

# Socio-economic conditions of the Adivashis in the Santal Colony Tribal Block, Kokrajhar District, Assam

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## Abstract

The Santal Colony Tribal Block is situated in the western part of Assam and is part of Kokrajhar district of the Bodoland Territorial Area District (Assam). The Santal colony was created way back in the year 1881 with *Thakurpur* under the then Dingdinga Gaon Panchayat as its headquarter. The term *Thakurpur* means 'Village of God'. The Santal Colony Tribal Block has been upgraded to a full-fledged Colony by the Assam government on 24<sup>th</sup> August 1977 with 57,930 bighas of land and has been renamed as Santal Colony Tribal Block. Today, the Santal Colony Tribal Block is comprised of 45 villages with its headquarter at Grahampur. The Santal Colony Tribal Block is populated by various communities such as Santals, Oraons, Mundas, Rabhas, Telis, Bengalis etc and majority of the Santals are the followers of Christianity in the colony. In the beginning this colony was dominated by two major communities such as Bodos and Santals. But the conflict between the Bodos and the Santals in the western part of Assam during the 1990s has completely uprooted the Bodos from the colony and this group of people of the colony remains displaced even today after 20 years of the conflict. The study of socio-economic status is very much important to know the economic development of any caste or communities. The topic entitled "Socio-economic conditions of the Adivashis in the Santal Colony Tribal Block" focuses on the socio-economic status of the Adivashi people of the Colony. The term Adivashi is used here to represent the communities such as Santals, Oraons, Mundas, etc. In this small write up, an attempt has been made to highlight the socio-economic conditions of the Santals in the Colony, causes of their backwardness and to provide measures for the upliftment of the community. The location map of the study area is prepared by using GIS technology.

**Key words:** Thakurpur, Adivashi, Colony, Tribal Block, GIS Technology.

## Introduction

The Santal Colony Tribal Block is situated in the western part of Assam and is part of Kokrajhar district of the Bodoland Territorial Area District (Assam). The Santal colony was created way back in the year 1881 with *Thakurpur* under the then Dingdinga Gaon Panchayat as its headquarter. The term *Thakurpur* means 'Village of God'. The Santal Colony Tribal Block has been upgraded to a full-fledged Colony by the Assam government on 24<sup>th</sup> August 1977 with 57,930 bighas of land and has been renamed as Santal Colony Tribal Block. Today, the Santal Colony Tribal Block is comprised of 45 villages with its headquarter at Grahampur. The villages are populated by the Santals and majority of them are the followers of Christianity.

The concept of development covers a far wider spectrum than commonly believed and aims mainly at improving the quality of life. 'Development' thus does not fall in to mere economic growth measured in quantitative terms only. Development can be understood as the gradual growth or formation of any entity or a process in which a person or thing matures, changes or advances to another stage to realize its inherent potentials. In general, it involves an improvement in the living conditions or material welfare of a given population- often inhabitants of a particular region (Mathur, 1998). Generally, the concept of development is of necessity anchored in the dominant socio-economic dependant capitalism in which their present urge for development is intrinsically tied up with their history of dependence- colonial or otherwise (Nayak, 1990).

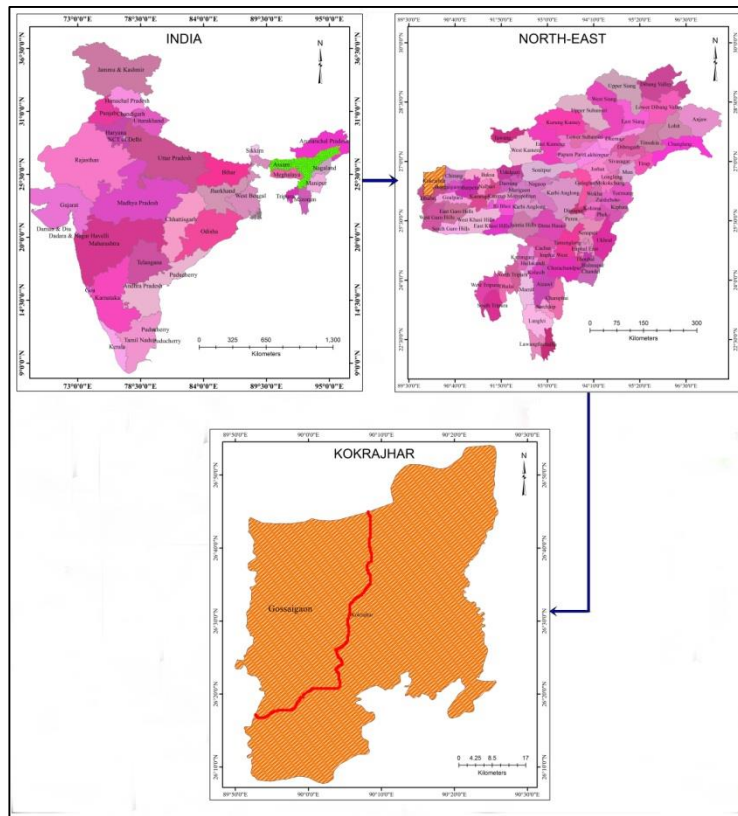
Development simply means a positive growth of any area in all aspects such as social, cultural, economical, political etc. when all these things move together in positive directions then only it can be considered that a true development is taking place.

