiece of Sadou Asom Chah Bagicha Somprodai Chatra Santha. It was published by Narayan Ghatowar under the editorship and its contribution was remarkable in profiteering awareness to the students about their future identity.

Besides these, the ATTSA maintaining the Tea Tribe identity has demanded the Schedule Tribe (ST) status as their counterparts are availing the ST status in the states of India. Thus while demanding the ST status for them in a memorandum submitted to the then Prime Minister of India on 13 December, 1998, the ATTSA pleaded:

The Tea Tribes of Assam consisting of one fourth population of Assam are treated as the most backward community in state. As you are aware of the fact that there has been a consistent hue and cry among the Tea Tribes community coming from different parts of the country like Bihar, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh etc. Their counterparts in the states of West Bengal and Tripura are also being recognized as the Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe. Though these people have been settled in Assam since long, they still maintain their old cultural heritage and social values and custom. They have maintained their ethnic character, dialect and culture.⁶

Despite such demands the ST status still remains unfulfilled. The demand has now been gaining more popularity than ever before among the Tea Community of Assam. Thus the Tea Community or Tea Tribe has become conscious of their identity like other ethnic group as to avail different government facility. As a part of strategy to maintain distinct Tea Tribe identity ATTSA increasingly advocated that the '*Sadri*'⁷ language needs to be

⁶ . The Memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister of India by the ATTSA, New Delhi, 13 December, 1998.

⁷ *Sadri* is a lingua franca to communicate each other among the Tea Community people.

cultivated, developed and protected. Likewise they have a rich folk culture and festivals of their own which have not been made available for the cultivation and preservation of the Tea Tribe lingo cultural heritage. For this, the ATTSA perceived the pressing need of adequate facilities for the regular broadcast and telecast of their socio-cultural programs in *Sadri* language, which they believed, might help to pressure and uplift the tea tribe's culture.

Thus, of late while submitting a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India the ATTSA forcefully appealed for broadcasting cultural programmes.

‘Though the Tea Tribe has a rich culture heritage, no scope has been given to broadcast the socio-cultural programmes of tea tribes in Doordarshan and All India Radio. Necessary arrangements should be made for presentation and upliftment of Tea Tribe Culture. Therefore, the central Government is urged to take necessary action to broadcast songs and socio-cultural programmes of Tea Tribes community through the Tea Tribe lingua franca in Doordarshan and All India radio as daily programme from Guwahati and Dibrugarh centre.’⁸

The Government of India however, seemed to be sympathetic to this appeal which resulted in the inception of only broadcast of tea garden labourers cultural programmes twice a week from the All India Radio, Dibrugarh. The partial fulfilment of socio-cultural aspirations of the tea gardens labourers provide them a source of inspiration for further presentation of demand before the Government of India as well as also to form or assert this identity i.e. the Tea Community or Tea Tribe.

Thus, by taking these steps ATTSA not only trying to work for the welfare of their people but also has brought an identity consciousness among these people.

3.4 Identity Construction:

Identity is a specific marker of how we define ourselves at any particular moment in life. Discovering and claiming our unique identity is a process of growth, change, renewal and regeneration through our lifetime. As a specific marker, identity may be seen tangle and fixed at any given point. Over the life span, however, the identity is more fluid.

⁸ .The Memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister of India by the ATTSA, New Delhi, 13 December, 1998.

Individuals or groups have multiple identities ascending different identity in different circumstances. It is discussed in the Chapter two that there exist three main points/ideas in identity process that identities are shaped in relation of outsiders, then identity and contradictory a social group/ a person has multiple identities and lastly the fluidity of identity formation of a social group is an ongoing complex phenomenon (cited in Deyong 2010, 5). It is the result of a complex interplay among individual's decision and choice, partial life events, community recognition & expectations and socializations.

