

**POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN:
A STUDY OF GRAM PANCHAYATS IN THE TEA GARDENS OF JALPAIGURI
DISTRICT**

Abstract

The political empowerment of women and their substantial presence in the formal structure of governance is an essential component of a vibrant democracy where their meaningful participation and active engagement in the political process may assure effective functioning of democratic framework and institutions. Participation of women in decision making process in different levels of governmental activities is the key to political empowerment of women. Good political institutions and procedures have substantive impact on the socio-economic status of women in a given context which may eradicate factors inducing inequality and discrimination while realizing the objective of political empowerment. The constitution of India provided equal rights for men and women and also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act has been considered as watershed in the history of state initiatives regarding political empowerment of rural women. While securing 33% reservation of seats in all tiers of Panchayati Raj Institution the Act provided a definite space for women to participate in rural politics for planning and development of the locality. It provided also an opportunity for rural women to steer the local level governance through the process of decentralization. It, therefore, prepared the context for women's contribution in the effective governance at the local level leading to their political empowerment and effective functioning of the system. This goal of empowerment of the rural women through 73rd Amendment was further stimulated with the adoption of National Policy for Empowerment of Women in 2001 which attempted to encourage equal access and active participation of women at all levels of decision making and implementation of policies and programmes on the basis of the principle of gender equality enshrined in the Constitution of India.

Against the backdrop, the present study attempts to locate the status of political empowerment of the elected women representatives in the tea garden panchayats of Jalpaiguri district. The study seeks to understand the relationship, if any, between the women's empowerment and the implementation of developmental programmes and schemes of panchayats against the backdrop of recent crisis prevailing over the tea

gardens in the District. The study attempts to reveal the actual position of the elected women representatives and their role in functioning of tea garden panchayats in the District. The context of the study is unique in itself as women in the tea garden areas constitutes 50% of the workforce and they tend to involve in trade union politics regularly along with the male workers and so their level of political awareness is expected to be higher than the non-tea garden areas which seems to be resulting in their more and more active involvement in the working of the Panchayats. However, the findings showed more or less a moderate underpinning of the empowerment process through the reservation of seats in Panchayats. The study, however, could not find any strong correlation between the women's involvement in the trade union politics of the tea gardens and women's involvement in the day to day functioning of the tea garden's panchayat. It is found that there is no effective channel of transmission of political power from the domain of worker's struggle to the domain of rural governance as the channels like trade unions lost their credibility before the tea workers in general and women workers in particular and instead of an ideological instrument It becomes merely a site for diffusing their grievances. Another channel like Political parties are more reluctant to involve in issues particularly related with tea garden's management and used to take more interest in rural politics revolving around the developmental and distributional benefits of Panchayats. Therefore, being half of the active members of the total workforce does not percolate any sense of becoming active participant in the working of the Panchayats or taking active part in rural governance. Though, the study found that there are certain areas of convergence so far as the livelihood issues are concerned particularly in the context of the severe crisis in the tea gardens but it does not affect the overall pattern of their differential functioning as tea workers as well as political workers in the distinct structural setting of two different domain of action. Therefore, empowerment through workers struggle and empowerment through constitutional amendment hardly coincide in the real life situation which in turn impede the overall objective of women's empowerment in the decentralized rural governance at least in the TG Panchayat.

Monalisa Chakravorty

Department of Political Science ,NBU