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# Tea Tribes in Assam in Historical Perspective with Special Reference to Udalguri District, Assam

Nizwm Sona Baro<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>. Department of History, Pandu College (Affiliated to Gauhati University), Guwahati, Assam – 781 012, India (Email: sonanizwm08@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** *Tea Tribes (also called Adivasis and Tea Garden Labour Community) in Assam are the off springs of the indentured labourers brought by the planters of the colonial period from different regions of present-day Jharkhand, Orissa and Bihar tribal belts; Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Madras in the nineteenth century. They comprised various ethnic groups such as the Munda, Kharia, Oraon, Gond, Santhal and Oriya. Despite being a heterogeneous community, they uphold their inter-ethnic integrity among themselves. They are counted as an ethno-linguistic minority who are estimated to be over 60 thousand people in the Udalguri district constituting about 17 percent of the whole population in Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) as well as 18 percent of Assam's total population as of 2011 census. The paper attempts to analyse the genesis of the Tea Tribes of Assam, tracing their colonial background as those who hailed from different corners of India and belonged to various multi-cultural and multi-lingual backgrounds.*

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**Keywords:** Tea Tribes, Adivasi, Tea Estate, Udalguri, Attrimuni, Livelihood, Identity

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## Introduction

Tea Tribes (Adivasis) comprising ninety-seven heterogeneous groups (Assam Government Ethnographic Report) are one of the most significant components of society in Assam. The British planters established Tea plantation industries in Assam from 1839. It conditioned the mobilization of labour forces in large scale from across the country. It brought about tremendous changes in the sparsely populated province of Assam. Although of late they have been absorbed by the mainstream society in Assam which has in turn enriched the history and culture of Assam as a whole. Previously due to their confinement in tea plantations, they had gotten little chance to assimilate with the mainstream society. They lived a secluded life in Assam, and they were treated almost as untouchables. They had not received attention from the local people until Mahatma Gandhi urged the people of Assam to eradicate 'untouchability'. Gandhi visited Assam for the second time in 1934 with the primary objective to preach for eradication of untouchability in the society of Assam. Gandhi's call brought about a change in the attitude of the people of Assam towards the emigrant tea garden labour population. In the twentieth century, the Asom Sahitya Sabha began to highlight their

life and culture through publications which has helped greatly in enriching the culture of Assam. The literary body of Assam calls them *Chah Bagisar Asamiya*, meaning Assamese of the tea gardens<sup>1</sup> (Kurmi, 1983). They are spread in the districts of Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur and Tinsukia in Upper Assam, Sonitpur, Udalguri and Goalpara in Lower Assam, besides hilly areas of Karbi Anglong as well as North Cachar in Central Assam. It can be noted that, majority of tea in Assam is grown in these districts.

## Identity Crisis

Tea Tribes (Adivasis) in Assam have been struggling for a long time to secure the status of Scheduled Tribe. They were brought to Assam, primarily with the aim to make them work in the tea plantations and they were made to live for many generations under the same surroundings disregarding their existence as a separate social group (Census Report, 1931). In the course of time, some of the labourers left the gardens and settled in the adjoining villages and adopted cultivation for their livelihood. The labourers employed as tea garden workers were termed as 'Tea Tribe' and those retired and settled beyond tea gardens were designated as 'Ex-Tea Tribe'. Although they belonged to diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, the British planters dubbed them as 'coolie' (labourer) and coolie tribe. The Official Records of the Colonial government merely categorized them as 'Coolie Tribes' or 'Tea Garden Coolie Tribes' (Kakati, 1989) and they were conceded Tribal status under the 'Depressed Classes'.

After Independence, they were de-scheduled in the Constitution in 1951 under the Gopinath Bordoloi Ministry in Assam. Officially, they are termed as 'Tea Tribe' and 'Ex-Tea Tribe' in Assam. But they do not enjoy privileges and rights like other tribal counterparts in the state.

The term 'Adivasi' (aboriginal or original inhabitants) is commonly applied to refer to the tribal people in the Constitution of India. Adivasis of India are conceded the Scheduled Tribe status and special rights in the Constitution of India. Some anthropologists viewed the term 'Tribe' as a colonial construct of the 19<sup>th</sup> century for the 'indigenous' people who were re-classified as Scheduled Tribes in the Constitution in 1950 (Report, Govt. of India, 2014). The Constitution, as per Article 342, provided for certain administrative and political concessions to these groups drawing a distinction between the term 'tribe' as a socio-cultural entity and 'Scheduled Tribe' as a politico-administrative category.

