

Chapter 4

ADIVASIS IN ASSAM

This chapter discusses the way the Adivasis were brought to the tea plantations in west Bengal and Assam as part of the labour recruited for the tea plantations. It also sheds light on the methods of recruitment and the socio economic conditions in the native places of the Adivasis which pushed them to the tea plantations. India is one of the leading producers of tea in the world. Tea plantations are predominantly located in North-Eastern States of India, particularly Assam. It is an agriculture - based industry. Tea plantation occupies an important place in Assam. In Assam, tea is grown both in the Brahmaputra and the Barak Valley. Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Nagaon, Sonitpur, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi are the districts where tea gardens are mostly found. Assam produces 51% of tea produced in India and about 1/6th of the tea produced in the world (Govt. of Assam, official website). And, of course, the the Adivasi labourers have a great contribution to establishment of the tea gardens in Assam.

THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF 'ADIVASI'

In nineteenth century, renowned anthropologist Sir Henry Maine, in his classic book *Ancient Law* identified tribalism with pre-civilized stage of human society and attributed the term to derogatory connotation of emotional, pre-scientific and irrational behaviour (Marshall 1998: 674). In the central India a social worker popularly called Bapa Thakkar among the tribes, who worked for his entire life among them for their welfare, designated them as *Adivasi* (Thakkar 1941). This generic term *Adivasi*, in Hindi, refers to a tribal. The term consists of two words, *Adi*

and *Vasi*, derived from Sanskrit roots, meaning original and inhabitant respectively. Thus, *Adivasi* means original inhabitant(s). The Adivasis or, the people of forests and hills or the original inhabitants who have lived for long time in the forests, hills and naturally isolated regions are designated differently by different scholars and organizations such as aborigines/ aboriginals by Risley, V. Elvin, Grigson, Lacey Sedewick, Martin, A.V. Thakkar, Shoobert and Tallents, primitive tribes by Hutton, so-called aborigines/ backward Hindus by G. S. Ghurey, submerged humanity by Dr. Das, Vanyajati/ Vanvasi by RSS, Pahari, Adimjati, Adivasi and indigenous people by political and non-political activists and Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, Janajati/ Anusuchit Janajati or tribes/ scheduled tribes by Indian Constitution (Article 342, 366) and the subaltern by Ranajit Guha and his group of historians (Sharma 2010:200).

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, who have welded together mainly four races and cultures; 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. The tribes or Adivasis as the first racial and cultural elements have made a great contribution to the formation of the Indian people (Vidyarthi and Rai 1976).

So, the term 'tribe' along with the terms, like 'primitive', 'savage', 'barbarous', 'uncivilized', 'preliterate', 'non-literate', 'little community', 'aborigines native' etc., was liberally used by the colonial masters for the communities under their

control. Most of the definitions of tribe are confusing ones. There is haziness and the definitions are never precise. According to Risley, “The tribe represents a collection of families, or group of families, bearing common name, which as a rule does not denote any specific occupation; generally claiming common descent from a mythical or historical ancestor and occasionally from an animal, but in some parts of the country they are held together rather by the obligation of blood found than by the tradition of kinship, usually speaking the same language; and occupying or claiming to occupy a definite tract of country. A tribe is not necessarily endogamous, i.e., it is not an invariable rule that man of a particular tribe must marry a woman of that tribe”(Sharma and Sharma 1998). D.N. Majumdar define “A tribe is a collection of families or group of families bearing a common name, members of which occupy the same territory, speak the same language, and observe certain taboos regarding marriage, profession or occupation and have developed a well assessed system of reciprocity and mutuality of obligations. A tribe ordinarily an endogamous unit, is a political unit in the sense that the tribal society owns a political organization”(Sharma and Sharma 1998). According to Dubey, ‘the tribe generally refers to territorial communities living in the relative isolation of hills and forests. Their comparative isolation, in some ways, has kept them apart from the mainstream of society in the country. Partly because of this isolation and partly because of their limited worldview, characterized by lack of historical depth (resulting in the early merging of history into mythology) and an overall traditional orientation, they are integrated in terms of certain themes rooted in the past. These integrative themes and a special cultural focus gave them a separate culture identity and they often possess latent or manifest value – attitude and motivational systems which are remarkably different from those of the other peoples’ (Sharma and Sharma 1998).

