

Chapter-1

Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem:

Today in Social Sciences ‘ethnicity’ and ‘identity’ have emerged as important analytical categories. Though ethnicity persisted throughout history but in the contemporary world characterized by migration, globalization and population transformation; ethnicity and identity crisis have become increasingly important areas of study. The various dimension of ethnicity have been continuously engaging the attention of scholars in different disciplines like Anthropology, Political Sciences, Sociology and Cultural Studies.

Whatever be the factor instigating from behind, the problem of identity crisis is a reality throughout the world. Almost all the communities of each countries of the world have experienced some kinds of turbulence relating to identity issue. However, most of such troubles seem to have originated from ethnic identity consciousness not only in case of India but in case of various other countries as well. The wave of ethnicity and identity consciousness took such a persistent nature that its challenges were felt equally by both developed and developing states. For example, Srilanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Turkey, Philippines, Australia, Canada and Germany are some of the countries which have faced and are still facing the problem of ethnicity and ethnic identity conflict. This pattern of conflicts has been described as ‘internal’ or ‘civil’ war largely because it involves a clash of identities based on ethnicity (Cited in Hagg & Kagwanja 2007: 12). Ethnicity is the felling or sentiments of a social group which is in pursuit to preserve its distinct identity. The sense of distinct identity generally based on the distinctiveness of one’s own culture and tradition. There are three main approaches which define ethnicity in three different ways. According to Primordialists ethnicity is a natural and given phenomenon. According to them, every individual carries with him some “attachments derived from his/her place of birth, kinship relationship, religion, language and social practices which are natural to him, spiritual in nature and that provide a basis for an easy affinity with other people from the same background” (Brass 1999, 69). Similarly, Constructivist approach considers ethnic identity of individuals as a dynamic, fluid or

constructed. Individuals, according to this approach, go on changing their ethnic identity on various situations or circumstances. Very often, they identify themselves with that identity which gives them more advantages socially, politically or economically. From instrumental viewpoint, ethnicity is used as a tool by the elites class of a social group to gain political and economic advantage (Brass 1999, 15). Thus, there are different meanings attached to ethnicity. Rational Choice theory, on the other hand, considers ethnic identity movement as a product of human choice and decision. It argues that the likelihood of collective action does not rest on factors like the degree of inequality or changing level of relative deprivation. Rather, it believes that any ethnic group will be engaged in collective action only when they estimate that by doing so they will receive a net individual benefit (Hutchinson & Smith 2009: 28).

There may be various reasons of conflicts and movements based upon ethnic identity which is growing throughout the world. But country likes India which is in nature multi-ethnic and multicultural societies has felt the forces of ethnicity more. The Partition of British India in 1947, which created the two independent countries India and Pakistan, was followed by one of the cruellest and bloodiest migrations and ethnic cleanings in history. The religious fury and violence took the life of some 2 million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs and rendered homeless during partition. But the story did not end here. The conflict in Punjab, for instance, had a dominant linguistic thrust during the mid 1960's. In the late 1970's and early 1980's they have also faced such other linguistic conflict. Besides, the country also witnessed the emergence of various tribal movements in different parts of it since the 19th century "of which a few have developed into bitter, violent, and secessionist movements directed against non tribals, against state governments and against the Government of India itself" (Brass 2010, 151). Some of them were fought for socio-economic deprivations while some others were mobilized to fight political marginalization and exclusion. For instance in Santhal parganas and Chhotanagpur region of Bihar, Jharkhand movement was launched. The movement for separate Gorkhaland is also going on in Darjeeling district of West Bengal since 1907. In Punjab, a secessionist movement was launched to create a separate Sikh country (known as Khalistan). Reference may be made to the Telengana movement in Andhra Pradesh in which the demand for a separate state is going on since 1950s. In fact, all the above mentioned movements were based on identity issues. Jharkhand movement in Bihar was

launched to preserve the distinct tribal identity of Santhals. Khalistan movement in Punjab was directed to carve out an independent Sikh country, while the Gorkhaland movement was motivated by Gorkha identity issue. Likewise, the Telengana movement was also the outcome of the identity crisis of the Telegu speaking people of Andhra Pradesh.

For decades, North-East India's situation is a matter of great concern to the states as well as to the centre. The Northeast India which is composite of various Tribal and non-Tribal ethnic groups which represent both communities have been struggling long either for special constitutional safeguard or for the creation of separate political entities on the basis of their lingo-cultural identities. In course of time, the number of various ethnic groups asserting such demands has risen up. Even some of the groups are demanding a separate state. Some extremist groups like NLCT of Arunachal Pradesh, ULFA, NDFB, KPLT of Assam, NSCN of Nagaland etc. are also active in the region demanding a separate state based on the distinct cultural identity of their communities. The cultural diversity and the demographic pattern of North-East India are far more crucial. Thus the diversity in the socio-cultural life of Northeast India has always provided a congenial atmosphere for the growth of ethnicity and identity politics in the region. The struggle for identity in the North East India first began in Nagaland which was a hill district of the then Assam. The people of this hill district started the agitation for their distinct identity during 1940s. On the eve of India's independence, Naga leaders appealed to the British Government for their independence with the rationale that no Indian power had ever conquered them (Rajagopalan 2008, 13). Naga unrest is not only the first turbulence to the region of Northeast. Other states of North East India like Assam, Tripura, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh are also facing such type of ethnic conflict. In Tripura, the tribals started a violent movement during 1980s and 1990s against the migrants from Bangladesh. Manipur is also under continuous clashes with Nagas and Kukis, Kukis and Paites and Maiteis and Muslims since 1990s. Arunachal Pradesh is often described as the parking place for different insurgent groups of Northeast (Hussain 2005, 76). From this it can be said that each and every state of North East India has been going through some kind of ethnic conflict. "With its controversial human rights record and sluggish economic growth rates", Sanjib Baruah remarked, "North-East India is a counterpoint to India's image as mature democracy, a dynamic economy, and an emerging major power"

(Baruah 2011, vii). As a matter of fact, there are inter-linkages between insecurity, underdevelopment and insurgency in Northeast India (Das 2012, xxvi).