In Assam, the term 'Adivasi' is usually referred to the emigrant tea garden labourers along with their present generation who's ancestors were previously mobilized by colonial planters in the nineteenth century. Since then, their identity in Assam has been associated with tea gardens although a number of their population are scattered outside tea plantations today. They do not enjoy any privileges in Assam as enjoyed by their Adivasi counterparts in India. Since, the tribal identity of Adivasi has been legally and constitutionally recognised; the labour community claiming Adivasi identity has

been placing their demand for Scheduled Tribe status in Assam, as their counterparts in their ancestral states like Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Bengal and Orissa enjoy the same status. The term 'Adivasi' as a collective identity for these heterogeneous groups has not been accorded in Assam. Terms like 'coolie' or 'tea tribes' conferred to them by the Colonial planters has deprived them of their Tribal identity which has deterred their overall development and resulted in them showing poor development indicators. According to the 2011 census, the population of the Adivasi community in Udalguri district is sixty thousand comprising 17 percent of the population in Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) and 18 percent of State.

### **Study Area: Udalguri District**

Udalguri became one of the 33 districts in Assam in the northeast of India in 2004. The newly created district was a sub-division of the undivided district of Darrang before 2003. Udalguri is a major tea growing region in Assam and several tea industries had been established by the colonial masters. The district has connecting routes to Bhutan, Tibet and China via three *Duars* (passes) *Khaling Duar*, *Buriguma Duar* and *Kariapara Duar*. Bhairabkunda is located on the border between Assam and Bhutan. It is the connecting gate way to Tibet and China. During the 1962 Chinese aggression, refugees from Bhutan took shelter in the plains of Bhairabkunda. In the north of the mighty Brahmaputra River the Orang National Park, the abode of one horned rhinoceros is located.

The sacrificial altar of sage Attrimuni at Attrikhat (called as Attareekhat) adds to the heritage of the district. According to local tradition, the famed Ramayana sage Attrimuni had a hermitage at Gosala on the Suklai River bank on North-West of Udalguri. While in exile Rama along with wife Sita and brother Laxman visited Attrimuni's hermitage. Sage Attrimuni celebrated the victory of Rama against Ravana by performing a sacrifice. The traditional sacrifice is held every year in a three-day celebration on the *Ramnavami* and many devotees arrive here from different corners of India. As per the tradition, the name Attrikhat is derived from Attrimuni and this is where the European planters established tea gardens in 1859 and named it as Attareekhat Tea Estate. This Tea Estate is situated on the Northwest of the district across the international boundary on the foothills of Bhutan.

Demographically, as per 2011 census, the district has a population of 8,32,769. The average literacy rate is 66.6 percent (Census, 2011). The district is inhabited by heterogeneous communities with the majority of them being Bodo. Assamese, Bengali, Adivasi, Nepali, Marwari, and other tribes are also found in this district. The Populations here comprises a Hindu majority followed by Christian, Muslim and a few Buddhists communities.

Geographically, the district is spreads over 1,852.16 sq. km. It is encircled by the Bhutan hills in the North, West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, Sonitpur district in the East, Darrang district in the South and Baksa district in the West.

Udalguri is located at 26°55' 0" N to 26°39' 45" N (Latitude) and 91°57' 30" E to 92°12' 45" E (Longitude). Udalguri is basically an agricultural region. Paddy is the staple crop while tea is a commercial crop whose plantation covers 3,50,000 hectares of land in Assam and around 1,17,000 hectares are owned by small tea growers (The Assam Tribune, 2013). Assam contributes over 54 percent of India's total tea production and 20 percent of the world's tea. There are 845 registered tea estates in Assam (Tea Board of India) of which 25 are in Udalguri apart from over 5000 registered small tea plantations. Ten Tea Estates of Udalguri district represented in figure 1 include Dimakuchi Tea Estate (1850), Attareekhat Tea Estate (1859), Bhooteachang Tea Estate (1860), Corramore Tea Estate (1860), Paneery Tea Estate (1868), Borengajuli Tea Estate (1886), Hattigarh Tea Estate (1893), Orangajuli Tea Estate (1894), Budlapara Tea Estate (1906) and Suola Tea Estate (1915).