Social scientists have enumerated different traits for defining 'tribe'. The elements of 'tribe' enumerated in the definitions include: common name, common language, common technology, common territory, held together by the obligations of blood and feud rather than by the tradition of kinship, common descent from a mythical or historical ancestor or the totemistic origin, may or may not be endogamous, the tribe should observe certain taboos regarding marriage, profession or occupation, should have developed a well assessed system of reciprocity and mutuality of obligations, the name of the tribe should not denote any specific occupation, should have their political unit, sense of belongingness, relative isolation of hills and forests, limited worldview, lack of historical depth resulting in the early merging of history into mythology, overall tradition orientation, integration in terms of themes rooted in past, separate culture identity, latent or manifest value attitudes and motivational systems, markedly different from that of the others, cluster of economically interwoven village communities, commonness of social codes and economic conditions, acting together in such common purposes as warfare, barbarous condition, chieftainship, smallness, homogeneity, distinctiveness and self-sufficiency.

THE MIGRANT ADIVASI LABOUR

Since the 1835 the tea industry in Assam began to flourish. As the scanty indigenous population was dispersed, the planters were interested in recruiting 'cheap' indentured labour from outside. Local labour was not so cheap. At the same time the local labourers were not available in large scale to meet the ever increasing demand of labour due to the rapid extension of tea plantation in the early phase of its introduction in West Bengal. So, it became necessary to build up the tea plantation labour force by import of people from outside the state. As production expanded in this labour intensive operation it became necessary to expand the work force.

Indenture and comparable forms of restrictive engagement provided a solution to the problem of maintaining an adequate supply of cheap labour. There was a ready source of manpower available in the semi-aboriginal people of Chhotanagpur, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. These people could make their way to the Terai and Dooars of North Bengal in gangs under their own leaders (Sardars) to the tea planters. The policy adopted for labour recruitment in West Bengal tea plantations was Sardari system. The migrant labourers in North Bengal tea plantations came to settle there only under organized migration. The tribal people migrated with their families and adapted to a new country more readily and absolutely. Such movement of people from one cultural setting to another may always lead to some kind of change in their life and consequently problems of their adjustment may also arise. The contact of the migrant ethnic groups with the alien cultural setting and the new occupational situation affects their traditional pattern of social organization and various cultural practices (Bhadra 1999: 81-93; Bhadra 1999: 68).

Different migrant groups of Chhotanagpur, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Nepal moved from their places of origin and gradually settled down in the northern districts of Assam for a variety of reasons. Of course, economic reason is the primary one. To some scholars migration in a sense is search for economic emancipation. But in the case of tea plantations the reverse is the picture. Migration here is not in search for economic emancipation but it was some sort of forced enslavement imposed on them by the British colonial policy of plantation (Bhadra 1999: 92; Bhadra 1999: 70). Rapid growth of tea plantations within a very short period experienced a labour crisis in Assam. This demand was then filled by large scale migration into the tea districts. The following are the labour districts from where the labourers were recruited and imported to Brahmaputra valley and Barak Valley in Assam:

Table 4.1
Tea Garden Labourers in Assam: Adivasi and Non Adivasi

Name of Place	Name of the Tea Garden Labour Community
Bilaspore	Gond, Gondan, Panika, Chanmar, Kurmi, Teli, Koiri, Kamar, Keot, Rato, Baigha, Manjhi, Kol, Khawar.
Raipur	Gond, Gore, Kamar, Lohar, Panika, Keop, Rabidas, Kawar, Kurmi, Mahra, Chamar, Teli, Lodhi
Balaghat and Bhandra	Gond, Mohar
Singha	Porja, Goala
Sambalpur	Gond, Kolo, Munda, Oraon
Jabalpur	Gond, Kol, Bhaiga, Panika, Lodhi, Kurmi, Kahar, Chamar, Kori, Ahair, Kotwar, Dhobi, Lohar, Sonar
Ranchi and Palamoo	Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Korwa, Kurmi, Lohar, Gond, Bhuiya, Bhumji, Ghasi, Chik-Baralk, Dhobi, Ahir, Panika, Teli, Kumber, Bedea
Hazaribagh	Goala, Bedea, Bhuiya, Chamar, Dhomi, Dusadh, Ghasi, Ghatwar, Kahar, Kumar, Loiri, Kurmi, Munda, Santhal, Turi, Oraon
Chaibasa	Munda, Ho, Bhumik, Santhal, Oraon, Bhuiya, Tanti, Ghasi
Purulia	Santhals, Bhujij, Kurmi, Mahato, Mohalis, Bauris, Bedea, Rajwars
Cuttack	Oriya, Pan, Tanti, Sawara, Bawri, Gore, Chassa, Gondo, Khondait, Khonds.
Balasore	Santhal, Munda, Khondait, Bhukij, Gore
Ganjam	Kond, Oriya, Pano, Paidi, Chasa, Bauri, Mala, Madigia, Kalingi, Velana
Visakapattam	Porja, Dome, Mala, Reddika, Paidi, Saura, Telanga, Valma
Godavari	Mala, Mediga, Kalingi, Telanga, Nelama, Yonadi
Bezwada	Kalingi, Reddi, Mala, Madika, Telanga, Golla
Nellore	Muchi, Mala, Telanga, Yanadi
Bankura	Bauri, Mali, Lohar, Hari, Khoira, Kora, Kamar, Chamar, Mahato, Bhuiya, Tanti, Kharia, Santhal, Bhumik
Midnapore	Lodha, Bhuiya, Lohar, Kumar, Goala, Telli, Tanti, Santhal, Dome, Bhumij, Kora, Kharia
Gaya	Bhuiya, Kahar, Dusad, Rajwar, Ahir, Koiri, Kurmi, Sonar, Chamar, MahatoMusahar
Luckeeserai	Goala, Dusad, Musahar, Kol, Ahir, Chamar, Turi, Keol, Teli, Ghatwar
Buxar	Koiri, Ahir, Kurmi, Dusad, Chamar, Goala, Kamar, Lohar, Rajwar, Musahar
Dumka	Kora, Majhi, Malpaharia, Santhal, Kamar, Ghatwar, Dome, Mahali, Bhuiya
Baidyanath	Dome, Rajwar, Chamar, Koiri, Snathal, Ghatwar, Bhuiya, Kol, Dusadh, Goala
Ghazipore	Bhar, Musahcar, Teli, Chamar, Ahir, kawat, Kol, Lohar, Nunia, Kahar, Pasi, Panika, Bind, Dusadh, Kanu, Mohar
Basti	Chamar, Ahir, Dhobi, Nunia, Kurmi, Kahar, Barai, Kewat, Lodha, Bhar, Telli, Malla, Lohar
Allahabad	Chamar, Ahir, Lodhi, Koiri, Kol, Pasi, Teli, Mali, Kahar, Kewat, Kurmi, Bania, Musahar
Faizabad	Chamar, KanuBhumij, Pasi, Ahir, Teli, Kewat, Bania, Musahar
Faizabad	Chamar, KanuBhumij, Pasi, Ahir, Teli, Kewat, Bania, Dhobi, Napit, Bhar, Kurmi, Kahar, Lodhi, Koiri

(Source: Indian Tea Association, Calcutta)

Various famines in Chhotanagpur and Santal Parganas in the mid- nineteenth century and prevalence of fever and outbreak of Cholera, too, were responsible for immigration of aboriginal people from Chhotanagpur and Santal Parganas to the tea districts of Assam, and the Terai and Dooars region of West Bengal in quest of jobs (Bhadra 1999 :81-93). Important among the famines that occurred, with subsequent scarcity were those of 1859-60, 1866-74, 1896-97, 1899-1900, 1907-08 and 1915-16. During 1859-60 actual famine conditions prevailed in Palamau (Hunter 1974: 346,409). There was food scarcity in some areas of the Ranchi district and the districts of Singbhum and Manbhum. Manbhum perhaps suffered the most in the famine of 1866. It was most intense in Barabhum, Manbhum and Raipur (Bhadra 1999: 81-93; Bhadra 1999: 65-67). Like the famine of 1866, the famine of 1873-74 also severely affected almost the whole of Chhotanagpur. Palamau was the most distressed tract in the division. Prices of food grains had gone up in the districts. Starvation deaths were also reported. Numerous groups of tribal people were moving in search of work as they had no food in their houses. They included men, women and children (Bhadra 1999: 81-93). The two famines of 1896-97 and 1899-1900 were caused due to drought. They affected many parts of Chhotanagpur and Santal Parganas and the prices of the food grains went up in all the parts. In 1907-08 and 1915-16, too, there was scarcity. The years of 1915-16 were, however, more serious. During the period of 1860-1920 there was constant drought and famine in the entire region of Chhotanagpur and Santal Parganas. The aboriginals and low caste Hindus were living in abject poverty and hardships which forced them to migrate (Hunter 1974: 346, 409).

Historically plantations had to be manned by enforced migration. The process of migration from districts of Chhotanagpur and its contiguous districts was one of the

remarkable features in the history of the tea industry. The tribals from all the districts in the Chhotanagpur and Chattisgarh regions regularly went to tea gardens of Terai and Dooars of West Bengal and to those of Assam. The nature of migration was permanent, semi-permanent or temporary. According to Census of 1872, the population of Ranchi district was 8, 13,328. The census report says that a large number of inhabitants annually migrated to the tea districts of Assam, Cachar and North Bengal's Terai and Dooars. The recorded data showed that 12,369 men, women and children, (one percent of the total population) were recruited as coolies in the period from 1864 to 1867. But a large number of migrants went without informing or registering their names (Beverley 1872: 122).