Again as according to Erikson "Identity formation begins where the usefulness of multiple identification ends that from this line we can draw that a person/social group started to form a new identity when their previous multiple identities are of no use. Ajit Kr. Danda (1991, 95, 99) said that 'in a pluri cultural situation like India, empirical evidences of multiple loyalties are expected as well in abundance. A man can be a Maitheli, a Bihari , a Hindu, a Brahman and a Hindustani all a time, although in actual situation one scarcely projects more than one identity in response to the immediate stimulus.' He further mentioned that an individual or a group tends to present one identity at a time, the individual or group belongs to several of them simultaneously. Nevertheless all of them are not likely to be manifest together. In other words plasticity of identity formation by and large can also be represented by the moment of expansion and construction depending on the nature of stimulus in the given situation. By this one can understand that a social group expansion can have multiple identities but all their identities may not function at the same time; it depends on the particular situation where the group or person is, at that time. By taking this into consideration Danda said that an ethnic group can have multiple identities at same time but at a time only one identity depending upon the situation or circumstances has been gaining more projection. So in the case of Tea Community it is also observed that they have also multiple identities but at present in Assam they are focusing on the Tea Community identity.

With regard to the Tea Community identity it is observed that along with this identity they have also two other simultaneous identities- Adivasi and the Caste or Tribe identity. But in the time of field investigation it is found that most of these people identify themselves as Tea Community or Tea Tribe. Below along with the construction of Tea Community identity and its capitalization; the two other identities are also being discussed.

3.4.1 Caste or Tribe identity:

The Tea Community of Assam is composition of various ethnic groups. Though in Assam they become a homogenous group but still amidst the uniformity of their social life the various ethnic groups tend to reassert their Caste or Tribe identity on some occasions. It is observed that the numerically large group of the tea garden dominant over other groups and they try to assert their Caste or Tribe identity. It is also seen that the tea garden which is located in remote areas and have very limited social connection with the outer world prefer to identify themselves by their Caste or Tribe identity. The tea garden labour used their clan as well as their caste or tribe name as their surname. In the present time in Assam it is only the surname from which they can identify their Caste and Tribe identity. Again Kar observes that some of the ex-tea garden labourers again started using clan name as surname:

Thus *Kha/kho/ Bar/a/ Bagh/ Kujur, Minz, Toppo*, etc. appear as surname for the members of Oraon community. These are in fact various clan groups within the Oraons (Cited in S. Karotempel and B. Dutta Roy 1990, 127).

Robert Kerketta remarked on the extent to which different communities constituting the tea tribes have lost or retained their original cultural identity and its attributes as:

‘They did not totally lose their identity, especially those communities which lived by themselves though a bit isolated. Some lost everything but they preserved at least their names, which helped them to track back to their origins or original culture, languages, dances etc. for example, the people still remembered their ‘*Karam*’ dance though the dance was anything but ‘*Karam*’. They still called themselves “Samra Oraon’ or ‘Mangra Munda’ which remained them of their original tribe to which they belonged. Similarly many still preserved their tribal surnames, which would enable them to identify their own tribe’ (Cited in S. Karotempel and B. Dutta Roy 1990, 14).

On the other hand Thomas Pullopillil regarding the tea garden labour as a homogenous group or as an ethnic group commented that:

Does it mean that the tea tribes and castes have become one ethnic group? The answer seems to be no. According to some authors, tea labour and ex tea labour form a multi-ethnic group. The identity that has emerged through a common

food, dress and a common lingua franca (*Sadri*) and festivals like *Karam* and *Sarhul*, seem to be very relative one. The authors point out to the emergence of various organisations to safeguard the culture and language in order to establish group identity and heritage in a multi-ethnic setting (Pullopillil, Thomas 2005, 7).

The Caste and tribe associations have been seen mostly in the time of marriages of the tea garden labourer. The elder people of the community prefer their children to marry within the same tribe or caste. But in the recent time it is observed that most of the boys and girls get married through courtship without taking permission from the families. The change of this social value is due to the prolong habitation in the same lines with the various ethnic groups of the Tea Community. Again in recent time some associations have come up which are trying to assert their Tribe or Caste identity and protect cultural identity. Some of these associations are Akhil Assam Pradesh kurukh (Oraon) Sangh. Ad Santhal Samaj and the All Assam Santhali Sahitya Sabha. Munda Mahasabha etc. These associations have organized various regional or state level conferences where the particular tribe or caste comes and participates in it. But during the time of field investigation it was found that though the people of their respective Caste or Tribe have participated in such conferences but they first recognize themselves as Tea Community then Oraon, Munda, Tanti, Mirdha etc.