It is worth mentioning that the planning process, which was introduced in India since 1951, has also failed to bring about the desired level of development in the North Eastern Region of India particularly in the western part of Assam. The planning mostly fails due to lack of understanding of the people and their problems (Bordoloi, 1990). While the planners and social activists are trying to take India towards the 21st century, they are mainly concerned with the weaker section of the society in relation to meeting their basic minimum needs and surprisingly precious little has been done as far as the development of the Santal colony tribal block is concerned.

The Santal Colony Tribal Block situated in the western part of Assam is one of the most backward areas of the state and has not been able to move at par with other areas in terms of development. The villages surveyed under the colony are found to be very poor and backward socio-economically. These villages are dominated by the Santals which is one of the major groups of the Adivashis. They belong to Other Backward Class (OBC) categories and the main religion in the entire colony followed by the villagers is the Christianity. They are mainly dependent on agriculture for their sustenance. The reasons for their backwardness are many such as lack of education, lack of good roads, higher educational institutions, hospitals, electricity, irrigation facilities etc. The people of the area could see the light of modern education first because of the untiring effort of the missionaries in the field of education. But today, the educational institutions of the area have failed miserably to provide good education to the people of the area which convinced the parents today not to send their children to schools. As they have started thinking that if their children do not learn anything after attending schools for so many years then what is the use of going to schools. Instead they prefer their children to be in the agricultural field as it will help the family in earning livelihoods (Bhagat, 2012). Another reason for their backwardness is the selling or transfer of their lands to others either directly or through other means such as Bandhak or Adi. The aged people of the area is of the opinion that the Santal people in colony was blessed with large land holdings but today most of their lands are in the hands of others which forced them to be impoverished as they have lost control over their lands. Finding no other way out, most of the villagers of the colony today depend on selling of firewood for their sustenance.

## Location

The area of Kokrajhar district occupies 3,129 square kilometres (1,208 sq mi). Kokrajhar district is situated on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra River. Kokrajhar district is also known as the gateway of Seven Sister States. The study area is located at 26°25'11"N latitude to 89°59'03"E longitude. It has an average elevation of



46.94 metres (164 feet). Fig. No.1

Fig. No.1 Locational Map of the study Area

## Genesis of Santal colony tribal block

The Santals are considered to be the largest homogenous scheduled tribe in India (Troisi, 1978) although others place them as the second largest tribe of India (Kochar, 1979) after the Gonds and Bhils. The Gonds and Bhils are larger, they are however very heterogeneous and are considered to be the constituents of a group of tribes designated by a common name (Hembrom, 1996). The Santals have been in India since time immemorial. Ethnically the Santals, Mundas and Kharias belong to the same family of the Kolarian race (Roy, 1970). Linguistically the Santals are classed with the Munda family of language, a language of Austric group to whom Max Muller gave the name of Munda family of languages (Hembrom, 1996).

