

## **Chapter 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Adivasis in India who are traditionally known as the ‘first peoples’ or indigenous peoples are thought to be the earliest settlers and the original inhabitants of the Indian peninsula. It is believed that Adivasis were already present in the Indian subcontinent at the time of the Aryan invasion. Aryans conquered some Adivasis and made them slaves. North-Eastern region of India remained beyond their reach. Other Adivasis escaped to the jungles or mountainous areas. Many who survived the impact of Aryan conquest managed to retain their separate culture and identity. However, Hindu fundamentalists who are attempting to re-write history say that the Aryans were the original inhabitants of India. There is no proof of the inception of human beings in India as since pre-historic Stone Age various population groups have been migrating in different periods of time from different regions. However, Adivasis were among the first group of people to arrive in India before any other communities such as the Aryans, Dravidians, and Mongoloids etc. Hence, they are marked as ‘first peoples’ (Chhetri 2005).

Adivasis evolved from hunter-gatherer societies to developing cultivation-based societies, much like numerous other population groups all over the world. Their intimate connection with land and natural produce is seen till this day. Their special relationship with their territories and the relationship between the individual, community and nature distinguish them from other people. The Adivasi management of resources is fundamentally different from the mere allocation of land to individual families. Adivasis understand that the individual and the community to belong to the land by virtue of their ancestors being seated in a given territory. The territory is an extension of the Adivasis’ collective consciousness with cultural, political and social

significance. The close relationship with nature forms the basis of the Adivasis systems of knowledge, and spiritualities or religions. Self-sufficiency and minimal dependence on market are other distinct features. These characteristics are present in varying degrees among different Adivasi communities, depending on the extent to which they have political control over their territory (Chhetri 2005).

Of the 300 million indigenous peoples of the world, 1167.76 million as per the 2011 census live in India. Adivasis are spread over 26 states and union territories of India. Except in the North-East, particularly in Assam, because the term ‘Adivasi’ refers to a specific community of tribes or sub-tribes (such as Santhal, Munda, Oraon etc.) who migrated from the Central Indian regions to work in the tea gardens of Assam, there are many other tribes in Assam and Northeast India like Bodo, Khasi, Naga etc and most of these other tribes have got Scheduled Tribes (ST) status while there are many socio-political complexities in the North-eastern Indian region over the issue of who ought to receive ST status and a central element in the issue is that of Adivasis in Assam. Here also there will be discussed tribal issues that directly relate to the struggle Adivasis in Assam to get ST status.

Some Adivasis have their counterparts across the borders in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar (Burma), China and Tibet. There are six broad regions of Adivasi concentrations: Central region, Island region, North-Eastern region, North-Western region, Southern region and Western region. The estimates of the number of STs vary from 250 to 635 as Adivasis appear in more than one state in the census. There are also instances where non-Adivasis have been listed as STs and, conversely, Adivasi communities have not been listed as STs. The numerical strength of these communities varies from the Great Andamanese, who are only 18 in number, to the Gonds, Santhals and Bhils, who are 5,000,000, 4,000,000 and 3,500,000 respectively.

More than half of the Adivasis (54.69 per cent) live in the Central region consisting of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal while the North-Western region of Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh has only 0.75 per cent of all Adivasis. As a percentage of regional population, their concentration is highest in the North-Eastern region (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura) and lowest in the Southern region, comprising Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu (Census of India 2011).

Approximately 8.081 per cent of India's population has been designated as Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the Census of 2011. The term 'Scheduled Tribes' indicates the communities which have been specified by the President of India under Article 342 of the Constitution. It is an administrative term which is area-specific and reflects the level of socio-economic development rather than a distinct ethnic status. The criteria of 'geographical isolation, distinctive culture, primitive traits, shyness of contact with the community at large and economic backwardness are generally considered relevant in the definition of such a tribe. Indians generally call most of the STs 'Adivasis' and the terms are used interchangeably in this study. This chapter introduces the research problem, methodology and significance.

#### THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

'Perspective from below' is the main concern of subaltern studies, analyzing consciousness of masses in their social situations. Of the subaltern masses tea garden labour forms a mass of heterogeneous groups of people in which tribes belong to extreme subaltern groups which were brought from Central India, Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal to the tea gardens in North Bengal and Assam. In the contemporary time they are called Adivasis and are categorized as tea tribes, a sub-category of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and More Other Backward Classes

(MOBCs) in Assam. The thought-process used to derive the meaning of the situation they live in constitutes their consciousness and is the main concern of the present study. While giving his opinion in an article in 'The Times Magazine' the British historian, E.P. Thomson, used the words 'History from Below'. 'Subaltern', meaning 'of inferior rank', is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), an Italian Marxist and Communist Party Leader, refers to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. A subaltern is someone with a low ranking in a social, political, or other hierarchy. It can also mean someone who has been marginalized or oppressed. From the Latin roots sub- "below", and alternus "all others", subaltern is used to describe someone of a low rank (as in the military) or class (as in a caste system). Subalterns occupy entry-level jobs or occupy a lower rung of the "corporate ladder." But the term is also used to describe someone who has no political or economic power, such as a poor person living under a dictatorship. Different kinds of synonyms are used for the word 'Subaltern', like: common people, lower-class, underprivileged, exploited, inferiors, minor, poor, downtrodden and weak people etc (Sahoo 2014). From the linguistic point of view, the word 'subaltern' is used to mean overlooked, neglected, disregarded, and treated with unconcern and indifference. the subordinate, common people, lower class, underprivileged, exploited, inferior minors, weak, secondary person, assistant, person of lesser rank, adherent, attendant, auxiliary, deputy, follower, junior, satellite, below the mark, casual, dependent, inconsequential, inconsiderable, lesser, minus, negligible, paltry, petty, piddling, slight, small, subsidiary, tacky, trifling, trivial, under, unimportant, conditional, dependent, enslaved, slavish, subjugated and soon (Sahoo 2014). *Webster's Dictionary* defines subaltern: 'A commissioned officer below the rank of captain/a person holding a subordinate position/particularly with reference to a related

universal.’ This definition links subalternity with the notion of *marginality* and Derrida’s notion of ‘presence’ as the subaltern subject, owing to either race, class or gender, marginalized and placed in a subordinate position in relation to the determining authority of ‘the centre’. In other words, the centre is designated as an invariable ‘presence’; it is a point of reference or authority from which norms are established. That what is outside the centre or in the margins is designated as the ‘other’. In the thousands of years of the society’s history-writing there is clearly seen the existence of two kinds of people; viz., superiors and inferiors. The superiors have been given more importance. Therefore, subaltern studies write the history again, making it free. The inclusion of lower people or common men’s history has been agreed. This trend of writing consists of the agony of exploited workers, labourers, oppressed class, caste and women’s income beyond the world of thoughts. The consciousness and autonomy of lower class consciousness is the foundation of subaltern studies. Accordingly, in the work of subaltern studies it is necessary to reach up not only to the ideological part but also to the livelihood of common people, i.e., poor farmers, shepherds, workers, labourers, oppressed castes and women. They are also human beings, they also think, take decisions, decide the way to live and grow in the society. On the basis of this lower class people’s consciousness, not giving a self-dependent form, writing of history is to write a never-before-history of the society or nation. In subaltern studies it is expected to include the farmers, workers and the puppets in the hands of national leaders, or the people who die without food. The study of all these lower class people is expected in subaltern studies. Thus, one can imagine the subtle nature of subaltern studies (<http://www.webster-dictionary.org>).

Adivasis, the people of forests and hills or the original inhabitants, have since long lived in the forest hills and naturally isolated regions, known by different names

such as *Vanyajati*, *Vanvasi*, *Pahari*, *Adimjati*, *Adivasi*, *Janajati* and *Anusuchit Janajati*, out of which the term 'Adivasi' is used most extensively, though '*anusuchit janajati*' or scheduled tribe is the constitutional name for them. In India the tribal concentration which is next to Africa is an integral part of the Indian civilization. In fact, tribes have been the earliest inhabitants of the country. According to Chatterjee