3.4.2 Adivasi Identity:

It is seen that a section of the Tea community people prefer to identify themselves as Adivasi. To prefer as Adivasi is a very recent phenomena or it can be said that it has get its popularity only after forming of All Advasi Students' Association of Assam in North Lakhimpur District. Though the term Adivasi or Adibasi generally means the aboriginal tribe but in the context of Assam it refers to those aboriginal tribes who brought from various parts of India, specially from the Chotanagpur region to work in the tea gardens and became permanent residents of the state.

When we speak of the Adibasis in Assam we mean in particular those aboriginal tribes who came from Chotanagpur in Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh to work in the tea gardens of Assam and who later settled down there. This term with this particular meaning has been accepted in general by the different sections of the people and the administration of Assam. Their

descendants still carry on working in the tea gardens. Others have settled down in the villages and give themselves to the cultivation of land. It is said that in Assam there are about 50 lakhs of *Adivasi*, 20 lakhs working in 770 tea gardens and 30 lakhs in the villages (Cited in S. Karotempel and B. Dutta Roy 1990, 10).

The Adivasi identity of the tea workers has seen more popular in lower Assam than of upper Assam. A very few people identify as Adivasi in upper Assam. While in Kokrajhar, Darrang, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji Districts, with the organisational support of the Adivasi Council of Assam (ACA) and the recently formed All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam (AASAA, 1996) trying to strengthen Adivasi identity among the tea workers. With regard to the purposes behind the construction of 'Adivasi' identity, Kar (2001) observes that the demand for treating all the tea and ex-tea labourers as 'adivasi' is motivated by the desire to derive political and economic benefits such as the Scheduled Tribe status rather than by a wholehearted urge for cultural amalgamation:

‘At the micro-level, the people by and large are not in favour of doing away with their individual tribe/caste identity in favour of their common identity as chah janajati. Nevertheless, with regard to the common label of "Adivasi" for all sections of people including the caste groups, many of them believe that the united collective effort under that banner of a single cultural group provides a better and stronger bargaining power to achieve the desired goal’ (Cited in K.M. Deka & K.N. Phukan 2001, 118).

On the other hand, in an interview in the National News paper ‘The Hindu’ dated 31st July 2010 Kamal Kumar Tanti opined in favour of Adivasi identity as:

I disagree with the naming of our community as “Tea-tribe”. Is there any community in this world named after a commodity? It is the best example of the colonial domination of British, and later the internal colonialism taken over by power-hungry, middle-class Assamese. It is true that our forefathers migrated or were brought from different parts of Adivasi-dominated areas of India during the British colonial period. What I believe is that we are an integral part of greater Adivasi nationality of India. The mainstream, middle-class Assamese is yet to consider us as a part of greater Assamese nationality, though from time to time, they claim we are. It does not mean that if we speak Assamese we are Assamese. We have never seen the middle-class Assamese consider us as

Assamese. Rather they always used to call us "Coolie-Bengali," just like the minority Muslim community in Assam is called 'Miya' or 'Bangladeshi,' even though we studied in Assamese medium schools, and adopted Assamese culture. The main question is the identity, and in that, middle-class Assamese never considered that we have a first identity Adivasi. After that only, we have a second identity 'Assamese', if they consider us so.

The community I belong to is backward, both socially and economically, since the British colonial period and far from getting what they should get from the state or other agencies. I think most of us are treated as people who are not capable of any good work other than physical labour. I feel we are not considered by most of the Assamese people as their own people. We are treated as lower caste people, with a sense of superiority from Assamese people.'