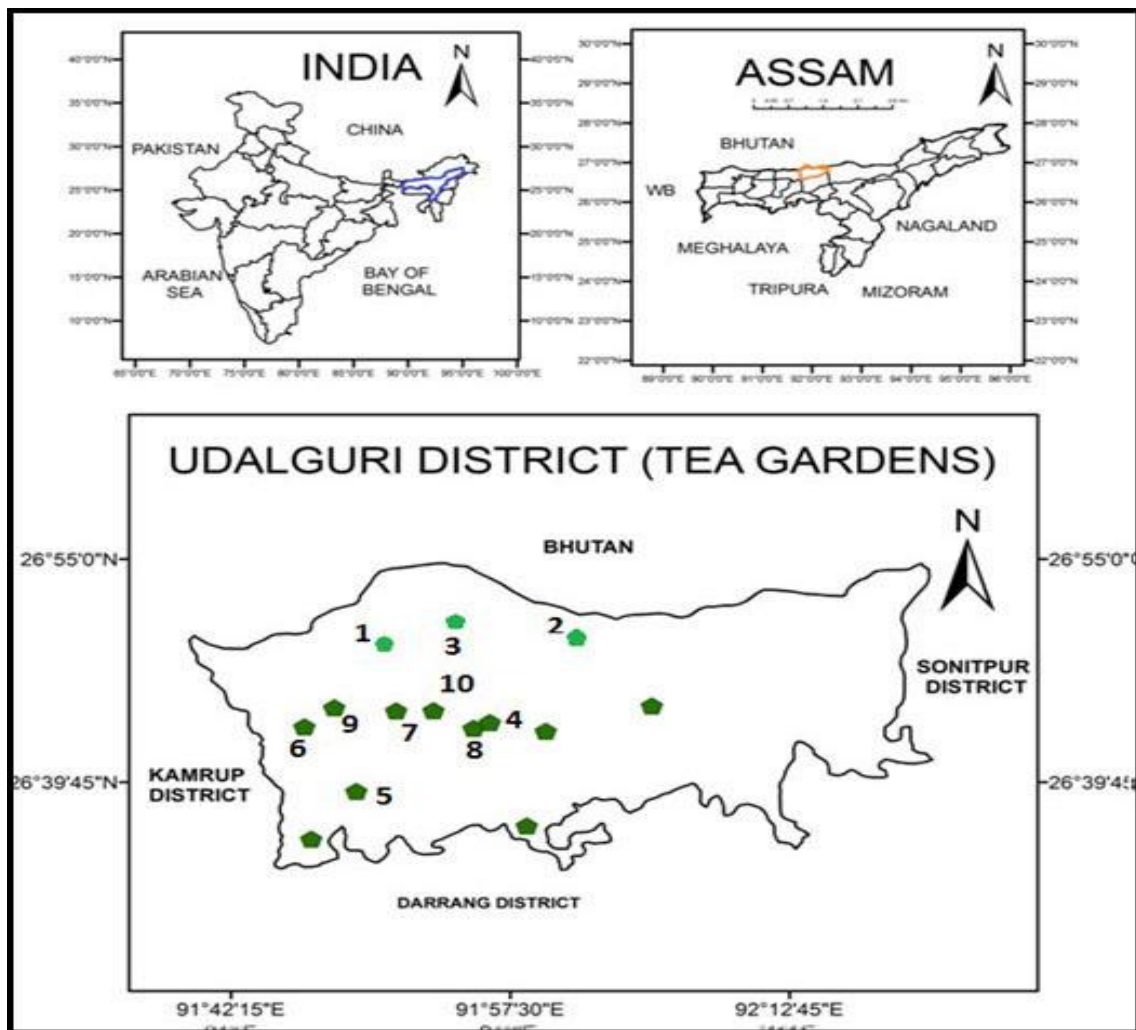


Figure 1: Map showing Tea Estates, Udalguri District

## Review of Literature

Fernandes et al (2003) studied educational attainment of tea garden labourers' children in Assam. This study indicated a number of factors responsible for the children's