Mainly four races and cultures have welded together into these people namely: (i) Austro-Asiatics in their primitive form represented by the Kol and the Munda, the Kharia and the Nicobarese, (ii) the Mongoloid people speaking dialects of the Sino-Tibetan family, largely found in the sub-Himalayan region, represented by Nagas, Bodos, Kuki-Chins etc., (iii) the Dravidians represented by the Mala, the Oraon, the Gond and the Khond who speak a tongue of the Dravidian family and (iv) the Aryans who are supposed to be the last race to come to India. Thus, the first racial and cultural elements made a great contribution to the formation of the Indian people. The Adivasis in North Bengal and Northeast have encountered a complex of cultural, structural, traditional and modern forces in a typical situation, which were brought in by the colonial planters (British) as indentured labour from the Chhotanagpur Plateau region, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa and Central India. They are one of the most backward and exploited tribes in India, though newer generations are comparatively educated and they have now some intellectuals and professionals in various fields (Vidyarthi and Rai 1985). The Adivasis in Assam, being basically tea garden labourers, live in villages, inside the tea estates established by tea planters. The estates located in interior places contribute to their backwardness as well as exploitation by the tea planters. The labourers, in a way, have to live with the basic facilities provided by the tea-planters. The tea planters usually exploit the Adivasis in every possible way. Violence and agitation of labourers against the management is common, where the

state machinery normally protects the tea planters. Illiteracy, poverty, addiction of males to country liquor, poor standard of living and health facility are characteristics of their life. There are instances when tea planters do not even supply the life saving drugs when workers are dying out of epidemics. The Adivasis are found mainly in the districts of Cachar, Darrang, Sonitpur, Nagaon, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia of Assam. The tea-tribes comprise a large number of linguistic, and social identities such as Santhali, Oraon/Urang/Orang, Munda/Mura, Bhumij, Mahato/Kurmi, Sora, Bhuiya, Pahariya/Mal Pahariya, Kharwar Kharia, Chero, Mahali, Bhils, Asur, Sora, Sabar, Garait, Kisan and Ho. Majority of these tribes belong to the Munda branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family. They are still confined to the tea garden setting and are largely occupied with the labour there. In the given conditions of hardships, exploitation and suppression they have lived with a consciousness of their kind, in their literary and oral knowledge. The present work is therefore an attempt to understand the subaltern consciousness of the tea garden labour in Assam, specially the Adivasis.

#### SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

‘Subaltern studies’ is a foreign trend of thoughts, the philosophical foundation found in the writing of the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci. The notion of the subaltern, meaning ‘inferior rank’, was adopted by Antonio Gramsci as a concept referring to the groups in society subjected to the hegemony of the dominant ruling classes. More concretely, Gramsci first used the term as a euphemism or original covert usage for the proletariat in his ‘Notes on Italian History’, a six point project that appears in his *Prison Notebooks (1973)*. He also claimed that the subaltern classes had been just as complex a history as the dominant classes. However, this “unofficial” history was necessarily fragmented and episodic, for even the subaltern

when they rebel are always subject to the activity of the ruling classes. In Gramsci's theory, the term 'subaltern' is linked up with the subordinated consciousness of non-elite groups. The concept was then adapted to post-colonial studies from the work of the Subaltern Studies historians' group. This group used subalternity as a catch-all concept encompassing all oppressed groups – working class, peasantry, women, and tribal communities, i.e., a name for general attribute of subordination. The project as such was led by Ranajit Guha with the explicit aim of expanding and enriching Gramsci's notion of the subaltern by locating and re-establishing a "voice" or collective focus of agency in post-colonial India. The purpose of the Subaltern Studies project was therefore to redress the imbalance created in academic work by a tendency to focus on elites and elite culture in South Asian historiography.

Subaltern Studies approach was founded in India in 1982 by Ranajit Guha. The group published its first volume in 1982. Since then the Subaltern Studies collective has produced eight volumes and several monographs. Ranajit Guha edited the first six volumes (1982,1983,1984,1985,1987 and 1989), which had various themes including critiques of elite historiography, uncovering peasant belief systems, peasant movements, peasant revolts, Indian nationalism, sectarianism, the colonial construction of communalism, power relations within the community, peasant insurgency, subaltern consciousness and politics, the people's perception of Gandhi, Gandhi's politics, the mentalities of the people, the character of the state, the ecological dimension of peasant protest, tribal protest, patterns of liquor consumption, Western medicine and caste, critique of feminist writings, crime in the context of the nationalist movement, and even a few critiques of Subaltern Studies. These volumes include very few themes related to the working-class movement, or to work, or production. Most of the studies concern protests by peasants and by tribal people, but



have no connection with the broader context in which they occur. Beginning with Volume 7 (1993), the editorship of the series was shifted from Ranajit Guha to Partha Chatterjee and Gyan Pandey. The themes in volume 7 and 8 are different from those in the previous six volumes. They revolve mainly around the nation, the community, the Bengali middle class, forest people, colonial prisons, India's partition and historiography, and Indian religion and language (Ranjit Guha and collective editors, *Subaltern Studies* 1982-97).