With regard to Assam where the study was undertaken, it may be said that the genesis of ethnic conflicts and ethnic identity movements in the state lies in its colonial past and the British policy of 'divide and rule' (Kumar 2007, 111-112). Assam has a good example of politics being influenced largely by issues concerning ethnic identity. The unusually large rate of migration into the state during the British rule and thereafter, and the varied array of ethnic groups, each striving to preserve its identity and its interests through the political process, has resulted in a situation of ethnic conflict. In Assam the problem of identity has become a burning problem with political development and raising aspiration of the communities after independence. Again over the few decades it is seen that the process of the formation of Assamese nationality most of the communities has lost their identity by losing some cultural elements for which the problem of identity has become more crucial. For example Bodo, Karbi, Mishing, Motok, Ahom, Sonwal Kachari are some of the ethnic groups which have faced and still facing the problem of ethnicity and identity conflict. The pattern of politics as it developed in the Upper Assam in the twentieth century came to be centred on issues of immigration and of linguistic identity. The attitudes adopted by various ethnic groups towards these issues, manifested in different types of political action including electoral behaviour, illustrate their perceptions regarding their social standing and their political interests in an ethnically divided milieu. Thus, each community in Assam has its own history which precipitated its identity crisis and led it to the path of movement.

So far the identity problem is concerned the Tea Community of Assam, who constitutes a substantial amount of the Upper Assam's population today. The impacts of the inherent peculiarities of the plantation system force the plantation labour to constitute a social category having limited interaction with the outside world of the tea plantation. This division was sharpened by the fact that the migrant workers were deliberately insulated from the local population by the plantation management during the colonial period. The lack of communication facilities in the tea garden¹ areas also meant that the workers lost

¹ The Terms Tea Garden, tea plantation and tea estate are used to mean the same meaning.

almost all contact with their native places which were far away from the Assam, so that their descendants became permanent residents of the region.

It is a fact that the Tea Plantation industry exerted some unique influences on the society of these recruited labourers. Before migration to this place these people belongs to different ethnic groups, cultural background, status, families and demands. But after migration to here and living more than hundred and fifty years in Assam and engaged in Tea Industry they have come to convergent point creating a common culture and evolving a common lingua franca. The Tea Industry has brought a new common type of economy, administration, housing pattern and social environment For all official purposes a labour is considered as a member of the entire workforce of the plantation but not as that of a particular tribe or caste or community Cited in Phukan and Deka 2001,112). And even by the other social group of Assam these people are always treated a single group of people; never regard by their different caste and tribe. So Living more than one hundred fifty years in Assam and engaged in Tea Industry they have come to a convergent point creating a common culture and evolving a common lingua franca. With the limitation of interaction with the other social group and more restricted in the tea garden setting; there has emerged a feeling of 'we' among people of the community and they regard the other social group of Assam as 'they'. As Fredrik Barth insisted that 'Ethnicity is based on one's perception of "us" and "them" and not on objective reality that actually exists "out there" in the real world' so based on this definition the Tea Community of Assam can be regard as an ethnic group.

In the post-colonial period, social interaction between the garden workers and the outside world increased steadily, owing largely to the breakdown of the old oppressive 'Planter Raj' and the advent of the democratic process, followed by a gradual improvement in the quality of life of the workers, which hitherto had provided only for a hand-to-mouth existence. Legislation passed both at the Central and State levels brought in some measure of social security to the workers, and in time a small section of educated people also appeared from amongst the newer generation of the workers' community, who could provide them political leadership in the democratic set-up:

After independence, gradually there emerged educated elite among the tea community who became articulate and organized to remove their backwardness. In this connection the movements carried out by the various ethnic groups of the state obviously induced the tea community elite to assert their constitutional rights including political ones for the cause of safeguarding their homogeneous distinct identity. Furthermore, such inducement has eventually led a section of them to the extent of launching a movement demanding autonomy as well as separate state as a measure of protecting their interests. Thus the Tea Community (later called the Tea Tribes) made a considerable degree of influence on the contemporary politics of the state (Cited in Phukan and Deka 2001, 131-143).

The present study “Ethnicity and Identity Construction: A Study of the Tea Garden Labourer of Assam” is about understanding the meaning of ethnicity and identity construction and how does ethnicity constitute an important factor of identity construction. The study is confined to the Sivasagar and Dibrugarh district of Assam.

1.2 Objectives:

Drawing an interdisciplinary approach, this research work tries to understand the identity construction of the Tea Community of Upper Assam. Ever since the tea garden labourers were brought by the British to Assam they have been facing a manifold identity crisis in Assam. One of the important questions that raise today is regarding the emergence of a common identity among the people of the tea garden labourers and how they construct Tea Community identity. Therefore the investigation mainly tries to highlight on the process of ethnicity and how they construct their identity. Composite of more than hundred caste and sub caste having various rites and rituals, festivals, religion etc. the people of the created a sense of unity among the various groups and trying to construct a single identity.

In general the main objectives behind this research are categorized as follows:

1. To investigate the issue of identity of the Tea Community.
2. To look at the process of ethnicity and identity construction.

3. To analyse how cultural diversity and various cultural expressions helps to form the Tea Community identity.

1.3 Methodology:

The study is mainly based on the Constructionist theory of ethnicity but also incorporated different arguments of ethnicity given by Paul Brass, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, Abner Cohen, Weber, Fredrick Barth, Phillip Q. Yang etc. Anthropologist and Sociologist like Abner Cohen, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan all are of the view point that ethnicity is not natural, but an artificial construction of the modern elites for their own vested interest. The core of the constructionist school is those ethnic groups are not eternal or natural, as primordialist naturalize them. They can be created and as they can be created they can be destroyed too. As Fredrik Barth mentioned that ethnic groups are not static but dynamics and fluid and ethnicity is a reaction to changing condition. That is ethnic identity are not given, they are socially constructed through cultural, historical or political process. Constructivism may be categorized into two sub types, viz., cultural constructionism and political constructionist. Cultural constructionist advocates that where a group constructs its identity through shared symbols and practices these have traditionally been called culture. While in political constructivism the elites within nation state, fashion a dominant set of ideologies, artistic styles, and linguistic usage which become normative under such situations (Cited in Sengupta 2014, 27). This research work the study of the ethnicity and identity construction of the Tea Community of Assam is mainly based on the cultural constructionist of ethnicity.