In the decade 1881-1891 there were series of migrations from the Karra and Khunti Thanas of Ranchi district to the tea growing regions of North East India. The census report of 1901 informs that the Ranchi district exhibited a steady decrease of population from its north east to the west and southwest, i.e., from Ranchi sub-division to Khunti and Gumia sub-division. The district lost by migration more than any other district and resultantly an apparent increase of 5.2% represented in Assam (Gait 1901:24, 118). In the decade (1891-1901) that followed the natural population of Ranchi district remained more or less stationary but on account of the greater volume of migration from the district, the loss in actual population was distinctly heavier amounting to 3.79%. In 1921 there was high rate of migration from the Chainpur, Bundu, Sonahatu and Tamar than as of Ranchi district which were the heaviest losers of population. Two famines occurred in 1897 and 1900 and there was prevalence of fever and outbreak of Cholera which is also responsible for migration of local people of Palamau and Ranchi districts to the tea districts of Assam and North Bengal in quest of jobs in tea plantation. The census of 1921 showed the decrease of

migration from the Palamau district, except the than as like Mahuadanagar Balumath and Ranka. In this period the Palamau district's population is marked by less migration than in earlier periods. The Mahuandanagar and Ranka areas were thinly populated and migration was caused there due to unproductive soil and forests. The census of 1931 informs an overall increase of population in some parts of Chhotanagpur Plateau in the Latchar Sub-Division, Daltonganj and Garhwa thanas of Palamau district. The completion of Bengal-Nagpur Railway resulted into almost 50% increase in the number of migrants in the census of 1901, chiefly in the tea districts of Bengal and Assam from the Singbhum, Ranchi, Palamau and other districts of Chhotanagpur. Such migration was mainly of the aboriginals. There was also migration from the eastern and northern districts of central provinces such as Raigarh, Bilaspur and Surguja districts. Besides, a number of coolies were supplied from Midnapore, Burdwan, Bankura, Birbhum and Balasore. The practice of importing labour was very high during 1860s. In the Terai and Dooars there was no labour law in force unlike Assam. So, no individual coolie could be put under an agreement and coolies were free to come and go as and when they liked. In the Terai it was necessarily adopted the Sirdari system under which the individual coolies were engaged by a Sirdar and supplied by him to the tea estate. His remuneration was usually fixed per day for each coolie at work. The Sirdar exercised no supervision over the coolies while at work but was merely in the position of a contractor who supplied the labour (Bhadra 1999: 81-93).

THE RECRUITMENT OF THE ADIVASI LABOUR

The development of tea plantation necessitated two basic requisites; viz., (i) large area for cultivation and (ii) labour force. The planters all over the world survived on imported labour which was usually cheaper than the local labour (Bhadra

1999: 81-93; Bhadra 1999: 65-67). The tea regions of Assam were either sparsely populated, or the locals rarely worked on plantations because of the low wages offered by the planters. Therefore, the plantation owners had to depend on migrant labourers whose migration was induced by the planters themselves. In the Indian tea plantations indenture became a common mode of recruitment. Planters were interested in recruiting 'cheap' indentured labour from outside. Thus, the migrant population became a resident labour force in tea plantations of Assam and North East India (Bhadra 1999: 81-93).

The migrants were mainly tribes; namely, Santal, Oraon, Munda, Bhumij, Mahato/Kurmi, Kharia, Mohali, Malpahari, Turi, Asur, Ghasi, Nagesia, Korao, Sawria, Barik, Goud, Parja and other tribals of Chhotonagpur, Madhya Pradesh and several feudatory states of Orissa. The local communities like Dimasa, Reang, Barman, Rabha, Rajbansi, etc. could not be attracted to the tea plantation, except for a very few. In order to recruit labour, the planters had established an organization called the Tea Districts Labour Association with its headquarters in Calcutta. 77 percent of the tea industry in North - East India too did the recruitment through this association (Bhadra 1999: 91).

In sum, after the settlement of the tea garden labour, they are alienated from their own production system. The literary term alienation simply means 'the separation from'. In the tea garden, there are two categories or classes; viz., capitalists i.e., owner or proprietor of the tea garden and proletariat i.e., labour class. The tea garden labour is the main concern of the subaltern history. They are extremely subaltern because they are landless, marginal, poor, uneducated, helpless and isolated from the mainland, so in the single word they are an oppressed class. This is the reason for growth of the various organizations in the tea industries.