educational stagnation. Their ethnic diversity and language became a barrier in education along with other factors. Kakati (1989) highlights the establishment of the tea plantation industry and Gandhi's influence on the labour populations throughout the freedom struggle. Banerjee (1996) studied the feudal culture in the Assam tea gardens which is peculiar compared to other industrial sectors. His study found this community largely illiterate, superstitious and untouched by modern progressive development. The study exposes their dependency on tea gardens and their bonded life instead of being able to be independent. Goswami, P. (1999) analyses the industrialization in Assam under British Colonial rule emphasizing the three most important industries- tea, coal and oil which brought about tremendous changes in Assam and greatly facilitated the British rule without any perceptible welfare on the local population. The study gives an insight on the labour migrations in the tea plantations of Assam and other industries. Behal (2000) has studied the wage policy, structure and living conditions of the labourers in the tea plantations in Assam with special emphasis on Assam Valley. Chattopadhyay (2012) highlights the contributions of the Brahmo missionaries of Bengal in bringing to light the untold miseries of the indentured labourers in Assam tea gardens and putting their issue to the national level.

## **Methodology**

This work is based on primary as well as secondary sources. Field observations are incorporated as primary source. Primary data include sample survey carried out on ten Tea Estates (Tea Gardens) out of the total 25 Tea Estates in the district. 500 households (50 households per tea estate) were taken in random for the purpose of investigation. Secondary data includes different published documents like books.

## **Objective**

The paper aims to highlight the history of Tea Tribes who although forming a significant component of the society in Assam, have failed to secure a legitimate identity in the state.

## **Tea Tribes: Tracing Their Roots of Origin**

Tea Tribes (Adivasis) in Assam are the descendants of the indentured labourers recruited by the colonial masters from poverty ridden regions of India. They were brought mostly from the poor tribal belts and agricultural regions of Chotanagpur, in present day Jharkhand and from other states like Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Madras, Bihar and West Bengal. These communities were dependent on agricultural, pastoral and hunting activities. Substantial portion of these tribal communities' dwell in and around 63.3 million hectares of India's forest area accounting for 19.3 percent of the country's landmass (Pushpam, 2018). But their livelihoods were adversely affected under the British colonial agrarian policies. Recruitment of indentured labour in the Assam tea plantations was facilitated by certain contemporary circumstances in the recruiting regions arising out of colonial economic policies (land revenue policy, de-industrialisation and commercialization of

agriculture), famines and epidemics. India had to bear increasing poverty, famines and epidemics in the mid nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

The recurring famines and epidemics of 1860-66, 1874-78, 1896-97, 1899-1900 in Bengal, Bihar, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and Orissa caused several millions of starvation deaths. Tribals especially the Santhals of Manbhum, Barabhum, Hazaribagh, Midnapur, Bankura and Birbhum areas suffered fatally under the colonial economic policies (Permanent Settlement of Bengal, 1793). They were oppressed not only by the British but also by the native *Zamindars* and money lenders. Such exploitative policies resulted in the outbreak of several revolts like the Santhal rebellion (1854-57), the Kherwar or Sardari Larai (1858-95), Birsa Munda Movement (1895) and Tana-Bhagat movement in Chotanagpur (1914-1919). As a measure to subdue the turmoil, the colonial Government encouraged emigration of the uprooted impoverished Tribals from the above huge populated regions to work as labourers in the establishment of tea plantation industries in Assam (Census Report, 1881). During 1884-85, indentured labour recruited from Chotanagpur constituted up to 44 percent which increased to 50 percent in 1889., Labour recruitment up to 27.2 percent was from Bengal, 21.6 percent was from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, 0.2 percent was from Bombay, 0.7 percent from was Madras, and 5.5 percent from was Assam itself (Table 1) (Administrative Report, 1884 and 1889).

Table 1: Number of emigrants into tea plantations in Assam (Report, 1921-22)

Year	Adults	Children	Total
1900	45,044	17,689	62,733
1901	19,887	6,336	26,223
1902-03	20,199	6,485	26,684
1903-04	17,769	4,393	22,162
1904-05	19,050	5,159	24,209
1905-06	24,595	7,135	31,830
1906-07	20,043	5,574	25,617
1907-08	58,934	25,890	84,824
1908-09	42,524	18,249	60,773
1909-10	29,397	9,935	39,332
1910-11	34,292	9,365	43,657
1911-12	45,905	12,741	58,646
1912-13	46,239	13,634	59,873
1913-14	45,849	13,020	58,646
1914-15	46,212	17,426	63,638
1915-16	72,608	37,768	1,10,376
1916-17	33,998	14,132	48,130
1917-18	15,084	4,323	19,107
1918-19	1,35,028	87,143	2,22,171
1919-20	65,463	36,626	1,02,089
1920-21	16,850	8,622	25,472

Thus, factors like colonial agrarian policies, famines and epidemics served as push factors while acute shortage of cheap labour and refusal of the local people to toil in the British established tea plantations of Assam, enticement of good fortune and easy earnings, served as pull factors in the large scale recruitment of labourers into Assam (Dalton, 1872). The Colonial Government reduced these mostly landless peasants to the status of wage labourers in Assam tea plantations. Arriving in the tea gardens of Assam they lost their respective identities.