Methodology refers to the way in which information is found or the way something is done. It also includes the methods, techniques used to collect and analyze information.

Social scientists, for their intensive study prefer to choose small communities like the single village or part of a tribe, which is known as microcosmic approach. To serve as the nucleus for the present study, intensive field investigation has been carried out in the Tea community inhabited in the district of Sivasagar and Dibrugarh districts. Four tea gardens named as Sonari Tea Estate, Tingkhang Tea Estate, Manjushree Tea Estate and Khowang Tea Estate are selected mainly for data collection. Besides these four tea gardens I have done my field work in some other tea gardens of the district to arrive at a

more objective conclusion. I have done my fieldwork in the normal days as well as during festive seasons when the degree of identity consciousness is quite high. The period of my fieldwork was from January 2011 to till May 2015. A brief introduction of the districts is given below.

Sivasagar District:

Sivasagar is one of the historical places of Assam. The District is surrounded by Brahmaputra on the north, The Naga Hills on the south, Dihing River on the east and Jhanji River on the west. Sivasagar has a definite identity due to its different races, castes, languages and cultures. It is mostly plains but there are hillocks on south-eastern and Southern areas near Nagaland Border. The population of Sivasagar District as per 2011 census is 1151050. The economy of Sivasagar District is mainly dependent on Oil and Tea industries. And the occupation of majority of the population is cultivation. The major ethnic group of Sivasagar is Ahom. The other ethnic groups are Koch, Kachari, Moran, Motock, Barahi, Chutia, Rabha, Hajong, Lalung, Mech etc. The Tea Tribes are also very important for Sivasagar District as they are related to the biggest industry of Sivasagar, Tea Industry. According to Labour Commissioner Office, Sivasagar District, there are 87 numbers of tea gardens in Assam.

Dibrugarh District:

Dibrugarh is one of the highest tea producing Districts in Assam even in the world. Dibrugarh district occupies an area of 3,381 square kilometres. It is bounded by Dhemaji District on the north, Tinsukia district on the east, Tirap District of Arunachal Pradesh on the south-east and Sivasagar District on the north and south-west.

Tea and oil are the major revenue source for the district. Dibrugarh has the world's largest area covered by tea gardens. The entire district is surrounded by tea plantations and has tea factories. It has total numbers of 180 tea gardens. Many tea gardens are more than 100 years old. The occupation of majority population is cultivation.

According to the 2011 Census Dibrugarh district has a population of 1,327,748 and literacy rate of 76.22%. The main communities in the district are Tea Tribes, Ahoms, Sutiya, Sonowal Kacharis, Mattok, Moran, Bengali etc. There are also some Tai speaking Buddhist communities like Tai Phake, Khamti and Khamyang.

So far the research topic is concerned the study is mainly based on primary data although secondary data are also used. As Normen Denzin (2000) has noted that qualitative research it focuses on multiple interconnected interpretive methods since no single method can capture the subtle variation in continuous human experiences. Therefore the techniques for primary data collection are included interview, questionnaire, discussion and interaction with local people and also by observation method. The interview and observation are major tools used for the data collection. People of different age and sex are interviewed to gather accurate information in different socio-cultural background. The techniques have mainly been used in informal way so that information about what the tea garden labourers of this region actually feel about identity can be found out. As the literacy rate and the economic status of the community who are still inhabitant of tea gardens are low therefore looking at the situations, the informants are selected randomly. Along with these interviewed some political leaders and members of student's organization and other non-governmental and cultural organizations are also taken separately. Various leaders of All Tea Tribe Students' Association, Assam Chah Jangusthi Sahitya Sabha and some other political leaders of Tea Community are interviewed during the fieldwork to know their opinion regarding Tea community identity as these members are regarded in some point as the representative of the community. I have observed and attended various cultural functions, festivals, rituals which are carried during my fieldwork to distinguish how they used their cultural forms in their identity construction. According to the information or data collected from the field the researcher has tried to classify and in order to fulfil the purpose the work the available data will be classified in different chapters.

As per the need of secondary data published books and articles from news paper and journals, e-resources, census report are consulted in this connection.

1.4 Literature Review:

Survey of literature on a particular research topic is very essential towards the understanding of the work done and methods use in them. A good number of literature have been reviewed which are as follows-

Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam (Amalendu Guha, 2014) is one of the influential work of Guha on the history of colonial rule and

freedom struggle in Assam and the North East. Along with an understanding of the Colonial socio-economic structure of Assam the author provided a detailed account of the evolution of the provincial legislature of Assam in the context of general political developments in the north east region. This book has given a new dimension to the historical studies of Assam. Guha writes about the socio-economic condition of a crucial period in the history of Assam. Some of the important issues that included in this book by Guha are plantation economy of the region, the imperialism of opium cultivation, the problems of steady influx of immigrants and the backlash of a local linguistic chauvinism, peasant's and workers struggle, the Congress, the Trade Unions and later of the Communist Party.

Empire's Garden (Jayeeta Sharma) In the mid-nineteenth century the British created a landscape of tea plantations in the north-eastern Indian region of Assam. The tea industry filled imperial coffers and gave the colonial state a chance to transform a jungle-laden frontier into a cultivated system of plantations. Claiming that local peasants were indolent, the British soon began importing indentured labour from central India. In the twentieth century these migrants were joined by others who came voluntarily to seek their livelihoods.

In *Empire's Garden*, the author explains how the settlement of more than one million migrants in Assam irrevocably changed the region's social landscape. She argues that the racialized construction of the tea labourer catalyzed a process by which Assam's gentry sought to insert their homeland into an imagined Indo-Aryan community and a modern Indian political space. Various linguistic and racial claims allowed these elites to defend their own modernity while pushing the burden of primitiveness onto "non-Aryan" indigenous tribals and migrant labourers. As vernacular print arenas emerged in Assam, so did competing claims to history, nationalism, and progress that continue to reverberate in the present.

Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of North-East India (Sanjib Baruah, 2005) explores the political meaning and significance of prolonged low intensity conflicts in North-East India. The author argues that if peace and development are to be brought to the region. India's policy will have to be reoriented and linked to a new foreign policy towards South East Asia. In the midst of stubborn economic and political

problems of North-East India trapped in the geopolitics of the colonial and post-colonial order, a translation solution to the problem of the region may be thought of.

India Against Itself and the Politics of Nationality (Sanjib Baruah, 2011) highlights the ongoing problem of insurgency and sub-nationalism in Assam. It explores the political and economic history of Assam since the time it became the part of British India. The region witnessed the tension between pan Indianism and Assam sub-nationalism since the early days of the Indian nationalism. However, the situation of Assam in recent years is much alarming. It is argued that such insurgency, human rights abuses by government security forces and insurgents, ethnic violence and a steady decline of the economy are largely the outcome of the strong centralising tendency of the Indian federation.

Ethnicity in North East India edited by Sarthak Sengupta is a collection of eleven original essays offered by renowned teachers and experienced researcher to acquaint wide readers about the dynamic nature of ethnicity in North East India to understand the mechanism according to which the character of its momentary commonality becomes clearly visible.

Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison (Paul R Brass, 1999) describes ethnicity and nationalism as socio-political construct. These are not given or natural phenomena. Rather, these are the creation of elites. The elites exploit the emotions and sentiments of the ethnic groups in order to gain their political, economic and social benefits. Competition among the elites for socio-economic and political mileage precipitates ethnic identity consciousness and ethnic conflicts. The cultural norms, values, customs, and practices of the ethnic groups are the instruments for the elites to compete for political power and economic advantages.

Ethnicity in Assam (Editor K.M. Deka and K.N. Phukan) is a collection of papers presented at the National Seminar on 'Ethnicity in Assam Today'. This book mainly discusses the various concept of ethnicity in regard of Assam.

Ethnicity in India by Ajit Kr Dana discusses about ethnicity in terms of plural society. He discusses that instead of comprehending the same primarily as the system of categorization based on a set of fixed criteria where inter-relationship of the national mainstream with the so called ethnic minorities is considered important, in view of pluri-

cultural realities, ethnicity has been perceived here as the strategy of interest alliance : a state of dynamic equilibrium. The nature of exposition of ethnicity under the circumstances depends to a major extent on the kind of stimulus received by an individual or a group at a given time of point.

Ethnonationalism in India: A Reader (Edited by Sanjib Baruah, 2010) Discussing various ethnonational movements in India, including the North East, Punjab, and the Kashmir movements, the volume covers their initiation, subsequent trajectory, and the role of the State. The first part provides the context discussing democracy, diversity, and devolution and the containment of social and political power. The second and third parts focus on Kashmir as a legacy of Partition, and the Northeast respectively. Both parts discuss the nature of contest among various forms of legitimate and not-legitimate power in these conflicts. Dealing with the nature of federal design, the fourth part discusses conflict-negotiation between a democratic nation and prospective breakaway units, with an emphasis on how such situations are controlled. The fifth part explores the theory of fragmented nationalisms and relates it to the specifics of the situation in India. The concluding part charts the rise and fall of self-determination movements across the country.

The Tea Labourers of North East India (Editor Sarthak Sengupta,2009) The impressive collection of twenty two research articles accommodated in this volume offer discrete descriptions on the history and migration of the workers in tea plantations in North East India and their settlements there. The articles included in this volume exhaustively cover the demographic characteristics; food habits of the populations; nutritional status; health and hygiene and morbidity scenario; economy, polity, social organisation; impact of Christian missionaries; status of women; socio-economic and political problems; trade union movement; their identity consciousness, etc. The volume will be of great use for wide ranging specialists-administrators, policy makers, planners and decision making bodies at different levels, development agencies, researchers in the field of social sciences and others concerned with migrant population groups.

Chah Janagusthir Sinta Chetona (2001) edited by Rajen Gogoi is a book of collection of various articles of tea community. The tea community of Assam is one of the major groups which reveals at present day population formation of Assam. There is remarkable

importance of the Tea community in the growth of Assamese culture as well as in the politics of Assam. In this book the author included various proverbs, rites and rituals, folksongs, festivals, dance forms that exist among the Tea Community. Here importance is given on feelings, emotions and thinking of the garden workers in selection of articles. And here it is also tried to select the articles which are written by the authors of Tea Community itself.

Questions of Cultural Identity (Edited by Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay) Why and how do contemporary questions of culture so readily become highly charged questions of identity? The question of cultural identity lies at the heart of current debates in Cultural studies and Social theory. Issue is whether those identities which defined the social and cultural world of modern societies for so long - distinctive identities of gender, sexuality, race, class and nationality - are in decline, giving rise to new forms of identification and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject.

Questions of Cultural Identity offer a wide-ranging exploration of this issue. Stuart Hall firstly outlines the reasons why the question of identity is so compelling and yet so problematic.

Ethnicity (Edited by John Hutchinson and D. Smith) although the term "ethnicity" is recent, the sense of kinship, group solidarity, and common culture to which it refers is as old as the historical record. Ethnic communities have been present in every period and on every continent, and have played an important role in all societies. The sense of a common ethnicity remains a major focus of identification for individuals even today. Ethnic community and identity are also often associated with conflict, particularly with political struggles in various parts of the world. Yet there is no essential connection between ethnicity and conflict, and in many instances, relations may in fact be peaceful and cooperative.

This *Oxford Reader* offers explanations for the often contentious nature of ethnicity, its worldwide effects, and the possible means for overcoming conflicts. It includes extracts by all the major contributors to debates on ethnicity, including Weber, Brass, Hechter, and Horowitz, and focuses on ethnic groups in the Middle East, the Balkans, Africa, and North America, as well as other areas.

In an article entitled *A Question of Identity Adivasi Militancy In Assam* Hiren Gohain, mainly highlighted on the issue of identity and Schedule Tribe status of the Adivasis of Assam.