The Santal Colony of Assam came into existence after 1880s only when the two missionaries namely Lars Olsen Skrefsrud and Hans Peter Boersen from Norway and Denmark respectively, who were working among the Santals in the Santal Parganas of Bihar decided to bring the Santals to western part of Assam in the year 1881. During the 1870s, the Santal Parganas of Bihar was over populated compared to lands available for cultivation. One of the aged person of the area opined that the soil of the Santal Pargana was not suitable for agricultural purposes. So, the Santals were interested to move out of the Santal Parganas and settle down in other parts of the country where the soil was suitable for agricultural purposes. Hence, the Santals requested Skrefsrud, who was working among them during that time to look for such a place where they could migrate to in large numbers. At first instance, a proposal was made to take the Santals to the Northern part of South Australia. Mr. Francis Dutton, Agent General of the South Australian government in Great Britain was contacted. The proposal was almost accepted through the South Australian parliament and W.H. Bunday,

Minister of Justice and Education sent formal invitation to Skrefsrud. Finally the plan had to be cancelled at the intervention of the Vice-Roy of India and as a result, an arrangement had to be made within India. Skrefsrud did not give up the idea of a Santal colonization outside the district of Santal Parganas. Through Dr. Graham, Skrefsrud contacted the officials in Assam in 1880 and on behalf of the Santals, Skrefsrud made an agreement with the Assam Government for the settlement. Ultimately an area covering 30 square miles of land was secured near the place called Dingdinga, 30 miles north of Dhubri in the Kokrajhar district of the BTC, Assam. By the end of 1880, all arrangements were made for bringing the Santals from the Santal parganas of Bihar (Olav, 1967). The migration of Santals into other parts of Assam had already started much before the arrival of Santals in the colony. But the situation in Kokrajhar district of the BTC is totally different than the other parts of the state of Assam as the migration of the Santals into this area started from 1881 onwards only.

A missionary Mr. Boersen arrived with the first batch of 42 families on 8th February, 1881. They came by train and steamer and first landed at Dhubri. Thereafter, they marched on foot about 30 miles north of Dhubri and gathered under a huge tree near a market place called Dingdinga. After their arrival, another batch of 13 families arrived under the leadership of Hezekiah Das, a teacher at the Ebenzer Boys School, Dumka. The families who landed at Dingdinga soon started cleaning the jungles of the area allotted to them and built some new huts in the area meant for them. So, the 55 families spread over five villages and a church was built at a place called Thakurpur, (located presently close to Dingdinga market) meaning the village of God. It was the first church of the Santal mission in Assam. And the village Thakurpur remained the headquarters of the colony for some years. Later on, the headquarter of the colony has been shifted to Grahampur in 1892. The Santals of the colony celebrated the centenary jubilee commemorating the completion of one hundred years of existence of the colony in the year 1981. The families, who had come, were engaged in the mini tea garden called Mornai Tea Estate located very close to the villages where the Santals settled. After working in the tea garden for sometimes, when the economic condition of the families improved a little bit, they moved to the surrounding areas and cleared the jungles for settlement. And that is how the Santal villages are found today in the colony. When they first settled in the five villages, certain laws were framed to be followed by the families and the rules were like no brewing, no drinking, no gambling etc. Some of the families found the rules very difficult to follow and left the village to settle down in other areas where no such strict rules are to be followed. This is one of the reasons why the number of families in the villages decreased. When the study was carried out, it was verified that the number of families in the village Thakurpur decreased to 10 to 12 families only.

### Social systems in Santal society

**Clan system in Santal society:** There are various types of clan system observed among the Santals. Although clans are many, no major differences are found to be seen. In the beginning, they had only seven clans but later on it rose to twelve. Each clan has more than 35 to 40 Totems. Out of these twelve clans, the clan Bedea is no more seen to be used by the Santals and at present there are only eleven clans now. Every clan is linked to occupations such as Kisku being Chiefs or Rajas, Hembrom being princess; Murmus being priests, Sorens being fighters, Tudus being drummers, Marandis being Merchants, Baskeys being traders and then the remaining four clans are the helper to all other clans (Chhetry, 2005).

**Santal Religion:** The Santals were animist in the beginning but later on they embraced Hinduism. They now worship all Hindu gods and goddesses like the other Hindus. For them Durga Puja is the main festival followed by Lakshmi Puja and Kali Puja. In the Santal society, some of the important festivals celebrated by the community are *Sohorai* and *Baha*. The *Sohorai* festival begins from 14<sup>th</sup> January and lasts for six days. On the other hand, the *Baha* festival is celebrated for three days. This festival is celebrated among the Santal community since long time. These festivals are celebrated by the Santal who follow Hinduism. They also believe in some of the traditional deities, benevolent as well as malevolent. A good number of Santals in Assam have accepted Christianity and they go to Churches regularly on Sundays (Singh, 2003). Christmas is their main festival which is celebrated with other Christians on 25<sup>th</sup> December every year. In the study area majority of the Santals are the followers of Christianity but outside the colony, followers of Hinduism would be majority among the Santals. The survey in the ten villages of the colony reveals the percentage of the Christian and Hindu population i.e 95.77 and 4.23 percent respectively. Religion of the families data are collected Primary source, it is showing Table 1 and graphically represent in Fig. 2.