The trend of 'Subaltern studies' has prevailed in India in the last twenty years of the 20th century. This new trend gave a way to new challenges by crossing the traditional writing of history. Historian groups are divided into the four subjective aspects; namely, (i) Imperialist historians' group (James Mill, John S. Mill and Vinscent Smith), (ii) Nationalist historians' group (Ramesh Ch. Mazumdar and Jadunath Sarkar), (iii) Marxist historians' group (Rajanipam Dutta, Sushobhan Sarkar, D. D. Koshambi, Romila Thapar, Ramasaran Sharma, Irfan Habib, Amalendu Dey, Barun Dey, Binay Ghosh and Sumit Sarkar), (iv) Subaltern historians' group (Ranjit Guha, Partha Chaterjee, Gayotri Chakravorty Spivak, Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Pandey, Shahid Amin, Dipesh Chakraborty, Ramchandra Guha and Gyanendra Pandey). These historian groups provided a new direction, new amplitude and helped in beginning a new chapter. Indian point of view of Subaltern history is similar to the trend of writing in England, which became famous as 'History from Below' and Gayotri Chakravorty Spivak reconstructs it as 'voice from the margin'. The editorial groups of Subaltern historians have moved from documenting subaltern dissent to dissecting elite discourse, from writing with socialist passion to following the post-modernist fashion by Michel Foucoult, J. Derrida, Rola Barth, Habermas, Rayan, Leonard, Frederick Jemson, Cristefar Norish and so on. Intellectual history, reframed

as ‘discourse analysis,’ is emphatically not subaltern studies. Given the influence of Subaltern Studies among the younger generation of scholars in India and now abroad, some such challenge seems justified because intellectuals’ writings do affect the real lives of people, often as public policy. This is a matter of further concern as Tom Brass (1991) again points out, “When any idea, analysis or perspective becomes academically in vogue, it is not because the ideas are themselves intrinsically right (= theoretically acceptable) but rather because the times are right (= politically acceptable) in both senses of the term.” So it is a school that claims to be writing for the oppressed, it should be a matter of concern that it has gained wider acceptance in the United States at a time when political life there has taken a sharp turn to the right. Before discussing such concerns in greater detail, it needs to be widened and expanded through a discussion on other aspects of the Subaltern Studies project (Guha 1982-97).

Sociologists, historians, economists, anthropologists and those who combine the methods of history and sociology have produced commentaries on the Subaltern Studies collective and on the monographs produced individually by some of its members. It seems appropriate to begin with the views of a well known Indian sociologist and historian Ramkrishna Mukherjee (1988) on the writings of Ranjit Guha, the founder of Subaltern Studies, because the unifying principles of the Subaltern School are found in Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983).

In his article (1988) on ‘Illusion and Reality’, Mukherjee's critique hits at the two major flaws in the assumptions of the founder of the Subaltern Studies: one, Guha's use of ‘peasant’ category is not appropriate because it is devoid of real life variations among peasants and their contemporaneous social base. Thus, this

categorization is ahistorical and astructural. Two, Guha draws parallels between countries by the sweeping use of a large span of time (four hundred years) in history across the universe. In contrast to Guha's sweeping use of a large span of time to draw parallels across the universe about peasant insurgency, the subalternist writers insist on the 'moment of suffering' (or oppression) particularity, so as to achieve a more textual 'truth'. Thus, the assumptions of, both, the founder of the Subaltern Studies and the collective are basically flawed (Atal 2003).