### **Society, Livelihood and Education of Tea Tribes**

Tea Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley can be called a transplanted composite community (Beckford, 1972) within the surroundings of the tea gardens. They lead a regimented life. Their distinctive ethnic identities were replaced by general adaptation in Assam. The planters confined these labourers in the isolated tea gardens. Belonging to heterogeneous ethnic groups, they were also disorganized as they were accommodated in a Labour Line following strict Industrial discipline. The management regulation also disregarded their ethnicity. Hence each Labour line remained as a separate unit in social relationship in their new habitations in Assam.

These communities have rich oral traditions through which they preserve their ethnic cultural values. Their linguistic origin is traced to the Austro-Asiatic, Indo-Aryan and Dravidian groups. Oraon and Gond are the Dravidian speaking groups. Munda, Ho, Santhal, Bhumij and Kharia are Austro-Asiatic speakers and the Hindu ethnic groups, mainly Nayak, Bhuiyan, Tanti, Kurmi and Goala are Indo-Aryan speakers. These groups speak their own ethnic dialects such as Panch Parghania, Kharta, Kurmali for intra-group communication (Tanti, 2001) but for inter-group communication they use Sadri or Assam Sadri (a mixture of Assamese, Hindi, Bengali and their original dialects). Nevertheless, Sadri has not been included as a medium of instruction in school education in Assam.

They inherited their ancestral traditional folk dance called Jhumur, a merrymaking performance related to ritual worship and prayer for rainfall particularly during the autumn season. Musical instruments called Madal (drum) and flute are mainly used in this dance. The male dancers wear traditional white dresses (dhoti and long kurta) along with a head dress (turban) and females wear white sarees with red border design paired with a red blouse. Although, Jhumur is performed as a part of ritual worship, this has become one of the most popular and significant cultural art and identity of the Tea Tribes in Assam which is celebrated by all the Tea Tribes irrespective of religion and ethnic diversity.

Religiously, they worship their traditional deities except the Christian converts. Predominantly, they worship Karam, a nature God and this resulted in a popular ritual worship known as Karam Puja. This is a harvest related festival celebrated during the full moon of the Bhadra month (which falls in August-September). This is a widely celebrated festival of the Tea Tribes of Assam as their counterparts in their

ancestral states like Jharkhand, Bihar, Orissa, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal. Another deity worshipped by the Tea Tribes of Assam is Goddess Tusu, a popular deity of rural people in West Bengal. The Tusu Puja is observed during the month of Magh (January). They celebrate these traditional customary festivals with Jhumur dance and the use of country liquor called Hadiya which is consumed by both male and female members including young boys and girls. By far, the most popular recreational festivals of the Tea Tribes in Assam are the Durga Puja, Kali Puja and Holi. Since the Colonial period the Tea Garden labourers were entertained with Purdah cinema (bioscope) during the Durga Puja and Kali Puja. Irrespective of their heterogeneous ethnicity the Tea Tribes of Assam celebrate these common festivals as a symbol of cultural harmony and unity.

Their average household size is 6.4 members per family. Majority of them maintain joint families (87.6 percent). Religiously, they constitute 66.2 percent Hindus followed by 33.8 percent Christians. They lead a simple life with poor development indicators. They are completely dependent on tea garden works. Their main income source is the wages earned from toiling in tea gardens as well as gardens in the outside. They are paid minimal wages in cash and kind (As of 01.01.2020, Rs. 150 and 3.26 kg rice and flour). Under the provision of the Plantation Labour Act (PLA), 1951 they are provided certain kind of housing, community drinking water, sanitation, health, and other minimum facilities for children's primary education. But practical implementation of these provisions is very less. On the other hand, Tea Estate labour lines are categorized as industrialized villages (clusters) and Tea Estates are private leased property regulated under the PLA, 1951. Accordingly, the Tea Estate clusters do not enjoy the benefit of any central development scheme. Their 96.8 percent families fall under Below Poverty Line (Sample Survey, 2017-2018). They have a very low food intake. Rice and roti (made of flour) are their staple foods. They consume roots, tubers, wild herbs besides flesh of animals and birds. Alcoholic drink and use of tobacco are common features of their society. Considering their poor health condition, the government has extended health and nutrition facilities to adolescent girls, pregnant women, nursing mothers and children of 6 years through the Anganwadi centres under the Integrated Child Development Scheme.