Sl No	Religion	No of families	%
1	Hindus	9	4.23
2	Christians	204	95.77
3	Others	0	0

Table 1. Religion of the families

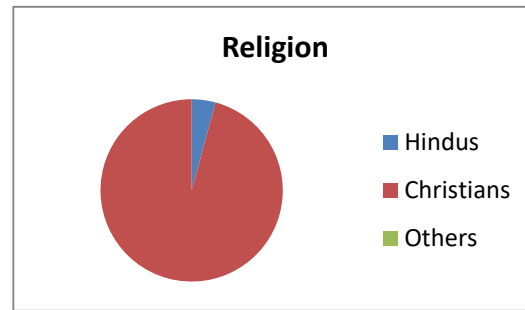


Fig 2. Religion of the families

**The Santal Marriage:** It is interesting to mention here that though the Santals have exogamous clans for the purpose of marriage, yet they have developed certain prohibited degrees to regulate the marriage tie. The general rule is that a Santal can marry from the mother's clan provided there is a three generation gap as the marriage within the clan is prohibited. No cross cousin marriage is found among the people of the Santal community. The Santali name for marriage is *Bapla* which probably means mutual strengthening of two families. Girls marry boys mostly of their own choice. There are various types of marriage among the Santals. The marriage arranged by *raibor* (marriage negotiator) is the regular form of marriage which is widely prevalent. The first step is the appointment of a match maker who happens to be an old and respected man who represents either of the two families. The proper age for marriage used to be 25-30 years for boys and 15-20 years for girls. After the marriage, the bride moves to the house of husband.

**The Santal family:** The nature of the Santal family is found to be nuclear, which includes husband, wife and unmarried children. Grownup sets up separate households after marriage. The father is the head of the family and his commands and decisions are accepted by all the members of the family. The members in the family are seen maintain good and congenial relations among themselves. The relationship between husband and wife is very cordial. Joking relationships exists between a woman and the younger brother and sister of the husband. Jokes are also exchanged between a bride's father and the bridegroom's mother, but the same is prohibited between the bride's mother and bridegroom's father. In a Santal family, avoidance relationship is maintained with the husbands elder brother, between father-in-law and daughter-in-law. The Santal wife and husband avoid mentioning each other's name. The inheritance of the property of the parents is always through the male line. The property is divided equally among the sons and if a family happens to be without sons then the daughter succeeds the family property. The widowed mother is to be looked after by the son who inherits the father's property at his death. In the Santal society, a family who does not have a son can adopt one and the adopted son is also entitled to inherit the property.

**Status of women in Santal society:** In the Santal society, the status of women is equal to that of men. A woman has a positive role in the family since she also participates in the economic activities equally with the man.

**Rituals related to birth and death in Santal society:** when a baby is born, they perform *Janam chatiar* ceremony on the fifth day in case of a male child and on the third day in case of a female child. Name giving ceremony is observed between the third and fifth day after birth. But at present there is no hard and fast rule regarding the date of the name giving ceremony of the newly born baby. The name to be given is decided by the head of the family or relatives. As the study area is dominated by the followers of Christianity, the rituals are mostly performed as per the Christian rituals. When a new baby is born, he or she is to be baptized in the Church within one month after birth and the ritual is performed by a Pastor (Priest). As per the report of the headman of the village, there are a few denominations among the Christians such as Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church (NELC), Baptist, Penticost, Roman Catholics, Believers etc. In the Santal colony tribal block, NELC is the majority and in NELC, at the time of baptism of the child, a religious mother and father is chosen from among the families who are responsible to guide the child in the right path. When the child grows up and understands his or her responsibilities, another ritual is performed in the church by a priest which is called *Confirmation*. But in Baptist, a child is given baptism at the age of 12 years or more. In Santal society generally, the male child receives his name after his grandfather and the female child is named after her grandmother on the parental side. The Santals cremate their dead. They do not have any fixed cremation

ground. The dead bodies of pregnant women and young children are buried. The Christians however, bury their dead. After the death, when the body is to be carried to the burial side, women cannot accompany the procession beyond the limits of the village where the death occurs.