Immigration and Identity Transformation in Assam published in Economic and Political weekly Udayan Mishra said that for centuries migrants have been accommodated in Assamese society. Here Mishra briefly discusses the shaping of Assamese society and culture over centuries and goes on to discuss pre and post independence changes in politics, attitudes and the demography of the state. He examines the language issue, the tribals verses Assamese middle class tensions.

1.5 History of Tea Plantation and Tea Community in Assam:

It was the British Colonisers who first introduced the tea plantation in India as well as in Assam Valley during the early part of the 19th century. As soon as the demand for tea started to increase in the worldwide and also the lost of its monopoly in the tea trade with China; the British Colonisers became interested in the possibility of tea cultivation in Assam. In 1778 Governor General of Bengal Warren Hastings instructed Sir Joseph Bank, naturalist and Botanist, about the possibility of cultivation of tea crops in India. Accepting the request of East India Company Sir Joseph submitted a report on the possibility of tea crops in North East India that there is a probability of bright future of the tea cultivation in the North-East region of India. But at that period Assam was under the rule of Ahom Swargadeo's (king's), so approximately till 1819 the possibility of tea cultivation remained unproductive.

Dr. Nathaniel Wallis Sahib, the Superintendent of the Calcutta Botanical Garden, requested Ahom King Purandar Singha for permission to start tea cultivation in Dikhowmukh to Gabharu Parbat area. At that time, according to the law if somebody clears vast jungle he does not have to pay any tax for that land. But, Later Wassil Sahib got despaired and went back when Purandar Singha told that the cultivator had to pay half of his crops as tax of such land (Cited in Bora 2006, 6).

Nothing seems to have happened often that until 1819 When David Scott, Agent to the Governor General in Assam, began to take an interest in the suggestion made by Banks and wrote for a consignment of plants and seeds which had

earlier been sent to the Botanical Gardens in Calcutta. The Consignment was despatched but the plants apparently died.²

A few days later of this in 1823 Robert Bruce got information about tea plant in Assam and concentrated on how to collect tea seeds and plants. C. A. Bruce his brother also assisted him in collection of tea seeds. Later C.A. Bruce claimed himself to be the first European who discovered tea in Assam. In 1823 when Robert Bruce came to Assam for trade survey he met Singpho Head Birsa Gam. From Gam he knew that there are tea plants in the forests of Assam. It is said that in 1823 Birsa Gam gifted two tea plants to Robert Bruce. Robert Bruce took these two plants with him but did not plant (Cited in Bora, 2006, 7)). Robert Bruce did an agreement with Birsa Gam that Gam had to provide some Tea seeds and plants in his next visit to Assam.

In 1826 when C.A. Bruce came to Sadiya as a Navy captain to suppress the Singpho oppressions started in 1825, his brother Robert Bruce instructed him to collect tea seeds and plants from Birsa Gam. After suppression of the rebellion in the returning way C A Bruce collected the seeds and plants from Gam. He handed over those seeds to David Scott and David Scott sent those to Calcutta Botanical Garden for examining. After examining it was reported that the seeds collected from Assam were not from same species of China but from the same family (Gait 2013, 351).

Though the tea plant was found in Assam in 1825 but the East India Company did not pay much attention or interest on it as at that time as East India Company was busy in monopoly business with China. Later, East India Company started to feel the importance of starting the tea industry after the Charter Act of 1833, when the English East India Company's highly profitable trade on Tea ended with China (Awasthi, 1975). The trade agreement of 20 years between China and Britain was reluctant to continue the trade agreement. Because of this the East India Company had to find an alternative source for the supply of tea. Therefore on 1st February, 1834 the Governor General of India, Lord William Bentinck formed a 'Tea Committee' to research about the probability of tea cultivation in Assam. The tea committee formed with 7 members of East India Company, 3 of them was merchants from Calcutta, Dr. N. Wallich, and two Indians. The Secretary

² Tea Digest, Calcutta, Tea Traders Association.

of the committee was G.J. Gordon. As soon as the Committee formed it started rapid survey of possibility of tea cultivation in various part of Assam.

Superintendent of tea forest areas of Assam C.A. Bruce formally opened tea plant gardens in the bank of Brahmaputra near Sadiya and in confluence of Kundil River in 1835. But the plants apparently died. Later on in 1837 the 1st Tea garden in Assam was established successfully in Chabua, Dibrugarh. Chabua is the first tea garden of Assam. In 1838, twelve boxes of tea sent from Assam reached London via Calcutta and got sold in the auction market with the tea from China. After this sale the excellence of Assam tea was ascertained and started to increase the demand of Assam tea. With the elevation of demand of Assam tea the number of tea gardens in Assam also started to be increased. A list of increasing tea gardens in Assam is given below.

Table-1.1
A report of increasing tea gardens in Assam

Year	No of Tea Gardens	Land used for Tea Cultivation (in Acre)	Tea Production (In Lb)
1850	1	1,876	2,16,000
1853	10	2,425	3,66,700
1859	48	7,599	12,05,689
1869	260	25,174	47,14,769
1871	295	31,303	62,51,143

Source: Bora, 2006, 12.

Charles A Bruce though claimed to be the first European person to discover tea in Assam but this claim was first rejected by Lft. Charletan in 1841. He claimed that he first sent the seeds of the tea plant from Assam to ‘Agricultural and Horticultural Society’ (Gait 2013, 354).

The discovery that the tea plant grows wild in the upper part of the Brahmaputra Valley was made by Mr. Robert Bruce, who has already been mentioned as an agent, first of Purandar Singha, and afterwards of his rival Chandra Kanta. He visited Gargaon for trading purposes in 1823 and there learnt of its existence from a Singpho who promised to obtain some specimen for him (Gait 2013, 354).

Again in 1835 Dr. Wallish in his report honoured both the Bruce brothers as tea discoverer in Assam. He wrote,

It was Mr Bruce and his late brother Major Robert Bruce at Jorhat who originally brought the Assam Tea to Public notice many years ago when no one had the slightest idea of its existence (Gait 2013, 354).