Since the Colonial period, education of the labourers had not received proper attention. Overall, the British planters were not in favour of educating the labourers. Though the Colonial government attempted to impart primary education for labourers, the managers in the gardens refused it (Census Report, Assam, 1921). As a fact, propagation of modern education in Assam by the Colonial government was not extended to the emigrant tea garden labourers. The Christian missionaries particularly the American Baptist Church initiated humanitarian works among the Adivasis in Northeast India. They were familiar with the labour populations who came from Chotanagpur and were already Christian converts (Downs, 1983). Their welfare works were primarily confined to spiritual aspects and catechism. Prominent Church historians such as F. S. Downs and M. Muttumana worked for the upliftment of the



spiritual wellbeing of the labourers. In Udalguri, activities of the Christian missionaries could not find much influence among the labourers in the gardens due to the Company's restrictions. Reverend Hesselmyer (in 1862) followed by Reverend Sydney Endle (in 1864) were appointed as the Chaplains to the Society for Propagation of Gospels at Tezpur (present Sonitpur district). They worked under the Kachari Mission mainly among the tribal people in the district including some Adivasis settled in the remote areas of tea gardens (Endle, 1911). Their literacy rate marked a gradual rise from 3 percent in 1950 to 5 percent by 1980 (Karotemprel, 1990). At present their literacy rate is 21 percent in Assam (Topno, 2014) against the 74.4 percent national literacy and 73.2 percent state literacy rates (2011 Census Report). The promulgation of the Right to Education Act, 2009 is yet to fully cover Tea Tribes. In Udalguri district, 44.8 percent populations (above 18 years) are literate accounting for 52.9 percent male and 36.5 percent female (Sample Survey, 2017-18). Female education is not yet popularized among the tea garden populations. Majority of the female labourers are illiterate. Besides early marriages, tea garden work such as plucking green leaf is mainly done by females which draw them to be engaged from a young age without attending schools.

Under the PLA 1951, the tea garden schools are managed by the Tea Garden Committee in which children can study up to class V. In the recent past, the Central government initiative for compulsory education such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Scheme has been extended to the tea garden schools by an agreement with the Tea Garden Management in 2008-09. Because of poverty their illiterate parents induce the children to work for their livelihood rather than schooling. Their children are engaged in certain unskilled works by which they can earn a little income for which no education is required.

The most ailing feature in their society is child labour. Initiated by the colonial planters the legacy of child labour pervades in their society. Children are engaged in various income generating activities as keeper of siblings, as domestic help for wages or in any paid job. It largely ruins their future and is detrimental to their educational attainment. In spite of promulgation of the Right to Education Act, 2009 no upper primary school is found in the tea gardens. Their society is commonly dominated by superstitions and incidences of Witch hunting. They are mostly fascinated by traditional healings based on magic, charms and herbs. Lack of education deters them from understanding modern scientific and medical developments. Usually, child delivery is found to take place at home. They have no proper access to modern health facilities. Most of their habitations are located at remote areas from where access to medical facilities is difficult. Their overall health condition is pathetic due to low food intake, alcoholism and lack of knowledge on medical health benefits.

## **Conclusion**

The development of a composite community comprising such a large variety of ethnic groups under a single social umbrella in a new socio-political setup in Assam has given

them a mixed identity completely different from the rests of their counterparts in India. Under such a situation, their identity construction shows a continuous process of assimilation, adjustment and rejection of the varied socio-cultural and linguistic elements. Being rich culturally these multi-ethnic groups have been absorbed in Assam but are unable to secure a recognised identity and Constitutional safeguard. Their socio-economic conditions and other aspects like education and political awareness have remained stagnant over the centuries.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> *Tea Estate* is commonly called as *Tea gardens* in Assam and both terms have been used in this article.

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