But it is a very controversial issue to identify these people as Adivasi as they are not the aboriginal people and they were brought by the British tea planters. So how far it will be right to identify them as Adivasi is really a vital question. But in the time of field investigation it is observed that a very less people identify themselves as Adivasi. One of the respondent name Amarjyoti Tasa, age 34, a government employee, of Sonari, Sivasagar District informed that though the Tea Community and the Adivasi are same but he himself prefer to identify himself as Tea Community. However, in the context of recent identity formation process some conscious leaders and political members preferred to use the term Adivasi than that of Tea Community. The reason behind identifying them as Adivasi is that they are known as Adivasis in their original homelands and those people are enjoying the status of Schedule Tribes in their homelands. So there is recent tendency to call themselves as Adivasis in Assam in order to get political straight jacket of Schedule Tribe from the Government. However, he and most of other respondents also informed that the tea garden workers of lower Assam are mainly preferred them as Adivasis and on the other hand in upper Assam the same tea garden labourers are preferred to call themselves as Tea Community or Tea Tribe.

3.4.3 Tea Community/Tribe Identity:

The Tea community identity as an ethnic group including both tea and ex-tea garden labourer emerges to be the strongest in the Sivasagar and Dibrugarh Districts. In these two Districts it has been observed that a descendant of tea labourer who might have left the tea garden over a century ago but still they prefer to identify themselves as Tea Community or Tea Tribe. The intermingling of various factors like economic and social backwardness, low literacy rate, lack of social interaction as discussed above provides the background for the construction of Tea Community identity. On the other hand, based on the field investigation it can be said that migration, common struggle, occupation, place, common culture, language/dialect, historical ties are the fundamental base of the Tea Community identity construction. As these people have experienced a common migration, struggle and have common history, culture and language; so based on these they are trying to construct their Tea Community identity.

The intermingling of various culture of the Tea Community is regarded as the strongest base for the Tea Community identity.

A separate culture of the tea garden labour class (i.e. tea garden and ex-teagarden labour population taken together) has now been recognized. This was revealed by a number of publications of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, an organization in Assam for the promotion of Assamese language, literature and culture, which had started taking interest in the tea garden labour society so as to bring them in to the main stream of socio-cultural life of the area. The identification of a separate culture known as the *chah mazdoor samajar sanskriti* (culture of the tea garden labour society) is a process of integration. The integration of different elements of tea garden labour through the medium of the Assamese language in itself has made it easier to integrate the tea garden society with the local Assamese society (Phukan 1984, 34).

Again regarding their culture Kamal Kr. Tanti opined that '*though some people try to divide us in various subgroups for political or some other purposes but it is the culture which always unites us*' (an interview published in You Tube on June 26, 2015).

There is also glimpse of local Assamese culture on the Tea Community culture. Regarding this Dr. Bibhuti B. Das says,

It can be safely asserted that the labourers settled in the tea belts of North-East India are not a floating mass of immigrants. The labourers employed in the tea plantations and their kith and kin and also the ex-tea garden labourers are now a settled population and have little or no connections with their original homes. The absence of social connections with their places of origin has led to the relaxation of many of the social customs and rites of different communities. They have adopted the local culture and customs and also the local ways of life including food habits. By socio economic adjustments with the local inhabitants they have *become* part and parcel of the main stream of population of North East India (Cited in Dutta Ray and Karotemprel 1990, 58).

The younger members of this community prefer to call themselves *chah janajati* meaning Tea Tribes. At present, the former term (*chah janajatt*) has gained currency and has been generally accepted as representing the Tea Community in the districts.. The two-day convention of *Chah-mazdoor Yuba Santha* and *Chahmazdoor Chatra Santha* held at Partapgarh T.E. (11-12 November 1981) witnessed some debate centering around the need for an appropriate nomenclature for the Tea Community, and though no conclusion could be reached, it was generally agreed that the terms *chahmazdoor* and *chahbonua* were not only incorrect but derogatory when applied to the community as a whole. Sushil Kr. Kurmi an author of the Tea community mentioned that:

Some have tried to divide the Tea Community saying that tea labour community refers only to those in the gardens...we need a more inclusive term. How can we call the descendants of those who were tea labourer once upon a time as *chah-mazdoor today?* (Cited in S. Karotempel and B. Dutta Roy 1990, 10).

