

ABSTRACT

Active participation in the democratic bodies (like the local self-government) and the democratic political processes of the marginalized section of society like the tribal women can help their empowerment and integration into the socio-political order and reduces the scope for social unrest. The present study is about the nature of political participation of tribal women in the democratic political processes in two distinctive areas of North Bengal, in the Dooars of Jalpaiguri district (where economy is based on tea plantation) and the Terai of Darjeeling district (with agriculture-based economy). The study would explore the political social and economic changes that political participation can bring about in the life of the tribal women and tribal communities in the tea gardens and in the agriculture-based economy.

The region known as North Bengal consists of six northern districts of West Bengal, namely, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Malda, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Cooch Behar. There is more than 14.5 lakh tribal population in this region (which constitutes 1/3rd of the total tribal population of the State), of which 49.6 per cent are women. Jalpaiguri district has the highest concentration of tribal population as 14.56 per cent of its population is tribal population whereas Darjeeling has 4.60 per cent of its population as tribal population. The tribal women of these two districts are predominantly engaged as agricultural labourers and tea workers and their economy could largely be termed as subsistence economy. The tribal population in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts has mostly migrated from the central India (popularly known as Chotanagpur) in different historical periods.

After the implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1993 the scope for participation of the members of the backward communities, particularly the women of these communities, has significantly risen. In North Bengal there are 717 Gram Panchayats, 61 Panchayat Samities, 6 Zilla Parisads and a Mahakuma Parisad. So far as the representation of the tribal women is concerned, in the GPs there are 479 members, in the Panchayat Samities 72 members, and in the Zilla Parisads and Mahakuma Parisad together there are 21 members. Thus all the *panchayat* bodies taken together there are as many as 556 tribal women members in North Bengal who would constitute the universe of the present study.

Primary data for the study would be collected through an extensive study of (a) the tribal women representatives of various bodies of the local self-governments and of the State legislature, (b) women providing leadership to political organizations and trade unions in tea gardens, and (c) the average tribal women who constitute the voters. The study would be conducted with the help of an exhaustive questionnaire-cum-schedule. We will substantiate the interview method with observation and case study methods. Available data from the secondary sources would also be taken into consideration.