Captain Jenkins also gave the honour of discovering the first tea in Assam to C. A. Bruce.

‘The merit of the discovery rests solely with Mr. Bruce, who in 1836 manufactured some specimens which were sent home, but were unfit for use.’

As a result of this honour given by Jenkins C.A. Bruce was selected as Superintendent of the Government Tea Forest (Gait 2013, 355).

But before discovering tea by the Colonisers in Assam, it was prevalent among some tribes of Assam as a beverage. The Singpho who lived in the North Eastern part of Assam called it as ‘*Fanap*’, ‘*Finap*’ or ‘*Falap*’. The Singpho used to collect the tea leaves from the wild tea in the jungles and boil them in a bamboo ‘*Chunga*’ (Cylinder) and liquor of the boiled leaves was drunk as a tea by them. The Assamese villagers also boiled these tea leaves in an earthen pot and drunk the liquor as a medicine against cold and cough.

1.5.1 Labour Recruitment:

Seeing the bright prospects of tea cultivation on the soil of Assam the number of tea gardens started to be increased very fast. The tea industry is a labour oriented industry. And as a gradual expansion of tea plantation in Assam, the tea industry needs a large number of workers to run the industry smoothly. In the initial stage the British administration thought of that they managed it by recruiting local people but it did not happen like that. The local people of Assam did not come forward to work as a labourer

in the tea gardens. As a result they faced a scarcity of workers. There were various reasons for which the local people did not want to work in the tea plantation. Some of these are-

i) At that time the population density was very sparse in Assam. Large areas of lands were uninhabited and unused. Therefore, local people were not interested to work in the tea gardens leaving their own cultivations on those large areas of lands.

ii) On the other hand, being under ruling of indigenous King the local aboriginal people became dignity conscious and free minded. So, they did not show interest to work in the tea gardens leaving their free lifestyle under the Company (Outsider).

iii) Due to excessive consumption of opium the local people were becoming lazy. So they did not want work hard in the tea gardens.

Among the Assamese people who worked in the tea gardens, the Tea Planters preferred only the people of Kachari community. The people of Kachari Tribe were hard working and to some extent free from venom opium. Therefore they were trying to recruit the Kachari people by various tactics like giving a variety of gifts, offering drink, organizing feasts, asking the Village Head to request them to work in the garden etc. But these tactics were not fruitful. In the first Assam Tea Company recruited people as labourer from Kachari, Rabha, Matak, Kuki tribes. They engaged Singpho people also but later they released very soon.

Getting no positive result from the local Assamese labourers they had to bring in (import) labourer from outside of Assam. In the first phase Chinese Skilled labourers were imported and recruited as labourers. The East India Company also imported labourers from Nepal to work in the tea gardens of Assam. The Chinese skilled labourers demanded high rate of wages and they were difficult to manage. As a result the planters compelled to think from elsewhere to import labourers. The Chinese in 1848 left the tea gardens and went back to their places. Now, they turned towards the Kukis, Nagas, Bengali and Tripuri, but this also did not work.

Having unsuccessful from all the tactics to obtain labourers from the local people and the neighboring areas of Assam the Planters' thought of immigrating labourer from outside

Assam. To solve out the labour scarcity problem the Planters thinking to immigrate labour from outside Assam. The Planters planned to recruit labourers from the place which were most famine and poverty stricken. C.A. Bruce wrote first expressing about the incapability of the local people to work as labourer-

‘A more hard working community is needed for tea garden, so that they allow their wives and children to work in the gardens with them’ (Antrobus 1957, 466).

In 1841 an attempt was made to import the first batch of the immigrant labour from Chotanagpur area but all of them perished and deserted in route and none of them reached the tea gardens. J.R. Kindo in Assam Tribune ‘Adivasi in Assam’ mention that

‘History tells us that the first batch of labourers was brought in 1841, but all of them succumbed to disease. Therefore the Adivasis were imported in large numbers. Hence the slave trade was carried on in the name of ‘coolie trade’-the derogatory name.’

In the year 1859-1860 the Tea Company first imported 2049 labourers from outside Assam. In the next year they imported 3081 labourers. These labourers were brought from Chotanagpur (of present Chhattisgarh) and Medinipur (West Bengal). The Tea Company imported 84,915 labourers from 1863 to till 1866. Notable, among those 30 thousand labourer died prematurely then only (Guha 2014, 18). 22,800 labourers out of the total 34,833 labourers who were engaged in the tea industry in the year 1867-68 were imported labourers. There were only 11,633 were local labourer (Cited in Bora 2006, 23). In the initial 5 years the Planters imported 54,352 labourers. In 1923 there were 5,27,000 labourer who were worked in the tea gardens. According to the census report of 1921 the number of labourers that brought from outside Assam was 1 ½ Million (Gait 2013, 362).

Table No. 1.2

Annual Immigration of Labour including Children into Assam Plantation

Year	No.	Year	No.
1902-03	26,684	1919-20	102,089
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	45,698
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	59,873	1932-33	39,901
1913-14	58,646	1933-34	47,960
1914-15	63,638	1934-35	19,968
1915-16	110,376	1935-36	23,876
1916-17	48,130	1936-37	27,842
1917-18	19,470	1937-38	32,335
1918-19	222,171		

Source: Amalendu Guha, 2014, 290.

Those imported labourers who were brought to work in the tea gardens of Assam were from different regions of India and of different linguistic family. They were mainly imported from Chotangpur, Bengal, the then Madras, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh etc. As these labourers were brought from different locations of India, they do not belong to the same ethnic group. These labourer was composite of more than hundred caste and sub-caste like- Munda, Orang, Saura, Kondh, Pahadiya, Ghatuwal, Bhumij, Khariya, Bhil, Boraik, Bauri etc. (See Appendix).