**Educational facilities:** The missionaries who brought the Santals in the colony did not only provide scope for sustenance but also provided the education and guided them in the right way till the time they worked among the Santals in the colony. Today, the percentage of literacy among the Santals in the surveyed villages of the colony is only 48.79%, which is much lower than the state average i.e 72.19%. Although, the government is taking policies to attract the children towards schools, it has not worked in the colony as most of the parents do not know the importance of education. Many of the children are to drop out midway as their parents cannot afford to provide necessary books, dress etc. due to poor economic conditions. Being illiterate, most of the parents even fail to encourage their children to go to schools. During the time of conflict between the Bodos and the Santals, the Santal people of the colony were not affected like the Santals of *Bahare hasa* which means outside the colony. But today, if compared between the Santals of Colony and outside the colony, the Santals of *Bahare hasa advanced more in the field of education*. The following table shows the educational qualification of the surveyed villages and the same is graphically represent in Fig. 3.

Sl. No	Classes	numbers
1	0-VI	572
2	VII-X	442
3	XI-XII	72
4	BA –Above	31

Table 2. Educational qualifications of the surveyed villages

Primary source

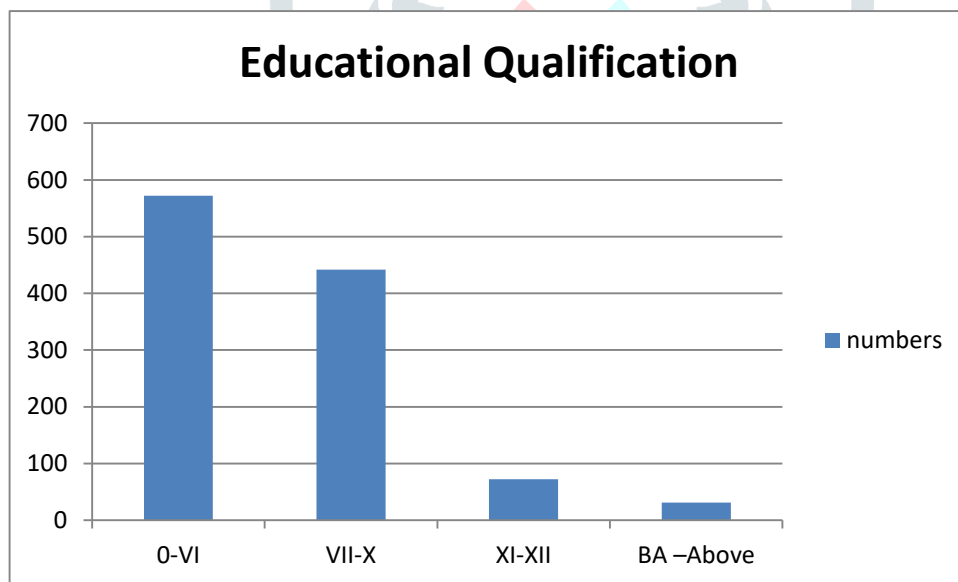


Fig 3. Educational qualifications

**Landholding pattern:** The Santals in the colony were blessed with large land holdings and for this too credit should go to the missionaries. The missionaries did not only bring them here but also took the initiative to provide patta lands to all the settlers. But today most of the lands of the Santals in the colony are in the hands of others, be it in the form of Adi or Bandhak . Some of them even sold to others due to economic hardship. One of the aged person of the colony stated that the Santals were blessed with large holdings but today they have been cursed by God because of their own fault. In the surveyed villages, out of 213 families, 94 families are having less than 5 bighas of land and 55 families are having more than 11 bighas of land. And the four families are identified as landless. As the land holding is decreasing and no more viable, many women and men folk of the community move to the neighbouring state of West Bengal to work as labourers. The annual incomes of the families are also not satisfactory. Out 213 families, the annual income of 119 families are less than 50,000/-, which is not suffice at all to manage a family. The annual income of 78 families fall in the category of 50,000-

100,000/- and there are only 16 families whose annual income is more than 1, 00,000/-. Because of poor economic conditions, the families are forced to work as daily wage earner. Table 3

Sl No	Land holding in bighas	No.of families
1	Landless	4
2	1-5	94
3	6-10	60
4	11- above	55

Table 3. Land Holding pattern in the surveyed villages Primary source

Sl No	Income	No of families	%
1	0-50,000	119	55.87
2	50,001-1,00000	78	36.61
3	1,00,000- above	16	7.51

