

ABSTRACT

Identity-crisis is one of the major problems in the North-East India in general and Assam in particular. One of the reasons for such concern is the growing assertion of various ethnic groups and its impact on the politics of the region. In North East especially Assam different ethnic groups which represent both tribal and non tribal communities have been struggling either for special constitutional safeguards or for an entity on the basis of their lingo-cultural identities. There are groups in the region who trying to preserve the distinct cultural identity of their communities. In Assam the problem of identity has become a burning problem with political development and raising aspiration of the communities after independence. Whatever be the factor instigating from behind, the problem of identity crisis is a reality throughout the state. The wave of ethnicity and identity construction took such a pervasive character that its challenges are felt equally by both majority and minority groups of Assam. For example Bodo, Karbi, Mishing, Motok, Ahom, Sonowal Kachari are some of the ethnic groups who have faced and still facing the problem of ethnicity and identity conflict. The Tea Community of Assam is no exception to it. The Tea Community which is composite of more than hundred caste and tribe like Munda, Orang, Mahli, Kurmi, Teli, Mirdha, Tanti, Ghatuwar etc brought by the British Tea Planters to work as a labourer in the newly established tea gardens of Assam and settled them in various gardens of Assam. There were differences in socio-cultural and socio-economic life of these people. Living more than one hundred fifty years and engaged in Tea Industry they have become a homogenous group by creating a common culture and evolving a common lingua franca. But ever since they come to this land they were identified by different identities. For the tea planters who bought the new settlers to work in their newly established tea plantations more than one and half century ago, they identify them as 'indentured labourer'. Then a latter period these tea planters identify the labourers as tea garden labourers and ex-tea garden labourers- terminologies which are still widely in use. For the average dweller of Assam they are identified as Baganiyas, Bongali, Coolie, Chah Bonua, Chah Jnagusthi and Chah Shramik. For Assamese 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 to be felt responsible about at other times. For a section of this social group identify themselves as Adivasi. So one of

the important questions that arises among themselves is the emergence/construction of a common identity.

The present study 'Ethnicity and Identity Construction: A study of the Tea Community of Assam' seeks to understand the identity problem and ethnic process of the Tea Community of Assam. The study tries to highlight how does identity crisis and ethnicity process lead to the construction of a common identity. This core issue of the study has attempted to analyze by understanding the perceptions of the Tea Community and their response to it. Secondly the study is trying to explore how the Tea Community stimulates their identity through various cultural expressions.