These labourers were not come to this land willingly; they were taken either by forcefully or by giving false promises. There were various reasons that forced the labourers to immigrate to Assam. Some of the main reasons were-

To begin with famine affected areas in the 19th century, there were severe famine occurred in North-West Provinces (1860-61), North Bengal, Orissa, the then Madras (1865-66), Bengal and Orissa (1873-74) in which more than one million people lost their lives. The people of these places were the worst victim of circumstances and this compelled them to fall into the trap of agents of the government. Thus the labourers were famine and poverty stricken areas were recruited without any much problem. Added to it, excessive exploitation of poor peasants and landless labourers by the *Zamindars* were the main reason of people's migration to this place in search of better livelihood. As the peasants were hailing from the poor economic background, most of the time for reasons they involved themselves into the debts to *Zamindars* and *Mahajon* (Money- lenders). Later due to their poverty and illiteracy they were easily exploited as much as possible. To get free from these, the labourers agreed for migration and thus they became as easy prey for the emigration to Assam.

It also appears from the folk songs composed by the tea garden labourers for their forced migration to the tea plantation of Assam. It is reflected in these folk songs that it was their extreme poverty, debt, social disorder and inhuman torturing by the *Zamindars* which compelled them to emigrate. Some of these folk songs reflecting the grief and sorrows are as follows-

i) *Chal mini Assam jabo*

Dese boro dukhere

Assam dese re mini

Chah bagan khulibo

Sobai mili gamsa bisai bhat khabo

English Translation³:

Let's go to Assam, Mini

Its full of grief in our land

³ The translation of the folksongs are translated by the researcher.

Mini, in Assam
We will open a tea garden
We'll have meal together

ii) *Nana morlek nodir majhe*
Nani morlek ghate
Bapeke dilo police thanai
Bhagai jabor dose

English Translation:

Grandfather died in the midst of the river
Grandmother died in the bank of the river
Father is thrown to the police station
In grief I want to run away.

iii) *Sardar bole kaam kaam*
Babu bole dhore aan
Sahab bole libo pithir sam
Re nisthur sam
Faki diye anili Assam

English Translation:

Leader said to work ceaselessly
Officers asked to catch him or her
And officer said that our backs would be skinned
O' betrayed group
You have brought us to Assam by false promises.

iv) *Gas hilale paisa jhare*
Woha kuno dukho naika ba
Woha poisa ba

English Translation:

Money falls when we shaken tree

There is no any sorrow

There is only money

1.5.2 Modes of Labour Recruitment:

In order to get labourers from various regions of India, the Tea Company took some recruitment systems. These systems are as follows-

i) Contractual Process: A Contractor was a licensed person whose only object was to collect as many coolies as possible, without reference to their fitness for work in the tea gardens of Assam or any consideration beyond their willingness to emigrate. He was also assisted by sub-contractor who was an un-licensed person for the same job. Since there was no restriction upon the contractor, the system became known as the 'free contractor system'.

The contractor used to recruit men, women and children from the North-West parts of India. It is found in various sources that under this system the coolies were neither medically examined nor registered and most of time they adopt all kinds of fraudulent methods while recruiting them. They signs contract with the poor and innocent peasants by narrating fantastic stories of abundance of land, high wages and bright prospects in tea plantation in Assam,

ii) *Sardari* System: The recruitment through Garden *Sardars* was commonly known as Sardari system and this method was used to recruit labourers directly. Under this system, a labourer, either a male or female who was working in tea garden was choose by the garden management and sent to his original place to bring his own relatives and friends to the tea garden of Assam as tea labourer. The Garden *Sardar* had to produce his certificate or license when he appeared with a recruit before a Magistrate for registration. This system of recruiting labourer by the Garden *Sardars* proved to be more satisfactory than that of Contractual. Regarding the salary, the *Sardar* were paid a fixed bonus per head on all Coolies brought, which was much less expensive than the first method that is Contractual system. Thus the *Sardars* collected and brought labourers from Chotagnapur, Rachi, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh etc.

It is seen that the story of collecting labours to work in the tea gardens of Assam from different places of India is actually a story of oppression, pressurization and torment. After collecting the labours, on the journey to Assam thousands of the labourers died prematurely of various diseases. Those who reached the tea gardens were kept in unhealthy lines of the gardens away from the lights of the outer world. They were not even allowed to remain absent in their work even for a day when they were unwell. They did not any chance to any freedom at all. They did not have any social interactions with the other social group of Assam and not even with their fellow members of other tea gardens. They had got a very low wages for which the whole family had to work in the tea gardens for their livelihood.

1.6 Socio-cultural life the Tea community:

Every social group has its own unique socio-cultural life. Socio-cultural life of a group consists of culture, language and dialect and traditional customs which in fact gives rise to fellow feeling and sentiments and has differentiate from other social group. The Tea Community has a rich and composite culture. They have various festivals and ceremonies in relation to birth, marriage and death.

1.6.1 Composition and concentration of the Tea Community:

Amongst the various ethnic group of Assam, the Tea Community is one of the important ethnic groups of Assam, a total population of about 60 lakhs or about 20 percent of the total population of Assam to 2011 census. The Tea community is composite of various tribes and caste and some of these major tribe castes are as follows-

Munda	Orang	Sautal	Saura	Khariya
Bhumij	Kurmi	Gowala	Porja	Bhiya
Gond	Ghatuwar	Kul	Asur	Teli
Rabidas	Boraik	Karmakar	Kahar	Tanti
Lohar	Mirdha	Tasa	Mahali	Lodha etc.

The concentration of the Tea Community found in most of the districts of Assam but their density varies according to the number of tea plantation in different region of

Assam. They are more numerous in Upper and central Assam than of lower Assam. The community dominates the district of Sivasagr, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Jorhat, Golaghat and Sonitpur. In Lakhimpur, Darang, Barak Valley and Bodoland Territorial Area of Assam also have significant population of the Tea Community.

1.6.2 Occupation:

As the people of the Tea Community were brought by the British Tea Planters to work as 'labourer' in the tea gardens of Assam, most of the Tea Community people still working as 'labourer' in the various tea gardens of Assam. Besides working in tea gardens a section of these people is also engaged in agriculture. Recently education has given the chance to engage in Governmental and Non-governmental sector too.

1.6.3 Religion:

The majority of the Tea community people are followers of Folk Hinduism. However through the some people of the community converted to Christianity. They worship different deities during different seasons or rituals. They are mostly animistic in nature and worship tribal gods. Many trees are considered sacred and are worshiped. There has religion temple and sacred ground for community in every tea garden.