Table 4. Annual Income of the families Primary source

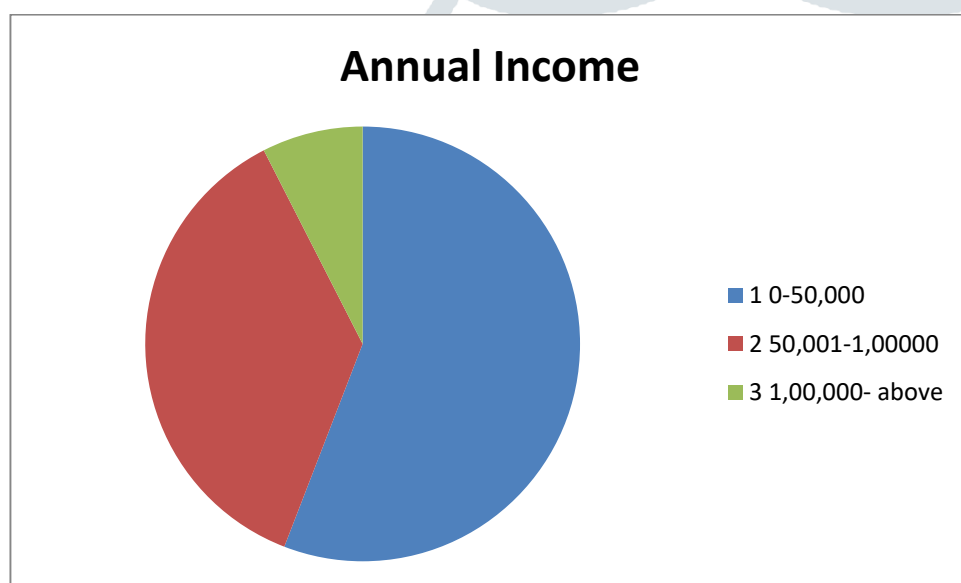


Fig 4 Annual Income of the families

**Cropping pattern:** Majority of the Santals in the colony cultivates their lands once in a year and they are not attracted towards modernization. Though the yield per hectare of land has decreased, yet they are not in favour of modernization.

**House types:** Out of total 213 families surveyed, only 70 families are having pacca houses and rests have kachha houses. And the houses of most of the families are congested, not enough to accommodate all the members of the family. Out of 213 households, only 87 families have electricity connections. In the surveyed villages, people are deprived from many facilities such as electricity, water supply, medical, bank, market etc. Although the village roads have been improved after the creation of the BTC, many other aspects have been neglected. For all round development, all aspects should be taken into consideration then only it can be claimed that true development is taking place.

**Conclusion and suggestions:** The Santals of the colony have not been able to maintain the socio-economic status they had in the beginning. With the passes of time, their main asset that is the land is sleeping away from their hands to others as majority of them are in debt and are not in a position to repay the loans. Educationally also they are very backward compared to other communities living around them and because of poor economic condition, the drop out in the primary stage is conspicuous. The people are also not aware about various welfare measures of the government and in this respect, the voluntary organizations, the Government and publicity

media have to play definite roles in the Santal colony tribal block to make the people aware about various developmental schemes available.

**The following suggestions may help in improving the socio-economic conditions of the people of the colony:**

1. As the people of the colony are educationally backward and less interested, massive educational awareness programmes be carried out among the masses so as to make the people aware about the value of education. Higher educational institutions should be provided in the colony.
2. The nature has also failed to provide timely rainfall during the growing season. So, irrigation facilities be provided so as to attract the cultivators again to cultivate their lands.
3. The villages should be provided with 100 percent electrification.
4. As the villagers of the colony have to move either to west Bengal or to other cities in Assam for medical purposes, a hundred bedded civil hospital be provided to assist the people who are suffering from various chronic diseases. The Sevapur mission hospital be revived again to facilitate the people of the colony. Once the Sevapur Hospital had good fame for its hospitality and treatment of the patients but it has died out today due to negligence of the management. Therefore, it should be revived again in the greater interest of the people of the colony in particular and the people of the surrounding areas in general.
5. The misguided youths who have joined the underground organizations, be motivated and counseled to come back to main stream.
6. The Mornai Tea Estate which is a charitable garden should take some welfare projects in the colony in the greater interest of the area in general and the people in particular. Currently, the contribution of Mornai tea Estate for the development of the colony is insignificant.

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