Resenting the fact that the Tea Community womenfolk have not been able to engage in free and meaningful social interaction with the larger Assamese society, partly due to their inhibitions about introducing themselves as *chahmazdoor*, the noted writer from the Tea Community, Mrs. Mamata Koiri suggests the term *seuj Asamiya* ('green Assamese') as a dignified way of identifying the Tea Community (Cited in Sushil K Kurmi,1983,12). The traditional image of a *chah-mazdoor* woman in the general Assamese society being the degraded one of a tea-leaf plucker, the term *chah-mazdoor* acquires distasteful connotations. The Asam Sahitya Sabha also held similar views and suggested *chah-bagisar Asamiya* (Tea Garden Assamese) as a substitute.

At present, terms like *chah-mazdoor* or *chah-bonua* meaning tea labour are used mainly to refer to those actually working in tea plantations, e.g., in the names of trade unions, and are seldom used in relation to the community as a whole including the ex-tea garden labourers. Most of the organizations pertaining to this latter entity, such as the All Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (ATTSA), the Assam Chah Janajati Juba Chatra Parishad, the Assam Tea and Ex-Tea Tribes' Youth Association, the Assam Chah Janajati Naba Sanskriti Parishad, and the Tea Tribes' Volunteer Force prefer the terms Tea Tribe or Tea Community, discarding the earlier ones implying 'tea labour community'. Socio-cultural interaction between the tea garden labourers populations in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys of Assam is limited, both due to geographical and cultural factors, although their original homelands were the same and their experiences as plantation labourers have been similar.

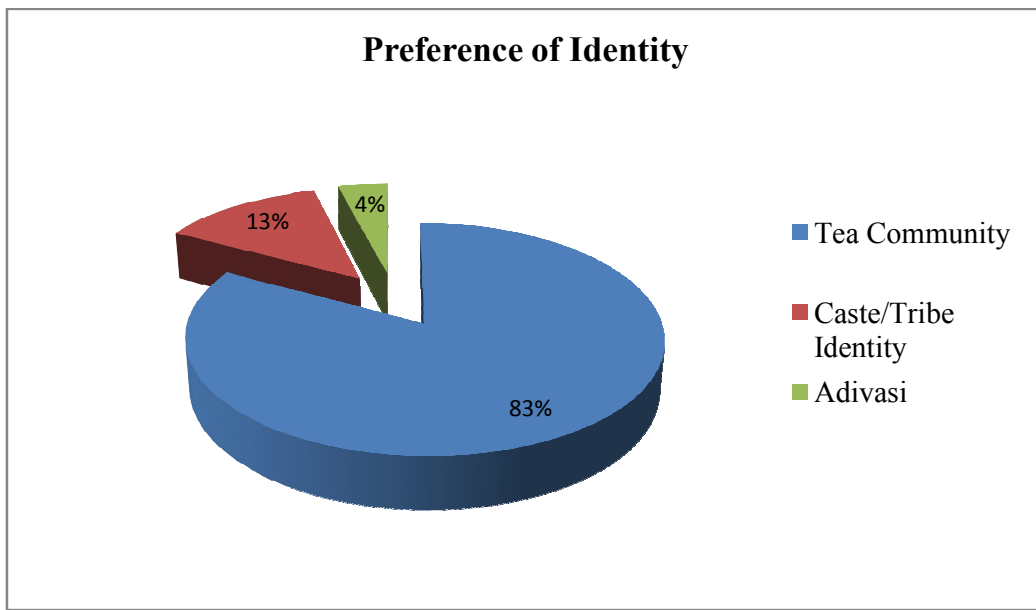
While enquiring about their identity in the time of field investigation a set of questions (questionnaire is attached in appendix III) were asked to 100 randomly selected participants. Among the 100 respondents though everyone identify themselves with an identity but only 90 per cent of the respondents actually expressed that they are aware of their identity. In order to get their idea about their three folded identity a question was posed to the sample of the present study. The respondents were asked about their preference among these three folded identity. The response to the question relating to their identity, as shown below in the table (Table 3.1) majority (83%) of the respondent responded that they are first prefer to call themselves as Tea Community or Tea Tribe, 13 percent opined that they prefer to call themselves by their caste or tribe identity and 4 percent respondent said that they prefer to call themselves as Adivasi.