Mukherjee also thinks that Guha's exclusive cultural analysis is based on Weberian appraisal of reality and he reminds of one out of the similar efforts made by the British imperialism "for a cultural understanding of contacts among conflicting groups". Mukherjee's concerns are echoed by others in several subsequent commentaries on the Subaltern Studies volumes. Rosalin O' Hanlon and David Washbrook (1988, 1992) wrote in a critique of Gyan Prakash's discussion (1990) on 'Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography': "What all this begins to look very like, in fact, is a new form of that key and enduring feature of Western capitalist and imperialist culture: the bad conscience of liberalism, still struggling with the continuing paradox between an ideology of liberty at home and the reality of profoundly exploitative political relations abroad, and now striving to salvage and re-equip itself in a post-colonial world with new arguments and better camouflaged forms of moral authority" (Atal 2003).

Shahid Amin, a close associate of Guha, has important contribution to the writing of 'Subaltern Studies'. He was the founder editor of subaltern studies and worked as teacher of history in Delhi University. He has analyzed 'Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-22' to know the effect of Mahatma

Gandhi on the minds of the farmers who participated in non-cooperation movement. He has tried to know the intention of different elements of society related to Chauri Choura incident (1995). He wrote an article 'Making the Nation Habitable' and a book *Remembering the Mussalmans (Remembering Chauri Chaura: Notes from Historical Fieldwork 1995)*. He has expressed his thoughts about the dangers and bad effects on history writing from the point of view of any religious group. In the trend of Subaltern Studies Sumit Sarkar also has contributed a lot, through his studies of Marxism. His important writings consist of the history of common people in national movement, history of neglected group, leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in national movement and the dominant nature of foreign colonial government (1997).

Sivaramakrishnan (1995) notices in the Subaltern analyses a "movement from Levi-Strauss to Ricouer-Geertz, culture as text and as neo-romanticism, and finally there are glimpses of Foucault". Part of the problem appears to be the creation of new binarisms in place of old ones, and the reification of power, as a result of which subalternists analyze power in a way that does not raise the spectre of disunited subalterns, or differences. Some scholars also have noted that the place of women in a Subalternist history is contentious because "while some critics like Spivak (1988) have critiqued the subaltern project for a certain degree of insensitivity to the problem of women, others like Chatterjee (1992) have optimistically contended that women's writings as well as their sheer presence in (their own and others') letters, autobiographies and fictions preserved a crucial place for traditional values during a period of embattled nationalism". The issue of literacy is highly pertinent because Subaltern Studies emphasize the written 'text' and has extended the analytical domain of history, as Gyanendra Pandey (1992) has suggested, including poetry. But "if poetry is admitted as historical evidence, why not fictionalised history? Should short

stories, novels, docu-dramas about the Bhagalpur blindings, the partition, and the Latur earthquakes be privileged as ‘history’ because they describe in a manner the historian cannot avail of? The members of the Subaltern School have also produced individual monographs. One of these monographs, Chakrabarty's *The Rethinking of Working Class History* (1991), has drawn the attention of A. K. Bagchi, V. Bahl and Ramchandra Guha. Bagchi, a well-known Indian economist, critiqued *The Rethinking Working Class History* (1991), linking the author’s arguments to those of the *Royal Commission on Labour in India* (1930), and saying that, both, in effect, discuss the Indian mill workers as ‘uprooted’ Indian peasants. In addition, Bagchi observes that Chakrabarty treats the “uprooted peasants as an undifferentiated mass liable to be governed by ‘primordial’ loyalties and liable to break out into primeval violence from time to time”. Bagchi also points out that “most students of society, whether trained in political economy or not, would find it surprising to be told that the experience of living perilously close to the margins of subsistence and of being exposed to the threats of disease and death or of living away from their nearest family members year in and year out should somehow not enter into the consciousness of these people”. Bahl and Ramchandra Guha (1995) also share with Bagchi a concern about the Subaltern School's lack of sensitivity to historical processes and to historical dynamics, as well as its insistence that “there is no such thing as a social system such as capitalism or colonialism with its own systemic exploitation and oppression”. Ramchandra Guha (1995), who writes as a one-time Subalternist insider, finds in Volume 8 of the *Subalternists Studies* a shift toward the study of the *Bhadralok class* (gentle people). Therefore, he suggests that Subaltern Studies now should be called *Bhadralok Studies* or “in deference to the spirit of the times, post-subaltern studies”. Elaborating on this shift, Ramchandra Guha (1995) also criticizes Gyan Pandey for

the promotion of writing 'desk history' by urging scholars to look inside the elite discourses. This process calls for a "complex and deep engagement with elite and canonical texts" (Ludden 2001).