1.6.4 Dress and Ornaments:

The traditional dress of the male member of the Tea community is *Dhuti*, *Kurta* and a white turban. The female is white *Saree* (It is a long piece of cloth) with red border and red Blouse. Some old women also wear black colour *Mekhela* above knee and *Chador* in the upper part of the body. Now the patterns of the community changed in the course of time. Men are generally using shirts and pants while women wear *Churider* and other modern dress. The traditional dresses are seen on special occasions like festivals, rituals, marriages and some other social or public gatherings only.

The women of the Tea Community use various ornaments. They mainly used silver made ornaments. Some of the ornaments used by the women of the Tea Community are-

Chandrahar

Chitapatee

Bala

Nakful

KamarGath

Khangkosh

Poiyeri etc.

Generally these ornaments are used in the marriages and on the time of performances of various folk dances. Male members use earring known as *Kanoshi*.

1.6.5 Rituals and Customs:

The Tea Community people have different rituals or social customs associated with birth, marriage and death.

1.6.5.1 Birth Rituals:

There is a custom in the Tea Community that as soon as the baby born, the family creates a noisy atmosphere by hitting the wall and roof of their home. They believe that by doing this it deport fears of the new born baby and in future the baby will not be afraid of thunders and lightening. After six days of born of the baby the mother of the baby offers *Puja* to the presiding deity of the baby. They have no any special preparation for this ritual. On the ninth day they have done a ritual which is called as *Norta* (Cited in Bora, 2006, 43). On this day the new born babies are brought for the first time outside the house. The house is purified using cow dung. They invite a barber to home and he cut the hair and nails of the baby. The new born baby and the mother are offered new clothes. All the people who come to see the baby gives oil on the baby's head. On the 21st day they convene/organize '*Kirtan*' which is called '*Ekeisa*'.

Another important ritual associated with the birth is '*Nambishi*' or name giving ceremony. In this ceremony some old persons take water in a bowl and some green grass called '*dubori bon*' and basil leaves are put on it. They also use rice in the ritual. The name is selected by the relatives or family members.

1.6.5.2 Marriage:

Marriage is an integral part of a society. In the Tea Community marriage is called '*Shadi*'. The Tea Community is a composition of various tribes and castes and so in marriages we see various customs associated with it.

The Tea Community people generally marry of their children in early age. The main person who takes the active role in the marriages is known as '*Aguwa*'. He is the middle man who passes the message to the both house (Bride and the bride groom). *Aguwa* first gives the message to the boy's house about the girl. And if everything matches the boy and his family members goes to girls' house to see the girl. If the boy and the girl agree to marry, the family members arrange the '*Kapud Pindha*' (exchange of cloth) custom. The *Kapud Pindha* is done from both sides, first the groom's side go the bride's house with the offering of clothes and ornaments. The '*gonog toaka*' (a certain amount of money) is given to the girl's house in this occasion of *Kapud Pindha*. That amount of money is given to the girl's parents as bride price. This is called *ganag sikki*. The girls's family on that day arrange feast for the people and after offering of cloths they invite the boy's family for food by offering '*Ghoti pani*' 'which is actually a glass of homemade rice beer to the girl's family. If the boy's family take the '*Ghoti Pani*' it means they have no any objection for the marriage. After this the girl's family also go to the boy's home and offering cloths take '*Ghoti Pani*'.

On the day of the marriage the boy wear white *kurta* with yellow colour *dhoti* and has white turban on head and the girl is also wear yellow colour *Saree* and wear various silver ornaments. *Sindurdan* is an important ritual of the marriage. Here the *Sindur* is given to the girl by the boy. After completion of the marriage the groom take his bride to his home. The boy's family arrange a *Ghar puja* in the kitchen and symbolically hand over the responsibility of the household to the bride. After the eight day of the marriage the *Athmongla* ceremony is held. The girl visits her parent's home and distributes some gifts amongst her family members.

1.6.5.3 Death Ritual:

Both cremation and burrial rituals in funeral are available among the Tea Community. Generally the Hindu people of Tea Community do cremation. But, in case if the dead person is minor, pregnant or died from snake bite then they will be burried. The Christian people do burrial with coffin. When a person dies, untill the eldest son or head of the family permits nobody from the neighbours or relatives touch the body. Before taking the corpse to the crematory it is washed with musterd oil and termeric paste then covered with white shroud and carry to the crematory. The pyre is placed in north-south

direction. Mango tree branch is used to light up the corpse. Generally the eldest son take the main role in cremation. After the cremation all the people take bath and return to the dead person's house. There they light up incense sticks, *dhuna* and pulverize *tulsi* water on themselves, then return to home.

On 10th day of death the family arranges '*daha*'. On *daha* they offer *pindo* to the dead on the bank of river or pond or in the house also. In case of death of minors *pindo* is not offered. On the day of *daha* non-vegetarian food is not used. In the evening three-four persons go to the place of offering *pindo* and they make a small cottage and burn it down. Then they come back to the dead person's home and one of them calls the family members from outside pretending as the dead person. The family members opens the door and let him enter then one senior person from the society pray him not to harm his home and anybody of his family. This is called '*Sahir Ana*'. Some people of the Community finish all the rituals for the dead person on the *daha* but some arrange some rituals every year.

1.7 Overview of the Chapterization:

The thesis has been organised in five chapters.

Chapter one consists of statement of the problem, objectives, methodology, literature review, history of the tea plantation as well tea community and their socio cultural life.

Chapter two outlines the theoretical perspective on the ethnicity and identity construction and their relevance to the Tea Community.

Chapter three and four is on the empirical data. Chapter 3 discusses on the various issues of Tea Community identity. Here it also highlights on the ethnic boundaries and the multiple identities of the Tea Community and finally discusses about the capitalisation of the Tea Community Identity.

Chapter four is about the various cultural expressions like festivals, language, folk songs, material culture which are used in the identity construction of the Tea Community.

Chapter five is the conclusion chapter where the final observation has been discussed.