Table- 3.1 : Distribution of Respondents' Opinion about the Identity

<u>Identity</u>	<u>Respondent</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Tea Community/ Tea Tribe	83	83
Caste/ Tribe Identity	13	13
Adivasi	4	4
Total	100	100

Source: Field Investigation

Figure3.1 Pie Diagram showing Respondents' opinion regarding Identity:



It is clearly seen in the table that majority of the people first identify themselves as Tea Community. Majority of the respondents informed that as working and living in tea gardens for generation together they have spontaneously evolved a common identity i.e. Tea Community on the basis of certain common socio-cultural criteria and therefore they more like to call themselves as Tea Community. They have also informed that to identify

as Tea Community they are promoting common feeling, developing a common language namely *Sadri*, seeking political safe-guards and also by preserving common culture that is tea culture within Assamese society. They also celebrate a host of common festivals like *Karam Sanmilan*, *Kali Puja*, *Jhumoir* folk dance and songs for preserving their identity. They have informed that the celebration of such common festivals by themselves for long time has obviously contributed towards a convergent point resulting a cohesive community both psychology and culturally regardless of their distinctive caste entity.

Again when they have been asked about their identity one of the respondents named Mridul Kumar Sahu, age 45, an employee of a regional paper Hamder Adhiker published from Moran and Dibrugarh informed that

'I myself prefer to identify myself as Tea Community. Though a section of the Tea Community preferred to identify them as the Adivasi and began organizing themselves under the banner of different from that of the Tea Community, but there is infect no lingo-cultural distinction between the Tea Community and Adivasi except the identity nomenclature' (interviewed on 04/07/2014 at the Hamder Adhikar News Paper office, Moran, Sivasagar).

One of the respondents Hemanta Satnami informed that:

'I regard, Tea garden, Assam is my origin place as I born and brought up in tea garden environment and I do not have any connection with the native place. I regard the unique cultural practices of the tea culture and the Sadri language that I speak are extremely important element to define my identity as Tea Community'.(Hemanta Satnami, age 28, A graduate of Rajmai Tea Estate, Sivasagar, (interview taken at the Doba Reginal karam Sanmilian held in Doba, Sivasagar on 12/10/014).

Former Minister, Ministry of DONER, Government of India P. S. Ghatuwar told that:

'The people of the Tea Community is one of the most backward social group of Assam so it is desirable to recognised as Schedule Tribe or and Schedule Caste under a single social group Tea Community' (dated 28/12/2014, Moran, Sivasagar).

Sushil Kumar Suri, president of All Assam Chah Janagusthi Sahitya Sabha (AACJSS) opined regarding about their first identity as

‘As a president of AACJSS I prefer to identify myself as Tea Tribe. Though outside Assam we have a different identity but living more than hundred and fifty years and engaged in tea industry in Assam we have come across a new environment, a new society which gives us a new identity that is Tea Community or Tea Tribe’ (Interviewed at Sonari, Sivasagar on 20/09/2013).

Again Mrs. Jibontara Ghatuwar, MLA of Moranhat Legislative Constituency informed that:

‘We are always regarded as outsider by most of the Assamese people; where most of the social group of Assam claim as aboriginal of Assam are actually migrated from other places. Living here in Assam they claim as aboriginal so living more than one hundred fifty years in Assam we can also claim as aboriginals. We are the people of Assam born and brought up here and mostly engage in Tea Industry. So I prefer to identify myself as Chah Janagusthi (Tea Community), (interviewed on 30/11/2013, Moran).

Ex General Secretary of ATTSA, Terosh Guwala opined that:

We are brought as tea labourer and from that point most of us still engage in Tea Industry. There are various examples of ethnic group whose identity come from their profession for example, Teli-those who are associated with the business of tel (oil) are identified as Teli and those group of people who are associated with Tat-Bua (weaving) are identify as Tati. That is why, I, think to identify the people who are mostly engage in Tea Industry as Tea Community is a logical one, (Dated 28/12/2014, Moran, Sivasagar).

These entire above mentioned informant’s response clearly showed that in the people of the tea garden labour or ex-tea garden labourers prefer to identify themselves as Tea Community in the selected districts. The information has brought the fact into the light that though the tea labourers have three folded identity but in Upper Assam they are mainly preferred to identify themselves as Tea Community and Adivasi is a very political issue in the light of the recent identity movement.