Paraphrasing Guha's influential "On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India" (1988:37-44) the goals of the group stemmed from the belief that the historiography of the victorious pro-Independence movement in India was dominated by elitism consisted of both British colonialists and local bourgeois nationalists. Such historic literature suggested that the development of Indian national consciousness was an exclusive elite achievement which failed to acknowledge or interpret the contribution made by "the people on their own", that is, "independently of the elite". In this respect, "the politics of the people" should be understood as an autonomous domain that operates outside elite politics (Ludden 2001).

Studying tribal and peasant revolts or movements was a dominant tradition both in the history and in the ethnography of India for quite some time. Among the pioneering accounts are the Bhumij revolts and Kol insurrection in Chhotonagpur by J. C. Jha (1964), Kalikankar Datta's (1944) work on the Santhal insurrection, B. B. Kling's (1966) study of the Blue Mutiny the indigo disturbances (1859-62) in Bengal, Ravindar Kumar's writing (1968) on the Deccan riots (1875), the Tanabhat or Birsa Munda and his Movement, the Rampa rebellion of 1924 and Sunil Sen's study (1972) of the sharecroppers' struggle in Bengal. Similarly, studies by Majid Siddiqi (1978) and Kapil Kumar (1984) on the agrarian /peasant revolt led by Baba Ramchandra in Pratapgarh and Faizabad districts of Oudh have notably continued the same trend in more recent years. Siddiqi (1978), Kapil Kumar (1984), Gyanendra Pandey (1978) and Dhanagare (1983) have started an important debate on the precise linkage between the peasantry and the Indian National Congress and Gandhi in

particular. However the middle peasant thesis (like that of Eric Wolf and Hamza Alavi 1965) and Barrington Moore's hypothesis (1969) on the role of commercial agriculture as a factor conducive for peasant mobilization have been thoroughly examined by only a few of these studies. Nonetheless, most of them have brought to light enormous source material to the present generation of social scientists. And their accounts are the most authentic about reconstructions of the peasants' revolts in India in the 1920s and 1930s, but most of them basically belong to narrative history or ethnography. Some of them like Siddiqi, Pandey and Kapil Kumar do identify and probe the historical conditions that facilitated the progressive development of consciousness of the insurgent peasantry or tribals who were the main actors of those movements. However, barring exceptions such studies seldom transcend specificity and are rarely inclined to get into questions of theory and generality as if they are irrelevant to the history and sociology of social movements. Suresh Singh's (1966, 1983) work on the Birsa Munda movement has produced abundant evidence of the strong millenarian elements in the Birsaite movement and Stephen Fuch's study on the Indian aboriginals has also gone into the millenarian movements among Indian tribals under the influence of Christianity. The notions of 'primitive rebels' and 'social banditry' introduced by Eric Hobsbawm (1972) have not been used fruitfully by the researchers of tribal and peasant revolts or insurgencies until Ranajit Guha (1982) and his colleagues launched the 'subaltern studies' approach. Getting immersed in the depths of the micro level reality and not rising above it in order to enter the realm of theorization and conceptualization was the tendency characteristic of the mainstream sociology and social anthropology as well as history and ethnography which was received in India as a part of the imperialist legacy for the social sciences.

These studies except those of subaltern studies mostly use objective perspective and do not focus on people's politics. A few of the studies on tribal movements have used subaltern perspective, i.e., perspective from below. Tea garden labour in Assam, specially Adivasis, make a genuine case of subaltern groups. Yet, no subaltern studies are available on the tea garden labour, including the Adivasis. Therefore, the present study analyzes subaltern consciousness of tea garden labourers, specially Adivasis in Assam. It focuses on (i) patterns of the consciousness like feelings, percepts and specially the structure of common sense of the tea garden labour, (ii) the class consciousness located in a collective, i.e., actual mass level consciousness, (iii) subjective dimension of consciousness which is different from its more readily observable objective manifestations of actions, socially structured relations, the historical dimensions of such actions and social relations and their crystallization in cultural practices, ideologies and organizations and (iv) the actual, collective consciousness, self-consciousness, thought and linguistic expressions.

#### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following were the objectives of the study:

- (1) To understand the nature of consciousness (self- improvement, self- progress, self- dependence, self- respect, self- confidence, self- protection and existentiality) of the tea garden labour specially the Adivasis
- (2) To analyze the ideology, rights and identity of the tea garden labour specially the Adivasis
- (3) To find out patterns of exploitation experienced by the tea garden labour specially the Adivasis
- (4) To know the politico-economic position of the tea garden labour specially the Adivasis in their consciousness



## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study has attempted the following research questions:

1. Do the Adivasis have any sense of self- improvement, self- progress, self- dependence, self- respect, self- confidence, self- protection and existentiality?
2. Do the Adivasis feel subjugated and exploited?
3. Do they find themselves as weak and helpless people?
4. Do they perceive 'others' (elites') as strong, privileged and exploiters?
5. Do these feelings have a general distribution across the groups of the Adivasi masses?
6. Are these feelings perceptible in historical or contemporary events of résistance, rebellion or movement?
7. Do subaltern feelings of Adivasis express in their cultural practices resistance or otherwise?
8. Are subaltern feelings of Adivasis reflected in any ideology of resistance or otherwise?
9. Have subaltern feelings of Adivasis crystallized into organizational forms (like All Assam Student Association (AASA))?
10. Do subaltern feelings get expression through language?
11. Is there any subjective expression of subaltern feelings through individuals among Adivasis?

## METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

While probing into the subaltern consciousness of the tea tribes; viz.; Santhal, Munda and Oraon, Bhumij and Mahato/Kurmi who form a large size of the tea garden labour population in Assam. The study has used historical and empirical data to analyse the subaltern consciousness of the labourers like Adivasis.

### **(i) Sources and Types of Data**

The study has sourced documents and field for data. Documents like books, journal and literary texts like poems, roddles, folktales, folksongs, folk-recollections and slogan have been used. From the field oral narratives and ethnographies have been collected from persons and organizations.

### **(ii) Universe and Units of the Study**

The tea garden setting in Assam dominated by tea garden economy is divided into two regions; namely; the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley. Both the regions have Adivasi populations in the gardens. Their forefathers were brought from Odisha, Bengal, Bihar and Central India. In recent decades they have formed the organizations of state level which have raised their voice for rights as well as expressed resistance against atrocities. Of these Adivasis, Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Bhumij and Mahato/Kurmi constitute a significantly big section of the population. These groups constituted the universe of the study while for oral and literary data collection individuals as well as organizations were sourced as units.

### **(iii) Selection of Units of the Study**

For the present study Subaltern consciousness of the Adivasis of Assam, i.e., Adivasis of Barak Valley and Brahmaputra Valley was purposively selected and five Adivasi communities; namely, Sathal, Oraon, Munda, Bhumij and Mahao/Kurmi were selected for the study. A sample of 150 households from the Adivasi communities from two villages, one each of the two valleys was taken. These two villages are Doloo tea garden village of Barak Valley with 1112 Adivasi households and Achabam tea garden villages with 1057 Adivasi households in the district of Dibrugarh in Brahmaputra Valley. By choosing evidences from the garden the individual sources of the oral folk literature and authors of written literature were

listed. The sources of oral literature were contacted to collect the literature authored writings for analysis.

#### **(iv) Tools for Data Collection**

An interview schedule was constructed and administered to the selected households of the Adivasis in the Doloo Tea Garden village of Cachar district in Barak Valley and Achabam Tea Garden village of Dibrugarh district in Brahmaputra Valley. The interview schedule consisted of the questions related social background like tribe, age, sex, clan, mother tongue, religion, family, marriage, kinship, economy and polity as well as cultural life comprising house pattern, dress, ornaments, food habit, language, education, health and communication and Besides particular questions were asked about migration, subaltern feelings, thought etc. in order to understand the subaltern consciousness of the Adivasi masses.

#### **IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

In the colonial period, number of tribes, castes and linguistic groups were uprooted from their habitats and were resettled in the tea garden setting. In the new situation, the phenomenon of power and dominance has worked in a way quite different from that in the mainland of India. So the study makes a paradigm shift for studying subaltern consciousness of the tea garden labourers like Adivasis who have so far been studied objectively but their consciousness has not been probed to understand their role in creation of knowledge about tea gardens. Use of perspective from below/subaltern perspective gives a penetrative understanding of these subaltern people and exposes the gaps of the elitist and objective perspectives which have so far dominated the mainstream of sociology and history.